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HAVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE AT WORK

A short, practical guide to support you in having safe conversations

about domestic abuse. The legal landscape is set to change in Northern Ireland with the passing into law of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Act and you can find out more about this in this [Domestic Violence and Abuse Podcast](https://www.lra.org.uk/resources/podcast/domestic-violence-and-abuse-podcast). The Act entitles victims of domestic abuse to at least 10 days’ of paid leave in each leave year for the purposes of dealing with issues related to domestic abuse. Joint guidance developed by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Labour Relations Agency, [Safe at home, Safe at work](https://www.lra.org.uk/resources/advisory-guide/safe-home-safe-work-guidance-domestic-violence-and-abuse-0) includes a sample workplace policy that can be adapted to suit specific business needs, and is suitable for employers regardless of sector, size and financial or other resources.

Ways that you can prepare for the legislation coming into force include:

* Recognising domestic abuse as a workplace issue
* Providing appropriate support for staff who have or are experiencing domestic abuse
* Introducing a written domestic abuse policy
* Raising awareness of domestic abuse and its impact on work
* Training line managers/designated support people
* Putting in place effective lines of communication
* Signposting affected staff to engage with specialist support agencies/professional services

## 1



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A sound policy opens the door to a safe work environment, but it is much more than a document. It is a framework for behaviour, for action. People bring a policy to life.

You can create your own workplace policy from the sample provided in pages 10-19 of [Safe at home, Safe at work](https://www.lra.org.uk/resources/advisory-guide/safe-home-safe-work-guidance-domestic-violence-and-abuse-0). Before you start to copy and paste, take time to consider how your organisation wants to respond to this issue, as driven by your values and culture, as well as the legislative changes. It is important also to consider what practical steps you might need to take. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6-7 men\* have experience domestic abuse. You will need to consider what impact additional leave will have from a financial perspective. You may need to create safe spaces in which people can disclose what is happening to them.

The primary purpose of this guide is to support you in having what may be emotional and difficult conversations.

## Step 1 - Establish Psychological Safety

Books

The Fearless Organisation

*Amy Edmondson*

Psychological Safety - The key to happy, high- performing people and teams

*Dan Radecki and Leonie Hull*

Psychological safety is a "shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Amy Edmondson). Consider how risky it feels for a person to share that they are experiencing domestic abuse. If there is a possibility (even a perceived one) of judgement, negative consequences or humiliation, the likelihood of someone sharing is much lower. What can you do to build psychological safety within your organisation?

\*[NCDV Domestic Abuse Statistics](https://www.ncdv.org.uk/domestic-abuse-statistics-uk/)

## Step 2 - Training and Education



Training and education in this area must be for everyone, to inform and equip those who are experiencing domestic abuse, managers, designated support people and colleagues. Training should be considered through a trauma-informed lens and there is more about this on page 7. There are certain things that are important to cover in training and these should link directly to your organisational approach.

Suggested Learning Outcomes

An understanding of domestic abuse and coercive control, its prevalence and indicators

Legislative requirements, best practice recommendations and your organisation's specific approach

Roles and responsibilities, including the boundaries of each role

Process, lines of communication, privacy and confidentiality

Managing conversations and difficult emotions

# Boundaries

Boundaries are critically important. That is why roles and responsibilities need to be clear. Managers and designated support people will be hearing disclosures of domestic abuse from colleagues. They are not counsellors, mental health professionals or occupational therapists. They are not expected to find solutions to individual situations and they need support in taking care of themselves and managing the emotional impact to them. It is essential to consider how all the groups below will be supported.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Disclosers  People sharing that they are experiencing domestic abuse | Managers  Who are managing impacted team members and the potential knock-on effect on the wider team |
| Designated Support People  Hearing about experiences of domestic abuse (this may include managers and trade union or staff representatives) | HR Team  HR professionals may be designated support people or managing queries, complaints, grievances in this area |

## 3

The usefulness of disclosing experiences with others depends on whether or not the environment is perceived to be safe, receptive, supportive or willing to help.

The responsibility for supporting colleagues experiencing domestic abuse does not sit with one person or a group of people, it is an organisational responsibility. Fostering psychological safety will help people in disclosing their experiences. How you respond will have an impact, but it is important to keep this in perspective. The most impactful things you can do in an initial conversation are: listen actively, show compassion, be reflective, ask what the person needs, say what you can offer, signpost to other sources of help.

Suggestion

Take a look at the Labour Relations Agency webinar recording on [Difficult Conversations](https://www.lra.org.uk/resources/webinar/webinar-difficult-conversations), or research local training providers/consultants that may be able to provide more in-depth training to support you with this.

If any of your staff have already disclosed domestic abuse and they are willing, invite them to be involved in policy and practice development.

## Step 3 - Having Safe Conversations

There are 4 priority outcomes for initial conversations in which domestic abuse is disclosed to you:

1. That when the conversation ends, the person leaves feeling heard and believed.
2. They know what the organisation can do for them and what the next steps for this are.
3. They understand what will be done with the information they have shared and are reassured around confidentiality.
4. They feel safe to have a follow-up conversation with you.



LISTEN

RELAY

ESTABLISH

NEED

CLARIFY

OFFER

NEXT

STEPS

Listening means being fully present and hearing every word, seeing every gesture and sitting with the other person's experience.

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Say what you have heard. You do not have to make notes or recite it back word for word, but it is worth checking your understanding of what you have heard.

Ask what the person needs. Don't be scared that they might say a list of things you can't offer. It is enough that you asked.

Share what the organisation will/is able to offer and what falls outside that. Ask what other support the person has and signpost as appropriate.

Be clear what you will do next or what happens next.

Let the person know when you will update them, or what the next steps are for communication.

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# Dos and Don'ts

## DO

Find a safe, quiet space for the conversation and check in with the person that it feels safe for them. What feels safe for one person may not for another.

Make eye contact if the person is comfortable with it but be aware that they may not be. Use the 3 second rule and don't speak until 3 seconds after the person has finished their last sentence.

Repeat or paraphrase to check your understanding of what you have heard. It is not easy to stay completely focused, especially when emotions are involved.

Say things like, "I am so sorry this is happening to you", "Thank you for sharing this with me", "What do you need right now?", "Would you like me to just sit here quietly with you for a moment before we move on?".

Be clear about what your organisation will do to support and be prepared with the details for other sources of support e.g. a small number of organisations/services that you can signpost to.

## DON'T

Think of what you are going to say next while the person is talking and don't interrupt.

Feel you have to speak a lot - you can acknowledge what you hear with single words, small phrases or your body language.

Give advice. That's not your role and every situation is different. As well-intentioned as it may be, suggesting that someone takes a particular action could lead to harm rather than safety.

Judge the person for the situation they are in. We all have bias and unconscious bias so even if you hear that judging voice in your head, find a way to make sure it is not conveyed in words or body language.

Say that you understand or that a similar thing happened to you. Don't share your story at this point.

Attempt to rescue - this person has already had their control diminished. And don't commit to anything you cannot follow through on.

The Emotional Contagion Hypothesis Elaine Hatfield (1993) defined emotional contagion as *“the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person’s and, consequently, to converge emotionally.”*

## Step 4 - Support the Supporters

We all have varying capacities for managing emotion and this is a skill that can be taught. What does your organisation need to do to ensure that managers and designated support people are also safe? This could be offering them a bespoke package through your Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), facilitating the development of self-care plans, inviting a professional in to facilitate regular debrief groups, or setting up a peer support group within the organisation or with trusted other organisations.

It is important to stress that what we talk about in this document is not counselling or coaching, but for context, this is how the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) defines supervision.

*"A specialised form of mentoring provided for practitioners responsible for undertaking challenging work with people. Supervision is provided to ensure standards, enhance quality, advance learning, stimulate creativity, and support the sustainability and resilience of the work being undertaken."*



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Facilitating Support

It is best practice in counselling and coaching to attend regular supervision. This would also be helpful for people hearing disclosures about domestic abuse. Check in with your Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) if you have one, look to expert organisations/professionals, or ask if you have a person with the right skills to support with this already in the organisation.

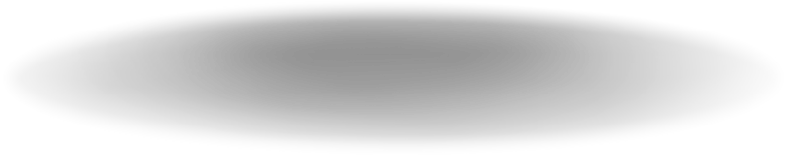
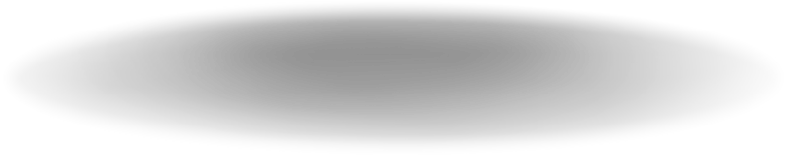
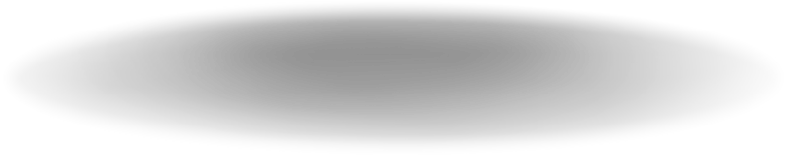
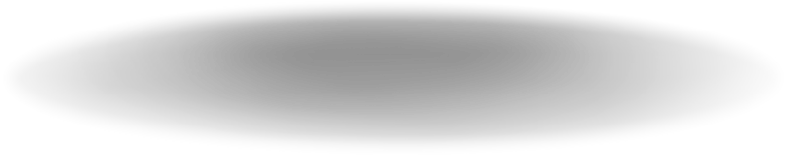
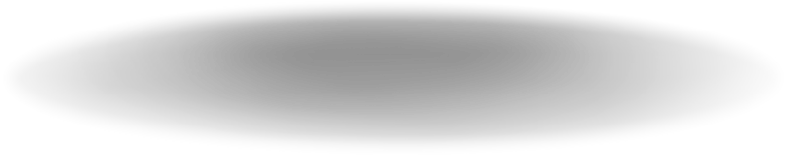
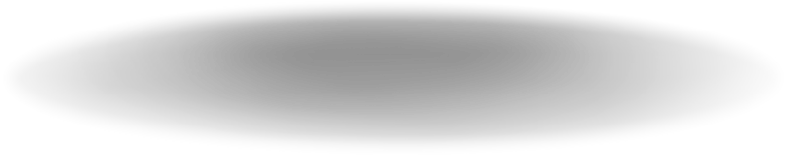
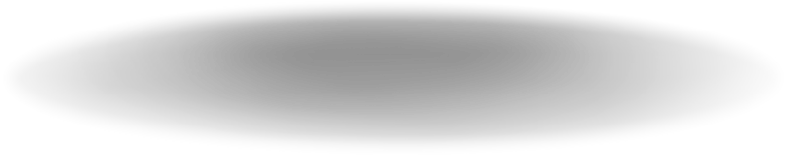
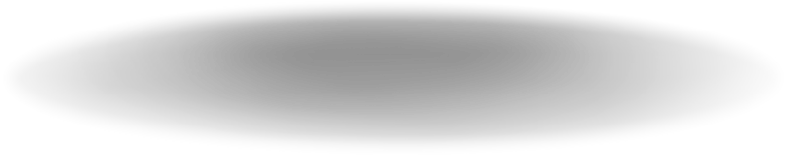
Being trauma- informed

There are 6 principles that drive a trauma-informed approach in the workplace. These should be considered in relation to people that are disclosing experience of domestic abuse. They should also be considered in relation to the people who are directly and indirectly supporting them within your organisation.

Trauma can be a result of a wide range of experiences, with diverse impacts. Adopting these 6 principles across all aspects of your work will support a more inclusive and psychologically safe environment.

### Trust

Setting and respecting boundaries, being transparent and doing what you say you will do.



### Empowerment, Voice and Choice

Giving people agency and choice in actions and decisions that affect them.

### Safety

Psychological, emotional and physical safety, including assurance on confidentiality and respect for privacy.

### Collaboration and Mutuality

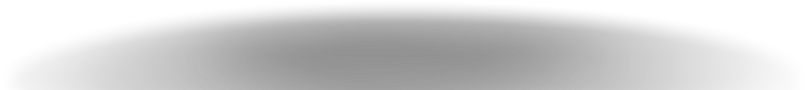
Recognising the value of staff and others lived experience in overcoming challenges, taking opportunities and improving the system as a whole.

### Peer Support

Be open to and actively encourage peer support. Share with others who may have similar struggles or experiences to promote community.

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### Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Recognise traditions and issues associated with different cultures and trauma, and recognise another person's needs based on connection not on stereotypes.



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We help people through their experience of trauma and support them in thriving beyond it. We offer a range of services all built around a core principle of healing in community. These include trauma recovery programmes, trauma recovery coaching and bespoke trauma education and training, tailored to meet the needs of businesses, GP practices, schools and more.

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We provide an impartial and confidential employment relations service to those engaged in industry, commerce and the public services. Our services include the provision of advice on good employment practices and assistance with the development and implementation of employment policies and procedures. The Agency offers a wide range of training.

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