



# Domestic abuse and suicide risks

## 1 Why is this a concern?

Nationally it has been identified that there is an increased risk/link between domestic abuse and suicide (BMJ, 2022).

This link has also been highlighted in a number of Sefton DHRs with clear learning around recognising the risks.

- ▶ **Women who suffer domestic abuse are three times more likely than their peers to try to take their own life.**
- ▶ **Those who have experienced sexual abuse within a relationship have an even higher risk of suicide, and are seven times more likely to have attempted to end their life.**
- ▶ **Victims of abuse by a partner are also more than three times as likely to self-harm and at more than double the risk of having suicidal thoughts.**

## 2 Thinking the unthinkable

It is natural for a practitioner to want to believe the best of people and/or families, being overly optimistic, or just accepting another's view. Thinking the unthinkable isn't about assuming the worst, it is considering all possibilities. Keep an open mind and try to think objectively about the evidence presented, and if it changes over time. Be prepared to accept information that does not fit with previous assumptions and assessments. Practitioners will need to think outside of the box beyond their usual professional role.

## 3 Potential warning signs

The experience of life-threatening abuse, sexual assault, coercion and control, and multiple or repeated abuses.

Feelings of despair and hopelessness relating to abuse.

Self-identity issues such as experiences of disrupted relationships, or childhood trauma.

Coping strategies such as self-harm, drug or alcohol abuse.

**Domestic abuse demolishes the survivor's identity, making it very difficult to seek or accept support.**  
*(Professor Flowe, University of Birmingham 2023)*

“ Professional  
curiosity is  
needed to  
appropriately  
assess the risk  
a victim may  
be facing ”

## 4 What can you do?

There is a need for **professional curiosity** particularly if a person is expressing anxiety/ depression, changes in mental health presentation, panic attacks; they may not be forthcoming with information about domestic abuse.

- ▶ Explore relationships and ask questions about the possibility of domestic abuse.
- ▶ For victims of domestic abuse with children who have been removed from their care, there is an increased risk of suicide. Think about how they are being supported through this process.
- ▶ Take disclosures of suicidal thoughts/ideation (making a plan around suicide) seriously.
- ▶ Find out what support is available.
- ▶ Think about creating a 'safety plan' with the person expressing suicidal thoughts.
- ▶ Increase your knowledge around domestic abuse and suicide by attending further training.

## 5 What is professional curiosity?

To explore and understand what is happening to children, young people and adults rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. This requires practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty'.

Professional curiosity is a combination of observing, listening, asking direct questions, checking out and reflecting on information received.



**Risk assessments need to draw the links between domestic abuse and suicide more than they are doing at present**



## 6 Creating a 'safety plan' around managing suicidal thoughts

If you are offering ongoing support to someone, you can also think about creating a 'safety plan' with them. This is a tool for helping someone navigate suicidal feelings and urges. It can also be a way for you and the person you're supporting to plan how to communicate and check in with each other going forwards.

The '**Working with suicidality in domestic abuse Tools and Resources**' document can help you do this.

## 7 Further information

For further information on help and support available visit:

[www.sefton.gov.uk/domestic-abuse](http://www.sefton.gov.uk/domestic-abuse)

[www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/pdf/livewell/domestic-abuse/da-and-suicidality-toolkit-v1.pdf](http://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/pdf/livewell/domestic-abuse/da-and-suicidality-toolkit-v1.pdf)