

## Week 3: Keeping Safe and Getting Started

**Safety is one of the first things we need on the journey of recovery as we cannot feel emotionally or physically well if we are living in fear. You have the right to live in safety.**

There are a number of ways in which survivors of abuse may not always be safe.

### Are you experiencing domestic abuse from a partner or ex-partner?

Domestic abuse is not just hitting but covers a range of experiences including:

- All types of violence, or threats of violence,
- Sexual assault,
- Controlling behaviour (not letting you make choices about day to day things or who to see),
- Emotional abuse (calling names, undermining you).

If this is happening to you please remember that although making decisions is really difficult there are some sources of advice and information. They will help you to think through your options:

- If you are at urgent risk immediately call **999**
- Scotland's domestic abuse and forced marriage helpline **0800 027 1234** for women
- AIMS—Abused Men in Scotland helpline **0330 094 9395** for men

- The National Helpline for Male Survivors of Domestic Abuse helpline **0808 801 0327**. Opening hours and further information available on **mensadviceline.org.uk**.
- The Mankind Project for male victims of domestic abuse and domestic violence across the UK as well as their friends, family, neighbours, work colleagues and employers. Helpline **0182 333 4244** **www.mankind.org.uk**
- Your local Women's Aid group (**www.womensaid.scot/find-nearest-wa-group**)
- The local police, Victim Support or social work services should also have sources or advice.

Unfortunately, although you may have managed to end a relationship, it is very common for threats and violence to continue.

This is called harassment or stalking. You may receive lots of messages, texts, notice your ex (although stalking is not only done by ex-partners, it can be done by others) repeatedly near your home or work, you may get unwanted gifts or threats to harm you, others you care about or themselves:

- If you feel in imminent danger do not hesitate to call **999**.
- Phone the National Stalking Helpline **0808 802 0300**

- Phone the National Domestic Abuse helpline **0800 027 1234**
- Visit **www.protectionagainststalking.org** or **www.womensaid.scot**
- Visit **www.protectionagainststalking.org** for further information

There is a safety planning sheet at the end of this section. Please look at this carefully.

**Do you have continued contact with an abuser who hurt you in the past? Are you still at risk from the abuser?**

Many survivors find themselves forced to have ongoing contact with their abuser, particularly if the abuse happened within the family and they wish to maintain contact with non-abusing relatives. For some, abuse that started in childhood does not end there and the abuser remains a threat to them.

The experience of meeting someone you have been abused by can be extremely upsetting, even if you are no longer physically at risk from them, (although you may be).

**If you are still at risk:**

- Please call **999**, if there is urgent or current risk.
- If there is ongoing abuse, you can discuss this with the course leaders, your GP, other supporters or the police. They may be able to help you plan to get safer.
- **YOU DESERVE TO BE SAFE.**

**If you are no longer at risk but meeting an abuser from the past is distressing:**

- Can you plan to visit at times you are less likely to meet the abuser?
- How can you prepare yourself?

- Remember your abuser may continue to pose a threat to others. If you know your abuser still has access to children, you will need to think about calling the local social work, police or the child protection helpline department. You may need to ask for some support to do this.

**Many survivors at times feel overwhelmed or despairing about what happened to them and experience suicidal thoughts.**

If you feel at risk of suicide at times, think about who you could call for support:

- Your G.P
- Psychiatrist/CMHT, support worker, counsellor, therapist or CPN (if you have one).
- You can contact the **Samaritans** (24/7) for free on **116 123** or look at **www.samaritans.org** or email them at **jo@samaritans.org**
- Contact Breathing Space (weekends and evening) on **0800 83 85 87** or get information from their website **breathingspacescotland.scot**
- Phone **NHS 24** on **111** or try their website **www.nhs24.scot**
- You could contact a safe/ supportive friend or family member.

It is important that you plan what you will do in advance of a crisis, for example make a list of useful numbers and leave these easily available if you need them (although ensure they are safe from others you don't want to share with).

You can also contact these people if you feel at risk of harming someone else.

## | Getting Started

Getting started is about thinking about how to take control again. The experience of abuse and trauma can make the basics in life; eating, sleeping, taking care of ourselves and making friends difficult to manage so a really good way of getting started is to look at these.

### Taking care of yourself

Many survivors do not take enough care of themselves or feel they deserve to.

Taking time and care for you is not a luxury but a necessity. You cannot have good physical or mental health without taking care of yourself.

- **Plan a daily treat for yourself:** This might be sitting down and watching T.V. or reading a newspaper/magazine/blog for 15 minutes, doing something else you enjoy such as having a soak in the bath, speaking to a supportive friend (not just one that likes to tell you their problems!) or going for a walk on your own or with company. Think about the things you used to enjoy or would like to do in the future.
- **Eat as well as you can:** None of us is perfect, but what we eat does make a difference to how we feel. You can't run a car without the right fuel. Also try not to miss meals as this increases our risk of 'binge eating'. This is when our body gets really hungry and sends out 'eat lots of stuff NOW' messages and usually results in us munching our way through the contents of the fridge/cupboard/corner shop. This is often regretted later and leaves you feeling less in control. We will look at this again in the chapter on 'surviving the surviving'.
- **Avoid too much caffeine:** Caffeine is a stimulant. When you are recovering from abuse your body is already 'on edge'. Adding more stimulants can make you even more stressed and make sleeping a problem. Remember that there is caffeine in coffee, tea, coke, energy drinks and Irn-Bru. Try to keep these to a few drinks a day. Why not try de-caff alternatives, fruit juice or water instead.
- **Alcohol:** Again, we will think about this in more detail in the chapter on 'surviving the surviving' but at this stage, start to think about how much alcohol you are drinking. Remember, the safe recommended limit is 14 units.
- **Take a little (moderate) exercise:** Yoga is great for relaxation. Taking a walk, joining a class, doing some gardening. There is evidence that regular exercise is very good for our mental as well as physical health. But be realistic, use the 3 P's.
- **Make a plan and stick to it:** Perhaps write what you plan to do on a daily basis on your calendar or in a diary.
- **Take care of your health:** Make an appointment to see the G.P., dentist or whoever, if there have been things niggling you. Get support to go if you need to.
- **Catch up with old friends, or make new ones:** Having contact with supportive or even just kind people is really important. Think about people whose company you have enjoyed and perhaps give them a call/text or email. If you feel you are in a rut with friends, think about where you can go to make new ones. Again, this isn't easy and takes time, but you can start to make some plans.

If you are very isolated, make developing the chances to meet people a priority. Remember you have made it along to this course, this is an important first step.

- **Remember to tell yourself you are really important:** You deserve to take care of yourself (even if you don't always believe this).

## | Sleeping

Difficulties sleeping are really common among abuse survivors. Your body may be 'stuck on red alert', waiting for the next assault (even if it has not been hurt for a while) and it is not surprising it struggles to relax to get to sleep. Some people avoid sleep because they get nightmares, or when they are in bed they start thinking about stuff that upsets them. Some people are afraid of the dark or letting their guards down. Some people are using a lot of substances such as alcohol or caffeine which disrupt your sleep.

There is a reason that sleep deprivation is one of the most effective forms of torture. Without sleep we find coping with day to day stresses more difficult, we are irritable and we can't think straight. Getting sleep patterns under control takes time but without it, it is hard to make other progress.

### Some basic sleep advice

- **No napping:** When we are exhausted catching up with a nap seems obvious. However, it can mess up our sleep pattern for the next night. Try to cut out day time naps altogether. Try hard to stay awake during the day no matter how tired you feel.
- **No caffeine in evenings:** Your already over-alert systems cannot cope with caffeine and then letting you sleep. Try hot chocolate, herbal or de-caff drinks instead. Similarly try to avoid too many cigarettes when you are trying to get off to sleep. Nicotine is a stimulant and acts in a similar way to caffeine.
- **A little day time exercise:** keeping physically active during the day will help you to sleep at night. Often when you are exhausted the easiest option is to stay still during the day. However, moving around and using up energy works both by producing natural chemicals which help us feel relaxed and making you feel physically sleepier at night.
- **Keep alcohol moderate:** Alcohol seems like a good idea when you can't sleep. A unit or two (up to 2 small glasses of wine) may be helpful to relax you but a lot of alcohol causes problems. A binge might get us off to sleep, but sleep quality will be poor and you won't feel the benefit of it. You need to re-learn to get off to sleep yourself, it can take a while but it will be worth it.
- **Have a 'switch off' time:** You will not get good sleep if you work until you drop. You need to feel relaxed and sleepy before going to bed not stressed and exhausted. Try instead to have a wee wind down with perhaps a bath or a read before bedtime. The light from TV and phone screens can keep us awake too, so it's best to avoid these before bedtime.
- **Keep bed for sleeping (or sex):** Try not to do lots of other things in bed, such as reading, watching TV, playing on a computer or whatever. We want your body to go 'ahh, bed, time for a snooze'.
- **If you don't drop off, get up:** If you lie down and toss and turn without dropping off, get up after about 20 minutes and do something peaceful (music, TV, book/

magazine, relaxation) until you feel really sleepy again. Then try again, repeat until you get off to sleep. You might need to do this for a week or two (combined with no napping) until you get into a new routine, but stick at it.

- **Nightmares:** We will do a bit on this in a week or two but all this advice is a good start. If you wake up after a nightmare and can't get back to sleep follow the advice above. Also remind yourself that what happened in the nightmare was not happening right now (although it can feel very real). Reassure yourself and calm yourself if you can.

Sometimes survivors, particularly if your mood is low, find they have another difficulty in taking care of themselves. This is feeling that you don't have the 'get up and go' to do things. You may find yourself spending long periods in bed or in front of the TV.

We will cover this in more detail in the session on managing low mood. But you could start thinking about small, achievable goals such as getting up 15 minutes earlier and having a bath or taking a walk to the shops for a magazine. Don't ask too much of yourself if you are in this situation but think in terms of small steps.

### Remember:

- **3 Ps**
- **Keep safe**
- **Take care of yourself**

## Safety Planning: Current Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse affects you and your children, safety planning is a way of reducing the risk.

**If you are at risk now call 999.**

- Try to tell people what is happening. Ask for their support to keep you safe, for example could a neighbour call the police if they think you are at risk.
- Try to keep a phone charged/ in credit and easily available.
- Try to keep a small amount of money hidden and accessible.
- Try to take copies of important documents (or the originals) such as passports, birth certificates, bank details, benefits, immigration information etc. can you leave them somewhere for safe keeping.
- If you can, have an emergency bag with medication and other essentials for example babies food and nappies and a change of clothes, somewhere you could access it in a hurry.
- If you are being assaulted, try to move away from kitchens and bathrooms (although this might not always be possible). But sharp edges and other things lying about increase the risk in those rooms.
- Try to record what is happening.
- If you have injuries, are they being treated? Does the health practitioner have an understanding of what has happened to you?
- Rehearse your escape plan.

If you are experiencing domestic abuse you may or may not be ready to make decisions to leave.

### If you are planning to leave your relationship:

- Do not threaten to leave before you go. You will increase your risk.
- If possible, you can discuss your options with the **National Domestic Abuse Helpline 0800 027 1234**, Women's Aid or a supporter. You will be able to cover traces of calls to the first numbers.

### If you are fleeing in a crisis:

- If at all possible, have a plan of where you (and your children) will go.

**Remember, regardless of what is being told you are not responsible for what is happening.**

## Safety Planning: Harassment and Stalking

Most commonly harassment and stalking are committed by ex-partners, although this is not always the case. If you feel in imminent danger (trust your instincts) call **999**.

Otherwise:

- Speak to friends, colleagues, family and services such as the police and let people know what is happening.
- Keep a detailed diary of incidents as evidence.
- Keep text messages, emails, letters, phone messages, unwanted gifts (if perishable you could freeze them).
- Ask those around you to keep a diary of anything they witness.
- Take seriously threats such as 'if I can't have you no one will' or 'if you leave me I will kill myself/you/others that you care about'. Inform the police.
- Change your phone number and other contact details and remove your numbers from lists.
- DO NOT try to engage with or reason with the perpetrator.
- DO NOT give any personal information.
- Always carry a phone and an alarm.

Phone the national Stalking Helpline  
**0300 636 0300**

Phone the National Domestic Abuse helpline  
**0800 027 1234**

Visit **[www.protectionagainststalking.org](http://www.protectionagainststalking.org)**  
or **[www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk](http://www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk)**