

Domestic Abuse: A discussion

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Fifi: Hello everybody. Welcome to **BSL Zone**, in conjunction with SignHealth. I would like to welcome two women; Marie Vickers [on your left] from **SignHealth** – she’s the Domestic Abuse Service Manager – and Sabina Iqbal, the Sensory Services Team Manager at Hertfordshire County Council [on your right]. Sabina, Marie - welcome! Obviously, we are connected remotely so we are not in the same room, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

On the topic of coronavirus, we are here today to talk about domestic abuse. It appears that during the lockdown, there have been increased reports of domestic abuse and helplines have been inundated with calls. First of all, I would like to ask Marie and Sabina to explain briefly what domestic abuse actually is..?

Marie: In the past, the term “domestic violence” was used and people thought this was related to physical violence, but we now use the term “domestic abuse” to cover different types of abuse. Different types of abuse include emotional, physical, sexual, financial and psychological. “Domestic abuse” is the term we now use.

Sabina: That’s right.

Fifi: Thanks for clarifying with the audience what domestic abuse means. I am just looking at the questions we will be covering in our session. I would like to thank to those of you in the audience who have sent questions in advance of this session. Both Marie and Sabina will try to answer as many of your questions as possible.

As we know, reports of domestic abuse have gone up during the lockdown, and we have read about upsetting stories of deaths. The number of calls to helplines have increased. Can you explain to us more about why this is happening?

Marie: When the Government announced the lockdown rules in which everyone had to stay home, and could only leave the house for four reasons: to exercise; travel to and from work if you are a key worker; food shopping; and to collect medicines. Those rules mean that people have to stay home to protect themselves, but at the same time, where there is abuse in the home, those lockdown rules have made things worse with restricted freedom. People can’t go out of the house to ask for help because they have to follow Government rules. Perhaps the abuser is always there in the same house, controlling things. Having to work from home means that a person cannot go to their workplace, where they may feel safe, being able to switch off from home. Children need to be looked after at home during the lockdown. Working from home, making sure everything is OK, looking after children, as well as coping with abuse at home, makes it harder to ask for help. This is why there has been a huge number of calls to helplines and live chat asking for help.

Fifi: Sabina, is there anything you would like to add?

Sabina: It is a real challenge. Imagine what it is like for those who are experiencing domestic abuse to be in lockdown suddenly - it is more difficult for them with more barriers. Like Marie said, the new restricted freedom during this lockdown means getting out of the house for support is suddenly much more difficult. The risks are so much higher, I am not surprised that helplines are inundated with calls.

Marie: A lot of deaf people usually go to deaf organisations for help; they, in turn, refer to our Domestic Abuse Service for support. However due to the lockdown rules, a lot of deaf organisations are now only offering remote services, which has created additional barriers for those seeking help. They cannot ask for help remotely from home as their abuser may be watching them and controlling their phone, so it is a really difficult time.

Fifi: This can lead to mental health issues.

Marie: Yes, and to feeling more isolated. Before the lockdown, they would have a support network of family and friends to visit and chat with, but now with the lockdown, they are trapped at home.

Fifi: Next question, some people are confused about what is allowed at the moment during the lockdown. If a person wants to go to a friend's house for a few days to escape, is this allowed?

Marie: Yes, the Government is allowing individuals to stay with friends or family if they are experiencing domestic abuse.

Sabina: I have information here from the Government website, which clearly states that isolation rules do not apply to anyone fleeing domestic abuse. It is important that safety comes first.

Fifi: So, if a person flees from domestic abuse, are they allowed to move out?

Marie: Well, there are different options. You can stay with family or friends if it is safe to do so. Do contact the local service or contact us at SignHealth and we can support you in different ways, such as supporting you to find housing such as a women's refuge, to make a homeless application or make a court order for a NMO - Non Molestation Order - to prevent your abuser from coming near you. We can also help you make an occupation order to enable you to move back home and the abuser move out of the home. There are different applications we can make, but the paramount priority is to keep safe.

Fifi: You mentioned women's refuge and court orders - but are they open during the lockdown?

Sabina: yes...

[Marie starts signing]

Fifi: Sabina? Or Marie?

Marie: Sorry... women's refuges are still open, but they are at full capacity due to the high volume of helpline calls, so it can be hard to find a space at a women's refuge. Some hotel rooms are being opened up to be used as temporary women's refuges for those fleeing domestic abuse. It is difficult at the moment, yes.

Fifi: So... yes Sabina?

Sabina: It is important to let people know that they shouldn't feel they cannot flee from domestic abuse; they shouldn't worry about the lack of space at a women's refuge. If it is not safe to stay, do leave and think about where you could go for safety. In Hertfordshire, we have been told that all our domestic abuse services are still operating. Our priority is for people to feel safe. We will support those at high risk. I am sure other local authorities have similar arrangements to ensure that people get the support that they need.

Fifi: How can Social Services help individuals experiencing domestic abuse?

Sabina: In Hertfordshire we have Sensory Services with staff who can sign and individuals can communicate with us in different ways such as via SignVideo, text, telephone or email. We are still operating during the coronavirus pandemic. We are still doing welfare checks with individuals to ensure that everything is OK. However, with our remote services, we can't see everything that is going on at home, so we need to rely on the individual to let us know whether they are at risk or are safe at home. We have to do risk assessments for each situation. Don't rely on just social service; use a range of services such as SignHealth, the police, or go to a place of safety. Boots the Chemist has set up safe spaces in their stores. There are different initiatives you can access for support. I am hoping that other local authorities have made similar arrangements in being creative and flexible due to the coronavirus pandemic. I want to stress again, what is important is that people feel safe.

Fifi: Two things - you mentioned Boots the Chemist, tell us more about that?

Marie: Boots is a pharmacy, so this is still open to individuals picking up medications. Boots worked in partnership with another domestic abuse organisation, Hestia. If anyone goes to Boots and points to a "Safe Space" poster, a staff member will take them to a private consultation room and signpost them to appropriate services. SignHealth also recently launched "BSL Health Access" which means a deaf person pointing to a "Safe Space" poster can use this videophone service to call the National Domestic Abuse Helpline or other services. They can also contact SignHealth directly.

Fifi: So Boots have tablets ready in their consultation rooms for video calls?

Marie: No, individuals will use their own mobile phones to make video calls.

Fifi: What if they don't have a mobile phone to use?

Marie: Perhaps Boots will have tablet for them to use?

Fifi: Sabina?

Sabina: I agree this is a good initiative, well done to Boots and Hestia. I hope that more people will become aware of this extra option to get the support that they need. In Hertfordshire we work in partnership with a voluntary organisation called "Safe Place" and they work with Hertfordshire Sunflower who provide a range of support for people who have been through domestic abuse, including IDVAs [Independent Domestic Abuse Advisors] who can link them up with different services including SignHealth. Once a person contacts a specific service, they will then have access to a range of support services.

Marie: Women's Aid has worked with a range of domestic abuse services, including SignHealth, on developing a range of resources hub, and this is available on the Women's Aid website. The resources are available in a range of languages, including BSL, which consists of nine videos available online. Topics of those videos include access to services, disability, how to contact services and so on. So watching those

videos from home could be an option for individuals to learn about their rights and knowing that they can ask for support. There are a lot of different...

Sabina: That is so important...

Marie: There are lots of different initiatives, such as Boots the Chemist offering a safe space, Women's Aid, all trying to support as many people going through domestic abuse as possible. It is important that they get the support they need.

Fifi: So if there is someone out there who is a BSL user who is going through domestic abuse and wanting to make remote contact for support, how can this be achieved if the abuser is in the same space watching them?

Sabina: It can be really difficult. Over to you Marie...

Marie: It is important to look at your space and work out where the safest place to make a call is. It could be your toilet or your bathroom because this space will be locked. Alternatively, you can make a call when your abuser is out of the house. You could ask your best friend to find out appropriate support services and text you the information. Obviously, do not send this text message to your friend in front of your abuser. The most important thing is to think about your own personal safety. Remember to delete your text messages and call history so that your abuser does not check the history and lose their temper with you.

Sabina: You can also use your landline phone or your mobile phone to call 999 by leaving it on after you have dialled 999. I agree with Marie, think of a safe space where no one can see you so that your personal life is not at risk.

Marie: It is important that everyone registers their mobile with the 999 SMS service which means you can then send a 999 message at any time. Alternatively, you can press 55 for the Silent Solution after you have pressed 999 - this method will let the operator know that this is a deaf person or a hard-of-hearing person who cannot talk on the other end of the line. The operator will then send an emergency police response quickly to check on you.

Fifi: That is useful information to know.

Sabina: Yes, this is important.

Fifi: Next question - if a person going through domestic abuse is physically disabled or housebound and cannot leave the house, what can be done? How can they leave?

Sabina: If a person has additional needs, a learning disability or physical disability and cannot leave the house, they would usually have PA support or carer who visits the home. However due to the coronavirus lockdown, it may mean that that person is stopped from visiting. This will mean that it is social services who will need to know what the risks are. If we don't know about a particular situation, it will be a challenge. It is important that social services know who is already receiving support or care package and it will be the carers who will notify us. It could also be neighbours, or it can be the person themselves using their safe space to send text messages. It is very difficult at the moment, as there are lots of people out there who cannot access services. If you think there is someone out there who is at risk, do share your concerns. Be aware that they may not consent to you sharing your concerns with the authorities. It can be challenging when life is at risk.

Marie: Sabina, you are right. If there is an immediate risk to life, dial 999. Some women's refuges are accessible for wheelchair users. There are options out there, but it will need social services involvement, plus input from PAs, who are imperative for communication between the person and ourselves at SignHealth or with other services. Different services will work together to work out the best support package to make sure the person is safe in their home. The person can make an application for a Court Order to remove the abuser from the home. There are various options, each case is individual. We will follow the needs and wants of each individual.

Sabina: We need to be aware that deaf people, in particular deaf women, are at double the risk of domestic abuse compared to other groups. We all need to work together to ensure that individuals get the support they need.

Fifi: As Sabina said earlier, if life is at immediate risk, call 999. If a person is worried about their friend who may be at risk of going through domestic abuse, what advice would you give them, in terms of them offering support in a safe way?

Marie: The best thing you can do is to be there for them. Don't judge them, criticise them or tell them to get out of the relationship. Be there for them and talk with them. Perhaps the person is not ready to leave. Friends or family can do their own research and find out what services are available and tell the person what options are on offer. You could offer them space to come and stay with you. Don't pressurise them, otherwise they may disconnect from you and shut down.

Sabina: People respond in different ways to different situations. I agree with Marie, just be there for them. Collect information – you can contact your local social services and ask them if there is anything you can do to support your friend in this situation and share intelligence with each other. You can have conversations with your friend during the coronavirus lockdown and discreetly find out if everything is OK, and share this with others in the background. Don't put the person at risk. If they are not ready to leave the relationship, let them be.

Marie: If someone's life is at risk, call 999. Don't have doubts, just call 999. It is better to do that, to save people's lives if they are at risk.

Fifi: Another question - if people cannot leave an abusive relationship, what can SignHealth do to help?

Marie: If a person cannot leave a relationship, we can work together and develop an individual support safety plan to ensure that person is safe at home. For instance, to identify a safe space where they can call us remotely, and to pack a bag ready in case they need to flee. In this bag, they need to pack important things like passports, documents, a few children's toys if there are children, clothes and so on, and discreetly hide this bag somewhere. So, when they feel ready, they just take the bag and go. We will also develop a support plan so that they know what their rights are, seeking legal advice from a solicitor...

Fifi: But can they afford to pay for a solicitor?

Marie: The problem with Legal Aid is that there has been a lot of cuts. So a lot of people have to pay legal fees themselves, or they may represent themselves. However, if you have experienced domestic abuse and are on a low income, you are entitled to legal aid with a support letter from your GP, or social services or another domestic abuse service, to confirm that you are going through domestic abuse. Whenever you visit your GP, do mention that you are in an abusive relationship so that they can record this on your files, so that when you feel ready to leave, you will have a support letter from your GP for your application for legal aid. Again, it is best to talk to us at SignHealth so that we can support you through different options. We

can also support you with your children, and housing for example, looking into changing tenancy agreements. There are lots of support plans we can cover and put in place for you.

Fifi: You mentioned that it is important to keep your GP updated about what is happening. What happens if the domestic abuse started recently and you haven't reported this to your GP, and now we are in coronavirus lockdown?

Marie: I think most GP surgeries offer online appointments in which you can connect via video calls. There is also the SignHealth BSL Health Access service to communicate with your GP directly. A third option is to email your GP to explain your situation. Your GP can log details on their system.

Fifi: Thank you, what about children? Is there a helpline for children?

Sabina: Children's services are usually in touch with NSPCC or Childline who can support children. Unfortunately for deaf children during this coronavirus lockdown, they haven't got a safe space at school to talk about their concerns. This is something that we need to be aware of; perhaps SignHealth could encourage friends to find out more details where their friends' children can get support.

Marie: Yes, it is hard for many parents to stay at home with their children in an abusive relationship. Children very often see what is happening or are involved with violence that is happening at home. It is vital that you protect your children and try to shield them from what is happening.

It is important that everyone is aware that children are negatively affected by domestic abuse, even from pregnancy onwards, even up to adulthood. They will feel traumatised by what they have seen and heard at home. Do think about protecting your children by leaving the abusive relationship. There are lots of services out there who can help you and your family, such as early help through social services and NSPCC Childline. At SignHealth we have Young People's Violence Advocacy (YPVA), so young deaf people who want to share their concerns can contact us directly in BSL in a safe setting. Sabina is right, schools are closed which means it is difficult for children to share their concerns in a safe space.

Sabina: Just to add - children's safety is paramount. We have to be seen that we are protecting our children from any potential risk of harm. Children's services will usually become aware and we have a duty to report to the police, IDVA or whoever. We have a duty to report any concerns. Child protection is not necessarily a bad thing, it is also about supporting the child.

Marie: A lot of deaf families are anxious about the idea that social services will take away their children. However, this is not always the case, the social worker is there to support families to ensure that referrals are made to the right services. Social workers have a duty to ensure the safety of children in the home.

Fifi: An important point. What happens if a person is at risk of suicide - if they want to kill themselves because they are in an abusive relationship? How do you identify the symptoms that someone is thinking about suicide, to stop it from happening?

Marie: The most important thing is to protect yourself. If you tell us that you are feeling suicidal, we have a duty to report this to the police to save your life. You can contact your mental health team through SignHealth BSL Health Access videophone service and let them know you are feeling suicidal and needing support. Tell your GP.

Sabina: I agree with Marie. In Hertfordshire, we have staff who can talk with you. People who feel they want to die often feel depressed. The current coronavirus lockdown means mental health issues are

increasing because they feel they can't leave the house, they may have no one to talk to, they feel isolated. We are encouraging people to think who could be isolated or feeling depressed, do try to contact them and have a chat with them. Having that chat may make a huge difference to that individual. Having that chat may prevent them from feeling that they want to die. They may have already decided to kill themselves, there is nothing we can do, but it is important to keep in touch. Make connections with individuals and check that they are okay, have a chat. Walk past their house and have a chat with them at a distance to observe social distancing rules. Text them, or have a FaceTime chat, anything you think that would help support individuals who are feeling isolated or depressed. They will know that you are there for them. Like Marie said earlier, be there for them.

Marie: You can communicate with your professionals, such as your CPN or your nurse using the SignHealth BSL Health Access. There is also SHOUT text service if you are feeling distressed.

Sabina: There is also Deaf4Deaf counselling services. SignHealth also have counselling services. Don't suffer in isolation, seek support. Do reach out and ask for help.

Fifi: Thank you. Next question...is there such a thing as verbal abuse, not necessarily using words or signs that the abuser uses, it is more about controlling a person. Is this bad?

Marie: Yes. There are lots of different types of verbal abuse. The abuser can use horrible names like "you are fat" or "you are a rubbish mother" or they can use words to blame you such as "it is your fault, you made me do it" or "Sorry I shouldn't have said that" and they keep saying the same thing repeatedly, getting into a vicious circle where the person continuously feel anxious and feel brainwashed. The person will feel a sense of "it is my fault" and the abuser will reinforce this "yes, it is your fault" There are different ways of controlling behaviour such as putting you down. It is important to report the controlling behaviour because it is actually a form of verbal abuse.

Sabina: Yes, it is linked to psychology. Controlling behaviour creates feelings of making you feel small, feeling bad, guilty, worthless. Even subtle repetitive inappropriate facial expressions without saying or signing anything to you is controlling behaviour, such as looking down on you. Controlling behaviour can make you feel unsafe at home. Controlling your finances, controlling your mobile, controlling your movements, telling you not to go out as they are there "what do you want to do that for?"

It is important to recognise controlling behaviour. If you want to change this controlling behaviour, do talk to someone. Talk to SignHealth about having a protection plan to try change the controlling behaviour. If that person won't change their controlling behaviour at all, there is nothing that can be done and you may need to think of a different option.

Marie: Also.....erm!

Fifi: If you remember what you were going to say, just let me know! I have another question, what other kinds of abuse can we be aware of? What telltale signs indicate abuse to us?

Marie: Domestic abuse can happen within a relationship or within the family. Abuse can happen infrequently, or it can happen on a regular basis. You may notice a friend's behaviour changes - for example, they used to be happy and have become withdrawn, depressed and cancel plans, you will feel that something is not right. Perhaps they are wearing different clothes, if they used to wear vests and shorts and are now wearing long-sleeved tops to hide bruises and cuts. They may make excuses not to go out because they have no money. If they are shielding due to the coronavirus pandemic, the abuser may

control them more with medication, food, shopping and so on. The person will then feel they have no choices left.

Sabina: Without naming individual names, we have had different cases where we have seen a power imbalance in the relationship, it doesn't matter if the perpetrator is male or female, or it is a same sex relationship - where one person holds the power and the other person is frightened. An example of harm is finance, the person may say "you don't know how to handle money, I will do it" and not give the other person any money, or they may control the other person's medication or food. Like Marie said earlier, perhaps the abuser has beaten up the other person, slapped or hit them, or used a knife to stab the other person, and they put up with it until one day they have had enough, and this is when they ask for help. This is when the police and the DVA get involved. The abused person will be supported through the process. They may be homeless because they have relied on their partner.

I want to reinforce it is not about a man abusing their female partner, it is about a relationship between two people and one person feels they have no control, and no power. They may feel they have no home because everything is in their partner's name. There may be a lot of barriers the person has to get through to break free. It takes real courage for a person to break free and get out of their relationship to safety. We have to remember it takes courage for a person to flee an abusive relationship. Like Marie said earlier, we have to recognise the signs that something is not right and be there to support them. Very often, the person will reject help, or they may secretly want help but they are frightened of their abuser. It can be very difficult.

Marie: It is important not to put pressure on a person; you need to be there for them, and offer support when they need it. Rape Crisis in England and Wales have announced that they have been inundated with recent calls about sexual abuse at home. Interestingly, male victims have made calls because they are worried that they are becoming abusers themselves as their emotions spill over and get frustrated, so they get worried that their role changes from victim to that of perpetrator. So there is a lot of evidence that due to the coronavirus pandemic, there are a lot of changes in behaviours. There are helplines out there to offer support when you need it.

Fifi: That is interesting. Two more questions before we end the session. Are courts closed due to the coronavirus lockdown, or are they still working dealing with abuse cases?

Marie: Many courts are currently closed, but next week they are starting to open up their biggest courtrooms again, due to social distancing measures. Cases will still be heard in court and will be backdated to deal with the backlog of cases. Some court cases have taken place remotely using videophones, telephones or emails.

Fifi: Will they be using BSL on videophones?

Marie: I am not sure, but they should be using remote interpreting.

Fifi: Sabina would you like to respond?

Sabina: That is interesting because there was an article in the Guardian newspaper, I think about two or three weeks ago, focusing on the challenges of deaf and disabled people using remote videophones in court settings; not just in criminal courts, but also for tribunals and other court settings. They have piloted the use of remote videophones and criminal courts have said that there have been difficulties in terms of communication. For instance, how can a solicitor have a discreet conversation with their client while everyone is connected remotely? We need to think of creative solutions to think about those difficulties. In

this situation, where there is a court case using remote technology, I would advise that whoever is supporting the deaf person, whether it is the interpreter or whoever is their legal representative - to use an extra screen to be able to communicate remotely. They need this extra facility and sometimes courts forget to organise this.

Marie: At the moment, if there is a deaf person that is required to go to court, do go - do not breach the court order. Go, and if there is no interpreter present, ask for the hearing to be adjourned to a future date so that there are interpreters present for the hearing. It is vital for you to follow the court orders. Criminal court trials are taking place with the presence of a jury, and some changes need to be made due to the new social distancing measures, so future court cases will be dragged out to ensure that court cases are accessible to all.

Fifi: Thank you. Last question of the session - what would be your message to those people who are feeling trapped in difficult relationships made worse because of the coronavirus lockdown?

Marie: No one, needs to be abused, no one. You have the right to flee from being abused. Please use support that is available out there. Contact SignHealth for remote support in BSL to discuss your rights and the different options available to you. If you feel concerned that sharing your concerns with another deaf person in a small world, please do not worry. We have very strict rules about confidentiality. Please feel reassured that you can contact us at any time. If you feel you cannot contact SignHealth, please contact your local services with an interpreter. There is also Live Chat available on Women's Aid website. There are plenty of resources out there; have a look on SignHealth's website. If you want to know whether your relationship is healthy, have a look at the questions on our Domestic Abuse page. My final message would be: you have the right to flee an abusive relationship that is harmful to you. Think about your children, think about your own personal safety. You are allowed to be happy. You do not need to put up with the abuse.

Fifi: I do have one more thing to ask you, you mentioned Women's Aid, what about support for men? Are there any helplines to help male victims?

Marie: Yes, there are two websites, both with Live Chat, Respect and Mankind. Deaf men can also contact SignHealth remotely.

Fifi: Sabina?

Sabina: I totally endorse Marie's comments. I am sure it is the same for other Local Authorities, in Hertfordshire, feel free to contact your local sensory services. We work very closely with other services and with SignHealth. We will make sure that you have the right support at the right time. Our staff can also sign. Remember, you are not alone. Hopefully you will find the courage to do something and know someone who is there for you. Keep safe.

Fifi: thank you to you both for sharing your thoughts with our audience. To the audience, I hope you found this session useful and reassuring. There is online support, help and resources available out there. SignHealth is there for you. Please look after yourselves and stay safe. Thank you for watching.