



employers'  
initiative  
on domestic abuse

A language guide  
**for everyone**





It is essential that we understand how language can enforce and reinforce power dynamics that are at odds with working through a trauma-informed lens. In other words, **language matters; what we say and how we say it matters.**<sup>1</sup>

## Who is this guide for?

This practical guide is intended as a tool for employers. It sets out key principles for the use of language, supporting employers (and colleagues) in considering their own and others' use of language in communications relating to domestic abuse.

The overarching aim is to create a safe and supportive environment for victim-survivors of domestic abuse, and to promote their safety and wellbeing.

## Why does language matter?

Using language appropriately can be the difference between opening a conversation on domestic abuse or closing it down. Making appropriate language choices can promote a victim-survivor's safety and support their journey towards a safer life and healthy relationships. It emphasises respect for the person's experiences, without judgement.

## Use of language

It is important to note that language use can change based on the user and the context. It can also change over time. In recognition of this, this guide focuses on key principles for appropriate use of supportive language, rather than supplying an exhaustive list of terms to use or avoid.

## Terminology

In this guide we refer to **appropriate** and **inappropriate use of language**, rather than 'bad' or 'good' words or phrases, acknowledging that words or phrases are not inherently 'good' or 'bad', but that people make choices in their use of language.

In this guide we use the term 'victim-survivor' to describe someone who has experienced domestic abuse. We acknowledge that some people may identify as a victim, others may prefer the term survivor, and some people may identify with neither term. When speaking with or about a person, you can ask them their preference.

## Key principles

Above all, it is important to focus on the safety of the victim-survivor (and any children), and to be led by what the person says they want and need. Be aware that this may include remaining with the person or people who are behaving abusively.

If someone talks to you about domestic abuse, give the person your full attention: listen, reassure, be open and empathetic. Use an open posture to reinforce the sense of listening and believing. Using this approach, **employers do not necessarily have to have solutions, but they can help to make the victim-survivor feel heard and supported.**

1 Trauma Informed Language Guidance (Cherry, 2023)

## Say something!

Often, when dealing with difficult or sensitive subjects, it can be hard to know how to open a conversation.

**If you suspect someone may be in danger or if something does not seem right, say something.**

Victim-survivors often tell us that they experience many occasions where they are willing someone to ask them if they are okay. This person could be a manager or a colleague.

It is important not to let the fear of saying the wrong thing prevent you from saying or doing something. Provided that you are showing professional curiosity and interest, and the sentiment and emotion behind what you say and do is genuine, there is a strong likelihood that it will be appreciated. Domestic abuse may not be involved, the person might not be ready to share at that moment, or they may not wish to talk to you. However your enquiry will let the victim-survivor know you are a safe person to talk to. This helps to **create an environment where wellbeing is prioritised and seeking support is encouraged.**

To open a conversation, you could ask:

- "Is everything alright at home?"
- "You haven't seemed yourself recently. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"
- "I have noticed a mark on your arm."

## Consider terminology

Choose words and phrases that convey empathy and respect for people who have experienced domestic abuse.

For example: consider using **'survivor'** instead of **'victim'**, **'experiencing domestic abuse'** instead of **'suffering from domestic abuse'**.

Ask the person what they would like to be called or how they would like to be referred to in the context of their experience.

The appropriate use of language may well change depending on the context. For example, in a police investigation it may be more appropriate to refer

to someone as a **'victim'** of domestic abuse than a **'survivor'**, whereas in a work context the use of the word **'victim'** may not be appropriate. Consider fitting the language to the environment and be prepared to change your language depending on the audience.

Be led by the victim-survivor and their language: for example, they may be reluctant to consider their partner an **'abuser'** or a **'perpetrator'**. So, if they say **'my partner'**, say **'your partner'**.

## Be aware of language that minimises abuse

Use language that reflects the severity and impact of abuse. Be aware of using language that minimises, downplays, trivialises, or dismisses the abuse or harm that a person is experiencing or has experienced.

All domestic abuse is serious.

Examples of language choices that could minimise abuse include:

- adding words and descriptions like **'just'**, **'minor'** or **'only'** when referring to abusive behaviour. For example: **'just a domestic dispute'** or a **'low-level argument'**.
- suggesting that some forms of abuse are more serious than others, especially if physical violence is not used. For example, **"they were threatened but there was no physical violence"**.

It is important to be aware that victim-survivors often use minimising language to describe the abuse they experience. When responding to someone's account, or writing notes, it is important not to reinforce this and to try to avoid using the language and terms that minimise abuse, even if the victim-survivors have used them.

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**"It is important not to let the fear of saying the wrong thing prevent you from saying or doing something."**



## Avoid victim-blaming language or language that excuses the person behaving abusively

Avoid language that suggests that the victim-survivor is at fault, commonly known as '**victim-blaming**'. Also avoid using subjective terms such as '**provoked**', '**asked for it**', or '**deserved it**', or language that implies fault.

For example: "Did you do anything to upset your partner?". Or "You didn't deserve that", which implies that some people may deserve 'that' and/or that there was something else that they **did** deserve, but just not 'that'.

Victim-survivors of domestic abuse may experience mental ill health, and this could be caused or exacerbated by the abuse they are experiencing. Avoid referring to them as being '**crazy**', '**hysterical**', '**attention-seeking**' or '**over the top**'.

Be careful to avoid language or additional context that can serve to excuse or minimise the actions of the person who is being abusive, such as "**they were tired/frustrated/had drunk too much**". Being tired, frustrated or drinking too much is never an excuse for abusive behaviour.

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## Use inclusive language

Inclusive language acknowledges the diverse experiences of victim-survivors. It avoids generalisations, reinforcing stereotypes or biases, or making assumptions, for example that the person behaving abusively is male or that domestic abuse occurs only in heterosexual relationships.

When talking or writing about domestic abuse, consider the following:

- Domestic abuse **can affect anyone from any background and any identity**. Do not assume a heterosexual relationship and be led by the language and terminology that the victim-survivor uses in the context of their identity.
- Avoid assuming the gender of victim-survivors or those behaving abusively. Instead of '**he/she,**' you could use '**they**' or rephrase the sentence to be gender neutral.
- Domestic abuse **can include abuse from close family members or ex-partners**. Do not assume the abuser is a person's partner.





## Avoid making assumptions or judging

People stay in abusive relationships for many different reasons. It can be very difficult for someone to leave an abusive partner, even if they want to.

- A common question to be avoided is **“Why don’t they just leave?”**

Victim-survivors may not leave the person or people abusing them for many different reasons. These may include denial, isolation, embarrassment, fear, love, shame, low confidence, financial dependence, trauma, or fear of losing contact with children.

Bear in mind that the point of leaving is often the most dangerous time for a victim-survivor.

Women’s Aid says:

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**“We need to stop blaming survivors for staying and start supporting them to enable them to leave. By understanding the many barriers that stand in the way of a [person] leaving an abusive relationship ...we can begin to support and empower [people] to make the best decision for them while holding abusers solely accountable for their behaviour”.**<sup>2</sup>

- Don’t project your own opinion or give someone unsolicited advice. The person will usually know the support that they want or need. Avoid telling someone they **‘should’** or **‘shouldn’t’** do something. Ask them how you can help or what support they would like.
- **Avoid assumptions** about how things may play out over time. Victim-survivors may stay with their abuser, need time away from work for court attendance or counselling, experience post-separation abuse, or they may need ongoing time and support in their recovery. Ask how you can help them.



- Avoid assuming how a person will react to their experiences. A victim-survivor reported being told: **“Whatever you do, don’t stop him having access to the child”**. This is telling them what to do rather than supporting them to reach their own decision. Moreover, the choice of words implies that the person who has behaved abusively is a victim.
- Avoid commentary on:
  - the person who has committed the abuse. Victims-survivors have shared examples of inappropriate commentary including **“Oh, but they are so charming ...”** and **“I can’t believe that they’d behave in that way ... ”**
  - the situation or relationship. For example: **“I always knew there was something wrong”**.

## Seek to empower and support

Use language that **empowers** victim-survivors and emphasises support. Focus on their ability to make decisions for themselves and the resources available to them.

Use phrases like **‘seeking support’** instead of **‘needing help’**.

Highlight available helplines, resources, and services for survivors.

**“Ask the person how you can help or what support they would like.”**

<sup>2</sup> Why don’t women leave? — Women’s Aid (womensaid.org.uk)

## Suggestions for appropriate use of language

Instead of	Consider using	Why
<b>Domestic Violence</b>	<b>Domestic Abuse</b>	'Domestic abuse' is now used widely in the UK instead of domestic violence. 'Domestic violence' does not capture the full range of harmful behaviours included within the definition of 'domestic abuse', including coercive and controlling behaviour, economic abuse, psychological and emotional abuse. <sup>3</sup>
<b>Victim</b>	<b>Ask the person what they prefer</b>  <b>Victim-survivor</b>	Some people who've experienced abuse identify as victims, and some identify as survivors. It is best to ask the person which they would prefer.  If you can't ask the person, or are talking in general terms, you can use 'victim-survivor'.
<b>Perpetrator</b>	<b>Person who caused harm</b>  <b>Person who harmed</b>  <b>Or use the person's name</b>	'Perpetrator' is a term largely used in policing and may not be necessary to use in other contexts.  Bear in mind that the term could act as a barrier to people who need or want to change their behaviour from seeking support, if they do not identify with the term.  We are not suggesting never using the word 'perpetrator', rather that it may sometimes be more appropriate to use another description, particularly when you are speaking to a person who has caused harm.
<b>Disclosure</b>	<b>Sharing, telling or giving an account</b>	'Disclosure' or 'disclose' are often words used by the person receiving information. The person who is giving the information may consider that they are 'sharing' or 'telling' someone something.  Also consider that using the word 'disclosure' can sometimes trigger ideas that further action will be taken or that a chain of events has been set in motion. Although this may be the case, it should be the choice of the victim-survivor whether any further action is taken.
<b>A domestic / domestic dispute</b>	<b>Domestic abuse</b>	'A domestic' or 'domestic dispute' frames the abuse as a mutual family problem, or non-serious disagreement, rather than a crime.
<b>Argument</b>	<b>Abuse</b>	The word 'argument' divides responsibility between two people. In the context of domestic abuse where one person is exerting control over another person, the responsibility lies with one person: the abuser.



## Language in written records

The following guidance is specific to language use when making a note of someone's account of their domestic abuse.

Applying this guidance and using clear, accurate language can help, should records be required for police investigations or court proceedings.

- All notes must be clear and accurate, and should give dates, times and locations.
- Notes should be a factual recording of the words of the person speaking to you, not your own.
- Use clear and simple language that can be easily understood.
- Notes should not include speculation or the views of the person taking the record. There is a difference between writing:

"X doesn't want to leave or to take any action"

and

"X is unable to leave or take any action".

The former implies that the victim-survivor has chosen not to take action, which places responsibility for the (continuation of) abuse with the victim-survivor. Abuse is always the responsibility of the person behaving abusively. If possible, set out the exact words used. For example:

"X came to me and said Y".

- Notes should always be written with the assumption that the victim-survivor will read them.

- A copy of the notes should be shared with the victim-survivor so they can ensure it reflects what they said.
- Be clear what has been recorded, where it will be stored, who will have access to the information, and how long it will be held.
- Do not assume that records need to be escalated to a person's line manager or to senior management. Consider what the victim-survivor prefers, and be led by their preference, maintaining confidentiality.
- Disclosures should not be included in an employee's personal record unless linked to their employment.
- Encourage the person coming forward to keep their own record of the abuse if it is safe for them to do so. They may even need to keep it at work. Their place of employment can be the only safe space they have.

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