

PURPOSE

This guide seeks to raise awareness about domestic and family abuse (DFA) concerns and provides guidance on recognising signs and responding to concerns.

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY ABUSE AND ITS PREVALENCE

DFA can be defined as violence, physical and mental abuse, and intimidation between people who are currently or have previously been in an intimate or family relationship. The perpetrator uses these actions to control and dominate the other person, which causes fear, physical harm and/or psychological harm.¹ DFA is often interchangeable with domestic and family violence, however we have opted to use the term 'abuse' as we believe this emphasises that coercive control can be through many shapes or forms.

Both men and women can be victims/survivors of DFA. However, there are gendered patterns in perpetration and victimisation. Women are more likely than men to be victims/survivors of DFA from intimate partners and are more likely to experience the severe impacts from DFA such as physical violence. Understanding these gendered patterns is crucial for better understanding the topic and developing effective responses.²

Our Watch, an organisation focused on the primary prevention of violence against women and children in Australia, have produced [this video](#) which provides a useful insight into DFA challenges.

Risk factors

DFA can happen to anyone – regardless of the victim/survivors' or perpetrator's personal circumstances, or if they are in an intimate relationship with each other. There are many examples of individuals being victims/survivors of DFA from different cultural backgrounds, religious groups, sexualities, genders, age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. However, there are some key risk factors for the perpetration or victimisation of DFA.

Some of these risk factors include:

- Individual factors – such as financial challenges or a difficult life event, substance abuse, difficulty controlling emotions, social isolation, and a history of abuse;
- Relationship factors – such as dominating and controlling behaviours by one partner, and unhealthy family relationships and interactions;
- Community factors – such as low social capital and a poor community response to poor behaviour; and
- Societal factors – such as exposure to the condemnation of violence against women and rigid gender roles.³

Challenges for victims/survivors

Abusive relationships can sometimes be difficult for victims/survivors to leave. This can reflect the number of visible and hidden obstacles that victims/survivors must overcome to leave abusive relationships, particularly at a time when they are going through a traumatic experience and when many of the obstacles are attributable to the controlling actions and behaviours of perpetrators.

¹ White Ribbon, [Domestic violence definition](#)

² Mission Australia

³ Mission Australia, [what is domestic and family violence – risk factors](#)

Aside from the visible obstacles of financial independence and having the courage to reach out to support networks, some hidden obstacles that victims/survivors of DFA may be facing include:

- Believing they are the cause and responsible for the actions and behaviours of perpetrators;
- Perpetrators changing their emotional behaviours– for example, shifting from abusive actions and behaviours to extreme kindness;
- Significant self-confidence and self-worth challenges, a loss of independence and feeling of being trapped; and
- Concern about impacts on status and social standing in the community, careers and other networks – this can also increase if perpetrators have high social standings which may result in fears of not being believed.⁴

Unfortunately, sometimes the difficulty for victims/survivors to overcome visible and hidden obstacles to leave abusive relationships may result in people not understanding or sympathising with victims/survivors.⁵ This overlooks the complexities behind DFA, particularly relating to structural inequalities and how the coercive control creating the situation is also what makes it difficult to leave the situation.⁶

Many victims/survivors of DFA go through several different phases when leaving an abusive relationship, and research suggests there are some common themes to these phases:

- To first endure and 'manage' the DFA while disconnecting from others;
- To second acknowledge the abuse, re-frame it, and to then counter-act it to others;
- Third, "breaking free" – starting to disengage and focus on one's own needs; and
- Fourth, the ongoing trauma effects in the months after separation. This can include negative spirals and worsening psychological outcomes.⁷

DFA statistics

The White Ribbon Foundation share a number of alarming statistics relating to DFA.⁸

- On average, one woman a week is murdered by their current or former partner.
- Approximately one in four women in Australia have been the victim/survivor of DFA by an intimate partner since the age of 15.
- Intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to illness, disability and premature death for women aged 18-44.
- Based on KPMG research, violence against women is estimated to cost the Australian economy 22\$ billion a year.
- DFA is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children. Most women leaving a violent relationship move out of their home.
- Women seeking support for partner violence are most likely to ask friends or family for help.
- Over 60 per cent of women experiencing violence from a current partner are working.

⁴ The Conversation, [Abusive relationships: why it is so hard for women to 'just leave' \(2018\)](#)

⁵ The Conversation, [Abusive relationships: why it is so hard for women to 'just leave' \(2018\)](#)

⁶ White Ribbon Australia, [Understanding the issue](#)

⁷ Anderson and Saunders (University of Michigan). [Leaving an abusive partner: an empirical review of predictors, the process of leaving, and psychological wellbeing \(2003\)](#)

⁸ White Ribbon Australia, [Data and statistics](#)

- Only 20 per cent of employees surveyed by White Ribbon would feel confident knowing how to help a work colleague experiencing DFA outside of work.
- 94 per cent of employees agree employers should take a leadership role in educating their workforce about respectful relationships.

HOW TO RESPOND TO POTENTIAL DOMESTIC AND FAMILY ABUSE CONCERNS

The three 'Rs' – recognise, respond, and refer

Learning the 'three Rs' is a recommended strategy to help you process information shared and to provide support to a person who may be experiencing DFA concerns. These are:

1. **Recognise** the signs of DFA and check in when you see a change in behaviour;
2. **Respond** in instances where you suspect DFA could be occurring or where someone raises it with you; and
3. **Refer** the person to appropriate support services such as an Employer Assistance Programme (EAP) or dedicated helpline. Help identify resources to support them to establish an action plan.

Tips for each of the three Rs are outlined further below.

1. Recognise

- Individuals experiencing DFA will often have a change in their usual behaviour. This could include:
 - Unexplained absences and secretiveness about home life;
 - Expressing uncharacteristic anxiety, fear, withdrawal, sadness, or lower self-esteem;
 - Extremely conscious about minimising trouble at home (e.g. not being able to do certain socialising activities because of home-related restrictions);
 - Anxiousness about leaving their children alone and unusually anxious behaviour about leaving the home at all. Further information about children at risk of harm and neglect is [here](#); and
 - Mention of their partner telling them what to do that appears to be controlling.
- Look for signs of unexplained bruises, or injuries, or wearing out-of-season clothing in order to cover injuries.
- It is important that you understand the different types of abuse in DFA – [read here](#).

2. Respond

- Don't ignore the situation.
- Listen without judgement and assure confidentiality.
- Check to see if the person is currently safe or has a safe space to go to.
- Guide individuals to seek the appropriate help and discuss these options with them.
- Refer individuals to people at work who can support them. This could include their line manager or a Mental Health First Aider.
- Talk with a Human Resource (HR) representative about ways to offer support to the employee. Your firm will likely have a Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) policy, including FDV leave entitlements (either paid or unpaid).*
- Stay in touch with the person to see how they are going over time. There are some helpful tips online about how to support a friend or colleague, such as this video from 1800RESPECT.

- Look for opportunities to raise awareness about the issue of DFA among all employees so that others can be aware of the role they can play – Our Watch has produced [a video](#) on facts and stories behind abuse against women in Australia.

***10 DAYS OF PAID FAMILY AND DOMESTIC LEAVE ENTITLEMENTS**

From **1 February 2023**, employees of **non-small business employers** (employers with 15 or more employees) will be able to access 10 days of paid family and domestic leave in a 12-month period regardless of whether they are full-time, part-time or casually employed.

From **1 August 2023** employees of **small business employers** (employers with less than 15 employees) will also be able to access the 10 paid days.

The full leave entitlement is available upfront and not subject to accumulation.

Please note: From **1 February 2023**, employers are prohibited from including certain information on an employee's pay slip about paid family and domestic violence leave (see below reference from Fair Work).

For more information on this new leave entitlement visit:

<https://www.fairwork.gov.au/newsroom/news/new-paid-family-and-domestic-violence-leave>

3. Refer

There is an extensive range of resources and services available to individuals experiencing DFA or those with any concerns. These include:

- [The Daisy App](#) – a free app which provides information about support services in your local area, which also includes safety features to help protect the privacy of people using it.
- [1800 RESPECT](#) – a free 24/7 national sexual assault and DFA counselling service.
- [Relationships Australia](#) – a relationship support service (community-based, not-for-profit and with no religious affiliations) specialising in counselling, family dispute resolution, and a range of support and education programme services.
- [White Ribbon Australia](#) – a movement of males working to end men's abuse against women. Their website also includes a 'find help' resource hub for those experiencing DFA concerns.
- [Qlife](#) – an anonymous and free LGBTQI peer support and referral service, which can also provide support with DFA concerns.
- [Lifeline](#) – a crisis support and suicide prevention service.
- Emergency services – call 000.

SUPPORT OPTIONS FOR PERPETRATORS OF DFA

It is important to note that there is a range of resources and support tools for perpetrators of DFA.

In short, research suggests perpetrator abuse exists on a spectrum – from those who do not realise their behaviour is abusive to those who deliberately terrorise the victim-survivor. All perpetrators use similarly controlling behaviours to varying degrees.⁹ This is significant because those who operate at the 'lesser' end of the spectrum are most likely to respond to behaviour change programs and seek support.

Some resources for perpetrators of DFA are below.

- No to Violence – [Men's Referral Service](#). This anonymous resource includes information for individuals who might be worried about their own behaviour and provides support for men who have

⁹ Lisa Ann Haeseler, [Themes of coping in the spectrum of DVA \(2013\)](#)

been abusive as well as people wanting to understand ways to support a friend experiencing or perpetrating abuse.

- NSW Government – [Perpetrator interventions and research](#). The NSW Government is funding a telephone counselling and referral service for abusive or potentially abusive men to help reduce DFA: ph 1800 656 463.
- Relationships Australia – [Taking responsibility](#). A course for men who have been abusive in their relationships and are ready to work towards building respectful, caring and safe relationships.

ADDITIONAL ADVICE FOR MANAGERS AND LEADERS

Workplaces, and managers and leaders, can play an important role in supporting employees in response to potential DFA concerns. This can include:

- Where possible, workplaces should ensure their messaging to employees provides any reassurance regarding their job security;
- Investing time in the wellbeing of employees through regular check-ins, proactive communication of wellbeing strategies and by providing access to professional support services;
- Ensuring there are options available for people that don't feel safe working at home and making sure employees are aware of all of these options;
- Providing opportunities for all employees to disclose if they do not feel safe working from home. It is important not to 'force' a disclosure, but to also provide suitable alternative arrangements for a range of circumstances (such as addressing poor workspaces); and
- Raising awareness and re-educating employees on your organisation's DFA policies, procedures and the support available. This includes ensuring all people managers and team leaders understand these arrangements and the provisions available. It may also be appropriate to update these arrangements to reflect new working environments.¹⁰

OTHER RESOURCES

- 1800 RESPECT – [self isolation and COVID-19](#)
- ABC News, [The only way violent men can change is if they want to](#) (research summary)
- ABC Life, [Is it possible to change angry and violent behaviour?](#) (research summary)
- Jess Hill – [See what you made me do](#) (book resource) – this is based on a four-year investigation into DFA with a lens turned on perpetrators – i.e. why do abusive men make the choices they do and what systems of power enable them.

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This guide provides a summary only of the subject matter covered, without the assumption of duty of care by Consult Australia. The summary should not be relied on as a substitute for legal or other professional advice.

¹⁰ Male Champions of Change Institute, Workplace responses to DFV during COVID-19 (March 2020).