



South Cumbria &
North Lancashire Branch

Joint meeting 17th July 2020



South Cumbria Occupational
Health & Safety Group

Venue: Zoom meeting

Topic: *How to spot the signs of domestic abuse and what employers can do to help*

Speaker: Michelle Walsh, Training & Development Coordinator, Safenet.

Dave Wilson, Secretary (Zoom meetings), welcomed attendees to the joint meeting of *South Cumbria & North Lancashire IOSH Branch* and *South Cumbria Occupational Health & Safety Group*. He then introduced our speaker Michelle Walsh, Training & Development Coordinator, at *Safenet*, Burnley.

Michelle started her presentation by giving members an overview of the work that *Safenet* has been doing to help victims of domestic abuse in Lancashire since 1974 such as providing safe houses for men, women and child victims of domestic abuse as well as giving domestic abuse victims support in the community.

Michelle then defined domestic abuse as:

“...**Abuse** of a person by another person with whom the victim is living, has lived, or with whom a significant relationship exists...”

She explained that this type of abuse could be experienced by people of all genders, all ages and all religions. She said that there were many forms of abuse that usually included one, or more, of the following: physical abuse, emotional abuse, psychological and mental abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse, verbal abuse, religious and spiritual abuse, stalking and harassment and coercive control. Domestic abuse also includes ‘Honour’ based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM)

Michelle stressed that **anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse** and that sadly the number of reported domestic abuse cases had increased during the Covid-19 lockdown. She explained that this was probably because the abuse victim was forced to live in a confined space with their controlling abuser and with no respite, during lockdown. She explained that unfortunately lockdown had also had a serious impact on any children in the victim’s home. Under normal circumstances children would ‘escape’ from the situation while they were at school – where they could meet other children and where teachers, are trained to notice suspected child abuse and will alert relevant authorities if they think that there might be a domestic abuse problem in a child’s home.

She then summarized some shocking UK domestic abuse statistics including:

- In the year ending March 2018, an estimated 2.0 million adults aged 16 to 59 years experienced domestic abuse - 1.3 million women and 695,000 men.
- On average two women are killed by their partner or ex-partner every week in England and Wales.

Next Michelle explained that domestic abuse was caused by the systematic misuse of power, by one person, over another. She said that power was gradually exerted in such a way that close family and friends were often completely unaware of what was happening for months or even years - abusers were adept at controlling their victims by gradually ‘taking over’ control, by making the victim think that their actions caused the abuser’s behaviour and by giving the victim ‘special treats’ to make them feel good for short periods of time. She said that research by Biderman et al, 1957, and the Leeds interagency project, 1992 had shown

that this systematic misuse of power, by one person over another, was usually exerted by using a mixture of controlling behaviours such as:

- Threats: eg to kill victim or to hurt children.
- Displays of total power over victim.
- Occasional indulgences.
- Isolating victim: eg not allowed to be alone with friends and relatives.
- Using victim's disability and/or exhaustion to exert control.
- Enforcing trivial demands.
- Distorting victim's perspectives eg convincing victim that they were mentally ill, or the cause of domestic problems.
- Degradation of the victim.

She explained that the above behaviours usually also included some form of sexual violence, physical violence, and/or financial abuse.

Michelle went on to summarise employee workplace behaviours that might indicate that a work colleague was experiencing domestic abuse:

- Increased absences from work.
- Always being accompanied to and from work by same person.
- Being bombarded with calls or texts.
- Being stalked on social media or physically followed.
- Changes in workplace performance.
- Low motivation on personal development .
- Leaving employment without following due process.
- Never going on work related social events – for example never having child-care available.

She added that other indicators of domestic abuse that might also include the person becoming:

- Withdrawn, tired, anxious, nervous and self-blaming for physical injuries such as a black eye or bruising on arms and legs.
- Engaging less with family, work, friends and giving up hobbies.
- Showing low self-esteem and self-worth.
- Making excuses for observed bruises and injuries or other abusive behaviour by partner.
- Developing mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.
- Developing a reliance on using coping mechanisms such as alcohol, drugs, or medication.
- Having problems with weight loss or gain.
- Showing unexplained physical and emotional pain.

Michelle then warned members that these behaviours can also be symptoms of other problems so that they needed to be dealt with in a sensitive way. She said that the main difficulty in identifying and helping people who were suffering from domestic abuse was that they were often too afraid of the perpetrator to admit to their predicament, or unable to even admit to themselves that they were being abused.

She said that if a manager or work colleague suspected that a fellow employee was suffering from domestic abuse they should try and unobtrusively make a private opportunity ask the person concerned if everything was alright at home, but not to be surprised if the person concerned was not ready to talk or to seek help.

Michelle stressed that it was important that work colleagues understood that they should not try and sort out a domestic abuse situation if they discovered that a work colleague was a domestic abuse victim. She warned that such interference could physically endanger the abuse victim. She explained that the best thing employers and workplace managers could do was to ensure that they had policies in place that would enable the victim to get specialist support as quickly as possible.

She said that there are things that employers can do to show that they are aware of domestic abuse and to make staff aware of the services that are available to help victims of domestic abuse. She explained that the dissemination of information about problems associated with domestic abuse can help victims overcome the 'wall of silence' about domestic abuse that prevents many victims from seeking help.

Michelle then discussed some of the ways that employers can provide members of staff with reliable information about the hidden problem of domestic abuse such as:

- Developing a workplace policy on domestic abuse – useful information can be found on the *Employers' Initiative on Domestic Abuse* web site: www.eida.org.uk
- Raising awareness of domestic abuse through:
 - Training managers and/or staff volunteers to become domestic abuse ambassadors.
 - Including information about domestic abuse in staff, and apprenticeship induction courses.

The training needs to focus on reducing the stigma around domestic abuse by explaining that domestic abusers are adept controlling their victims in a way that prevents close relatives and friends from realising what is happening to the victim.

- Raising employees' awareness of domestic abuse by displaying information in the workplace and on the workplace website or intranet about where members of staff can get help about coping with domestic abuse.
- Making the workplace a domestic abuse supportive environment.

Michelle explained that it would also be helpful if employers, who became aware that a member of their staff was suffering from domestic abuse, provided them with practical support such as:

- Allowing them to contact agencies and get support during work time so that there was no chance of their abuser discovering that the victim was seeking support.
- Allowing them time off to move home or escape when relevant agencies had set up the necessary support systems.
- Helping men to speak out.
- Adapting their work hours if necessary.

Michelle then recommended some other useful sources of information and help about domestic abuse:

Brightsky Mobile App – a free mobile app providing comprehensive support and information to people affected by domestic abuse that has been developed by the *Vodafone Foundation* and *Hestia*. It includes a UK-wide directory of specialist support services that can also be used as a tool for friends, family and professionals seeking to support someone who is a victim. Find out more at: www.hestia.org/brightsky

This App can be downloaded from the *App Store* and *Google Play Store* or

Text: REGISTER to 999 – this is an emergency text service.

The police have also provided a leaflet with guidance about making emergency calls when the caller cannot speak freely to the operator:

https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/research-learning/Silent_solution_guide.pdf

Carol Stearne then asked Michelle some of the questions that had been submitted via Zoom's chat facility. Members' comments and questions on the *Zoom* chat clearly demonstrated that Michelle's presentation was worthwhile and much appreciated. She is passionate about her work and illustrated some of her comments with thought provoking case studies.

There was a lot of positive 'feed-back' from members in the *Zoom* chat section during this meeting including the following comments: "...*wow what a wonderful presentation and*

delivered with such passion ❤️ thank you so much...” and “...Such a great and informative presentation THANK YOU 😊...” An amazing 94% of members gave Michelle’s presentation the highest rating on our closing opinion poll - a great achievement!

David Wilson brought the meeting to a close by thanking Michelle for making such a worthwhile and thought- provoking presentation.

Sources of other relevant information:

UK Government guidance - Domestic abuse: how to get help during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak:

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help?qclid=CMXE_MLv9OoCFQ6ZGwodYQgMjQ&qclsrc=ds

NHS guidance on getting help: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/getting-help-for-domestic-violence/>

Refuge – national abuse helpline: <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/>

Safeguarding children and vulnerable people: <http://www.scohsg.org.uk/safeguarding-children-when-coronavirus-restrictions-are-in-place/>

Cumbria County Council:

<https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/LSCB/professionals/supportandservicesforfamilies/domesticabuse.asp>

Related HSE web site links:

Protecting vulnerable workers: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/protect-people.htm>