

Family Violence during COVID-19

With the COVID-19 pandemic evolving and changing every day, these are uncertain times for everyone. Research shows that in times of emergency, those in family violence situations are more at risk. For people who have already experienced family violence it can get worse or for some, family violence will happen for the first time during or after an emergency.

If you are in danger, contact the police on triple zero. If you are afraid for your safety, be reassured many services like 1800 RESPECT and safe steps crisis response phonedlines will continue to operate as usual 24 hours a day, seven days a week to support you.

What is family violence?

Family violence includes a range of behaviours that are used to take power and control from a person. The behaviour may involve coercive, threatening or abusive actions that are designed to intimidate, humiliate, undermine and isolate a person so they feel fearful and insecure.

Family violence can include physical violence, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse, spiritual abuse, psychological and emotional abuse, online abuse, social isolation and stalking. Family violence can be experienced in a range of different relationships between intimate partners, from a parent to a child, from a child to a parent, between siblings, grandparents, extended families, kinship networks or carer relationships. Family violence can affect anyone regardless of age, cultural background, education, sexuality or ability.

The current environment

We know that the current health pandemic is putting a lot of additional stress on individuals and families. No matter how much stress or hardship is happening in life, there is never an excuse to use violence on anyone. If you are experiencing violence it is important to remember it is never your fault.

There are different ways to deal with family stress and uncertainty. Talking through issues or reaching out for help is a step toward safety and positive action.

The measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 may lead to behaviours that are abusive in different ways, such as:

- Withholding necessary items such as food, medicine, hand sanitiser or disinfectants.
- Providing misinformation about the pandemic to control or create increased fear.
- Using the pandemic as an excuse to gain total or increase control of the family's finances.
- Threatening or preventing access to appropriate medical attention.
- Increasing criticism of parenting and blaming for children 'misbehaving' or being upset.
- Further isolating or restricting movements within the house or escalating isolation tactics.
- Increasing monitoring of personal communication devices such as mobiles, emails, online messaging.
- Using COVID-19 to excuse, blame or justify abusive and violent behaviour.
- Manipulation to reconcile a relationship or living arrangement.
- Breaching of a family violence intervention order.
- Using Family Law contact orders to change contact arrangements with children.

How to stay safe

During this period, home may not be a safe place, and places of safety such as the workplace, family and friends are no longer readily available. To help with your safety while in social isolation, it is critical that you develop a safety plan (a personalised, practical plan to help keep you safe) to provide you with protection while you are in a relationship, planning to leave a relationship, or after you leave.

For advice on developing a safety plan, contact a support service or a specialist family violence service or visit the 1800 RESPECT website <https://www.1800respect.org.au/help-and-support/safety-planning/>

Things to consider for increasing your safety or in developing a safety plan:

- Think about the types of essential services you may come into contact with during the COVID-19 restrictions (such as school, GP, other healthcare services, post office, supermarkets) and how you can use them as part of your safety plan.
- Try to maintain social connections online or over the phone if it is safe to do so and try to stick to your daily routines as much as possible.
- Teach your children how to call police and if appropriate, have a safety plan for them to follow.
- Where possible, have a charged phone and a back-up plan in case you are separated from your phone.
- Establish signals to alert neighbours/family/friends you need support you. Eg. turn on the porch light, send an agreed code word by text.
- Have an escape plan and back-up plan. Rehearse this.
- Keep spare keys, some money and important documents where you can get to them readily.
- Try and buy time and/or space, to defuse the situation, or to protect yourself and children.
- Reach out to a specialist family violence service for support, they are there to help.

You can reach out for help. Specialist family violence services, children and family services, services for men using family violence, Victoria Police and other community services are all working together to ensure everyone's safety.

Key contacts:

- If you are in danger, contact the police on triple zero (000).
- For confidential crisis support, information and accommodation, call safe steps 24/7 family violence response line on 1800 015 188. If it is unsafe to call, email safesteps@safesteps.org.au
- For confidential phone help and referral in Australia, contact 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732.
- The Orange Door (Bayside Peninsula) is the access point to services for adults, children and young people who are experiencing family violence. Contact 1800 319 353 or visit www.orangedoor.vic.gov.au
- For a specialist LGBTIQ family violence service, please contact W|Respect on 1800 LGBTIQ (1800 542 847) or visit www.withrespect.org.au
- The Men's Referral Service is a confidential service for men who might be using violence towards a family member or who have been victimised by a partner/family member. Contact 1300 766 491 or visit www.mrs.org.au
- For a culturally safe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family violence service, contact Djirra on 1800 105 303 or visit <https://djirra.org.au/>
- In Touch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence provides support and information for migrant women in your language 1800 755 988 www.intouch.org.au
- WIRE provides free support, referral and information for all Victorian women, nonbinary and gender-diverse people. Contact 1300 134 130 text chat or email support@wire.org.au
- Download safety apps to increase your safety when using mobile devices. The Daisy App will link you into supports nearby and the Sunny App is for women with a disability who have experienced violence and abuse.
- If you are experiencing online abuse, the following eSafety Commission link can provide advice to keep you safe. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/women/domestic-family-violence>