

## TOOL KIT: Domestic & Family Violence (DFV)

### A self-help resource to help people living with domestic violence

Domestic & family violence is abuse by one person towards their partner, girlfriend/boyfriend or spouse. If your partner's actions make you feel afraid, powerless or unsafe, then you are experiencing domestic & family violence. This can happen during the relationship and after you have separated. Children who see, hear or sense this violence are also affected and it is a form of child abuse.

Domestic & family violence is a crime and the person who uses violence is breaking the law. In domestic & family violence the abusive partner uses their power to intimidate, threaten or harm the other person to get what they want.

This may include possessiveness; control; limiting how the other person can behave; or putting them down. They often enforce secrecy and isolation, so that those outside the family do not become aware of their violence. Domestic & family violence is not always physical.

#### **Non-physical forms of abuse include but are not limited to:**

emotional abuse, financial abuse, verbal abuse, social abuse, threats of physical harm, sexual abuse and rape, stalking, and spiritual abuse.

Non-physical forms of abuse can be just as damaging as physical assault. If you do not feel respected or able to be yourself in a relationship; if you are afraid to disagree or negotiate what you want, this is a sign of domestic & family violence. If you realise this is happening to you, talk to someone and get help as soon as possible.

#### **Who is affected by domestic & family violence?**

Anyone can experience domestic & family violence. It happens in every community, young and old; wealthy or poor; all cultures; people in same-sex relationships; people with disabilities; those who are socially successful and

those who are struggling. Over 90% of victims are women, although men can also be victims.

### Leaving the relationship

There may come a time when you want to leave. This can be a difficult decision and will need careful planning and support.

### Why is it hard to leave?

There are many reasons why it can be hard to leave. For example, you may:

- Have a strong commitment to the relationship for cultural or religious reasons
- Still love your partner and hope for change
- Worry about the children's wellbeing if the family breaks up
- Have lost confidence in your own judgment and feel unable to decide what to do
- Fear losing your home and financial security
- Have pressure to stay and 'work it out' from family, community or church
- Fear being blamed or rejected by friends
- Depend on your partner for daily, personal care
- Be pregnant and believe this will finally turn things around

For all of these reasons, some people decide that remaining with an abusive partner is the best choice for them at the time. If you are in this situation, it does not mean you have to remain silent or alone. Keep in touch with people who are supportive and review your situation regularly.

### If you decide to leave

Leaving an abusive relationship often increases the level of violence. The time leading up to and following the separation may be the most dangerous. It is important to have a safety plan that you have talked through with a trusted family member, friend or support worker. If you are not escaping from

immediate danger and you have time, you could pack an emergency bag of things to take with you. Be careful that the person abusing you does not find your written preparations or packed bag.

### Things to take with you should include:

- Emergency numbers – 000 (national emergency number), local domestic violence crisis services, and friends and family
- A bag of clothing and toiletries
- A few of the children's toys and blankets
- Important documents: bank account details; Medicare number; passport; immigration papers; driver's licence; tax file number; children's records; marriage certificate; birth certificates; your address book
- Other important items such as medication, prescriptions, car and house keys, credit cards and cash

You can arrange for the police to be there on standby when you leave to ensure your safety or to return to the house with you to collect your possessions later on. What are my rights? Everyone has the right to live without fear. In addition, physical or sexual assault, threats of violence and stalking are against the law in Australia. You can apply to the police or a solicitor for a protection order (also known as an apprehended violence order (AVO), intervention order or restraining order).

The protection order can direct the abuser not to harm you, come near you, your children, home or workplace. You will need to show evidence of the violence and reason to believe it will happen again. Keep your own record of incidents and see a doctor if you have been physically or psychologically injured, so that a medical file is created. If your partner disobeys the order, you must report it and they can be charged with a criminal offence. You may sometimes have the legal option to stay in your home and act against your partner, so they are removed and ordered not to return.

### You may also be able to access:

- a Centrelink crisis payment to help you with immediate financial difficulties
- financial compensation from Victims of Crime
- free counselling through Victims of Crime or another community-based organisation
- emergency accommodation
- increased security measures at home

The abusive partner can also access counselling, crisis accommodation and support. Each State and Territory has different processes, so it is important to get professional advice. Free legal services are available from community legal centres and other organisations.

### What can friends and family do?

- Listen to them and believe them, without judging
- Do not underestimate the situation. The abusive partner has deliberately tried to break down the victim's confidence and they may feel stupid, hopeless and responsible for the abuse
- Build their confidence, respect their decisions and tell them about the services available
- Offer practical help such as looking after the children, transport, or going with them to court or to see a counsellor
- Stay in touch and maintain your support, especially following a separation
- If the victim chooses not to leave the abusive relationship it is very important to stay connected and continue offering support
- Protect their safety (and your own). For example, do not tell the abusive person where their partner is or how to get in touch with them

- Help change community attitudes by talking about the effects of domestic & family violence and how this damages families and the whole community
- If you suspect someone is experiencing domestic & family violence, ask them about it
- Seek advice from support services so you can find out more about local assistance

### **What can I do if I am in a violent or abusive relationship?**

#### **1 Find supportive friends/family members**

Have someone you can safely talk to while deciding and making changes. Break the isolation and reach out.

#### **2 Let go of feeling responsible**

Domestic & family violence and abuse is not caused by something you have done or not done. It is a choice by your partner to exert control over you and it is a crime. In most cases they will not stop the violence without professional help.

#### **3 Know your rights**

Seek legal advice and practical and emotional support from your local services.

#### **4 Contact a support group**

Organisations that support survivors of domestic & family violence can help you connect to others who have experienced similar situations. This sharing can offer you direct help and hope.

#### **5 Look after yourself**

Find a supportive GP or health worker and tell them what's happening. You can also ring Lifeline for support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 13 11 14.

## 6 Do not judge yourself

Remember that part of the difficulty of leaving an abusive relationship is coping with loss and change. You may find that you regret leaving the relationship, even though you are very relieved to have left the abuse. It is normal to feel this and with help it will gradually become less overwhelming. Talk to supportive friends, family or support workers when you are feeling this way.

## 7 Recognise your strengths

You have to be very resourceful to survive in a violent and abusive situation. Your skills and abilities have kept you going and may have already helped you to leave. You can draw on these strengths to create a more positive life.

### **What are the effects of domestic & family violence?**

Victims develop survival skills to protect themselves and their children. They may 'tiptoe' around their partner's moods or change their behaviour to 'keep the peace'. They sometimes withdraw from their friends and family. They try to protect children from seeing or hearing the abuse. They do everything exactly as their partner wishes, but still, this does not stop the abuse. Some victims also try to fight back.

Living in an abusive relationship can lead to depression; injury from assault; suicidal thoughts; panic and anxiety. You may have nightmares, be unable to sleep, stop eating properly, or feel confused and hopeless. These are normal reactions and many people overcome them with support.

### **What about the children?**

Children living in a household where there is domestic & family violence usually know exactly what is going on and they may blame themselves for the violence and tension in the household. Domestic & family violence is a form of child abuse. Children need support to deal with the trauma they experience and the disruption it causes to their development. Unborn children or small babies can also be directly affected by the violence and

by their mother's fear or stress. Be aware that during pregnancy and around the birth of a new baby there is often a greater risk of violence. Many women are hopeful that these major life events will change their partner. However, there is very clear evidence that these times are often triggers for increased violence due to jealousy and issues of control. Some children may not have the words to tell you how it is affecting them, but their behaviours show you how they feel.

### For example:

- Aggressive, demanding behaviour and language
- Low self-esteem and shame
- Physical reactions; eating and sleeping problems, stomach cramps, bedwetting, headaches
- Withdrawing from friends or difficulty making and keeping friends • Problems with schoolwork
- Becoming a victim or a perpetrator of bullying
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Self harming These are understandable responses to living with fear and worry.

### Children need:

- To know they are not forgotten and that you notice what they are dealing with
- To feel and hear they are loved
- Protection from direct physical, sexual, emotional and verbal abuse
- Encouragement to talk about their worries and make sense of what is happening
- Reassurance that the violence is not their fault

- Help with making their own safety plan for where to go when they are fearful
- To know that bullying and abuse are not ok
- Professional help if they show signs of ongoing distress

Finally, it is important to teach your children how to handle arguments without using abuse or violence. Show them that people can disagree and still respect and care for one another. Respectful relationships involve mutual care and consideration, negotiation and compromise.

### Places to go for help now:

- For immediate help if you are in danger, call the police on 000
- The National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line: 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732)
- Each State or Territory has its own network of services that can help deal with domestic & family violence. Find a local service in your area at <https://www.respect.gov.au/services/>
- For men who use violence or male survivors of domestic & family violence, contact Mensline on 1300 78 99 78
- For specific information about same-sex domestic violence: <https://www.acon.org.au/what-we-arehere-for/domestic-family-violence/>
- For information about receiving a Centrelink crisis payment to help you with immediate financial difficulties, contact Centrelink on 13 2850 or find information online at [www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/crisis.htm](http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/crisis.htm)
- For help finding services whether you are a survivor or a person who uses violence, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14