The long-term impacts of domestic abuse: Insights for employers

This is a summary of our Insight Hour on 25 March 2025. It is a common misconception that when an abusive relationship ends, the abuse stops, and victim-survivors are free to rebuild their lives. It is important to understand that this is not the case, and why.

Coping with trauma after abuse – a survivor's experience

Sharon Livermore is the founder of Domestic Abuse Education and an EIDA Ambassador.

Sharon was in an abusive relationship for 18 months. She lost contact with her family and friends. She disclosed the abuse to her boss, who despite having no formal domestic abuse training, supported her and helped her to contact the police. The perpetrator was questioned but subsequently released. Five days later, Sharon left work with a colleague. She got into her car and smelled her partner's aftershave. He was hiding in the boot of her car, with tape, rope, and a knife. With the help of other colleagues on site, he realised he would be overpowered fled the scene. He was subsequently arrested, convicted, and sent to prison.

The court case was held seven months after the attempt to abduct and kill Sharon. Sharon found herself reliving the trauma of the abusive relationship, and she had to take annual leave to attend court. For victim-survivors whose perpetrators are not imprisoned, this sense of fear may be even more pervasive. Sharon again found herself re-living the trauma when the abuser was released eight years later. She can still be triggered by the smell of aftershave, which brings her mind straight back to the dangerous situation in her car.

Sharon encourages all employers to empower their employees to ask for help. Victim-survivors may need time off to attend court cases or support investigations months or even years after the abuse has ended, which may trigger trauma to resurface. Crucially, employers must know the referral pathway to specialist services. Employers are not expected to be experts, but they can provide empathy and support that victim-survivors need.

The impact of trauma on workplaces – a path to recovery

Dr Craig Newman is a Clinical Psychologist and developed the "Go Out Get Love" self-delivered digital recovery programme model for victim-survivors of domestic abuse – to access via workplace wellbeing initiatives.

Domestic abuse is one of the primary drivers of mental health issues. 64% of domestic abuse victim-survivors experience post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), and they are 3-4 times more likely to develop anxiety and/or depression. Domestic abuse can affect careers and strip people of their self-confidence. Mental health-related costs are estimated at £1,600 per year, contributing to an overall annual cost of £7,245. Around 10% end up leaving the workplace.

There may be significant barriers for victim-survivors to seek help and join a recovery programme. 70% list shame and embarrassment as their primary reasons for not seeking help,

and 17% also work in the same place as their perpetrator. People may experience hundreds or even thousands of abusive experiences, which all shape their relationship with themselves and with the world.

Trauma resulting from domestic abuse is unique and complex. The goal of a recovery programme is to provide specialist support to break the cycles of trauma and increase employee confidence. Support must be accessible, long-term, confidential to access, flexible, and focused on trauma recovery – which will benefit both to the employee and the business.

A lifetime of abuse - impacts across generations

Carrie Bower is a specialist in later-life domestic abuse and the founder of Visible Later Lives.

We are at a unique point in history where some workplaces will employ up to five generations of people. We must consider how our values and behaviours are shaped by our early years, and what we learned about domestic abuse when we were young. Until recently, domestic abuse was believed to be only physical violence – coercive and controlling behaviour was only criminalised in 2015 – and mainstream gender narratives normalised aggression and dominance among men. While legislation and policy changes have come a long way, attitudes and beliefs don't automatically change as a result.

Emerging research also shows a correlation between domestic abuse and long-term health conditions, such as autoimmune disorders and neurological issues. Nearly half of victim-survivors over 60 have a disability or long-term health condition. These illnesses are typically attributed to age rather than being a result of abuse. Additionally, over one in four of those who are killed or die by suicide in a domestic abuse context are over 55.

- Employers must be aware that retirement can be a high-risk time. For the victim-survivor, they may lose their safe space, spend more time in close proximity to the person abusing them, and lose their financial independence.
- For perpetrators of abuse, leaving the workforce can exacerbate abusive behaviours as they may perceive a lack of control and status that their career gave them.
- Employers should consider specific resources for mature employees who face retirement.
- It is also important to be aware that domestic abuse can happen in many types of relationships such as child to parent abuse or adult grandchild to grandparent abuse.

Support for older victim-survivors of abuse

Hourglass Charity operate a 24/7 helpline. PEGS Charity support those abused by children and grandchildren. Local services may also offer specialised support such as IDVAs (Independent Domestic Violence Advocates) who are experienced in the needs of older people.