

**ARTICLE**

# **How to help during the rise of domestic abuse due to social isolation**

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When we think about caring for people during the COVID-19 crisis, many of us think about widows, the elderly, or those already battling severe medical conditions. Pastors and ministry leaders may think about children's ministry, streaming services, caring for people at a distance, and what weddings and funerals should look like in this season. But there's a demographic in your church who are in really difficult situations and likely won't speak up. They're not going to reach out, because they're in an oppressive situation.

In the amount of time you read this article, approximately 170 adults will experience abuse at home.<sup>[1]</sup> We already saw these statistics played out in situations as counselors, but with people being isolated, losing jobs, financial concerns, fears, and ways of escape blocked by restrictions to contain this pandemic, domestic abuse and violence will be amplified. Those who might speak up and seek help ([https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52063755?fbclid=IwAR3uqWfAaYBAgSIzB390uDmY-MiYPtECV8XN0HAb\\_n87GlbG3A3Vv0C1Y44](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52063755?fbclid=IwAR3uqWfAaYBAgSIzB390uDmY-MiYPtECV8XN0HAb_n87GlbG3A3Vv0C1Y44)) are limited in doing so as they are stuck in the same home with their abusers.

The sad reality of the increase of domestic violence has already been seen worldwide in this pandemic. At the end of March, calls to the domestic abuse hotline in the United Kingdom went up 65%

([https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52063755?](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52063755?fbclid=IwAR3uqWfAaYBAgSIzB390uDmY-MiYPtECV8XN0HAb_n87GlbG3A3Vv0C1Y44)

[fbclid=IwAR3uqWfAaYBAgSIzB390uDmY-MiYPtECV8XN0HAb\\_n87GlbG3A3Vv0C1Y44](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52063755?fbclid=IwAR3uqWfAaYBAgSIzB390uDmY-MiYPtECV8XN0HAb_n87GlbG3A3Vv0C1Y44)).

The United Nations has called for “urgent action to combat the worldwide surge in domestic violence

([https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html)

[violence.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html)).

As the virus has spread in China, there has been an uptick in domestic violence reports

([https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html)

[violence.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html)). We should expect the same thing here domestically. In fact,

Seattle has seen a 21% increase ([https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-domestic-violence-de98b402-51f2-49ec-919c-c70052e29eef.html?](https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-domestic-violence-de98b402-51f2-49ec-919c-c70052e29eef.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam)

[utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_axiosam](https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-domestic-violence-de98b402-51f2-49ec-919c-c70052e29eef.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam)

in domestic violence reports, and the local CBS news station in Sacramento reported that domestic violence calls had skyrocketed

[\(https://sacramento.cbslocal.com/2020/03/27/domestic-calls-skyrocket-victims-abusers/\)](https://sacramento.cbslocal.com/2020/03/27/domestic-calls-skyrocket-victims-abusers/) as victims have been forced to stay inside with their abusers. This is a heavy topic, in the midst of a heavy season, but we want to care for the vulnerable who are stuck in unsafe homes.

Perhaps as you read this, you are already thinking of one to two people you have a burden for. Maybe they have shared with you or maybe you've just noticed some things that leave you concerned. Here are some steps to provide the best level of care to the people who are increasingly vulnerable to domestic abuse during this time.

**1. Be aware:** It's easy in a season of chaos and confusion to be focused on how that affects you—your family, your home, your situation. We are to care for those things, but God also calls us as Christians to care for those who are oppressed, who don't have a voice for themselves. Start by asking God to help you be aware. In this season where we are seeing people less, we don't want what is out of sight to be out of mind, especially when it comes to the most vulnerable. Let's be thoughtful and praying to see opportunities to help. Reading this article is a step toward raising your level of awareness.

**2. Be present:** A lot of people are out in front of their houses and walking in this season. Even being visible and making our presence known is helpful so abusers don't feel as safe hiding what they're doing. In a time like this it would be really easy for them to assume they have even more control and ability to do what they want. It also allows vulnerable people stuck at home to know they aren't alone, and that the windows aren't all shuttered cutting them off from their neighbors. Spend some time on your driveway or porch; go for a walk on the street; be present.

**3. Reach out:** Even as counselors, we rarely have a woman say, “I’m in an abusive relationship.” Sometimes they are silenced by fear and shame, and at other times, they don't even realize they are in an abusive relationship. But she might disclose a small bit of the abuse by telling you what her husband did when he didn't like how dinner tasted. She might recount the incident as a normal occurrence. Hearing her story, you might realize that's not normal and not okay.

Times like this can push us to grow in our skills to care for people—in our question asking, listening, or moving toward the most vulnerable in some of these situations. Maybe call a woman from your Bible study and say, “Hey, I haven't heard from you in about a week; that's unusual. I know this is an unusual time, so I just wanted to check in. How are things going?” Ask simple but inviting questions to draw people out.

As you talk on the phone with someone whose safety you are concerned for, ask yes or no questions. She may not be free to say very much. We may need to carefully think and prepare ahead of time to allow her the opportunity to acknowledge that something is going on that should concern us.

Every situation is different, so you need to take great care to know the best ways to communicate. Take your cues from the vulnerable person. For some people in abuse situations, a phone call may be the best form of communication. For others, digital forms of communication might be easier to access than a phone call. For others, even private messages may be seen by the abuser. If you don't know what are safe forms of communication, be thoughtful to keep up with them regularly in general during this time.

**4. Form a safety plan:** If the situation allows and it is safe to do so, ask, “What are one to three different practices we could have in place to make sure you are safe?” Safety plans are important to have before things escalate. Brad Hambrick shares how to create a safety plan on his website.

A safety plan may include helping the vulnerable person come up with a safe word. That way, if they're having a really difficult day or there is a heightened incident, they would have a word to send you that would let you know they need you to respond right away. Or, maybe it's a particular codeword you've set beforehand to indicate you should call 9-1-1. Creatively think about how you can help them signal, “I'm in distress and need help.”

Safety plans often include practices that are limited in this pandemic.

Depending on where we live, our movements may be significantly restricted by the government or by wisdom in trying to keep from spreading COVID-19.

Access to cash may be restricted; hotels may be closed. Developing a safety plan may take some creative problem-solving and service, but it is vital.

Safety plans will vary according to each case and available resources. Do they have family or friends nearby that would be able to be a safe place for them to go? Is there a couple in your church who has an Airbnb that isn't being used in this season? Are there any hotels they could stay in and where you could drop off toiletries and nonperishable food? Are there resources available through a church benevolent fund? What things would they need to leave quickly? Should they text or call someone, and when?

As believers, we might be thinking, “What can I offer?” Maybe we don’t have finances available because we are out of work, but maybe we have extra items that someone who is fleeing in a hurry can use, or maybe we have a place for them to stay for the long haul. This isn’t just a pastor’s responsibility. We need church members with an all-hands-on-deck mentality.

**5. Provide respite:** In a season like this, often an abuser’s desire for power and control are amplified, and a person who is abused has fewer opportunities for peace and shelter. Normally a wife might have eight or nine hours where her husband's not home. She may normally have opportunities to go to church or to see family as a break from the hostility, but that has changed in this season, too. The mere presence of an abuser, because of the history of volatile and harmful behavior, can be difficult. Imagine constantly being afraid of being attacked, with nowhere to go. Here are some possible ways for someone in that situation to pursue and receive a period of rest and relief.

- Help them brainstorm when they could go into another room and spend some time alone for even 15-20 minutes. Perhaps it is going to the basement to pray, to the back porch to read, or doing a quiet activity with the kids.
- Stop by for a welfare check while practicing social distancing.
- Where it is appropriate, a pastor or a friend could reach out to invite the abusive spouse for a walk or a meet-up while practicing social distancing. This can get him out of the house to provide a brief window of relief for the family at home.
- Host a virtual book club or something similar. An abusive spouse may be concerned or forbid a spouse from attending Bible study or some events,

but may not be as restrictive about a virtual book club. It could be a potential time where a woman would be able to access community.

**6. Educate yourself:** This is a great opportunity to begin preparing and educating yourself. Do some research. Have the numbers of local women's shelters on your speed dial. Familiarize yourself with their websites. Reach out to local domestic violence shelters, and ask what someone who leaves home quickly for a shelter is going to need. When an immediate crisis presents, you don't want to find yourself needing to do hours of research to figure out how to help. Vulnerable women and children will need a rapid response. Don't find yourself unprepared for a crisis. These are things we, as ministry leaders, should know anyway. If COVID-19 gives us the time and forces us to do this work, then many families in our church will benefit in the future.

**7. Reporting when children are involved:** Many domestic abuse situations can include children. If you have any reason to believe a child is in danger, contact Child Protective Services immediately. Remember, when you call CPS you are not “pressing charges.” You are merely getting an “expert second opinion” as you allow someone experienced in abuse cases know what you know and do a risk assessment based on that information. Beyond your legal responsibility as a mandatory reporter, please don't let your fear keep you back from doing something that at the end of the day might protect a child.

To learn more about a wise response when abuse occurs against an adult, rather than a child, key responses to physical abuse, and what happens when you call CPS, see Lessons 3, 6, and Lesson 7 of *Becoming a Church that Cares well for the Abused* (<http://chuchcares.com>). If you are unsure, the hotlines below can

connect you with an experienced caseworker any time of the day or night, provide guidance regarding the local authorities' role in preventing and investigating abuse, and provide support:

- The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)
- The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233) or 1-800-787-3224.

Even a call over something that seems suspicious may help provide some measure of relief in a situation that might be far worse than what we've even observed. Even if CPS chooses not to investigate, they can help you learn important risk factors to look for and provide guidance on how your church can help the family.

You will likely not be able to provide all the resources and support those who are experiencing domestic abuse need, but you can recommend resources and people to meet those needs. You can be aware, present, reach out, and provide respite. You can prepare beforehand by educating yourself, knowing how to help them form a safety plan, and by being prepared to make a report when needed. Our role is to be aware and alert, asking the God who is our refuge, strength, and an ever-present help in trouble to open our eyes to the vulnerable among us and to use us to care for them.

## Notes

1. <sup>^</sup> *Based on this article taking you 8.5 minutes to read (Around 2,000 words at an average of 238 words per minute).*



<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749596X19300786>

[\(https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749596X19300786](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749596X19300786)

*Approximately every minute 20 domestic partners are abused.*

[https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic\\_violence2.pdf](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic_violence2.pdf)

[\(https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic\\_violence2.pdf\).](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic_violence2.pdf)

*Those numbers do not include the children who also experience abuse.*

[https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/nca-digital-](https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/nca-digital-media-kit/national-statistics-on-child-abuse/)

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