

Domestic abuse

how can we help?

Diana Wellens provides an insight into some of the issues facing employees who are experiencing domestic abuse at home and looks at some ways employers can help



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Dear Counsellor,
I need something in particular of you. I'm not sure what it is. I don't think it is complicated but it might be hard. I might need you to ask me questions – the ones you don't want to ask in case you get it wrong. The thing is you won't get it wrong if I know you really care and I know you can hear the answer. Tell me if you're worried about getting it wrong – then I'll know that you care about getting it right for me.

I might need you to mess with your boundaries. You are the counsellor and I am the client but I need to know you see me as a person as well. That you care about me and respect me. That you can see how we are different but also make connections. Could we laugh together, do you think? I know you have rules but I don't really care about the rules. I'm talking to you because I'm getting desperate for someone to be able to help me with this mashed head. To ask me about the good when everything seems so bad. To ask me about the bad when everything seems OK.

Oh my mashed head! He would say it has always been mashed and it is only him that can put up with it. But then others say I should leave, that he is no good. But that's not it either. Because sometimes he is lovely. He treats me like a princess and makes me feel on top of the world. Sometimes he bakes cakes with the kids. He brings me breakfast in bed and rubs my feet when I am tired.

So if I tell you he rubbed my dinner in my face and poured a cup of tea over my head and that I love him – can you hear that I love him? If I tell you he made me do stuff in bed that I hated but I love him do you believe me that I love him? Can you stay with me and ask me about the love? Because you see everyone seems to want me to hate and be angry. But I don't and I'm not – or at least not all the time. I just want it to be different.

You've been trying to make me see that it's not my fault but if it's not my fault then I have no control at all. I provoke him you know. I'm not an angel. Sometimes I can see the mood coming and I needle him to get it over with. And I use all sorts of tactics to avoid the certainty that I can't put it right, that I can't make him change. You may have to stand with me for quite a long time until I really see it. Keep turning me back when I look away. Wait until you are sure that my turning around is to find something else. Do you have the time? The patience? The courage?

Please hear me. Thank you so much.

These are paraphrased expressions from several women I have worked with over recent years. I have chosen them because they represent themes I hear from women who are experiencing domestic violence. Regardless of whether the abuse is physical or emotional, sexual or mental, there is common ground in the feeling of being at fault, conflicting feelings, fear about telling, being stigmatised, disbelieved, or not being able to trust one's own judgment.

This article will introduce issues concerning women experiencing domestic abuse and some initial ideas about supporting women in the workplace. Statistics from the Home Office show that women are at greater risk than men¹, but that doesn't mean that all abusers are men or all victims are women. I have worked with men who have been abused by their female partners, and with abusive same-sex relationships. I have had clients who are experiencing abuse from their children and others fearful of disclosing for fear of repercussions from members of their community. Each of these situations throws up different issues and concerns which can be disconcerting for anyone offering support. Holding your nerve, keeping calm and seeking support for your own decision-making is often the best generic advice that can be given. The websites in the references will provide extensive additional information for those who wish to research further.

There is no formula for recognising domestic violence; no checklist that we can tick off to make sure we have ruled it in or out. People experiencing abuse are unique individuals in unique relationships and will have developed their own strategies for coping with what is happening. Some may be depressed or turn to alcohol or drugs as a way of coping; others may be strong and confident in the workplace, offering no obvious clue to what is happening at home.

One in 10 women will experience domestic abuse over any given year and one in four will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. Two women per week are killed by current or former partners¹. All those women have friends and family. So it is likely that we all know someone who has been affected by domestic abuse – even if we are not aware of it. They might not have told us; we might not have guessed; we might not have thought it possible; they might have thought it was their fault. They didn't say and we didn't ask.

There are many sources of information about domestic abuse (see Useful Links at the end of the article) that I will not repeat here. Domestic abuse is about the exercising of excessive power and control over the lives of intimate partners or family members, so support for those experiencing abuse needs to be focussed on

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empowerment. This will involve understanding the dynamic of an abusive relationship, the client's part in that relationship and exploring ways in which she can regain control over her safety and her life choices.

What has it got to do with work?

The Equality and Human Rights Commission tells us that there are legal and moral reasons for dealing with domestic abuse issues in the workplace (being a good employer surely includes supporting staff and providing a safe and effective working environment) as well as financial reasons. It states that more than 50 per cent of abused women are frequently late for work and/or miss at least three days of work per month² and quotes a DTI research report³ showing that the total annual cost of domestic violence for the state, employers and victims is around £23 billion.

What can we do in the workplace?

For some, the workplace can be a safe haven. Some women will not want to talk about their experience at home because they come to work to get away from it. Offering support will be most effective if the woman is convinced her supporters have respect and understanding. In particular there needs to be an awareness of the need for confidentiality so that she will not be put in more danger. Employers can help in several ways:

- 1 Having a policy. Employers can download templates and guidance for a workplace policy from the Equality and Human Rights website or the Women's Aid website (See Useful Links at the end of this article).
- 2 Training key staff members so that there is someone in the organisation who understands the dynamics and potential risks for the individual and the company. Many Women's Aid groups will be happy to talk through this or organisations can find out if there is a Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator for the area, who will often have a good overview and knowledge of local support groups and processes.
- 3 Letting staff know that they can approach someone if they need to and that they will be received sympathetically. Disclosing is a huge risk for a victim. Even if support is wanted there may be fear that disclosure will affect their employment or that their abusive partner may find out if they speak. Doing something as simple as putting information about local support groups/internal support in the toilet areas can be useful.

- 4 Being realistic and flexible. Some support programmes are quite rigid in the amount and timing of support offered. It can often take a few sessions of counselling before a client experiencing abuse might be ready to disclose. A counsellor would then need to risk-assess to decide the focus for any work. Six sessions over six weeks may not be enough time for the client to make safe decisions about seeking further support or taking any action. Six sessions spread over 12 weeks may allow more thinking time; or extensions to the number of sessions where personal safety might be at risk would be useful. It will help to have a clear contract with the counsellor about whether and what flexibility or extra support can be offered if safety is at risk.

What should counsellors be thinking about?

Counsellors will have their own styles and approaches in asking difficult questions and dealing with difficult issues. In that respect identifying and dealing with domestic violence is no easier or more difficult than asking about any other intimate aspect of a client's life. What can make it scary is that there is a possibility that the client (and her children or other dependants) might experience real and physical danger. Some counsellors will find it more difficult than others to ask direct questions or to express their own concerns about a client's safety. This may be because of differences in theoretical approach or because of personal values or fears. What all counsellors have in common is their ethical need to be looking at the safety of the client and anyone else at home who might be affected as well as being reflexive about their own approach to the work.

Below are a few tips for counsellors to think about. These tips are aimed at counsellors working with female victims. Working with a perpetrator or a couple raises significant safety issues which will not be covered here although much of the information might still be relevant.

Safety: Advice to women from family and friends can often include encouragement to leave the abusive partner. It is important to recognise that the point of leaving and soon after is the most dangerous time for a woman as her partner may feel that control of her has been lost. It is often at this point that violence escalates or non-physical abuse becomes physical. Possibly for similar reasons, pregnancy is another known time when abuse can escalate. There are many strategies to help a safe leaving, from protecting the body physically to keeping a case of clothes and some money/bank cards at a friend's house; from making a plan of how to leave to visiting a solicitor for legal advice. There are too many to cover

'An abused woman may be confident and outgoing at work – work can often be a safe haven from what is happening at home'

adequately here – Women's Aid groups will often be able to help with safety planning issues.

Working with a short contract can often conflict with the need to work at her pace. It is important to be realistic about the aim of the work. Many counsellors are increasingly having to work with shorter contracts, either because of policy or funding constraints. Some counsellors will be used to this and the need to establish and maintain focus. For those who are used to longer contracts, it may feel more rushed – especially when safety is at stake. I find it useful to remember that misinformation and isolation have often been a part of domestic abuse and I approach initial assessments with the intention of making it OK to talk about the subject (I might include a sentence acknowledging that it can be difficult to talk about private issues such as money, sex or violence with a stranger; or I might write some of those words on pieces of paper and ask the client to pick out 'relevant' subjects to focus on or 'the easiest/most difficult' subjects to talk about.)

But however well thought out your questions, you may not get a disclosure until a later session. For some clients, a disclosure is an enormous decision. She may have had years of being told it is her fault, that the children will be taken away if she tells anyone, that he will hurt her/the children if she tells anyone. It is not uncommon for someone to make a 'test' disclosure – maybe a hint or a small incident to see how you react. In this case your response may well be a really important factor in the client's future. Acknowledging what hasn't been talked about may help sow the seeds for the client to seek further support. Wondering whether the small disclosure is a sign of how difficult it might be for her to talk about this may also be useful. Providing information about the dynamics of abuse might make her feel that you understand and that she is not the only one. Knowing what support is available in her area and how she can access it, when she is ready, can also be important. Let her know where she can find more information but be aware that it may not be safe for her to carry relevant phone numbers or search websites if her partner is likely to discover them.

Know your obligations. Be aware of what your legal, agency policy, and ethical considerations are with the client you are dealing with. For example, if you are concerned about the safety of your client or their children, it would be sensible to seek supervision in deciding your way forward. In some cases, allowing your client to take her own time may not be a safe option for the children. In others, trying to rush the work may be damaging.

Know yourself. Knowing your own indicators for being stressed is really important for your client and yourself.

Knowing your experience of domestic abuse and how it might affect the way you think about the work is also important. Hearing stories of abuse and/or violence can be emotionally intense. Be aware of what helps you and make sure you ask for it.

Be honest about your fears and concerns. If you are scared of asking whether there is any violence happening, then it is important to reflect on why. If you are concerned about being too blunt or intruding on a 'too sensitive' area, then you may risk colluding with the taboo that gives domestic violence its power. Think about how you would approach other 'difficult' issues (sex, death, debt etc). One approach may be to be upfront about your hesitancy: *'You haven't said anything but I am worrying whether you are getting hurt'* can be a way of approaching conversations about violence or exploring why you are worried and she is not. Voicing your concerns may also let the client know that this is a place and you are a person where it is OK to talk about violence and abuse.

An alternative strategy may be to ask generic questions of all clients as part of the initial assessment. Building a picture of what is happening can help us and the client see if/where there is danger. Examples might be:

How do you and your partner make decisions? Couples often have agreements about who will manage money, social life etc. We need to be alert to indicators that the client has no choice – having to account for every penny spent; being made to feel uncomfortable about inviting family or friends round or going out; not being able to attend work events because of a partner's jealousy etc.

What do disagreements look like? Building a picture of how arguments happen can help us to feel what it is like for our client. Is your client consistently diffusing arguments to keep the peace or protect the children? What happens if she doesn't do this? Has there ever been any physical violence? (One incident can be enough to let the victim know that it could happen again.) What about pushing, or throwing things?

What happens if you disagree with your partner or do something he doesn't like? Abusers can use many tactics to make their displeasure known. Verbal or physical abuse and threats are the most obvious, but emotional manipulation can also be very powerful. Partners may seek to regain control by threatening to harm themselves or twisting the conversation to make themselves the victim.

When you say he 'got a bit physical/slapped you/got wound up', what does that mean? Women victims often minimise the abuse (eg a punch is described as a slap; got wound up meant he was throwing stuff around and making threats). Dig down into what actually happened.

Be wary about using the term 'abuse'. The client may not see it in these terms. Focus on what is happening and the consequences, not what it is called.

Be aware of any 'fix it' feelings you may have. Knowing that someone may be in danger can hinder us from staying with the client. Knowing that you only have six sessions to work within can exacerbate those feelings. We may start to panic or offer advice in an attempt to get her to safety. We may start to listen less and do more. Being able to think about safety while continuing to listen is a skill worth practising.

Hearing the love

To go back to the 'letter' at the beginning of this article: why does this woman stay? It may be that she is in total fear of leaving but more likely she still has strong feelings for her partner. Understanding this is probably one of the most important lessons I have learnt in working with women and one that I most consistently get feedback about: 'You understand that I still love him, even though I know it's not right what he is doing'. If she leaves it will be a huge loss and she will need to grieve. Yet those around her want her to be relieved, angry, glad about the end of the relationship. Counselling may be the only space for her to acknowledge the whole relationship rather than just the abuse.

Conclusion

I am sure we would all like to think that domestic abuse is something that happens in someone else's family. But domestic violence has no boundaries in terms of geography, wealth, race, religion, disability, age or sexual orientation. It happens in equal measure across all classes and cultures. Poverty may exacerbate the situation, as may stress or use of alcohol, but it does not cause it. Abusers don't necessarily conform to our stereotypes – an abusive man may be a generally violent man who also gets into fights down the pub. Equally he may be a well-respected member of the community who seems to have the 'perfect' family life. An abused woman may be confident and outgoing at work – work can often be a safe haven from what is happening at home. If you don't ask, she may not be able to tell. If you assume you know, you may inadvertently close another door.

Have courage, keep calm, listen to her (it may be the first time someone has listened) and seek supervision.

You can make a huge difference.

References

- 1 Reducing homicide report. London: Home Office; 2003.
- 2 www.equalityhumanrights.com/yourbusiness
- 3 Walby S. The cost of domestic violence. London: Women and Equality Unit; 2004.

Useful links

- www.homeoffice.gov.uk
- www.womensaid.org.uk
- www.welshwomensaid.org.uk
- www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk
- www.respect.uk.net
- www.caada.org.uk
- www.refuge.org.uk
- www.mensadviceline.org.uk
- www.womensaid.org.uk

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