

FAMILY VIOLENCE & COVID-19 UPDATE

26 March 2020

We know that in times of crisis, family violence can escalate, and we already have evidence of this locally. Avoiding public spaces and working remotely can help to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but for many victim survivors, staying home may not be the safest option. We know that any external factors that add stress and financial strain can negatively impact victim survivors and create circumstances where their safety is further compromised.

Family violence is about power and control. When victim survivors are forced to stay in the home or in close proximity to the perpetrator more frequently, a perpetrator can use any tool to exert control over their victim survivors, including a global health concern such as COVID-19. In a time where companies may be encouraging that their employees work remotely, and DHHS is encouraging 'social distancing', a perpetrator may take advantage of an already stressful situation to gain more control.

Here's how COVID-19 could uniquely impact family violence victim survivors:

- Perpetrators may withhold necessary items, such as food, medications, hand sanitiser or disinfectants.
- Perpetrators may share misinformation about the pandemic to control or frighten victim survivors.
- Perpetrators may use the pandemic as an excuse to gain total or increase control of the family's finances.
- Perpetrators may prevent victim survivors from seeking medical attention if they need it or hide their Medicare card.
- Programs that serve victim survivors may be impacted – the ability to place families in crisis accommodation or refuge may become more limited as accommodation services manage their response to the coronavirus. Victim survivors may also fear entering refuges because of being in close quarters with groups of people.
- Perpetrators may increasingly monitor victim survivors' personal communication devices such as mobile phone, email, online messaging.
- An ex-partner may use COVID-19 in their attempt to reconcile or enter/live in the family home. They may try emotional manipulation to allow them to stay to 'help' with the children.
- Perpetrators may breach a family violence intervention order.
- Travel restrictions may impact a victim survivor's escape or safety plan – it may not be safe for them to use public transportation or to fly.
- A perpetrator may feel more justified and escalate their isolation tactics, such as restricting victim survivors' movements in the house, forcing them into specific spaces in the house or disabling their mobility devices.

Here's what we have heard from some victim survivors:

- *The perpetrator was using the virus as a scare tactic to keep the victim survivor away from their kids.*
- *A perpetrator was using COVID-19 as a scare tactic so that they would not visit family.*
- *A health professional still living with the perpetrator called and said they were physically abused that night because the perpetrator was sure they were trying to infect him with COVID-19.*

If any of the above sound like they may be happening to your consumer, here are a few suggestions that may make this uncertain time feel a little bit safer:

Create a safety plan.

A safety plan is a personalised, practical plan that includes ways for victim survivors to remain safe while in a relationship, planning to leave, or after they leave. You can learn more about [safety plans here](#) and [here](#). Call Safe Steps on 1800 015 188 or 1800 RESPECT and they will safety plan with you, with victim survivors, family members, friends and anyone who is concerned about their own safety or the safety of someone else.

Victim survivors and perpetrators may be required to self-isolate or be told by either or both of their employers to work remotely to limit social interaction. Children may be unable to attend school and spending more time in an abusive home. Having a safety plan laid out can help protect victim survivors (including children) during this stressful time.

Practice self-care.

COVID-19 is causing uncertainty for many people, but getting through this time while experiencing mental illness and family violence can feel overwhelming. Taking time to focus on personal wellbeing, even for a few minutes, can make a difference in how a consumer will be feeling. To learn more about how to build in self-care while staying safe, you can [learn more here](#) and [here](#).

Reach out for help.

For any victim survivors who need support, call Police 000 in an emergency, Safe Steps 24 hrs on 1800 015 188 for confidential crisis support, information and accommodation (women and children only) or 1800 RESPECT 24 hrs for safety planning, information, referral and free counselling, and W/respect for our LGBTIQ+ consumers on 1800 542 847. **All services are continuing to operate as usual at this time.**

For consumers that may be perpetrating family violence, Men's Referral Service is continuing to provide telephone counselling, information and referrals on 1300 766 491. They also provide support and referrals for women and men seeking information on behalf of their male partners, friends or family members, and workers in a range of agencies seeking assistance for their consumers who are men. Remember also our responsibilities under the Family Violence and Child Information Sharing Schemes – follow this link for a reminder of what we can share, when and with whom to help manage the risk to victim survivors (and that consent from perpetrators to share their information is usually not required) – [SVMH Information Sharing Schemes policy](#).

Remember Rachel Cameron our Specialist Family Violence Advisor is available for secondary consultations and information regarding family violence.