

INCREASING SAFETY FOR FAMILIES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Dublin Safer Families Service

April 2020

As Ireland is adhering to social distancing and quarantining during the COVID-19 crisis, we are all finding this a challenging and complex time. However, for many, their home is not a safe place and the national measures which are there to protect us all, places others at increased risk of further violence and controlling behaviour in their homes. We are being sent the message that staying at home is the safest thing we can do but for some their home is a dangerous place. Some of the additional risk factors that may exist where domestic abuse and coercive controlling behaviours are present include;

- **Isolation:** Those who act violently and abusively can use this time to further isolate victims from their loved ones and other social supports. They may also use this as a time to further restrict a victim's movement in person, controlling where they go and when. They might also control a victim's interactions online, limiting their access to the outside world, which is critical in this time of social distancing in Ireland.
- **Restricting Access to Information:** They may also restrict access to the news and other sources of information, making themselves the source of all information, especially controlling information on COVID-19. This can then in turn be used to control, threaten and intimidate further.
- **Increased Abuse/ Violence:** The abuse may worsen during this time as victims may be spending more time in contact with their abusers, especially during the time when we have been asked to stay indoors as a nation. Victims may also experience new or different types of abuse during this time.
- **In-Person and Digital Stalking:** Perpetrators may try to exert their power by trying to monitor, control and stalk victims in person and digitally. This may be particularly used when living separately and access taking place by phone.
- **Financial Abuse:** Many individuals are experiencing financial burdens due to being unable to work and abusers may further financially exploit victims during this time.
- **Parenting:** Victims who co-parent their children with those who act violently and abusively may be facing unique challenges during these times, such as barriers to access and/or increased exposure to the perpetrator due to lack of accessible childcare. For example, in order for a victim to work, they may need to meet those who were violent and abusive to them for childcare reasons. Victims may also not be able to challenge the parenting of the perpetrator for fear of instigating further violence and abuse.

Safety Tips During the COVID-19 Crisis

1. Safety Person “Code Word”

Now that the country has been asked to stay indoors, finding privacy is difficult. This can make it more difficult for victims to phone for help without further placing them and their children at risk of increased violence. Victims should identify at least two people they can contact with a “code word/phrase” (e.g. “Isolation” or “I never thought I would miss school so much”) to let them know if you are in trouble. Plan in advance what should happen if you send them the code word (e.g. call the Gardaí).

2. “Safest Room”

If there is an argument, identify an area of the home you can move to where there are no weapons and there are ways for you to leave the house, apartment or building, such as a door or window to exit. For some victims, especially those quarantined at home with an abusive partner or ex-partner during COVID-19, no room may feel safe, so it is called “safest room”. If you can at least identify the lowest risk areas, you may be able to reduce harm.

3. Planning with Children

- **Code Words:** Decide with your children how to communicate urgency. For example, opening your arms wide and your child knows that this means to come quickly as it is not safe. A “code word” may also be created with children that means they should go to the “safest room” in the home that you have already decided upon.
- **Emergency Numbers:** If for some reason you are not able to make emergency calls give them the Safety Person number(s), if they are old enough and it is safe to do so.
- **Silent Safety Sign:** If access during COVID-19 is by phone, you should show your child a Safety Sign (e.g. thumbs down) to make if the abusive parent is being abusive, looking for information or making derogatory comments about the safe parent. The call can then be ended to protect the child.

4. Exit Plan

In case you have to leave the house in an emergency, this should not be avoided due to COVID-19. A safe exit plan should be created and shared with a Safety Person ahead of time. Is there a trusted friend/relative who you can stay with, if needed? An Garda Síochána should be called on 999/112 in an emergency. Do not hesitate to do this due to COVID-19, if you are in danger. The Gardaí have stated that they will respond to domestic violence calls as they are aware that COVID-19 can increase danger for victims and their children. You should also contact your local Tusla Social Work Department.

5. Medication

Medication should be kept in the safest and most easily accessible location in case an emergency exit is needed. You should keep a copy of all prescriptions, if possible, with your important documents.

6. Emergency Bag

Pack an emergency bag if it is safe to do so, with an extra set of keys, clothes for you and your children, medications, copies of important documents etc. If it is not safe to prepare a bag you can leave these clothes and items together hidden in the wardrobe.

7. Important Documents

Make copies or take pictures of your important documents for yourself and send them to a trusted friend, relative or Safety Person. Important documents may include IDs, PPS numbers, passports immigration documents, birth certificates, copy of important numbers on paper and Court Orders.

As mentioned earlier, be mindful of sending anything via phone or computer. Please use whatever method is safest for you. When these are sent to the person you trust, you should delete these if necessary. They can always be sent back to you if you need them.

8. Seeking Social Support

With social distancing and quarantining, victims can feel even more isolated and those who are abusive and controlling of them may use further isolation as a power and control tactic. Identify trusted friends, relatives or even online support groups where you can still connect virtually. Apps such as WhatsApp, Facetime and Zoom may be useful. Be conscious of what you are speaking about and that it is not overheard.

9. Creating a “Peaceful Space”/ Self-Care

Many victims are feeling forced to spend more time with the person who was abusive during the COVID-19 outbreak because they may feel unsafe leaving the home, as well as unsafe staying in the home. Currently, we have been advised to stay at home and this further restricts safety. If you cannot leave your home, try to create a “peaceful space” for yourself at home, if that is safe for you. You can sit in your room/ quiet safe space and use mindfulness/ visualisation to create or remember your safe place. This can help you take an emotional break to visualise somewhere more peaceful and safe. You may also think of positive affirmations to remind yourself of your worth. There are lots of mindfulness activities online, try to find one that suits you. It is important to self-care during this period to ensure that you are emotionally, mentally and physically as well as you can be during these difficult times in Ireland, for yourself and your children.

10. Taking a Time-Out

A Time-Out is a safety strategy used successfully in Dublin Safer Families Service and briefly means removing yourself temporarily from an argument to prevent violence. It is used to manage behaviour on occasions where it could lead to violence.

- A Time-Out is used when you feel that your anger will lead to violence or when you feel unsafe because of your partner’s behaviours. Your children’s safety is always prioritised and they must remain with the non-violent parent.
- The person getting angry/ emotionally dysregulated should leave the room/ home for an agreed short period. They can go for a walk within the 2km range during the COVID-19 crisis or go to another room, if it is safe to do so (e.g. to call a support person or watch a movie).
- The person at risk should care for the children or make sure they are with your Safety Person. Do not enter a room with no exits, respect the others’ space and only engage in conversation when the other has calmed down completely and it is safe to do so.
- If the partner who was emotionally dysregulated has not calmed by the agreed end time of the Time-Out, they should communicate with their partner by text/call in order to extend the Time-Out for another *shorter* period. Time-Outs cannot be enforced on your partner and should not be used against your partner simply to walk away from a discussion.

11. Stick to the Plan

Consider keeping a note of your Safety Plan in your phone or wherever might be safe for you. Please consider what is safest for you and your children. If you choose to write your plan somewhere, consider listing only key words that help you remember the plan, but that would not be clear to the perpetrator. If this is not safe, try to memorise your plan, focusing on memorising at least one key emergency number on your list of resources

