

Transcript – Services Australia Podcast – Coronavirus Conversations – Family and domestic violence

Content warning

This episode of Coronavirus Conversations is about family and domestic violence. Some of our discussion is confronting and may not be suitable for all listeners. It is not suitable for children.

Announcement

You're listening to a podcast from Services Australia.

Hank

This is the second of two podcasts that look at family and relationship pressures that people may be feeling while living in a county affected by coronavirus.

With the continuation of lockdown arrangements in Victoria, and unstable employment and income affecting the country, relationships have been put under even more pressures than usual.

If you haven't listened to it already, I'd highly recommend you listen to the first podcast looking at family relationships; it's called 'Coronavirus conversations – Families under pressure.' You can find it on our website at mediahub.servicesaustralia.gov.au or wherever you find your podcasts.

This podcast will focus on people living with family and domestic violence.

Services Australia has contact with many people in these situations, and we've seen an increase in people seeking out information about what help is available for them.

We stand with other Government departments and agencies, as well as community agencies to support all Australians affected by family and domestic violence.

Together, we stand against violence in any form.

G'day. My name is Hank Jongen. I'm a General Manager with Services Australia. Today I am joined by Social Worker Andrea Mills to talk about the reality that is family and domestic violence and what help is available to keep Australians safe in their homes.

Before we begin, I want to say that sometimes words or messages can cause sadness or distress, or trigger traumatic memories for people, particularly survivors of past abuse, violence or childhood trauma.

If you need to talk to someone, support is available. You can call 1800 RESPECT or speak to a Services Australia Social Worker by calling 132 850.

So Andrea, thanks for joining us. Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, and, I guess, really why you work as a social worker for Services Australia?

Andrea

Hi Hank, thanks for having me.

I've been working as a social worker for Centrelink for 11 years, and have been afforded many opportunities to practice social work in such areas as crisis intervention; collaboratively working with local domestic violence services; running a group for 10 years for women who've experienced violence.

I've been a student supervisor, and provided support to people after natural disasters such as the recent bush fires.

Prior to working with Centrelink, I briefly worked with Wesley Mission, in the homeless sector, and in my studies, I was fortunate enough to do a placement in Brazil working in the Favelas, and also did an amazing placement in Melbourne with an organisation called Project Respect.

I was really drawn to social work as it allows me to be myself and work in a field that complements who I am as a person. I don't know how I – I think Social Work really just chose me, you know. It chose me by virtue of all the social related things I was engaged in. But my overriding goal is to be a voice for people who otherwise may not be heard.

Announcement

Everyone deserves a safe home. Visit us at [servicesaustralia.gov.au/domestic violence](https://servicesaustralia.gov.au/domestic-violence), or call 1800 RESPECT for more information and help.

Hank

Look, given your depth of experience, no doubt you'll have done a lot of work in helping people living with family and domestic violence, can we just start with some of the basics?

What do you mean when we say family and domestic violence?

Andrea

Thanks Hank. Well firstly I just like to point out that family and domestic violence generally occurs as a pattern of behaviour and it's linked by power and control, and basically what this means is that a person within the relationship intentionally and deliberately rules by fear and suppresses another person's free will, intimidates, threatens, as a way to have power and control over them.

Another really important thing is that family and domestic violence doesn't discriminate, and it happens in many different types of relationships including past and present – your current and or maybe past intimate relationship as well as relationships involving carers, relatives, guardians, and other kinship groups. So I think that's a really important thing to know, that it affects everyone and anyone and can happen at any time in someone's life.

So, there are many different types of abuse and some people may experience all these types of abuse and some people may experience some abuse in their relationship.

Some of the different types of abuse a person can experience include threats, intimidation, verbal abuse, physical violence, emotional abuse, social abuse, as well as economic, sexual, cultural and cyber abuse.

This isn't a complete list, and, as I said, people can experience any or all. Abusive relationships can show up in all sorts of ways.

Hank

Thanks for that Andrea. That's a really important reminder. We may have all heard the names, but what do these types of abusive relationships actually look like? Can you tell us some more about them so we can understand what we're dealing with?

And look, I'd like to provide a content warning, sometimes people speaking about this topic can trigger memories for people, particularly survivors of past abuse, violence or trauma. If you'd prefer not to listen, please turn the volume down for a few minutes.

Andrea

So, I guess one of the first ones that I'd like to point out are threats and intimidation. So this is really about, it's a real key element to domestic violence because it's about it's a real powerful way to control someone and these types of behaviours may include smashing things; destroying possessions, putting fists through walls; and even handling of weapons.

Then we've got verbal abuse. And this is really aimed at destroying someone's sense of self, like who they are. And this includes types of behaviours like screaming and swearing, shouting, put-downs, name calling, even using sarcasm and maybe destroying someone's belief about who they are.

Physical violence, which can include behaviours like pushing, slapping, strangulation, hair-pulling, punching and it can also include the use of weapons such guns, knives and other objects. Anything can be a weapon in a house if you could imagine that.

Emotional Abuse – So emotional abuse, this type of abuse is aimed at humiliating and degrading and demeaning an individual. It deliberately undermines someone's self-esteem and their confidence. I often hear in my work someone say that, you know, my partner has told me I'm crazy and I should be on some medication or go and see a psychiatrist, or they're told that they're bad mothers, or that they're stupid, so it's a really powerful weapon, emotional abuse.

Then we have social abuse, so social abuse includes isolation. So when we look at isolation, this is when someone might prevent you from seeing your friends and your family, from having contact from social groups, you may have been an artist and went to art class and things like that and all of a sudden you can't do anything. Also we notice with social abuse as well, that sometimes the person who uses violence, what they'll do is they'll put down your family members and friends and what happens is that you slowly then disconnect from your support networks.

We also have economic abuse. This type of abuse is really aimed at the individual becoming financially dependent on the person who uses violence, and once again it can look many different ways. You might not have any access to your funds at all; you might have to ask for an allowance; and everything financially is controlled by that individual; you might be signing your name over for

debts and be directors of a company and have no idea what you're actually signing, or I often see a lot in my work as well of women being forced to claim a Centrelink payment, for example, where they're in a partnership or a relationship but they're claiming it as a single person.

Then we have sexual abuse. So sexual abuse includes a wide range of unwanted sexual behaviour. It could be anything from being raped, being forced to perform sexual acts that cause you harm and aimed at humiliating you.

And then we have cultural and spiritual abuse, which is used at – what the perpetrator does is put you down around what you believe and may prevent you to go to or practicing your religion or spiritual beliefs. There are some other abuse as well, we've got controlling behaviours; separation violence which is probably one of the most scary times for someone when they leave. They're at such risk of being harmed when you leave a relationship.

Stalking as well as cyber abuse, which is becoming more and more prevalent and we're seeing more and more people who use violence use the cyber world as a way to abuse their partners or ex-partners.

As you can see, FDV is extremely complex and it affects so many different parts of an individual's life.

Hank

Look, you've outlined a large range of different scenarios, but it's also my understanding that one of the unfortunate aspects of all of this, is that people may not even realise their being abused. So are there any signs that someone should be looking for, to see if they, or someone they know, is being abused?

Andrea

Yeah, that's right Hank. It's really common for people who, for example, maybe aren't experiencing physical violence in their relationship; that they're not identifying that they're in an abusive relationship. I actually see this quite a lot in my work. I had a woman, honestly just the other day, who had been in a relationship for about 20 years and she experienced extreme financial and emotional abuse and it wasn't until we sat down and went through and did some psycho-education around abuse, those abuse that I just lined out, and she realised that she was in an abusive relationship, but her thinking was "I've never been hit. He's never hurt me. He doesn't yell at me" so because there wasn't this violence in the relationship she wasn't aware that she was actually in an extremely controlling financial relationship and had been for 20 years.

So I think it's just really important then to point out that domestic violence is not always physical, and the psychological consequences of violence can be as serious as the physical effects and can have significant impacts on the health and wellbeing in both immediate and long term and continuing after a relationship ends as well.

So some of the indicators can be maybe you've lost confidence, or you might see that someone's unusually quiet, you might see that you're afraid of your partner, like in a healthy relationship you're not going to be afraid of your partner so that's definitely an indicator that if you feel that you can't be your authentic self with someone or do something, then that's a real indicator.

You may notice, or you might stop seeing your friends and your family or family members. You might notice that your partner criticises you or humiliates you in public; someone who controls you; who controls how much money you spend, what you wear, or who you can hang out with. Also things like you might hear someone talk about their partner has a bad temper or gets really jealous; that their partner pressures them into doing different kinds of sexual activities. Also there might be some very obvious ones, like bruises, broken bones, and sprains or cuts, and also, where children are involved, you might see that they might be afraid of the person who uses violence and they might become quite withdrawn and anxious.

Hank

So, let's just imagine that I have a friend who's showing some of these indicators, how can I help them? What exactly should I do to keep them safe?

Andrea

So, domestic and family violence, people who experience this, there's a lot of shame and embarrassment that can go along with telling your story, and telling someone what's happened to you. So one of the first things that I think is really important is to provide a safe space for someone to talk, where they feel that they can let you know what's happening for them, and be sensitive to what they're going through as well.

And the other thing would be to get professional advice. Encourage your friend or your family member to seek out specialist domestic violence support agency. This, to me, is one of the most important things because if you, say, get support from someone or from a service that doesn't understand what you're going through, this could be a barrier in the future for getting support.

Also, another really important point I'd like to make is "Don't Push". Don't push what you feel onto someone. Like if you think that they should leave, they may not be ready to leave, or it may be safe for them to leave. So, it's really about meeting the individual about where they're at, because like I indicated before, is that family and domestic violence is extremely complex; the person who's experiencing violence can feel extremely unsafe; they're very traumatised; it's a very stressful situation – and having a safe haven or someone who supports them as a friend can be lifesaving for them.

Hank

Andrea, I notice that there's a child in the background, which I guess shows you're at work doing what you do.

Andrea

Absolutely, and that's right Hank. Never a dull moment in the office.

Hank

And look, a lot of what you're saying is about offering practical help, isn't it? Like minding children, taking care of a pet, cooking meals, that sort of support?

Andrea

Absolutely. That could be, if safe, could definitely be a godsend to someone who's experiencing family and domestic violence, because they might not have any of that support. As I said previously, isolation is a big part of a tactic that someone who uses violence uses to keep an individual's world really really small and to keep their power and control over them, so if you can keep in contact and connected to your friend or family member that is experiencing family and domestic violence, it could potentially save their life.

Hank

Now Andrea, I know we're going to talk about what it means to have to leave an abusive relationship, but it doesn't always have to come to that does it? I think we need to acknowledge that for someone's safety, there may well be times that they have to leave, but what resources are out there for people who can see the relationships might work if they can get help?

Andrea

There's a lot of support services out there that people can access around fleeing family and domestic violence, and there's also support services that can help you look more deeply at your relationship, and further explore the relationship dynamics that you were in, with you and the person who uses violence.

One of the places that you can access a service like this is Relationships Australia. Organisations like Relationships Australia can help you manage conflict better; work through the changes to keep the relationship healthy; but also, you might be able to figure out if this is the type of relationship you want to stay in.

Hank

And that really raises the issue of staying safe, because sometimes for a whole range of reasons, it's possible that someone who's a victim of domestic violence will be staying in that environment for a little while longer, you know, until the times right.

What can we say to someone to help them to stay safe while living with an abusive partner?

Andrea

That's right Hank. Some people think it should be really easy for someone to leave a relationship where domestic violence is happening. The truth is, it is much harder to leave an abusive relationship than a non-abusive relationship. Some experiencing violence may choose not to leave the relationship because it's the safer option to stay.

So, it's really important to have safety plan to assist you, and if you have children, your children as well to stay safe, so safety is always at the centre of every intervention. So when you create a safety plan, it's really just practical ways to have practical supports that you're aware of that you will put in place when maybe a violent incident starts to happen.

So things could be quite simple like keeping essential items where you can easily get them. Essential items are things like, maybe passport, marriage certificate, bank documents. Things that might be a bit difficult to get once you leave. Often people who use violence will not freely hand over your personal documentation. So having those in a safe place, sometimes I've worked with women and they will leave those types of documentation with a friend or with a family member. They'll take copies of them and leave them at a friend's place.

Have access to a phone where possible or know where the closest payphone is and if you are in danger, call '000'. Have a code with someone you trust so they know to call the police, and I guess that means that that could be a text message that you send to someone and it could just be a word, and then they know, that family member or friend knows that you're not safe and they need to call the police to go to your house.

You could also let a trusted friend, family member, even a neighbour, know of your safety plan. Teach your children how to get help. That's another part of the safety plan. Also to let the children know not to get involved in the violence as well. Identifying safe areas in your house is another part of the safety plan where there's no weapons, such as moving an argument or a potential violence incident out of a kitchen maybe into a lounge room, for example. Also practicing your safety plan as well is really important.

And the other things to be aware of with safety plans is, as your circumstances change, so will your safety plan, so it's really important that you engage with a service like a domestic violence service that understands and knows how to support you with your situation and your safety plan.

Hank

So this idea of recognising and providing support to an individual, I guess what it lays you open to is accusations of interfering and potentially even some danger to yourself?

Andrea

Absolutely Hank, and I think that is often why people may pull away, or the person who is experiencing violence may pull away, because it's not safe for them, it's not safe at that point to have family members involved or have friendships, you know, friends involved in their life because they know the real danger if they were to, say, tell you what was going on with them and the person who uses violence found out. That could be that they turn up on your doorstep; they could start abusing you; because these people, you know, the very real risk is that people lose their lives in domestic and family violence situations.

And another point to make is that sometimes when we're supporting someone who's going through family and domestic violence is that we can get fatigued, because we can't understand why they're just not leaving, or why they keep going back to this person who hurts them and harms them so much, and it can be really really devastating for the person who is experiencing violence because

they start losing friendships and connections and their world becomes even smaller, and they don't have those connections there to help them.

Announcement

Services Australia is working with other Government and community organisations to help people who are living with violence and abuse. Together, we stand against violence in any form. If you need support from Services Australia, please call us on 132 850 to speak to one of our Social Workers.

Hank

So Andrea, let's talk about the help that is available. If someone is thinking about leaving their home, where can they go to find help and someone to talk to?

Andrea

Well, firstly, if you or someone else is in danger or have been threatened physically, hurt or sexually assaulted, call '000' first immediately.

Secondly, if you are experiencing domestic violence, getting the right support to be safe is the most important thing. I know I've said that before but I can't stress it enough.

Some key contacts which are free, confidential, and provide support and information and referrals are services like 1800 RESPECT, which is 24 hours 7 days a week. DVCONNECT which is another great service is also called 'Womensline' depending on the state that you're in, or territory, once again it's a 24 hour 7 day a week service and provide all the information and supports that an individual who is wanting to leave a relationship or just might need to talk about what their options are. We also have 'MensLine' as well, and we have 'Kids Helpline' for young people who are going through family and domestic violence.

There's also some apps, so if it's safe for you to have apps on your phone there are some free apps, such as 'Daisy' and 'Sunny' which is for people with disabilities, and there's also a great website, which is called 'Ask Izzy'. It's free and an anonymous way to find national and local supports that you can link into.

So there is a wealth of information out there, I think, around domestic and family violence, but they're just some key services that I'd like to point out.

Hank

Thanks, but what about if you have to go? You just have to grab the kids, grab what you can, and leave. Where can someone go then? Who do they talk to under those circumstances?

Andrea

So, as I just pointed out before, we do have those great services like DVCONNECT and 1800 RESPECT and MensLine, but here at Services Australia we also have social workers, who offer a great service. We're very well trained in family and domestic violence and we can offer great support to people who have left a relationship or even thinking about leaving a relationship, or anyone at any stage of their journey with domestic and family violence.

And the support is very practical. It's crisis intervention and it is really aimed at the person and supporting them from a non-judgemental point of view, which is really really important because, as I highlighted before, there's a lot of shame and embarrassment that often people who experience domestic and family violence feel.

So, if you were to engage with our social workers, you can expect a great response; a response that can look at really what your needs are at that point in time. It's a real collaborative response as well. I recently was working with a young woman who came up from New South Wales because of the danger she was in in her area. So she relocated up here. I actually was a referral from another social worker who had completed a crisis payment for her, and my role in this intervention, in this referral, was to link her in and support her to re-establish herself, stabilise her situation, and ensure that she was linked in with the right support, and it was all around safety.

So we worked closely with the police; closely with youth services. She was very young. She was only 21 years old. Closely with the courts as well, ensuring her safety, and all this was done from this collaborative space, because that's another point I'd like to make is that because of the complexities of domestic and family violence, there's just not one service that can do it all. We all have to work together and address this issue and support the individual going through the violence.

So if you want to speak to a social worker at Services Australia, you can call Centrelink and contact us on 132 850 and ask to speak to a social worker.

We've also got Community Engagement Officers as well that can help. Our Community Engagement Officers have a real tailored approach to, and are linked in to key services within our community such as the refuges, family and domestic violence services, and once again it's that collaborative approach that's supporting services, supporting the individual to ensure that it is wrapped around and everyone's getting the best service possible.

Hank

And look, you've made reference to Services Australia. Of course one of the important aspects that we provide is financial support at a time when you need it, and I guess really the best way to find out what financial support is available is, of course, first you can go to our website, servicesaustralia.gov.au and look for Payment and Services Finder. If you just do a search 'Payment Finder' it will take you to a button whereby after answering a few questions you can get some guidance as to what you may be eligible for.

You've already made reference to our social workers. They're an obvious conduit. But you know what, any customer service officer – our staff are actually trained to assist and refer customers affected by family and domestic violence, it's part of their training, and, of course, they will then link you in in the same way.

But look, Andrea, what other types of financial assistance services are available?

Andrea

Yeah, so when you're in a crisis, social workers do assess what we call Crisis Payments. So we have, in regards to family and domestic violence, there's three types of Crisis Payments that we assess. They are a 'Stay at Home' Crisis Payment; 'Left Home'; and 'Perpetrator' Crisis Payment. All these Crisis Payments come from a framework of safety, and keeping everyone involved in applying for that payment safe. And that type of payment, if eligible for it, can support someone to get new locks on the doors if they're to stay home, or to pay for some accommodation if they had to leave their home quickly. Or, in regards to a perpetrator, ensure that the perpetrator is safe in some accommodation so they don't go back to the home that they have been ousted from.

The other thing that's really important is that someone might have access to an advance payment, which is essentially like a loan that you pay off once you get it, so that could also support someone to stabilise their situation as well if they're eligible for that.

And I think another thing to point out is that, as your circumstances change, and you might leave relationships or leaving homes and care of children, it's really important that you engage with us so we can ensure that you're getting the right payment for your situation. Things like rent assistance; making sure your Family Tax Benefit is correct; we can look at exemptions from taking child support because, as we know, child support can be a huge trigger for perpetrators, people who use violence, sorry. To use that against the person who is experiencing violence.

Hank

Andrea, if you had a message, one message, to give victims of family and domestic violence, what would it be?

Andrea

It would be – I have several – but it would be everyone deserves to be safe and no-one deserves to be abused and affected by family and domestic violence. And there's another thing that I really like to point out is that I've worked with so many women in my time, and although things can be really challenging and overwhelming for them, many women have been able to leave abusive relationships to go on to live safe, happy, fulfilling lives for themselves and their children.

So I think that's important too

Announcement

If you or someone you know is in danger, or is being threatened, physically hurt or sexually assaulted, call triple zero (000).

Hank

I'm very conscious of the fact that this has been a graphic and challenging discussion. If this podcast raises any issues for you, remember, help and advice is available from our social workers. The number is 132 850.

Until next time, I'm Hank Jongen, goodbye for now.