Recognising and Responding to Domestic Abuse: A Guide for Faith Leaders

As a faith leader, you are probably often called on to counsel in relationships or families where there are problems. Visiting members of your faith community may also be part of your duties. It is at such times that it can be helpful to know the signs of an abusive relationship or the symptoms exhibited by someone who is in an abusive relationship.



What to do if you do suspect abuse?

If you see any such signs or symptoms, it is important not to 'go it alone'. Counselling in an abusive situation can be tricky and it is a good idea to refer to professionals. If you are not sure, contact a professional for advice. Do not wait, and do not fall for an abuser's gaslighting.

Recognising Signs of an Abusive Domestic Relationship

It can be challenging to discern when behaviour in a relationship has become abusive. Awareness of the red flags is crucial for providing support to those in need.

How can you tell if someone is being abused?

Abuse in a relationship may not be easily obvious, but the impact on the mental and physical wellness of a survivor can be immense. Some survivors are more able to hide what they are going through than others. Some survivors may not recognise that they are being abused as they may see the treatment as normal. Survivors may be any age, race, gender or class. It is important that faith leaders and other members of faith communities pay attention and not be in denial about changes they are noticing in a person. The changes may be gradual, since abuse can gradually escalate over time if an abuser is not stopped.

Levels of abuse are linked to levels of a sense of powerlessness – the worse the abuse, the more powerless and trapped they feel – and the more urgent it is for the faith leader to take action.

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Signs (how the couple relates)	Symptoms (how the survivor presents)
Emotional Abuse Consider whether the person's partner: • Belittles or puts them down in public. • Blames them for the abuse or arguments. • Denies or minimises the abuse. • Isolates them from family and friends. • Prevents them from pursuing education or work. • Makes unreasonable demands for attention. • Accuses them of flirting or infidelity. • Controls what they wear, who they see, or where they go. • Manages their finances or denies them access to money for essentials.	Self-stigma, self-hatred, feeling inadequate. Self-blame and making excuses for the perpetrator. Expressions of guilt and self-blame. Withdrawal or obsession with spirituality and faith gatherings. Withdrawal from public life. Panders to the perpetrator. Doesn't engage with men. Lost confidence, feels ugly or useless. Cannot commit to buying anything, has to keep asking partner or may never have money while actually earning well.
Threats and Intimidation Look for signs where their partner may: • Threaten to harm or kill them. • Destroy their belongings. • Invade their personal space or stand over them menacingly. • Threaten to harm themselves or children. • Monitor their communications, including emails or texts. • Harass or follow them. • Coerce and control their physical and spiritual life	Feelings of worthlessness. Suicidal tendencies, talk of ending their life or that it is not worth living. Hesitance to contact people online or via cell phone.
Physical Abuse Indicators of physical abuse may include: • Slapping, hitting, or punching them. • Pushing, shoving, or physically intimidating them. • Biting or kicking. • Burning or choking. • Throwing objects at them.	Unexplained bruises, wounds, burns, or bite marks. Reacts defensively to sudden movements.

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Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse can affect anyone. Consider whether their partner:

- Touches them in ways they do not consent to.
- Makes unwanted sexual demands or pressures them for sex.
- Hurts them during sex or insists on unsafe practices.

If someone comes for counselling, if they share the following problems, it may be a symptom of sexual abuse:

- Fear
- Nightmares
- Sleep problems
- Anger
- Embarrassment
- Shame
- Guilt

Immediately after an assault, a victim's behaviour can range:

- From talkativeness, tenseness, crying, and trembling
- To shock and disbelief without showing emotions, just smiling, or not moving

Later responses:

- Avoidance reactions
- Physical exhaustion
- Never expressing emotion
- Depression
- Anger that may be displaced on to helpers

Support

If you believe someone in your faith institution may be experiencing abuse, approach the situation with care:

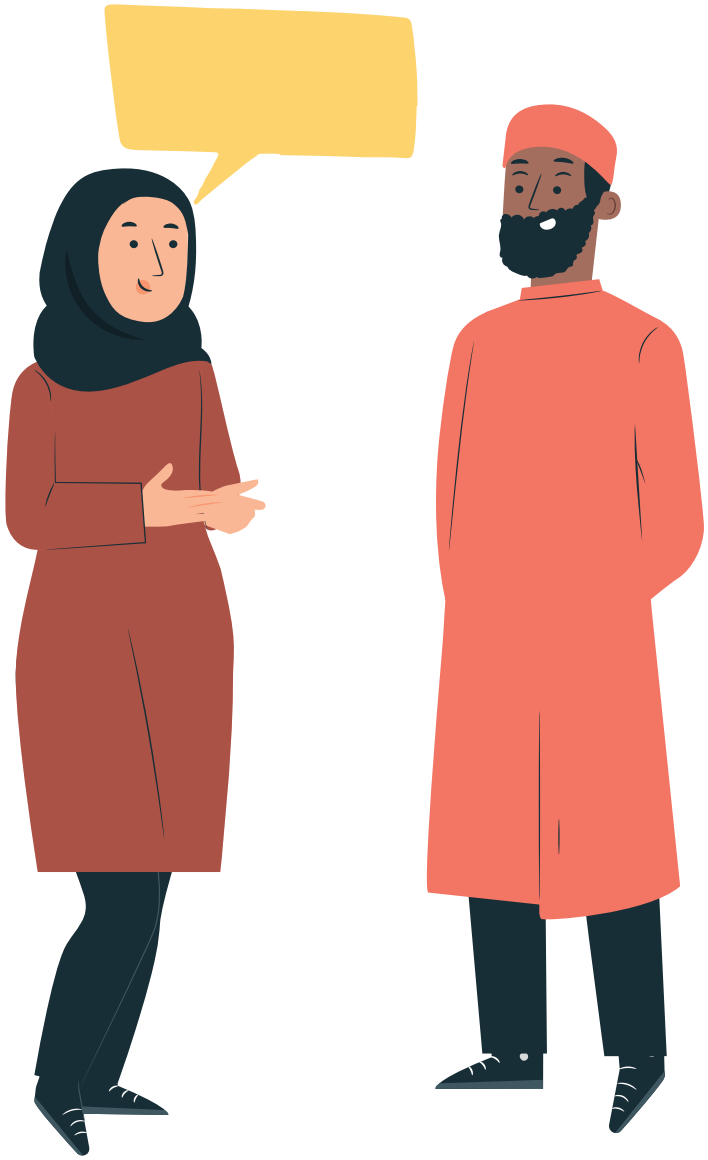
- Gently let them know that you've noticed something seems wrong, but don't force them to talk if they're not ready.
- Show that you care and are available when they are ready to open up; your support can mean a lot.
- If you hear or witness an assault, or believe they are in immediate danger, do not hesitate to call the police.

DO NOT WAIT until the situation is critical, or God forbid, until the abused person is dead!

Remember not to force a survivor to take a radical decision until they are ready. Rather listen to them compassionately and create trust between you. They need to know they are supported and cared for, as an abuser may often make a survivor feel so worthless that they do not even try to leave and are too afraid to confront the abuser. They may believe it is 'the way the world is' and that change is not possible, or that they have been 'called' to suffer for God, or to bring their partner to faith. Give them time but do not wait until it is too late!

By being aware of these signs and providing compassionate support, faith leaders can play a vital role in effectively responding to domestic abuse. But it is only possible if you are willing to be a safe space. Suspend judgement, be sensitive and above all, listen and refer to professional service providers as needed. Create a list of local service providers you can refer them to for additional support.

Read the Safety Plan infographic on tips to survive and leave an abusive relationship.



Interfaith Online Platform:

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