

## Why victim-survivors don't report domestic violence

Jen\* could never predict when her ex-husband was going to have one of his 'episodes'.

The mum of two in her 30s experienced verbal, emotional and psychological abuse in her previous marriage for more than a decade.

Jen says the unpredictable and frequent abuse wore down her self-worth. "He made me feel like I wouldn't eventuate to anything without him in my life.

"He'd use the children against me and make me feel like an awful parent." The few loved ones she disclosed to encouraged her to go to the police. But Jen felt she couldn't.

"He would have found a way around it. They always do. "You have a sense of believing they are above the law."

Recent statistics show 60 per cent of victim-survivors of domestic and family violence don't go to police, and the experts we spoke to say that figure is likely much higher.

Understanding why could help you better support a loved one experiencing domestic violence.

### Why most victim-survivors don't report domestic violence

While both men and women experience incidents of domestic abuse, women are considerably more likely to experience repeated and severe forms of abuse committed by men — usually an intimate partner.

Reasons victim-survivors don't report can be complex because there are so many factors at play, explains Delia Donovan, the CEO Domestic Violence NSW.

An individual may fear they won't be believed, or will be victim-blamed. They can feel ashamed and might even blame themselves.

Minimising their experiences is also common "because denial is a safer place than feeling traumatised", says Ms Donovan.

There are those who have been isolated from their support network, don't know where to turn or believe reaching out won't make a difference.

"Some people don't even realise they are affected by violence because they are being coerced," Ms Donovan says.

Victims who don't have access to an income or are experiencing financial abuse will also find reporting domestic violence difficult, explains Ali Howarth, clinical engagement manager at 1800RESPECT.

"People who are vulnerable generally have less access to a healthy income, which could give them independence from their partner.

"It's great we are seeing domestic violence leave now, but many women might not even have access to the income or leave that comes with the employer."

Like Jen, many people don't have faith in police or the systems built to tackle family violence.

They may have seen people go through the legal system and how difficult — and dangerous — it can be. Or not want a legal response at all.

"They might not be ready to stop loving them and 'give up' on them," Ms Donovan says.

Jen also believed reporting it would cause her children further suffering. "I didn't want to bring any unnecessary pressure on the children from what they were already witnessing.

"No-one understood the implications [reporting him] could have, on everybody."

Ms Donovan says it's common for victims to fear implications for themselves and loved ones. "There is a fear of consequences, the feeling of hopelessness, helplessness."

### **Greater barriers for those in regional, migrant communities**

There are factors that make it even harder for victim-survivors to report, such as those who are from regional or migrant communities.

"For people in regional and rural areas, there might be a perceived lack of privacy; the doctors and police in town know both the victim and the perpetrator," Ms Howarth says.

"The perpetrator might be a pillar of the community, but using violence behind closed doors." People from migrant communities can be socially isolated, face language barriers and discrimination.

"Many are terrified they will create issues for their visa [if they report]," Ms Howarth says. "They may also fear authority; perhaps the situation they fled, authority wasn't a safe option."

People with a disability, the LGBTIQ community, Indigenous women and children, and the elderly are other groups who face greater challenges when it comes to reporting abuse.

## Spotting the signs of domestic violence

It can be difficult to spot the signs of domestic violence. Knowing what to look for can help you support a friend in an abusive relationship.

## It's not always safe to report

Many victim-survivors fear they won't be kept safe after reporting the abuse.

"We do know that one of the most dangerous times for a woman is when she goes to police," Ms Howarth says.

"When she starts to take her power back, that triggers the abuser to up the ante and increase coercive control, violence and threats."

Ms Donovan says disclosure is not always safe, but victims should feel encouraged to reach out when they feel ready and safe to do so.

"The domestic and family violence sector believes you, we are shouting for you, crying for you, we are allies and we won't stop advocating for you.

"And we are seeing progress. There are some incredible services that can respond and safeguard women ... leading them to wonderful lives free of domestic violence."

## When safe to do so, how can we encourage loved ones to report?

Believing the victim is the most important thing you can do, says Ms Donovan.

"Society can victim blame ... we've been conditioned for so many years around what we read, see and hear, we don't realise our own unconscious bias."

Educating yourself on what help is available will be useful for when the victim is ready.

Ms Donovan says to find out what helps look like. Educate yourself on different forms of domestic and family violence, and reach out to local services for advice.

Understand it may take a long time for someone in a violent relationship to seek support, says Ms Howarth.

"In that situation, just be there and listen and support her in her decision and gut instinct.

"Let them know you support them no matter what their choice is — that you trust their judgement."

When they're ready to leave, help them with safety planning.

"Things like having a code in a text message that means she needs help right now, or to phone the police," Ms Howarth says.

"Help her put aside money, look after documents for her so she can leave at a moment's notice."

Ms Howarth says we need to squash the stereotype that it's a woman's role to protect herself and other women.

"It's everybody's role to stop violence and call it out when you see it."

\*Name changed for privacy reasons.

Family and domestic violence support services:

1800 RESPECT national helpline: 1800 737 732

Men's Referral Service: 1300 766 491

Lifeline (24-hour crisis line): 131 114

Relationships Australia: 1300 364 277

Other resources that can help:

WIRE: 1300 134 130

Victims of Crime (or your state or territory's Victims of Crime service):  
1800 819 817

If you're in immediate danger, call the police on triple zero

**Lifeskills Australia** are here to support you. Please make a confidential appointment with one of our clinicians on **1800 870 080** or **[info@lifeskillsaustralia.com.au](mailto:info@lifeskillsaustralia.com.au)**