

# Domestic abuse and mental health

**A GUIDE FOR  
SURVIVORS**

**women's aid**  
until women & children are safe



**#DeserveToBeHeard**

“

“Recognising when you’re being hard on yourself. Figuring out ways to be kind and gentle with yourself.”

“

**“Friendship groups.”**

66

*“Making a mind-map of my support networks and my friends/family’s best strengths.”*

“Plan to go out at least 3 times a month and make sure I have things in my diary. It always gives you something to look forward to.”

“

“Jigsaw puzzles or something that’s portable. If I visit a friend’s house for the night, I take it with me, so I know I have something there if any anxieties arise.”

“

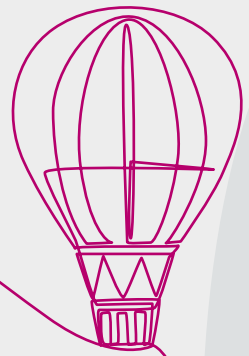
**“Gardening house plants and tending to flowers.”**

“Getting out of the house and going for a beach walk.”

**“Guided meditation (free on YouTube!) to help me get to sleep.”**

## Who is this pamphlet for?

This pamphlet has been created for survivors who find themselves struggling with their mental health after experiencing domestic abuse. This abuse can have occurred at any time, whether it was perpetuated by an intimate partner or family member, or if you witnessed abuse taking place as a child.



## What is this pamphlet for?

This pamphlet provides information on how mental health can be impacted by domestic abuse and includes some helpful self-care techniques from other survivors, as well as links to free support resources. This pamphlet is not designed to replace formal mental health support; however, we hope it can give you useful information about why domestic abuse has affected your mental health.

## Why did we design this pamphlet?

This pamphlet has been developed as part of [Women's Aid Deserve To Be Heard campaign](#), in response to findings from our connected [research report](#). We recognise that many resources already exist regarding how traumatic experiences may affect your mental health, however, gaps remain around the impacts of domestic abuse on mental health, and we hope this pamphlet begins to address these.

## How did we design this pamphlet?

This pamphlet has been designed by Women's Aid Research and Evaluation team, in consultation with our survivor advisory board, the mental health charity Mind, and Somerset Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Service.

## Signs or symptoms

# of mental ill-health associated with domestic abuse

It is important to remember that everyone is different and responds to abuse differently. A diagnosis may not be helpful or relevant to everyone, but for some people it can help to access appropriate treatment. Please do contact your GP for further information around this. Here are some signs and symptoms that may be familiar to you if you have found yourself struggling with your mental health after experiencing abuse. All of these are very normal responses to an adverse situation.



### Low self-esteem

If you have been made to feel bad about yourself or that you deserved the abuse you have experienced, it is understandable that your self-esteem may be low. Although it can be difficult to change how you feel about yourself, it is possible to build up your confidence and self-esteem over time.



### Anxiety and panic attacks

It is a natural human response to feel worried, tense, or afraid when we feel we are under threat, or are going through a stressful event or change. If anxiety begins to impact your ability to live your life it may be something you need support with. Anxiety may come through thoughts and feelings, as well as physical sensations and responses, such as panic attacks.



## Eating

There are many reasons why someone may develop a difficult relationship with food – one may be that it feels like a solution to problems, but it could also be linked to feelings of low self-worth or wanting to regain a sense of control over your life.



## Sleep-related problems

If you're struggling with your mental health this can affect how well you sleep, and in turn, poor sleep can make it more difficult to manage your mental health.



## Depression

Depression can include a loss of interest in things you'd usually enjoy, feeling empty or numb, and in some cases suicidal feelings. Although we all experience low moods sometimes, depression is when this lasts for a long time and affects your everyday life.



## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

It is normal to need time to adjust to what has happened after experiencing trauma. Unfortunately, some people find themselves reliving distressing events repeatedly in a way that significantly impacts their life over time. This can come in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, or constant negative thoughts.

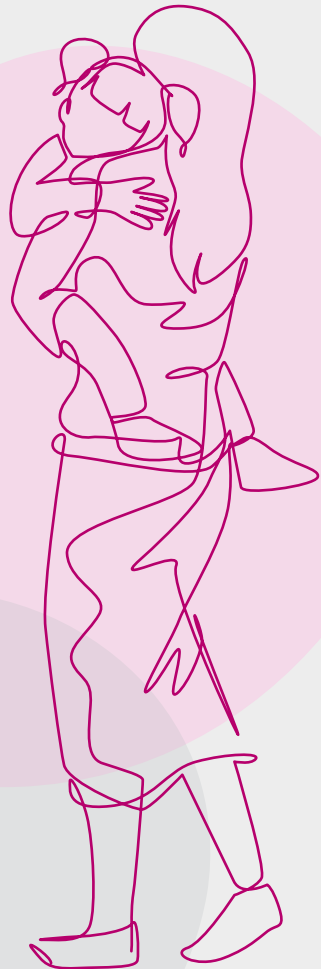
---

**For further information on any of these and more,  
please see Mind's mental health A-Z:**  
**[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/a-z-mental-health](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/a-z-mental-health)**

# Understanding the impact of domestic abuse on your mental health

## Domestic abuse and trauma

Domestic abuse often goes hand in hand with high levels of stress, fear and shame. You may feel like you are in a constant state of high alert, trying to keep yourself and possibly your children safe, being made to feel like the abuse is your fault and questioning what you know to be true. You may have experienced prolonged periods of your perpetrator putting you down, making you feel worthless and trapped. All these dynamics are likely to have an impact on your mental health. If you feel yourself struggling with your mental health after having experienced domestic abuse, it may be helpful to understand this as a form of trauma. Emotional trauma is an emotional response to a distressing or frightening event.



## Responding to danger

When we feel stressed or threatened, our bodies release specific hormones called cortisol and adrenaline. This can affect the way that we respond in these situations.

**Here are some responses you may have:**

### **FREEZE**

Feeling as though you are unable to move.

### **FLOP**

Doing what you're told without being able to object.

### **FIGHT**

Fighting, struggling or protesting.

### **FLIGHT**

Fleeing or hiding.

### **FAWN**

Trying to please or appease the person you are afraid of.

## Mental health effects of trauma

The effect of these responses can continue long after the trauma is over, this may have an impact on the way you think, feel, and behave. This may result in flashbacks or feeling like you are still in danger long after the abuse has ended, trouble sleeping, poor self-esteem, or adopting coping mechanisms that are not always healthy or beneficial in the long run.

## Why this is important when it comes to domestic abuse

There are many ways that someone can be abusive, and one survivor's experience may be very different from another survivor's. Here are some ways that struggling with your mental health may be made worse because of domestic abuse. For example:

**If you have been told or made to feel that you are not good enough or that there is something wrong with you, you may come to believe this about yourself.**



After getting married, Tania moved in with her husband and in-laws, who expected her to take on all the cooking and cleaning and made her leave her job. They were **highly critical** of Tania and told her **she wasn't clever enough** to do her job anyway. Since leaving the marriage, Tania has managed to secure a job interview for a similar position that she had been doing before. However, the night before the interview **she finds herself going over in her head the cruel things her in-laws used to say to her about her not being good enough.** She finds herself unable to sleep properly the night before the interview and ends up cancelling it.

**If you have had your mental health used against you by your partner, you may have struggled to reach out for support or developed coping mechanisms to help yourself. As a result, you may have become more and more anxious over time.**

Emilia has been struggling with anxiety and panic attacks since having her second child. Emilia's partner has started to tell her that she is crazy and **cannot be trusted to look after the children.** Emilia wants to speak to her GP about how she is feeling but is **worried that this could be used against her by her partner if they ever split up.** As a result, Emilia does not seek help and finds her symptoms begin to worsen over time. Emilia finds herself leaving the house less and less often in order to avoid having panic attacks.





## Myths around domestic abuse

Unfortunately, there exist many myths and misconceptions in society regarding domestic abuse. This can make it hard to be open about what you have experienced, or perhaps someone may say or ask something such as, “why didn’t you just leave?” This can be unhelpful or feel hurtful, especially when staying may have been the safest option, or have felt like the only option for you at the time. People may support you and know that your abuser’s behaviour was wrong, but they still might not understand domestic abuse very well. Because of this, they may sometimes say things that are unhelpful or upsetting.

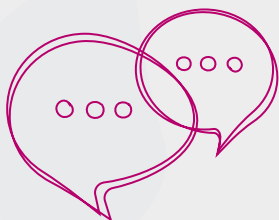


## Self-care tips

---

### Have compassion for yourself:

Try imagining how you would respond to a friend who confided in you that they were struggling with their mental health after experiencing abuse and speak to yourself with the same kindness and compassion.

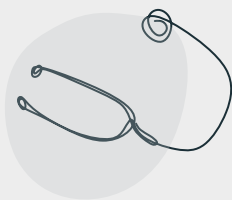


You may find it helpful to speak to other survivors who have had similar experiences. You could try Women’s Aid online [Survivors’ Forum](#) or try contacting your local domestic abuse service to see if they run any support groups. You can [search for your local service](#) via our website.

It is understandable if you don’t feel ready to speak to other survivors. If so, you may instead find it helpful to look at some of the resources we have listed on the last page.



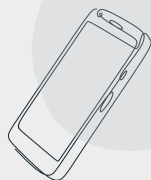
## Processing your emotions and moving forward:



You may wish to seek support from a professional who specialises in mental health. A good starting point could be **your GP**, who should be able to put you in touch with a mental health service.

Many **local domestic abuse services** offer specialist counselling around domestic abuse. You can find their contact details via our Directory:

**[www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-directory](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-directory)**

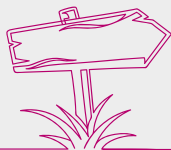


You may wish to try **keeping a journal**. You could use this as a space to express your feelings about things that have happened, or to set small realistic goals for yourself, or to note down things you feel proud of or grateful for.

Some survivors find it helpful to **volunteer or fundraise** for a cause they feel passionate about. Be careful not to put too much pressure on yourself to do this, and only do it if you feel ready and would like to.



**Everyone is different and you may have to find what works for you. You can read suggestions from other survivors on the front and back cover of this leaflet.**



## Further help

---

**Beat:** (for support around eating disorders) - 0808 801 0677

**Women's Aid online live chat service:** [chat.womensaid.org.uk](https://chat.womensaid.org.uk)

**Mind:** 0300 123 3393 - [www.mind.org.uk/information-support](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support)

**NHS Dependency and addition services:**

[www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/find-an-alcohol-addiction-service/location](https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/find-an-alcohol-addiction-service/location)

**Samaritans:** 116 123

**Calm:** 0800 585858 and Webchat service - [www.thecalmzone.net](https://www.thecalmzone.net)

**Supportline:** 01708 765200 or [info@supportline.org.uk](mailto:info@supportline.org.uk)

**No Panic:** 0300 722 9844

**SANEline:** 0300 304 7000



## Free resources and further reading

---

**Chayn** has free online resources to support the healing of survivors of gender-based violence. [www.chayn.co](https://www.chayn.co)

**The Courage to be me** is a book created by psychologist Nina Burrows, about life after sexual abuse but is applicable to other forms of abuse. [www.consentcollective.com/courage](https://www.consentcollective.com/courage)

**The Freedom Programme:** designed to help survivors make sense and understand what has happened to them. You can enrol on the course via their website. [www.freedomprogramme.co.uk](https://www.freedomprogramme.co.uk)

**Sarsas self help guide:** designed for survivors of sexual abuse but is applicable to other forms of abuse. [www.sarsas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/SARSAS-Self-Help-Guide.pdf](https://www.sarsas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/SARSAS-Self-Help-Guide.pdf)



**"Tell people when you are feeling down."**

**"Eating nourishing food."**



**"Running, painting, breathing exercises."**

**66**

**"Find your favourite place where you can be by yourself. Somewhere that you enjoy."**



***"Learn to challenge yourself with something new - something that will take your focus off the bad stuff and drive you forwards."***

**"Put in my calendar for one day a week to have nothing to do - no expectations, no plans. Making sure I have time for myself."**

**"Exercise."**



**"Positive affirmations."**



**"Videos of cute animals."**

**66**

**"Writing notes- positive compliments, things I've achieved that day etc. If I'm having a bad day I reflect on those notes."**

© Women's Aid 2023

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)  
[www.loversrespect.co.uk](http://www.loversrespect.co.uk)

Women's Aid Federation of England is a registered charity in England & Wales (1054154) and is a company limited by guarantee in England & Wales (3171880)

Produced in consultation with Mind, and Somerset Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Service (Saras)

