

I. WHAT TO DO WHEN A DISCLOSURE IS MADE

The guidance below aims to assist you in responding to people disclosing abuse. Remember that the paramount concern is the safety of the victim and any children in the household. As you seek to assist victims, bear in mind that telephone calls, holding information about support services for domestic abuse, the use of texts and e-mails and accessing relevant websites all create potential risks for those experiencing abuse. Support should also include information on how to cover their tracks.

It often takes a great deal of courage for survivors of abuse to seek help. The initial response they receive will likely determine whether they open up further or close down. The first person a survivor discloses to can be the first step in enabling them to seek help. It is important to acknowledge where you can and cannot help. Please refer to the [Disclosure Flow Chart](#) for immediate responses and [Recording Disclosure Conversation](#).

1. DOs and DON'Ts with an Abused Person

DO:

- a) **Do ask.** Most survivors want to be asked. If you suspect that someone is a survivor of abuse and you feel able to broach the subject, you could offer help by inquiring if everything is ok at home or if someone is hurting them. Ask open ended questions that will help them talk. You can ask direct questions like, "Has anyone close to you made you frightened?"
- b) **Do find a private place.** Try wherever possible to talk in a safe, private place where you will not be interrupted, or arrange to talk again (but someone in distress may start talking anywhere).
- c) **Do take plenty of time to listen and believe what they say.** If they sense disbelief, they may be discouraged from speaking again. It is important to be non-judgemental, as people may be afraid that they will be condemned by the church. Treat people with respect and sensitivity – it is difficult enough to talk about these issues.
- d) **Do affirm the strength and courage it takes to have survived the abuse and to talk about it.** Reassure them that, whatever the circumstances, abuse is not justified and not their fault.
- e) **Do express concern for their safety and immediate welfare.** Do they have somewhere to stay?
- f) **Do assess the degree of urgency and risk to children.** Ask about the children and their safety and welfare. You may need to persuade them to report any concerns to children's social care. You have no option but to do so if you have received information that a child is at risk. Where there are children involved, consultation with the Designated Safeguarding Officer is advised. (see Appendix 3 - Disclosure Flow Chart).
- g) **Do ask them about what support is available to them from friends and family.** Do be sensitive to people's backgrounds and cultures and check your own and their understanding of how the cultural issues affect them.
- h) **Do encourage them to seek professional help.** Local domestic abuse services will be able to offer practical safety planning advice, even if they do not want to leave their home. In addition give information about national specialist helplines and websites, as required. People may disclose long-standing abuse, which may have ended or be on-going. A victim may be safe but traumatised, where there is no new allegation or disclosure, but support and healing are still needed.
- i) **Do give her/him referral information.** However, be mindful that any access to helpful information creates a potential risk if discovered by the abuser. Emphasize the need to cover their tracks.
- j) **Do provide or point them to a source of spiritual support.** Abuse not only distorts a victim's concept of self but also their concept of God. Victims need to know that the choices they make are consistent with

God's will for their lives as expressed in the Bible (see Appendix 4 – Domestic Abuse and the Bible). Survivors of abuse require long-term pastoral care.

- k) **Do provide referrals for clinical counselling support.** Domestic abuse is a trauma that leaves lasting spiritual, emotional, and psychological damage that requires God's healing grace and professional support.
- l) **Do connect them with a same-gender social support network.** This can be a vital source of encouragement.
- m) **Do encourage them to focus on their own needs.** This is something they may not have been able to do since the abuse began but which is critical in helping them to change their situation.
- n) **Do ask them what they want from you and the Church.** Offer help which is in response to their needs and preferences and which lets them keep in control. Let them know that while the church is always there to help, they may require professional support as well.
- o) **Do find out if there are criminal proceedings.** Find out if there has been a complaint to the police, and if so, what action has been taken? If the disclosure is about a third party, ascertain whether they are aware that it is being shared and if they are, find out if they wish to seek help.
- p) **Do respect the person's choices.** Help them clarify their options and provide support. Even if victims choose initially to return to the abuser, it is their choice. According to the National Domestic Abuse Hotline, on average, victims will leave the abuser seven times before they 'stay left'.
- q) **Do encourage them to think about a safety plan.** Set aside some money; copies of important papers for them and children; a change of clothes hidden or in care of a friend if s/he decides to go to a shelter. Plan how to exit the house the next time the abuser is violent. Plan what to do about the children if they are at school; if they are asleep, etc. This is both practical and helps the survivor stay in touch with the reality of the abuser's violence. Safety planning is a process that is ongoing (see Appendix 8 – Domestic violence Personalised Safety Plan).
- r) **Do protect their confidentiality.** DO NOT give information about them or their whereabouts to the abuser or to others who might pass information on to the abuser. Do not discuss with anyone who might inadvertently pass information on to the abuser. It is vital that those offering support keep confidences over addresses, information about children and schools etc, and about where and when it is safe to contact the person who is being abused. It is important not to undertake to pass on letters from the perpetrator - the victim knows where the perpetrator lives and can contact them if they wish.

Immediate action

- **Do dial 999** if you are witnessing a violent incident or if the person needs medical care. If the victim is in immediate danger, the Police should be called. Be aware that intervention may heighten risk, but it is important to explore how to ensure people are safe.
- **The safety of children is paramount.** If children are involved, a referral to Children's (Social) Services/the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) needs to be made in addition to calling the Police, if possible, encourage the victim to make the referral themselves, perhaps supporting them through the process. The DSL will also need to be informed.
- **Mental capacity.** If you think the person making the disclosure of abuse may lack mental capacity to make decisions affecting their safety, then it is very important you speak to your District Safeguarding Officer, who will inform Adult Safeguarding (Social Services). It is not your job to make an assessment about whether or not the person lacks capacity in this situation.

DON'T:

- a) **Don't promise complete confidentiality.** Depending on the nature of what is disclosed you may be obligated to report to law enforcement or child protection services. The survivor's right to privacy must be balanced against their safety and the safety of children.
- b) **Don't make promises you can't keep.** They may be safer in your office, but you cannot keep them safe outside your office.
- c) **Don't recommend marriage counselling.** Domestic abuse is not a communication or conflict resolution problem. It is an abuse of power. Marriage counselling creates greater danger for abuse survivors. In abuse situations, the priority is the safety of the victims – NOT the preservation of the marriage.
- d) **Don't blame the survivor.** This can be done directly or by implication. Don't ask why questions with survivors that can imply blame, i.e. Why do you stay? Don't ask insensitive questions like, 'What did you do that set him off?' 'Why don't you try being more submissive?' Abuse is ALWAYS the abuser's choice. Watch your terminology and words. Survivors are not addicted to the relationship or co-dependent, but someone who is suffering from the effects of abuse.
- e) **Don't guilt-trip the victim into remaining in the abuse.** It is not uncommon for biblical passages on headship, submission, and enduring suffering to be misinterpreted to influence victims to remain with an abusive spouse (see Appendix 4 – Domestic Abuse and the Bible).
- f) **Don't confront the abuser without a safety strategy.** Well-meaning attempts to reason with the abuser may place the survivor at greater risk as well as yourself.
- g) **Don't minimise risk.** The greatest time of danger for abuse survivors is often when they attempt to leave or just after they have left.
- h) **Do not put a survivor under pressure to involve the police (unless children or others are at risk).** If they decide they do not want to report abuse to the police, they should receive a response that respects their right to privacy. However, if you are concerned that they or someone else is at serious risk of harm or at risk to life, explain that you must discuss this with your District Safeguarding Lead (DSL), though they can be kept anonymous.
- i) **DON'T do nothing.**