

The increased risk to the families we work with due to **Coronavirus**



STRENGTHENING PRACTICE
DEVELOPING SKILLED AND VIBRANT PROFESSIONALS

The Increased Risk to the Families we Work with due to Coronavirus

Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus and subsequent government advice and measures¹, we could see an increased risk for some of our children and families. The pressures of self-isolation, uncertainty, financial issues and children unable to attend school is an unprecedented situation and will in some circumstances heighten risk. There are some people who will be more vulnerable than others including the elderly, people with mental health issues and children at risk of abuse and neglect. We will consider how coronavirus changes the risk posed by domestic abuse and mental illness and how we can support individuals and families during this difficult time.

This is without doubt a challenging time for families, and it is important to remember that families also have strengths and resilience. The social worker's role in this context is to hear from families what plans they already have, what help they may need and how they can be supported during this time.

Coronavirus could increase risk of domestic abuse

Social workers should be aware that the current government advice for social isolation could increase the risk of domestic abuse. In situations where women or men are at risk of abuse in the home, the advice to remain at home may put individuals at greater risk².

Social isolation will likely lead to an increased vulnerability for some individuals with less opportunity to leave the home and the absence of the usual family and friends to check in on them.

The enforced social isolation will impact on the availability of the usual community resources. It is likely that there will be less staff available so support groups, refuges and charities may only be offering a limited service. It is important that social workers are aware that individuals fleeing domestic abuse are less likely to be able to access accommodation in refuges during this time³.

Many people are being advised to work from home. This means that couples will be confined together for large periods of time and where there is risk of an abusive relationship, this may be heightened.

There is also an increased risk of people losing their jobs and experiencing financial difficulty. Research shows that in situations of stress and financial crisis, the risk of domestic abuse increases with the perpetrator directing his/her frustrations onto their partner⁴.

Recent school closures mean that children will be staying at home from school for an uncertain period of time. Families will be self-isolating and therefore house bound. This is likely to cause boredom, tension and arguments in the home. Parenting strategies can cause conflict and in an abusive relationship, this may lead to further abuse.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/201806/domestic-abuse-linked-financial-crisis>

³ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-and-children-experiencing-domestic-abuse-and-the-life-saving-services-that-support-them/>

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/201806/domestic-abuse-linked-financial-crisis>

The Impact of this:

The current situation increases the risk for vulnerable adults experiencing domestic abuse but also for children that will be at increased risk of witnessing domestic abuse. Research suggests that 20% of children in the UK have lived with an adult perpetrating domestic abuse ⁵.

School closures may reduce safety for some children living with domestic abuse as research suggest that 'school life can provide an escape' ⁶. There is an expectation that vulnerable children who have a social worker will attend school, as long as it is safe for them to do so ⁷.

Social isolation means children living with domestic abuse will also experience limited support from family and friends. Leaving the house when there is a risk of domestic abuse is usually a strategy for some children, but the current self-isolation advice will make this more difficult to do. Children remaining in the home during a domestic abuse incident makes them more likely to be hurt. Current research tells us that 62% of children in households where domestic violence is happening are also directly harmed ⁸.

What can Social Workers do to Reduce Risk:

It is important that these families continue to be contacted and supported even though, there will be many challenges on staffing and resources.

Home visits

It is imperative that social workers remain in communication with families and undertake statutory home visits. It is possible that some families will be self-isolating and will decline visits. It is important to consider alternative ways of staying in contact with families and making sure that they are safe. Where you are unable to enter the home due to health risks, you can offer to see families, from a safe distance outside their homes. Where it is possible, encourage family members to come to the doorstep, where you are able to maintain a safe distance (2m apart); this will enable you to have some contact, see how they are doing and offer support.

Telephone/Email contact

It is important that families know that they have support available to them during this difficult time. Social workers will need to be creative and can use technology to maintain regular contact with their families via text message, WhatsApp and email. Video calling may be a good alternative where social workers are unable to access the home and the families have use of WhatsApp. Social workers should ensure that families have credit on their phones and be mindful that victims of domestic abuse may not be able to speak on the phone but may be able to communicate via text messages or online.

Although social media can be problematic for some of the families we work with, it may be a very important resource during this time. We should encourage our families to stay in touch with family and friends so they do not feel isolated and can reach out to their support networks.

⁵ NSPCC (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today; Research into the prevalence of maltreatment in the United Kingdom.

⁶ Sterne A. Poole L. (2010). Domestic Violence and Children, A Handbook for Schools and Early Years Setting. London: Routledge. [Google Scholar]

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>

⁸ Safelives (2015) Getting it right the first time.

Financial/Practical Support

Social workers should discuss with families any financial concerns they may have. Where they identify risk of financial issues, offer S17 support, ensuring that families have enough food, credit for gas, electric, phones and with anything else that could reduce risk. Vulnerable children and those at risk should still attend school and access school meals.

The social worker should ensure that support services are in place and coordinate multi agency support and visits with key workers.

Safety Plan

It is important that where there is an identified or potential risk of domestic abuse, a safety plan is drawn up with the family. This plan should outline who to contact in an emergency and provided contact numbers for support services. This should include a mobile no. for the social worker and the out of hours team. Social workers should also advise those at risk to have important documents such as passports and birth certificates to hand, in case they need to flee in an emergency.

Coronavirus could Increase Risk of Mental Health Issues

The outbreak of coronavirus has caused anxiety and fear of contracting the virus, losing loved ones as well as being advised to stay at home. The media and general public reaction have heightened fear with panic buying and there is uncertainty about the impact on the economy.

This has caused stress and tension for many of us but young people and adults with mental health issues, may be more vulnerable to the effects of widespread panic and threat ⁹. Social Workers will need to be minded of the increased risk for these individuals and provide the additional reassurances and support that is needed.

The advice to stay at home may leave individuals with mental health issues feeling more isolated and vulnerable than usual. This may also mean that they have less support available to them from family and friends. Feelings of isolation can lead to or increase symptoms of depression.

The fear of becoming unwell from coronavirus due to poor hygiene and spreading of germs may be debilitating for some people. It could prevent individuals from leaving their homes and adopting excessive cleaning regimes. This is particularly the case for those who suffer from pre-existing conditions such as OCD. This situation is likely to increase anxiety and depression and may become all too stressful for some individuals to deal with ¹⁰.

There have been some conspiracy theories on social media about the coronavirus and its origins. Social workers should be aware that for those with mental health issues, this is likely to heighten symptoms of paranoia and anxiety about what may happen and can lead to delusions for some individuals.

The increased pressure on the health services, due to coronavirus means health appointments could be cancelled. This will leave those with mental health issues vulnerable. Patients may not be able to access required treatment and medication, which may place some patients at risk.

⁹ <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/psychiatrists-beware-impact-coronavirus-pandemics-mental-health>

¹⁰ <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/psychiatrists-beware-impact-coronavirus-pandemics-mental-health>

What is the Impact?

Coronavirus is causing fear on a societal level. On an individual level, it may exacerbate anxiety and psychosis like symptoms as well as lead to other mental issues such as mood problems, sleep issues and phobias ¹¹.

When parents experience a deterioration in their own mental health, they may struggle to provide their children with the care that they need. An analysis of 175 serious case reviews from 2011-14 found that 53% of cases featured parental mental health problems ¹². Mental health problems are frequently present in cases of child abuse or neglect, therefore social workers need to offer appropriate and timely support to reduce risk factors.

What can Social Workers do to Reduce Risk

Maintain Regular Contact

It is important that Social workers try to maintain regular contact. Telephone contact and video calling is an option. Social workers may also do a doorstep visit or arrange to meet in the park and maintain safety. Individuals should be encouraged to exercise or go for a walk, which will provide them with much needed fresh air and exercise.

Provide Advice and Support

Social workers should encourage individuals with mental health issues, to try to avoid rumour and social media speculation and rely on reputable sources. Social workers should offer them reassurance and education to help manage their fears and anxieties.

Support with Accessing Health Care and Multi-Agency Working

Social workers should support individuals with accessing health care where it is required and attending health appointments and reviews where possible. Social workers should liaise with professionals to identify what advice and support is available and if there are alternative ways to engage with services i.e. telephone or internet.

It is important that social workers ensure that the young people and adults, who need medication, are able to access prescriptions and delivery of medication if they are unable to leave their homes.

Safety Plan

Where possible social workers should encourage vulnerable young people and adults to stay in touch with family and friends via telephone/email or social media in order to maintain some socialisation and receive emotional and practical support. Social workers should also provide a list of contact numbers for services that provide telephone support such as Samaritans.

Social workers should ensure that parents suffering from mental health issues have a good support network. Social workers should help them identifying relatives or friends that can help if they feel unable to do so due to their own mental health needs. Social workers should also maintain regular contact with them, provide them with phone numbers and encourage communication via phone calls etc.

¹¹ <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/psychiatrists-beware-impact-coronavirus-pandemics-mental-health>

¹² Sidebotham, P. et Al (2016) Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014: final report (PDF). London: Department for Education (DfE)

Summary

The information relates to the increased risk of coronavirus related to mental illness and domestic abuse, however the risks related to coronavirus are not limited to these two areas. Social workers should be aware that there are also other risk factors. Families need to feel supported during this difficult period and need access to resources while they are in isolation.

Key points to take away

- **The outbreak of coronavirus may increase the risk for some vulnerable young people and families.**
- **Social workers should recognise that families have strengths and resilience. Social workers should explore these with the family when assessing and planning safety with the family.**
- **Social workers should offer practical and emotional support both where it is needed and to reduce risk.**
- **It is important that families remain connected to their support networks and social workers should be encouraging communication.**

References

NSPCC (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today; Research into the prevalence of maltreatment in the United Kingdom.

Safelives (2015) Getting it right the first time.

Sidebotham, P. et al (2016) Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014: final report (PDF). London: Department for Education (DfE)

Sterne A. Poole L. (2010). Domestic Violence and Children, A Handbook for Schools and Early Years Setting. London: Routledge. [Google Scholar]

www.psychiatristimes.com Psychiatrists Beware! The impact of COVID-19 and Pandemics on Mental Health by Nidal Moukaddam, MD, PhD and Asim Shah, MD. March 15, 2020. Volume 37, Issue 3.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/201806/domestic-abuse-linked-financial-crisis>

Resources and Guidance

The impact of COVID-19 on women and children experiencing domestic abuse, and the life-saving services that support them. Anghard 17th March 2020, COVID, News press Release, Covid-19

www.gov.uk Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on vulnerable children and young people. Published 22 March 2020

www.gov.uk Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on isolation for residential educational settings. Published 21 March 2020