



Domestic abuse and COVID-19

What is GDASS?

The Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service is known as GDASS. GDASS is there to support anyone experiencing domestic abuse – that is 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men whose life is touched by abuse in what should be the safest of environments. This could be your family, your friends or co-workers.

What is domestic abuse?

Home Office definition of DA: Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.

Types of abuse:

Physical violence:

- Hitting, slapping or punching – the most visible form of abuse that may leave a visible mark.
- Any marks together with any explanation of cause should be recorded.

Emotional abuse:

- Eroding the victim's self-confidence.
- Putting the victim down – this can be simple name calling, eg repeatedly calling someone fat. It can extend to telling them that the perpetrator is the only one who could put up with them as they are not good enough for anyone else.
- Demeaning the victim.
- Shouting at the victim.

Psychological abuse:

- Sometimes called 'gaslighting'.
- Words and actions that undermine the victim's mental health, making them question their sense of reality.
- Tricks include cancelling or rearranging appointments or 'losing' keys and frequently includes denying or minimising other forms of abuse.
- Locking someone inside.
- Making threats.

Sexual abuse:

- Making someone do things sexually that they don't want to do.
- Withholding sex.
- Examples have included pictures that could later be used to threaten.
- Acts that degrade.
- Forced prostitution.
- Rape as a demonstration of power.

Financial abuse:

- Limiting someone's choices or burdening them with responsibility.
- Stopping someone from working.
- Forcing someone to work.
- Taking your money.
- Controlling all finances and only giving an allowance.
- Making you commit fraud.
- Making you financially responsible for all outgoings – bills etc in your name.

All these forms of abuse are about having power and demonstrating power within the relationship.

Who is a typical victim?

Absolutely anybody can experience domestic abuse; it doesn't matter about race, ethnic or religious group, sexuality, class, or disability.

People who have a disability, problem with substance misuse, homelessness, mental health difficulties, or are LGBT are at an increased risk of experiencing domestic abuse and may find it harder to access support.

How might victims of abuse present?

Physical indicators of abuse may be:

- Physical injuries such as bruising, broken bones, burns
- Repeated pregnancies or miscarriages
- Complaints regarding headaches, IBS, etc

Behavioural indicators may include:

- Reluctance to speak in front of a partner or family member
- Appearing submissive or afraid to speak
- The family member or partner may be aggressive, dominant, talk for the client or refuse to leave the room
- The partner or family member may always attend appointments unnecessarily

- The service user may be a frequent attender – or they may frequently miss appointments
- They may be non-compliant with an agreed plan

Emotional indicators might be:

- Depression, panic, anxiety
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts
- Reporting feelings of dependency
- Appearing to have lost confidence and having low self worth
- A loss of hope
- Describing feeling isolated
- Drug and alcohol misuse

Indicators of control may include:

- Non compliance of client with a plan you have agreed
- Frequent missed appointments
- Reporting limited access to money for basic things such as food, transport, electricity etc.
- Trying to hide injuries or signs of abuse
- Minimising the extent of abuse or injuries

Really listen to what they are saying.

Are they trying to tell you something without actually telling you? Sometimes we have to read between the lines to get to the bottom of what is going on.

How has Covid-19 lockdown impacted on victims of domestic abuse?

For victims of abuse, potentially being in lockdown for extended periods with a perpetrator can be difficult to cope with, but it's also an increasingly risky time.

How can you and your service help?

Many of us are working in different ways to normal with our service users. Some we may be still able to see in our usual service centre; others we now have to contact by phone or Skype; and for others we are going to their houses. Starting by noticing what is going on in the background and for the client, and then finding a way to safely ask if they are okay (if possible) is the best way forward.

Is your service still open to service users to attend?

- You can advertise that your organisation is a safe place to talk about domestic abuse by putting posters up. You can download these from our website.

- Try wherever possible to have a few minutes alone with a service user without their partner/friend/family present.
- If you can do so safely and away from other people, ask them how are things at home: Are you safe? Is anyone hurting you? Are you afraid of anyone at home?

Are you having to contact service users by phone or Skype now?

- It can be difficult to know who else is in the room when you are talking on the phone. Firstly check that you are not on loud speaker when talking to the service user. Once you are sure of this, ask the patient if they are free to talk and then ask yes/no questions over the phone.

Some examples of useful questions to ask are:

- Is it safe at home?
- Do you feel safe?
- Is somebody hurting you?
- Is somebody making you do things you don't want to do?
- Are you in immediate danger?

This way if someone is listening to their responses they will not know what they are answering to.

- If you are Skyping a client, what can you see in the background? Are there other people in the room? Can you see any damage to property (holes in walls, doors, broken furniture)? Can you spot any visible injuries on the client.
- Do they look scared? Nervous?
- Does someone keep missing check-ins or appointments with you?
- Does someone other than the service user repeatedly answer the client's phone? Can you hear the other person dictating what the client is answering?
- Is the client reporting having a strict routine they must follow that appears imposed? Are they able to go to the shop or collect medication. If not, why not?
- Does the client report being unable to speak to friends or family over social media or on the phone?

Are you visiting people at home?

- Are you able to actually see the person you need to check on? Or does somebody else answer the door all the time?
- How does the service user present? Scared? Nervous? Hurt?
- There is only so much you can notice when socially distancing – but can you hear any disturbances? Shouting? Screaming?
- Again, can you see any damage to the property such as holes in walls, doors, broken furniture. Can you spot any visible injuries on the client?

- If you can do so safely and away from other people, ask them how are things at home? Are you safe? Is anyone hurting you? Are you afraid of anyone at home?
- Let them know that if they need to talk to you they can contact you.
- Ask if it would be better for you to call them and find out a safe time to do so.

Please note that you must NEVER talk to the person about abuse in front of the suspected/alleged perpetrator.

How to respond to disclosure of domestic abuse:

Your response is important.

- “I believe you”
- “This is not your fault”
- “Thank you for telling me”
- “Support is available for you”
- “What would you like to happen next?”

If you get to talk to the client alone, and they disclose abuse, let them know that they can contact you should they need to.

Choose a phrase or code word that they can use if they feel they are in danger. For example: “Thanks but I’m not interested”. If they say this, you know to call the police or that the perpetrator is around and it is not safe for them to talk to you at that time. **The phrase and what it indicates should be agreed explicitly with the client in advance.**

Give them details for GDASS so they can seek help if they wish to.

Offer to make a referral to GDASS on their behalf. You can do this via the website.

Determine if there is anyone else at risk. Do they have any children or vulnerable adults living with them? If yes, you may need to refer to the relevant safeguarding body (Children and Family Social Care, Adult Social Services).

If you feel that the service user is in immediate danger of injury or death, contact the Police on 999.

[Referrals or enquiries can be made via \[gdass.org.uk\]\(https://gdass.org.uk\)](https://gdass.org.uk)

If you feel that someone is in immediate danger, always call the police on 999