

SPIKE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

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Domestic violence hotlines have received an increase in calls throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic. One woman reported that she faced the threat of being thrown out into the street if she coughed. Another claimed to have been strangled by their partner, but the threat of coronavirus prevented them from seeking immediate medical treatment. These are just a few instances of the many alarming domestic violence incidents during the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic.

Domestic Violence (DV) encompasses forms of violence related to household or familial violence, including intimate partner violence (e.g., stalking, psychological, sexual and physical violence caused by current or former partner), elder abuse (e.g. neglect), and child abuse (e.g., sexual, emotional and physical violence). Domestic Violence is often caused by someone from the victim's domestic circle and can be a result of power imbalances in the home environment.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, patterns with respect to DV are only beginning to develop on a worldwide scale. With most of the countries engaged in trying to reduce the spread of the virus, people are forced to stay at home. For some, staying at home implies being in close proximity to their abuser, who is often a partner. Hubei province in China reported a three fold increase in the DV cases in February 2020, in contrast to the cases reported exactly one year earlier. Declaration of lockdown in France led to a precarious rise of 30% in the DV cases reported. The stay at home orders resulted in a 25%, 30% and 33% hike in DV calls in Argentina, Cyprus and Singapore, respectively.

Police departments in the various states of the US have provided instrumental data with regard to the impact of COVID-19 on DV. For instance, following the March 23 lockdown, in Portland, Oregon, the Police Bureau of the city recorded a 22% increase in arrests related to DV compared to the weeks prior. The San Antonio Police Department noted an 18% expansion in calls related to family violence since the stay at home orders on March 24, 2020, in stark contrast to March 2019. The Sheriff's Office in Jefferson County Alabama and the police department in New York City reported a 27% and 10% increase in DV calls respectively, in March 2020 contrasted to March 2019. Despite the police records, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cases of DV in the US is just beginning to be acknowledged by means of recounted reports since there is restricted information that is accessible for evaluation purposes.

In cases of domestic violence, recognizing the different signs of abuse is imperative. One should not remain oblivious to the damage and harm that is being caused to them or their loved ones. The nature of abuse is not restricted to physical harm but goes beyond, and hence there are some **signs to look out for**;

1. Psychological abuse: The major aspects of psychological abuse include humiliation, embarrassment, or creating fear and anxiety in the victim. Exercising control over the victim and socially isolating them from friends and family members are other serious signals.
2. Physical abuse: Physical abuse can range from minor injuries caused by burning, biting, shaking, pushing, punching and grabbing the victim to extreme cases of injury that can result in crippling the victim or even causing death. This injury could be caused by the use of weapons or the physical strength of the abuser.
3. Financial domestic abuse: Those victimized financially are often denied the ability to access money or participate in other financial dealings. They are often not allowed to work and/or are forced into social isolation as seen in the case of psychological abuse. This is one of the most common manifestations of abuse and often occurs against family elders.
4. Emotional abuse: Steady, unwavering abuse aimed at embarrassing and insulting the victim is a form of emotional abuse that leads to low victim self-esteem and confidence. The emotional scars resulting from emotional abuse can be very difficult to heal.
5. Sexual abuse: Sexual abuse is not restricted to sexual assault or rape, but goes beyond to include demeaning behaviors such as non-consensual filming of sexual activity, coercing victims to pose for pornographic photos, or unauthorized release of such photos. It also includes forcing a partner into unprotected sex and sometimes forcing them to have an abortion (reproductive coercion).

It often takes every ounce of strength and courage to raise one's voice against the abuser and to even recognize abuse, for it can be manifested using multiple of the abuses outlined above. However, it is crucial to seek help and protect one's and other's physical and mental health once these signs have been recognized. Provided below are some **resources/helplines** that are available for victims of domestic abuse in the United States of America:

1. 911 should be contacted immediately, in case the victim faces an immediate danger or threat to life.
 - Note that calls to 911 are also fraught with racial tensions and may not be the safest option for some people.

2. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is a nationwide helpline and provides services in multiple ways.
 - To talk to an advocate, use the chat feature, or contact by phone at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY).
 - The same advocacy is offered through chat services, available 24/7/365 for those affected by domestic abuse (the chat feature is available 24/7 for English and Spanish speakers)
 - <https://www.thehotline.org/>
3. Safe Horizon can offer assistance in any language;
 - Domestic Violence Helpline: 1-800-621-HOPE
 - Safechat offers a chat option which is available Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET, excluding holidays.
 - <https://www.safehorizon.org/hotlines>
4. The National Dating Abuse Hotline is the direct service provider behind loveisrespect.org;
 - Assistance on call can be provided on the number 1-866-331-9474 or TTY 1-800-77-3224.
 - It has a text option too, which can be reached at any time by texting LOVEIS to 1-866-331-9474.
 - <https://www.loveisrespect.org/>
5. The National Domestic Hotline has partnered with the Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services (ADWAS) to ensure Deaf advocates are available to respond through email and video phone to those callers seeking help.
 - Advocates are available to help individuals who are Deaf and hard of hearing at 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) or by chat.
 - Video phone (only for Deaf callers): 1-855-812-1001
 - <https://thedeafhotline.org/>

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3. Cambridgeshire Constabulary. Signs of Domestic Abuse. Retrieved from <https://www.cambs.police.uk/information-and-services/Domestic-abuse/Domestic-abuse-signs>