

Talking about domestic abuse

At any time in the past year have you been pushed, shoved, hit, slapped, kicked or otherwise hurt?

Has your partner shouted at you, sworn at you, put you down, made you feel worthless or stopped you seeing your friends or family?

Has your partner made you do anything sexually that you didn't want to, or in a way you didn't want to?

Are you afraid of your partner or an ex-partner?

Don't be surprised or offended if your GP asks you these questions - or others like them - at your next doctor's visit.

It's part of a new initiative to encourage people to talk to their GP about domestic abuse and violence.

If you're in immediate danger, your first call should be 111 to the police. But if you're trying to find a way to get out of an unhealthy relationship, organisations such as Shine and Women's Refuge are there to help, as are your GP and practice nurse.

If you're feeling frightened at home, chances are it's taking a toll on your health. Aside from the physical injuries you might have suffered, the stress you are under could mean you are having trouble sleeping or eating, feeling depressed or anxious and even having palpitations or chest pains.

That's why your GP is a good person to share your worries with. You might be going to see him or her anyway with everyday illnesses or when the kids are sick, so this is a safe, confidential environment in which to have a chat about what's really on your mind.

Your doctor or nurse will also ask about the safety of any children who live with you. "If Mum is being abused there's a 60 to 70 per cent chance the child is too," says Dr Faye Clark, who is part of a Doctors for Sexual Abuse Care team contracted by the Ministry of Health to teach GPs and their practice teams how to identify and respond to patients who are experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse. Research shows that for children the long-term effects of witnessing family violence are as damaging as being a direct target of it themselves.

For children, the stress of living in fear can result in many signs such as bedwetting, aggression, refusing to go to school, reduced learning capacity and other behavioural problems. Your GP and practice team can get help for your children as well as yourself.

The first step towards escaping the control of a physically or emotionally abusive relationship is to gather the courage to talk to someone about it.

Dr Clark believes GP practices are often the most important and available place for family violence to be dealt with before it becomes life-threatening. "Eighty per cent of women will go through a primary practice each year and they trust their doctor or nurse," she says.

Dr Clark teaches doctors and nurses to make it part of their consultation routine to ask patients if they feel safe at home. "People are not offended if they are asked appropriately," she says.

About 90 per cent of family violence is experienced by female partners, so doctors are encouraged to raise the issue annually with all women over 16 and anyone else of any age or gender who shows a symptom or sign suggestive of abuse, remembering it can also occur in same-sex relationships. "It's all about power and control, not just gender," says Dr Clark.

Practice receptionists and administrators are included in the training too, so you can be confident that everyone in your practice understands the importance of confidentiality. Domestic abuse posters in the waiting room are a good indication that your practice has been through the training. Some practices will also have pamphlets available in private areas, such as toilets, to help minimise any embarrassment about picking up information.

Sue Hobbs of domestic abuse prevention organisation Shine is also working with GPs to help them appropriately manage disclosed or suspected cases of family violence. "I have been encouraged by the positive response that we have received from practices that have volunteered to take part in a pilot programme around how to identify and manage family violence within general practice," she says.

"All medical practitioners have an important role in identifying family violence so that personal suffering and health costs to individuals, families and the nation can be reduced."

Dr Clark says your GP or nurse will not force you to take any action you do not wish to, but will put you in touch with agencies such as Shine or Women's Refuge, if appropriate, and provide information and advice as you decide how to address your situation.

"It's not about telling you what to do because actually that's abusive - you've already got people telling you what to do," she says. "It's got to be up to you to make your choices."

Instead they will be a touchstone for reality, making you aware that in New Zealand abuse is not okay, the law is there to protect you and the police will take it seriously if you choose to involve them. And with a little help and support you can find a way out.

"Nobody deserves to be hit or frightened by someone they love or have loved in the past."

One woman's story

It was when Manola's partner threatened to kill her pet cat that she realised she had to get out. "He was drinking heavily and when he drank he had a horrendous change of personality," she says. "I felt very unsafe. I was having anxiety attacks and getting paranoid that I was going to be hurt physically. I wasn't sleeping and I was having trouble focusing on my work. I felt trapped. I couldn't just pack up and leave - had I done that, things would have escalated."

Manola initially visited her GP to get medication to calm her anxiety and help her sleep, but then she confided the reasons behind her anxiety and insomnia. "My GP was just marvellous. It was like he was holding my hand and walking through the process with me. He has been an absolutely top person."

The GP put Manola in touch with domestic abuse prevention organisation Shine, which counselled her on keeping herself safe while she made an escape plan. "They made sure I had my passport and money and somewhere safe I could go to quickly. It was so reassuring that somebody was giving me advice."

Eventually Manola and her partner sold their house and went their separate ways. "I got out by keeping calm," she says. "I never lost my cool. I made sure I didn't drink myself because alcohol can make you angry or upset."

She says women shouldn't be afraid or ashamed to talk about domestic abuse and violence to a doctor or friend, or phone a helpline such as Shine. "It can happen to anyone - even professional people - and they don't have to put up with it," she says.

"I want women to know that if you are going to the GP because you're not sleeping and you've always got a headache, feel free to talk to your GP about the emotional things and what's going on at home. If the reason you've got a headache is because your husband or partner is abusing you physically or emotionally, tell your GP because there's all these organisations out there that care that I didn't even know existed."

Two years later she has weaned herself off the anxiety medication and sleeping tablets and started a new life in a different city. "I'm taking good care of myself now. I'm out. It's done. I'm safe."

**Her real name has been changed to protect her privacy.*

Help for abusers

If you want to change the way you treat your partner or family, talk to your GP or practice nurse. They will provide a confidential, non-judgemental listening ear and referral advice for men or women who want help to stop being violent or abusive. "There are plenty of perpetrators who hate themselves for what they're doing but don't know who to turn to for help," says Dr Faye Clark. "It's okay to ask for help, to say: 'Hey doc, I hit my wife and I don't want to do it again.'"

Who to contact

- Your ProCare GP and practice team
- Shine: Confidential Domestic Abuse Helpline 0508 744 633 or visit Zshine.org.nz
- Auckland Women's Refuge: 24-Hour Crisis Helpline 378 1893 or visit awrefuge.org.nz
- It's Not Ok Campaign: 0800 456 450 or visit areyouok.org.nz