

Domestic Abuse – The Importance of Language

This document has been created to enhance professionals when communicating with those who experience domestic abuse. It is imperative that appropriate language is used to build a rapport and reflect the persons lived experience. This document can assist in using a trauma informed response which can assist with further disclosures and can look to reduce the use of victim blaming language.

The language we use can be shaped by cultures, work, personal environments, and the media to name a few. Language is always evolving, and it is key to ensure we are using correct terminology to enhance our understanding of domestic abuse and the impact it has on those who experience it.

For consideration

We know that domestic abuse is a hidden crime however, the ONS (2022) noted that an estimated 6.9% of women (1.7 million) and 3.0% of men (699,000) experienced domestic abuse in the last year.

[Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/domestic-abuse-victim-characteristics-england-and-wales)

As practitioners we have expectations of those who are experiencing domestic abuse to adhere to safety plans and put measures in place to ensure the safety of themselves and any dependants (adults/children).

'Words that come to mind when we think about how a victim of abuse of domestic abuse may feel: fearful, trapped, coerced, abused, belittled, judged, isolated, frightened, controlled, unsafe, and manipulated.'

'Yet we continue to expect them to make disclosures, make decisions, take control, and protect and implement safety for themselves.'

[Avoiding victim blaming language in social work practice with domestic abuse | Social Work Today](#)

If we want people who experience domestic abuse to engage, we need to start off by using appropriate language and use a trauma informed approach.

A person's history of relationships can make up how they respond in relationships in the future. When you are involved in a situation emotionally, you have a different view of what someone on the outside may have. The term 'rose tinted glasses' is often used to explain this.

When you are talking to someone who is experiencing domestic abuse, you need to consider what and how you ask them questions.

Notes for consideration	Suggestions
Calling someone a 'victim' – this is often used in a professional context, in legal terms and on statements and other documents.	Refer to someone that is 'experiencing domestic abuse' or something else related (enduring, living with, in an abusive relationship, suffering)

<p>However, when speaking to someone and calling them a victim if they do not see themselves as a victim this could put barriers in place for engagement and disclosures. This is something to consider.</p>	
<p>Using terminology such as <i>not engaging</i>, <i>refusing</i>, <i>not cooperating</i> may seem that you are stating facts, however this can suggest the person is purposefully being disruptive and can impact other professionals' views on them especially if this is noted on professionals' files.</p>	<p>To use professional curiosity to understand the person more and trying and ascertain if there are reasons behind the concerns that you have. For example: 'Can you tell me more, so I can understand your concerns?' 'Can you tell me why you don't feel able to talk further?' 'What are you worried about?' Ensuring that if a DASH or further disclosure cannot be completed, further context such as 'because they are fearful of repercussions from abuser/children being taken away/no one will believe me' is noted on documentation. Not only could this help professionals to understand where that person is at, but it could also show a pattern of the impact the abuse has and could be used as further evidence of domestic abuse. Agencies can still complete a DASH on their professional judgement without full client engagement.</p>
<p><i>Choosing to remain with the abuser</i> – this suggests the person experiencing domestic abuse has a choice in the matter. What we know about domestic abuse is that it is driven by the need of power and control and to induce fear.</p>	<p>Stating that the person does not feel able to leave or does not feel safe to leave currently encompasses a variety of reasons (fearful of reprisals, dependant on perpetrator, shame regarding their situation and reliance on their abuser). It may be that they are not aware of their options or services available to support. Consideration needs to be had on the psychological impact the abuse will have on those experiencing it and it should be remembered that leaving an abuser is one of the highest risk times.</p>
<p><i>Putting themselves at risk</i> – by stating this, this could make the person feel like professionals think they like being in an abusive situation and that the professional believes they have other choices. If that person thought they could get out of the situation easily or safely with what they currently know, wouldn't they? Consideration to the fact that the person could have been 'conditioned or groomed' by their abuser. That they may have been in other abusive relationships/positions in their life and may have experienced trauma which does not enable them to see their situation like you do as a professional.</p>	<p>Discussing that you are concerned about the situation that they are in. You are concerned that 'x' is causing them harm and putting them at risk. Concerns that due to the abuse that 'x' is perpetrating on them, you are aware they cannot engage with professionals or access services for help easily. Stating 'they are at risk from....,' '.... is putting them at risk' or '... could cause further risk' takes the responsibility of risk away from the person who is experiencing it. The abuser alone is responsible. By changing our language, we</p>

	can change how we perceive referrals and information shared.
<i>Not safeguarding</i> – there needs to be clarity over someone not putting any measures in place to ensure the safety of all of those who may be impacted by the abuse and someone who is managing risk to the best of their abilities.	Professionals need to consider realistic safety plans and agreements and ensure you are fully appraised of any events leading up to an incident/concern. Were there missed opportunities to put in further safety measures? Would risk have escalated if they followed the plan?
<i>Victim breaching bail/agreement</i> – remember the bail conditions were not put onto the person who is being abused. They are the responsibility of the abuser, and we know abusers like power and control. The person being abused is at further risk by these being breached by the perpetrator. Is the person being coerced into breaching these? Are they in fear of repercussions if they do not? Do they feel they depend on their abuser? Consider <i>Stockholm syndrome</i> . Do they understand what conditions are in place and why?	Discussions about keeping them safe, that this shows a lack of respect of the law and to the person they have abused by breaching these. Professionals SHOULD ALWAYS report breaches of which they are aware. We know that by putting orders/conditions in place, this can give the person being abused some time to ‘ <i>breathe and think.</i> ’ They may start to see that they can live without their abuser. They may become less fearful of them or notice that without them they are physically and psychologically safer.
<i>Person is vulnerable</i> – we must be clear what we mean by this. Are we saying they are a vulnerable adult due to a diagnosis of sorts? Or are we saying they are in a vulnerable position? These mean vastly different things and there needs to be fact and clarification around this.	If a person is vulnerable, explain why. If they are in a vulnerable <i>position</i> , then explain this and look to include information on any complicating factors.
<i>Caught in the crossfire</i> – when you look online for examples of this phrase, there are lots of images of war and fighting where a different innocent party gets hurt. If we refer to this phrase when there are children in the home, this suggests that two adults are fighting against each other. What we know about domestic abuse, regardless of if the abuse is bidirectional, that there will always be one main aggressor. By stating they are caught in the crossfire suggests that both parties are causing harm, and both are perpetrators. We know children are classed as experiencing domestic abuse now, not just as a witness, however the adult in that environment is also experiencing domestic abuse and this should not be forgotten.	Be clear who is the main aggressor here, and who is being abused. If there are concerns regarding bidirectional abuse, then state this. However, information should remain factual. If there are injuries or threats, make it clear who has done these.
<i>Domestic abuse in the home</i> – implies that there are two adults taking part in abusive behaviours in equal measure.	Be specific who is the perpetrator and who are the people experiencing the abuse. Who has that control in the household?
<i>It has only been a minor breach, no threats</i> - A breach of an order/conditions is an offence, there is no such thing as a minor breach. The impact on someone experiencing abuse who has protective factors in place to protect them,	Professionals should encourage people to report breaches themselves. Professionals can also report breaches, this shows that you are listening to the person experiencing the abuse and understand the effect that this is having on

<p>should feel protected and not have others judge what is or is not minor/major. The person experiencing the abuse does not need to have a threat to feel frightened, a hello text or knock on the door can impact that person as much as an outright threat of violence. There has been a breach of an order or conditions which shows us more about the perpetrator and that they have a heightened sense of entitlement to feel that they can continue with their pattern of abuse with no consequences.</p>	<p>the person and the level of heightened risk is understood. Explain why you need to report the breaches and the fact this can show an escalation of risk with the perpetrator showing complete disregard for the law and the person they are abusing. It can help professionals to look at any changes in risk and what other safety planning and safeguarding needs to be considered.</p>
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We also need to consider how we identify children who are living with domestic abuse.

We know that the DA Act 2021 states that children are victims in their own right. Professionals often state children 'witness' domestic abuse when they have 'experienced' it.

'Domestic abuse undermines a child's basic need for safety and security. It can have a serious effect on their behaviour, brain development, education outcomes and overall wellbeing.'

(Holt, Buckley and Whelan, 2008; Stanley, 2011; Szilassy et al, 2017)

[Protecting children from domestic abuse | NSPCC Learning](#)

The United Kingdom Encyclopaedia of Law states that a witness is: *'A witness to an incident or event.'*

[Witness – United Kingdom Encyclopaedia of Law \(lawi.org.uk\)](#)

A victim is described as: *'someone or something that has been hurt, damaged, or killed or has suffered, either because of the actions of someone or something else, or because of illness or chance.'*

[VICTIM | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#)

Looking at both definitions, there is no mention of the impact on a witness.

Stating children have witnessed an incident, does not show the *true impact* domestic abuse can have on them during, shortly after or in their future.

Examples of inappropriate language from MARAC referral forms in Lincolnshire:

'Caught in the crossfire'

'Domestic abuse in the home'

'Only a minor breach'

'Happy to have him back living with her.'

For further learning about appropriate language, look to complete the eLearning titled *'Domestic Abuse - The importance of language in Domestic Abuse'* on the LSCP Website [LSCP Training – LSCP \(lincolnshirescp.org.uk\)](#)