

Suicide and Domestic Abuse – Briefing Paper for Professionals

“Experiences of domestic abuse, and other forms of gender based violence, are known to have long term adverse impacts on psychological wellbeing, particularly when these harms are both traumatic and chronic in nature. Depression, post- traumatic stress, anxiety and their behavioural consequences, such as social isolation, substance misuse and self- harm (in its broadest sense), are common outcomes of such abuse. These negative consequences are recognised risks for suicide, and its precursor suicidality (suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts) amongst victims of domestic abuse, as well as the general population.” Aitken & Munro, Domestic Abuse and Suicide

Those suffering domestic abuse and sexual violence who are expressing suicidal ideation, are likely to be suffering psychological injury from the trauma of repeated abuse rather than having a psychiatric illness. Therefore, the response to those in this situation may be wider than a mental health intervention, and specialist domestic abuse or sexual violence support could be helpful.

Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR)

In Cambridgeshire, since May 2018, nine suicides relating to domestic abuse have been considered as requiring a DHR.

A key recommendation in the recommendations for a DHR in East Cambs, was that the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Partnership and Suicide Prevention Boards work together to examine how future deaths may be prevented. Further recommendations from the death of “Barry” in Fenland included this professional briefing.

Often, domestic abuse is not disclosed to statutory agencies, so most suicides, where there has been domestic abuse, are unlikely to be raised as a DHR.

Suicidal Thoughts are Common for Victims of Domestic Abuse

DASH Risk Assessments are completed by police at all DA incidents, these comprise of 27 questions, which include Q5. “Are you feeling depressed or having suicidal thoughts?”

In a study in Kent of 1,000 DASH Risk Assessments, 63% responded “yes” to this question.

Cambridge Rape Crisis reported around a 20% increase in suicidal ideation of callers to their confidential helpline, during the “Covid Lockdown” period.

Research:

- Domestic Abuse (DA) victims are 8x more at risk of suicide than the general population
- DA is a factor in around 12.5% of female suicide attempts
- 25% of those in DA services have felt suicidal due to the abuse
- 50% of DA victims who attempt suicide will undertake further attempts within a year
- 20% of DA victims attempting suicide are pregnant
- A third of female suicides are subject to DA
- “Suicidal acts..... are more likely where feelings of defeat and entrapment exist alongside beliefs that neither rescue or escape are possible” Williams (2001)
- 3-10 women a week die by suicide where they have suffered DA
- It is estimated 30 women each day attempt to take their own lives due to suffering DA

Key Research Articles:

Stark (1995) Killing the Beast Within. Walby (2004) The cost of Domestic Violence.
McGowan (2006) Manslaughter by causing another’s suicide. Williams (2001) Understanding the Cry of Pain
Aitken & Munro – Domestic Abuse and Suicide. Source: OPCS Surveys of Psychiatric Morbidity 2007

How can you help in your role?

Is the person you are speaking to suffering domestic abuse from a current or former partner?

Do they feel hopeless that the situation will never end? Are they frightened that they, or their children, will be harmed? Have they suffered sexual abuse or violence and need specialist support?

If this is the case, there are a number of options available:

- If they are at risk from or frightened of their partner, complete a DASH Risk Assessment and refer to the IDVA service, this case may need to be heard at MARAC if there is a risk of significant harm or homicide: www.cambsdasv.org.uk/website/referral_forms/296136

Provide details of local support services found on www.cambsdasv.org.uk, including:

- National Domestic Abuse Helpline - 0808 2000 247
- Men's Advice Line - 0808 801 0327
- Galop (LGBT Support) - 0800 999 5428
- Cambridge and Peterborough Rape Crisis Partnership - www.caprccp.org.uk

The following information is taken from Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire (CPSL) Mind's STOP Suicide campaign website: www.stopsuicidepledge.org

Around one in five of us will experience suicidal thoughts at some point in our lives and there are warning signs we can all look out for in others. These include:

- Actively looking for ways to kill themselves
- Talking about death/suicide, hopelessness, having no reason to live, being a burden or in pain
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Suddenly appearing very much 'recovered' after a period of depression
- Unexpectedly saying goodbye to people, making arrangements or setting affairs in order

You don't have to be a mental health professional to help someone who is feeling suicidal. If you're worried about someone, asking them directly about suicide is the right thing to do. Use questions like "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "Have you been thinking about killing yourself" rather than using ambiguous or invalidating phrases.

Many people fear that asking open questions about suicide might 'give the person the idea' but there is no evidence for this and, in fact, it can be a huge relief to the person to be asked the question in a direct way. Anyone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts should be taken seriously.

Listen in a compassionate and non-judgemental way and ask if they have a plan to take their life, this can help you find ways to keep that person safe. If the person has a specific plan and the means to take their life, then they need urgent help. **If they are at immediate risk, call 999.** Do not put your own safety at risk and take care of yourself after supporting someone.

Anybody in crisis in Cambridgeshire or Peterborough can get support 24/7 from the NHS First Response Service by dialling 111 and selecting option 2 to speak to a mental health professional.

Alternative helplines are available at www.stopsuicidepledge.org/help-now including the Samaritans national helpline on 116 123 and Lifeline in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough on 0808 808 2121.

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