

April 24, 2020

The Role of Interfaith Leaders in Domestic Violence during COVID-19

With COVID-19 and its subsequent quarantine/self-isolation, we know from research there is an increased risk of domestic abuse during this time. In fact, Canada's Minister for Women and Gender Equality stated that [domestic violence rates have increased 20 to 30 per cent](#) in some regions of the country since the start of the pandemic.

In many ways, we are in unprecedented times, and as a community we are working to anticipate needs to respond effectively. Our current situation brings many challenges, from financial restraints and shifts in routine to isolation from social networks and support services. These conditions can accelerate or exacerbate domestic violence. Faith leaders are an integral part of the support that people experiencing domestic violence rely on. Thus, we felt it was important to reach out to Edmonton faith leaders to provide support to you if you are receiving and/or suspect domestic violence amongst members of your congregation. It is important that information is sent out now as disclosures may start to increase in the coming weeks.

Thank you to the faith leaders who were able to attend the Reverend Al Miles session on February 27, 2020, before COVID-19 social distancing came into place. Reverend Miles shared many insights into domestic violence from the perspective of a faith leader. During the keynote and workshop, he emphasized the importance of understanding the many forms that domestic violence takes, as well as the role faith leaders can have when working with someone experiencing domestic violence. To read more about the event, and insight from Reverend Miles during COVID-19, please see our [blog post](#) on the It's Time website.

What is Domestic Violence?

We define domestic violence as "a systematic pattern of abusive behaviours within a relationship **characterized by intimacy, dependency and/or trust**. The abusive behaviours exist within a context where

the purpose is to gain **power, control and induce fear.**" (*Community Initiatives against Family Violence, Adopted October 9, 2001*).

These types of relationships can be between intimate partners, parents and their children, adult children and their parents, and relationships within extended families. The terms "family violence", "domestic violence" and "spousal abuse" are often used interchangeably to describe a deliberate, recurring pattern of behaviours.

Domestic Violence Comes in Many Forms

It is important to remember that domestic violence often comes in many forms that intersect. These abusive behaviours can take any or all of the following forms, and often increase in frequency and severity over the course of the relationship. We often think of physical violence when we think of domestic violence but it is integral to our understanding of domestic violence that the abuse often begins with other forms of abuse/violence and can escalate to physical violence. The behaviours may include:

- Emotional/psychological abuse
- Financial abuse
- Cultural/immigration
- Stalking
- Physical violence
- Sexual violence
- Spiritual abuse

Domestic Violence Can Affect Anyone

Domestic violence can affect anyone, regardless of job, social or economic status, gender, religion, race or culture. It is not always observable through physical injury. Changes in behaviour, demeanour, and social relationships can also be signs of issues within an intimate relationship.

Supporting Individuals During COVID-19

During COVID-19, ways of interacting and engaging in empathetic conversations with people experiencing domestic violence is going to look a little different. Due to extreme safety issues, it is very important that we follow the lead of the person who we suspect is experiencing domestic violence and/or who has disclosed domestic violence to you. Because people may be in their homes with their abusers 24/7 during COVID-19, it is important we do not put that person at even more risk.

When engaging in empathetic conversations:

- **Be discreet.** You could unknowingly put that person at risk or increase their isolation by initiating a conversation about their safety over the phone, by text message, email or on a teleconference.
- **It is important to stay connected.** Continue to practice social connection by reaching out and checking in with members of your congregation. Let them know you are available. If they connect with you for support, let them know there are resources available if they need (see below). Keep in mind they are the best to know what they need in these times.
- **Follow the lead of the person who is reaching out** or that you are concerned is in a domestic violence situation. **Often, they are the best judge of what they need in the moment.**

Do you need more support and guidance if you are assisting someone who is experiencing domestic violence?

Please contact The Today Centre at 780-455-6880 for support.

STEP 1: Keep conversations confidential and private. **Ensure the member of your congregation is speaking to you alone and their partner is not present.** Actions should be informed and led by the person contacting you.

STEP 2: Let them know they are not alone. Respond empathetically and without judgment. Let the members of your congregation know you are happy they reached out.

STEP 3: Encourage your congregation member to use the following resources (if safe for them to do so):

- 24/7 [Family Violence Information Line](#): 310-1818
- [The Today Family Violence Help Centre](#): 780-455-6880
- [211](#) for information and referral to a wide range of community, social health and government services

STEP 4: If you feel comfortable, ask how you can safely stay connected with them and follow **their** direction.

STEP 5: Do you need more support and guidance if you are assisting someone experiencing domestic violence? Please call the Today Centre at 780-455-6880. They are a resource available for someone experiencing domestic violence as well as a support for those who are supporters.

Training:

If you are wanting to get more direct training on how to support someone who is experiencing domestic violence during this time, please have a look at Sagesse's "Real Talk" training. Their website has great information and there is a webinar you are able to sign up for that is taking place every few days. Please see the link to their website: realtalk.sagesse.org

Other resources we recommend at this time include:

- [IMPACT and Sagesse's Domestic Violence Community Protocols](#). This is a high level document that gives a good overview of how to best serve people experiencing domestic violence during this time.
- [Alberta Council of Women's Shelters Domestic Violence and COVID Information](#).
- Learn more about the '[shadow pandemic](#)' of violence against women and girls during COVID-19 from United Nations Women
- Research from Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence out of the University of Calgary titled [Supporting the Supporters: How Friends and Families Can Help to Prevent Domestic Violence](#)
- We also recommend signing up for the weekly newsletter from [Community Initiatives Against Family Violence](#). There are links to webinars, local agency updates, and other information.

Sharing Information with a congregation:

- Information can be shared with a congregation through newsletters, faith-based websites, or even posted on the front doors of prayer/faith-based gathering spaces. This is an example of information which can be shared:

What supports are available for those impacted by Domestic Violence?

Often it is difficult to reach out for support. It takes a lot of courage. It is important to know you are not alone. In cases of immediate danger, call 911.

External Community Supports:

- 24/7 [Family Violence Information Line](#): 310-1818
- [211](#) for information/ referral to a wide range of community, social health and government services.
- [The Today Family Violence Help Centre](#): 780-455-6880

Thank you for all the work that you do as faith leaders in our community. You are an important resource and safe space for victims/survivors of domestic violence.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to the the Gender-based Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Initiative Team for any questions related to general information on domestic violence supports, training and information in our community, or to the Today Centre at 780-455-6880, for direct support and guidance on supporting people experiencing domestic violence.

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