

BRIGHTER FUTURES

Domestic Abuse: Recognising It, Staying Safe and Finding Support

Plain information for people experiencing abuse, those
worried about a relationship, and people supporting
someone else

*You do not have to be certain what to call your experience before
asking for help*

This guide replaces an earlier Brighter Futures / Rainbow Action Group Survivors Handbook. Useful material on recognising abuse, safety planning, supporting another person and self-care has been retained in revised form. Outdated legal guidance, service information, statistics and COVID-era material have been removed.

Revised by Brighter Futures - August 2026

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is not limited to physical violence. In England and Wales, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises physical or sexual abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, controlling or coercive behaviour, economic abuse, and psychological, emotional or other abuse between people aged 16 or over who are personally connected.

That can include a current or former partner, spouse or civil partner, or a family member. Abuse can be a single incident, but it is often a pattern of behaviour used to frighten, isolate, control or undermine another person.

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, disability, income or background.

Children can be affected even when the abuse is not directed at them. The law recognises a child who sees, hears or experiences the effects of domestic abuse as a victim in their own right where the legal relationship criteria are met.

Abuse is not always obvious

- It may begin gradually and become more restrictive over time.
- The person using abuse may behave very differently in public from how they behave in private.
- There may be periods of kindness, apology or apparent calm between abusive incidents.
- Someone can be frightened and controlled without ever being physically assaulted.
- Abuse can continue or become more serious after a relationship ends.

You do not need to prove that it is "bad enough" before seeking advice

If something in a relationship is making you frightened, controlled, isolated or unsafe, you can speak to a specialist service even if you are unsure whether the word domestic abuse applies.

Recognising the signs

One incident on its own does not always tell you what is happening. Look at the pattern: what happens, how often it happens, what you have to do to avoid a reaction, and whether another person is increasingly controlling your choices.

Type of behaviour	Examples
Emotional or psychological	Insults, humiliation, criticism, intimidation, threats, blaming you for the abuse, making you doubt your judgement, or repeatedly making you afraid.
Controlling or coercive	Deciding where you go, who you see, what you wear, whether you work or study, monitoring your movements, or making ordinary independence feel dangerous.
Economic	Controlling access to money, taking wages or benefits, creating debt in your name, preventing work, withholding essentials, or making you account for purchases.
Physical or sexual	Pushing, hitting, restraining, choking or strangulation, damaging property as intimidation, unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, or forced sexual activity.
Technology-facilitated	Checking messages, demanding passwords, tracking location, controlling online accounts, placing monitoring devices, impersonating you online, or using technology to harass or threaten.

Questions you might ask yourself

- Do I change my behaviour because I am worried about their reaction?
- Am I becoming more isolated from friends, family, work or activities I used to enjoy?
- Does another person control money, transport, communication, medication or access to support?
- Am I frightened of what might happen if I disagree, leave, end the relationship or ask for help?
- Do I feel watched, followed or monitored, or have threats been made against me, children, relatives, pets or things important to me?

If you are worried about your safety

If there is immediate danger

Call 999 and ask for the police. If you call 999 from a mobile and cannot speak, listen to the operator. When prompted, pressing **55** tells the system that you need police assistance and cannot talk.

A safety plan is not about telling you whether to stay or leave. It is a way of thinking in advance about what might help if a situation becomes dangerous.

Safety planning is individual

- **Think about safer places.** If tension is rising, where could you move that has an exit and is away from potential weapons or other hazards?
- **Know who you could contact.** This could be a trusted person, specialist domestic abuse service, police, health professional or support worker.
- **Agree a simple signal if useful.** A trusted person may be able to recognise a code word or agreed message that means you need help.
- **Keep essential information accessible if it is safe to do so.** Important telephone numbers, medication information, identification and key documents may be useful in an emergency.
- **Think about children and dependants.** Their safety needs should be part of any plan. Avoid asking children to intervene in violence.
- **Trust changes in risk.** If behaviour is escalating, threats are becoming more specific, stalking is increasing, or weapons are involved, seek specialist or emergency help.

Leaving can be a particularly risky time

Do not assume that leaving immediately is always the safest option. If you are considering ending a relationship or leaving home, a specialist domestic abuse worker can help you think through the risks and available options. If you are in immediate danger, call 999.

Phones, accounts and practical safety

Technology and money can both be used as forms of control. Safety measures should be chosen carefully: suddenly changing passwords, disabling location sharing or moving money can sometimes alert the person using abuse.

Digital safety

- If you think a phone, computer or account is being monitored, consider using a safer device to seek advice.
- Location sharing may exist in phone settings, family accounts, car apps, social media, photographs, smart-home devices or shared online accounts.
- Changing passwords can be useful, but first consider whether doing so could increase risk or reveal that you are seeking help.
- Private browsing may reduce what is stored in the browser, but it does not make a device completely untraceable.
- A specialist domestic abuse service can help you think through technology safety without making sudden changes.

Money and documents

- If someone controls your money, debts, benefits or access to banking, this may be economic abuse.
- If it is safe, keep a note of important account information and documents you may need later.
- Do not take financial steps that could increase immediate danger without considering the consequences and, where possible, getting specialist advice.
- Housing, benefits and legal options can be complicated. Specialist services can help you find current advice rather than relying on old information.

Use a safer device when you can

If you believe someone is monitoring your device, it may be safer to use a trusted person's phone, a library computer, a work device where appropriate, or another device the person cannot access. Refuge publishes specialist technology-safety information for people experiencing domestic abuse.

Supporting someone else

If somebody tells you they are being abused, you do not need to solve everything in one conversation. A calm, practical response can make it easier for them to keep talking and seek specialist help.

What can help

- **Listen and take them seriously.** Let them describe what is happening in their own words.
- **Avoid interrogating them.** They may already be managing fear, shame, confusion or pressure from the person using abuse.
- **Do not blame them for staying, returning or changing their mind.** Leaving can be complicated and sometimes dangerous.
- **Ask what would be useful.** They may want information, somewhere safe to make a call, practical help, or simply somebody who knows what is happening.
- **Respect their choices where it is safe to do so.** Taking control away from them can repeat a dynamic they are already experiencing.
- **Encourage specialist support.** A domestic abuse service can discuss risk, safety, housing, legal options and other help.

Be careful about promises of secrecy

It may not always be possible or safe to promise that you will tell nobody, particularly where a child or an adult at risk may be in danger. If you are acting in a professional or volunteering role, follow your safeguarding procedure.

Do not confront the person using abuse on the survivor's behalf

Confrontation can increase risk, reveal that the survivor has spoken to somebody, or remove their control over what happens next. If you think there is immediate danger, contact the emergency services.

If the person stops talking or returns to the relationship, leaving the door open for future contact can be more useful than expressing frustration or withdrawing support.

Finding the right kind of help

Different people need different forms of support. You may want to talk without making a report, make a safety plan, ask about housing, get legal advice, report a crime, or find specialist support for children.

Specialist domestic abuse services

A specialist worker can help you think through risk and options without requiring you to make an immediate decision about leaving or reporting to the police.

Police

Domestic abuse can involve criminal offences. You can call 999 in an emergency. For non-emergency police contact, use the current contact route for your local police force.

Legal protection

Civil legal protections may include non-molestation orders and occupation orders. Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders are also being introduced through a phased pilot in parts of England and Wales, so availability varies by area. Because the law and procedures change, get current specialist legal advice rather than relying on an older handbook.

Housing and practical support

A domestic abuse service or local authority may be able to advise about safe accommodation, housing options, benefits, financial support and practical safety. You do not necessarily need to have left home before asking for advice.

Health services

A GP, nurse, midwife, sexual health service or other health professional can provide healthcare and may also help you access specialist support. If you have been injured, strangled or sexually assaulted, medical assessment can be important even when injuries are not obvious.

This guide does not provide legal advice

The legal section in the 2022 handbook has deliberately not been reproduced. Procedures, eligibility rules, protection orders and legal aid arrangements can change. Use a current specialist service or qualified legal adviser for individual advice.

A personal safety and support plan

Only write this down if it is safe for you to keep it. If somebody monitors your belongings or devices, a written plan may create a risk. You can instead think through these questions with a specialist worker.

People I could contact if I needed help:
A place or person I could go to in an emergency:
Important medication, mobility, communication or access needs:
Things that have recently made me feel more at risk:
Children, dependants or pets I need to consider in a safety plan:
A safer device or place I could use to seek information:
A specialist service or professional I could speak to:

Your plan can change

Risk and circumstances can change quickly. A specialist worker can help you review a plan if the situation changes, particularly around separation, stalking, escalating threats or changes in access to money, housing or children.

Support in East Sussex

Advance - East Sussex Domestic Abuse Service

East Sussex County Council states that, from 1 May 2026, Advance provides domestic abuse support across East Sussex for people aged 16 and over affected by domestic abuse, sexual abuse or violence.

Telephone: 0330 055 9278 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm)

Email: EastSussexDA@advancecharity.org.uk

If there is immediate danger, call **999** and ask for the police.

If you are worried about a child

East Sussex County Council advises contacting its Single Point of Access (SPoA) if you are worried about a child who may be at risk of harm. Current details should be checked on the East Sussex County Council website.

National information

The NHS publishes current information on recognising domestic abuse and finding help. Refuge provides the National Domestic Abuse Helpline and specialist technology-safety information. Specialist national services are also available for men and LGBT+ people.

Check service details before relying on a printed copy

Services, opening hours and legal arrangements can change. This guide was checked in August 2026. For current non-emergency details, use the relevant organisation's official website or the East Sussex County Council domestic abuse page.

About this guide

This is general information, not emergency, legal or medical advice. It has been substantially rewritten from the 2022 Survivors Handbook: useful themes on recognising abuse, safety planning, supporting somebody else and self-care have been retained, while old contacts, statistics, COVID-era material and detailed legal guidance have been removed.

Reviewed against: Domestic Abuse Act 2021 / GOV.UK; NHS; East Sussex County Council; Refuge; Independent Office for Police Conduct Silent Solution guidance.

Brighter Futures

Community wellbeing, creativity and connection in East Sussex

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