
clarity
A Christian Response to Domestic & Family Violence

Queensland Churches Together acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which Australian churches work and worship.

The information in this booklet (including that contained in the section 'How can the law help people who are experiencing DFV?') is general in nature and provided for information purposes only. It is not legal, financial, or professional advice. You should obtain expert advice tailored to your circumstances.

If you are experiencing harm or have been harmed as a result of domestic or family violence, please consult emergency services, crisis responders and/or other professional practitioners (including medical and legal practitioners).

For easy access to further information, endnotes have been used for referenced information. Please also see the Further Resources section at the end of this booklet for additional information.

This booklet includes links to various web material. All links were working at the time of publication. Please note however that these links may become outdated over time.

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Preface

The Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Project (JCDVPP) was established in 1991 to inform and resource Christian churches about Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) – because DFV is unfortunately prevalent in church communities and Christian teaching has often been misused to justify violence and abusive behaviour.

In 2010, JCDVPP published its first resource booklet for victim-survivors of DFV, titled *Questions Women ask about Domestic Violence and Christian Beliefs* (updated in 2016).

Further updated in 2021 under a new title – *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Questions Women ask about Domestic Violence and Christian Beliefs* – JCDVPP's booklets have supported women who are practising Christians, as well as women who aren't connected with a church. They have also helped clergy and pastoral carers support victim-survivors in their congregations.

This latest booklet represents a substantial revision and original new work, as reflected in its new title, *Clarity: A Christian Response to Domestic and Family Violence*.

It draws on research and the professional expertise of Christians working in DFV prevention, including information about coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse, and recognises that DFV doesn't only impact women. This booklet also directly addresses several myths about DFV and goes deeper into how Christian churches can support victim-survivors.

You don't need to read this booklet from cover to cover. Feel free to use the Contents page to find what you need – or jump straight to the end of the booklet, where we have included a summary section for different types of reader.

We are grateful to the Glenburnie Program, administered by the National Council of Churches in Australia, and the Queensland Churches Together (QCT) Board for financial support to develop this new resource – and we deeply appreciate the expertise of our Project Officers, Amanda Ballin and Genevieve Farquhar, who worked with JCDVPP's Project Management Group to bring this booklet to you.



Thanks go to past and present members of JCDVPP, who saw the need for this resource and contributed time, energy, information and insights for each new edition. We are especially thankful to Professor Sarah Wendt, Dr Josephine Clarke and Dr Brian Sullivan – along with Reverend Deborah Bird, Deepa Manuel (Romero Centre), Taisoo Kim Watson, Anand Kumar and several anonymous reviewers – who read and commented on the final draft.

We also thank AKTA Media for their expert graphic design and Ms Jackie Fewtrell, QCT Administration Officer, for coordinating the publication process.

I pray that you will find this booklet helpful — whether you are experiencing DFV, have experienced it in the past, or are seeking to support a victim-survivor in the church or wider community.

Dr Kate Power

General Secretary,
Queensland Churches Together

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Introduction

Welcome to the fourth edition of Queensland Churches Together's resource about Domestic and Family Violence (DFV). This resource is for you, if …

- you are experiencing or have experienced DFV
- you are concerned for people you know who may be in an abusive relationship
- you are a Christian leader (e.g., priest, pastor, chaplain, elder, Bible study or small group leader, Sunday School teacher)
- you want to learn more about DFV and how to respond
- you want to improve responses to DFV in your faith community and broader society.



If you are experiencing DFV and are in immediate danger, move to a safe place and call the police (in Australia: dial 000). In Australia, DFV support is also available from:

1800RESPECT is a free and confidential 24–hour DFV support hotline. You can call 1800 737 732 or text 0458 737 732. Online chat and video chat options are also available on the 1800RESPECT website. If you need an interpreter, ask for a translation service or call 13 14 50. If you find it difficult to hear or speak, you can get support by phoning the National Relay Service (NRS) on 1800 555 677 and giving them the 1800RESPECT service number (1800 737 732).

DVConnect is a free and confidential service for Queenslanders who feel unsafe at home because of domestic, family or intimate partner violence. You can call 1800 811 811. Men who want to change their abusive behaviours can also call DVConnect's Mensline on 1800 600 636.

The Elder Abuse hotline ELDERHelp is a free and confidential hotline. You can call 1800 353 374 for information and advice. Hours may vary across states.

The Rainbow Sexual Domestic and Family Violence Hotline is a free and confidential hotline supporting LGBTIQA+ people, family members, supporters and anyone impacted by sexual, domestic or family violence towards the LGBTIQA+ community. You can call 1800 497 212.

13YARN is a 24–hour free and confidential service run by trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support workers. You can call 13 92 76.

MensLine Australia is a 24–hour free online and telephone counselling support for men who are experiencing or using DFV. Support is also available for mental health, stress, anger and suicidal thoughts. You can call 1300 789 978.

Men's Referral Service offers 24–hour advice for men about family violence. You can call 1300 766 491. Translation services are available upon request.

Precious lives are being devastated and lost at horrific rates due to DFV.

One woman is killed by a current or former partner

EVERY 9 DAYS[1]

Two in five women have experienced violence since the age of 15 years.[2]

Two in five Australian children are exposed to domestic violence.[3]

We urge all Christians – particularly leaders – to engage with local experts and specialist services to learn how to support victim-survivors. A single church, agency, organisation or individual cannot do it alone. But Christians can stand together to condemn controlling and abusive behaviour and stand by victim-survivors as they recover.

Christianity allows no room for abuse. Abuse cannot be justified by the Bible or Christian beliefs. Domestic and family violence is wrong and should never be condoned by Christians. Wherever Christians worship, God calls people of faith to speak for the voiceless and to lift up the broken hearted.

If you are experiencing domestic or family abuse now, or have done in the past:

- You are precious in God's eyes. God has called you by name. God has not forgotten you.
- Whatever situation you are in, God has great love for you.
- Jesus understands – and stands with us in our pain and difficulties. Isaiah 53:3a states,
  'He was despised and rejected by mankind,
  a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
  Like one from whom people hide their faces
  he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.'[4]
- You may need to make hard decisions to care for and protect the life God has given you. For the sake of your safety or sanity, you may need to end a relationship – or leave until it's safe to return.
- If the safest option – or your choice – is to remain, that's OK. You can receive support regardless of whether, how or when your situation changes.
- Take courage. Seek support and advice from trusted people and experts.
- Reclaiming your life, dignity and agency takes perseverance, but recovery is possible.
- Life can be hopeful and flourishing again.
- Whatever your decisions are along the way, know that God loves you and wants the best for your life – including freedom from violence and abuse.



One Woman's Story

I met my (former) husband when I was in my early twenties. I was shy, unworldly, inexperienced and lacking in self-esteem. He was older, handsome, charming and worldly. I was raised in a conservative Christian family, believing in the sanctity of marriage and family. I was swept off my feet and we married!

We both had well-paid jobs and we bought our first home pouring our money into renovations and the mortgage. I organised everything around his full-time shift work so he could rest and care for our children, while I worked part-time. We invested in property and shares for our children's future education and our eventual retirement.

Our youngest child was 18 months old when he lost his job and I took up full-time work. I now realise that his loss of status caused him shame, jealousy and resentment which he turned towards me.

Unable to find a new job that paid as much as mine did, he became a home husband, and I became the principal income earner. He managed all the household finances and his growing resentment towards me led to financial abuse.

> **His abuse was not physical or sexual but he preyed on my low self-esteem.**

This created a culture of dependence, reinforced with various forms of coercive control, manipulation, undermining tactics, now known as 'gas-lighting'.

After years of emotional, financial, and spiritual abuse, I was exhausted, having lost all sense of myself and all hope. During my thirties and early forties, 'the lights were on, but no-one was home!' I believed his lies, that I was the cause of all our problems.

He listed my many faults and told me I was too sensitive, too proud, too fat, looking old, tired and ugly, not earning enough, spending too much on the children's education, food, and utilities; that I was never happy, and always nagging.

I was unaware that he was squandering our money. If I asked about our finances he retaliated with questions about my Christian values and beliefs. How could I call myself a Christian if I could not trust him, forgive him when he made mistakes, submit to his will, and acknowledge that he was 'head' of our family?

The spiritual abuse was reinforced by my church. Sermons on forgiveness in marriage and the sanctity of marriage and family further duped me into accepting his constant domestic abuse. His regular outbursts increased my 'Godly Guilt', so I told no-one what was going on behind closed doors.

To service our growing debts, I worked up to 100 hours a week and still made little headway financially. He did work part-time, refused to be accountable for anything and had complete financial control.

When he left, I eventually found out that he womanised and sustained heavy losses on the stock market trading in 'futures'. We lost our home, two rental properties, a substantial shares portfolio, and some smaller investments, resulting in huge debts to repay. Outdated marriage laws meant that I was solely responsible for all his debts. Problems with the Family Court of Australia and expensive legal proceedings meant that very few cases were heard in Court, including mine.

Australian Family Law now recognises emotional, psychological and financial abuse – and the complex issue of coercive control.

My solicitor advised against expensive Court action which would cost $250K, with no guarantee of success. It was unlikely that my ex-husband could pay, in the event I was successful. So I accepted the awful terms put before me by my solicitor, including responsibility for ongoing child care and repaying all debts accumulated in my name, as we had joint accounts.

He was on a minimum wage so qualified for Legal Aid and I did not. This is one reason why people like him can do it again to someone else, without fear of retribution.

The scars from this lived experience of domestic violence run very deep and at times the impacts are still overwhelming, especially the financial ramifications.

Twelve years ago, I was constantly on the verge of bankruptcy, causing me so much stress. I feared losing my very responsible state-wide job with a large multi-national company if I told anyone about my domestic situation.

After I told him to leave, it became a race against time to repay the debts and save a little for my retirement. Homelessness was an ever-present threat, older women being the fastest growing statistic in Australia's homeless sector.

> **Today, I am happy and grateful that my story has a happy ending, a 'good news story'!**

It took me five years to scrimp and save and repay the debts. A few years later, I saved enough to take my children on a wonderful overseas holiday and enough money to put a deposit on a home.

Seven years ago, I met a wonderful man and we have just celebrated our fifth wedding anniversary. My children are now adults and live independently, but I see the effects of my abusive first marriage on their relationships. With God's help, I hope that this new Christian marriage will demonstrate love, mutual respect and trust between two people, resulting in a life-giving relationship.

Kindness, wise counsel and practical assistance from two female Anglican priests saved me, for without them I think I would likely be dead. One helped me identify emotional, spiritual and financial abuse and explained that I was under no obligation to remain in such an abusive relationship and it was common knowledge in the parish that he was intimately involved with another parishioner. She pointed out the danger my children and I might be in after the separation as his behaviour towards me was both aggressive and unpredictable. The second priest helped me over the course of the following 18 months to process my experiences and heal.



Terminology

Around the globe, Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) is known by various names, including *intimate partner violence* (IPV); *violence against women* (VAW); *violence against women and girls* (VAWG); *gender-based violence* (GBV); *family, domestic and sexual violence* (FDSV); and *battery*.

In the Australian legal system, the terms *the aggrieved* (for the person experiencing abuse) and *the respondent* (for the person using violence) are often used. The term *perpetrator* is also widely used when referring to people who use violence, although some communities choose not to use this term because it may fail to motivate change.

In this resource, we use the term 'Domestic and Family Violence' (DFV) to align with Australian state and federal policy and planning documents. We also use 'violence' and 'abuse' interchangeably to help readers recognise that DFV is not only physical in nature. It is important to recognise that DFV occurs across a range of relationships and life stages, and some of the common terms may not reflect these diverse experiences.

To be as inclusive and clear as possible, we have chosen to use the following terms:

- *Victim-survivor* (VS) is a person who experiences abuse.
- *Person Using Violence* (PUV) is the person who uses forms of violence and abuse.

Preamble to Queensland's Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Act (2012)[5]

- Living free from violence is a human right and fundamental social value.
- Domestic violence is a violation of human rights that is not acceptable in any community or culture and traditional or cultural practices can not be relied upon to minimise or excuse domestic violence.
- Domestic violence is often an overt or subtle expression of a power imbalance, resulting in one person living in fear of another, and usually involves an ongoing pattern of abuse over a period of time.
- Domestic violence can have serious impacts on people who experience it, including physical, emotional and psychological harm, and can result in death.
- Perpetrators of domestic violence are solely responsible for their use of violence and its impacts on other people.
- Domestic violence is most often perpetrated by men against women with whom they are in an intimate partner relationship and their children; however, anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence.
- Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children.
- Children who are exposed to domestic violence can experience serious physical, psychological and emotional harm.
- Behaviour that constitutes domestic violence can also constitute a criminal offence.



SECTION ONE

Understanding DFV

What is DFV?

The Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act (2012) defines DFV as behaviours that occur in the context of family, intimate or informal care relationships. It can be a single act or a pattern of abusive, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviours that causes someone to fear for their safety or wellbeing.

Similar definitions are found in other Australian laws and around the world.

DFV differs from the relationship difficulties or disappointments of healthy relationships, where there is no disrespect or indifference, and partners and family members are willing to repair. By contrast, DFV happens in destructive relationships when a Person Using Violence (PUV) intentionally directs harmful, controlling behaviour towards a Victim-survivor (VS), including getting someone else to inflict harm on a VS. In destructive relationships, one person has physical, emotional, financial, mental and/or spiritual power over the other.[6]

> ‘In a destructive relationship, you don’t just feel it’s hard, you feel like you’re dying inside. There is no “you” in the relationship. There is a lack of freedom to be yourself, speak your own thoughts and feelings, to be a separate person and to make decisions for yourself. You don’t feel safe to speak up, set boundaries, ask for what you need or want or disagree without a heavy price to pay. There is often chronic deceit and indifference to your feelings, needs and personhood.’[7]

Is DFV only physical violence?

There are many forms of DFV. It includes any kind of abusive behaviour that controls another person by hurting, humiliating, isolating, frightening or threatening them. These behaviours are rarely clearly visible to people outside the relationship.

You may hear excuses, such as ‘I didn’t hit them’, which invalidate VS fear by casting doubt over whether a specific behaviour ‘counts’ as DFV. A similarly harmful phrase is, ‘It takes two to tango’, which shifts blame for abuse onto the VS. Both phrases perpetuate the myth that DFV is only physical.

What other forms of DFV are there?

Coercive control involves a PUV intentionally creating an unequal power dynamic to control and instil fear in you. Rather than being a specific incident, coercive control takes place over time. It can be very subtle. The PUV often uses several forms of abuse interchangeably. Physical or sexual abuse may or may not be present. This type of DFV includes ‘playing mind games’ (e.g., fabricating scenarios or issues) to make you doubt your own memories or experiences (often called ‘gaslighting’, after the film Gaslight). A PUV may use threats of suicide to try and get you to feel obligated to stay in a relationship or feel guilt for leaving. The controlling behaviour can be as simple as a look or gesture that instils fear. A PUV may also get others to contact you on their behalf and use various ways of monitoring you to maintain control. This type of abuse is the most likely to be ignored by Christian women due to notions of serving/obeying a husband. Other people

may not recognise these abusive behaviours because they don't understand the relationship dynamics. But coercive control is targeted and dangerous. It breaks down your sense of identity and self-worth. It can be difficult to disclose this kind of abuse. You may fear you won't be believed, especially when the tactics used by the PUV are subtle. But, in some cases, the first act of physical violence has been murder. It's important to take it seriously. Coercive control laws are developing across Australia as it is increasingly being recognised as a serious form of DFV. In Queensland, coercive control is a standalone criminal offence as of May 2025.



RECOGNISING THE SIGNS OF COERCIVE CONTROL[8]

Sometimes it's hard to tell if you, or someone close to you, is experiencing coercive control because it can be hard to spot. Here are some examples of what coercive control could look like from a partner, ex-partner, someone close to you, or someone living in your home:

- Trying to control when or if you see family and friends or go to community events.
- Trying to control where you go and what you can do. They might stop you from leaving by locking you in the house or taking your keys, car, phone, wallet, or ID.
- Bullying you to take your bank card, spend your money or not let you spend it.
- Making unreasonable demands of you or your family, often about money (sometimes known as 'humbugging').
- Watching everything you do, including tracking your phone, or going through it without permission.
- Running you, your family, or your mob down.
- Getting others in community to gang up on you, fight you, or make you shame.
- Separating you from culture, community or Country, or questioning your Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity.
- Making you have sex or do sexual things you don't want to (even if they are your partner or ex-partner).
- Threatening you, your family or friends, threatening to damage your home, or threatening to report you to the police.

Emotional abuse (also known as Psychological abuse) is any behaviour that undermines your sense of self, making you question your value as a person or feel worthless and put down. A PUV may also tell you that other people agree with their perspectives and make you believe that you are the cause of problems. They might also withhold affection or communication – giving you the 'silent treatment' to cause you emotional distress and punish you. Emotional abuse is very common. It co-occurs and overlaps with the other forms of DFV listed here.

Spiritual abuse is when a PUV uses spiritual beliefs to hurt, scare or control you. They might force you to participate in spiritual or religious practices that you don't want to do. Or they might prevent you from participating in spiritual or religious practices that are important to you. They might use your beliefs against you or misuse religious texts to make you feel guilty, threaten or blame you. If they know your faith is important to you, PUVs may defile religious images/objects or twist religious texts or your own beliefs to control you and justify their abusive behaviour. Unfortunately, religious leaders – intentionally or unintentionally – may also participate in spiritual abuse, misusing religious texts or teachings to persuade you to stay in an abusive situation. Spiritual abuse can also take many other forms.

Verbal abuse involves communicating with you in ways that deliberately demean, belittle, humiliate, harm, frighten or control you. Verbal abuse inflicts emotional pain and can make you feel guilty or worthless. It includes repeated yelling, swearing, insults, name calling, criticism and intimidating remarks. It also extends to false accusations or threats (e.g., to harm you or someone you love, to report you to authorities, or to suicide). In religious contexts, a PUV may use spiritual language to increase the effect of their verbal abuse.

Social abuse involves isolating you from your social networks and supports. A PUV may control where and when you can go out and whom you interact with. They may prevent you from having contact with family or friends or continually put down your friends and family, making them feel unwelcome. They may slowly persuade you to disconnect from your support network. Social abuse also includes verbally or physically abusing you in public or in front of others. A PUV may even contact your employer or intentionally say or do things to jeopardise your employment (also a form of financial abuse).

Technology-facilitated abuse is when a PUV uses one or more forms of technology to cause you emotional, psychological or reputational harm. It includes restricting your access to communication devices; monitoring your computer/phone; using GPS or spyware to track you; and sending you persistent unwanted, threatening or harassing text or social media messages. A PUV may also cause you distress and harm your reputation by impersonating you online, publishing intimate photos without your consent,

or threatening to share photos or messages (this is known as 'sextortion'). The use of generative AI or deepfake technology to create manipulated photos, videos or messages about you is also technology-facilitated abuse.

Financial abuse involves harming you through the controlling use of money (including your own), often making you financially dependent on a PUV. It includes preventing you from working; forcing you to work; denying or limiting your access to money; forcing you to account for how you spend money; or demanding that you (and any children) live on inadequate resources. A PUV may also control bank transactions, take/spend money without your consent, withhold financial information, or force you to sign loans and be responsible for debts you have not incurred. (Please also see the section below on 'Post-separation abuse'.)

Physical violence is the most easily recognisable form of DFV. It involves violent behaviour or threats of violence, including pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking and/or throwing objects (with or without the intention to harm you). Further examples include punching walls; slamming doors; deliberately breaking or damaging property; choking/strangulation; banging on or yelling at a door separating you from the PUV; and a PUV using their body to block or intimidate you. But physical violence can also be more subtle, such as sleep or food deprivation. Physical violence can be directed at you, your children, other family members and/or pets.

Harming pets or threatening to harm your – or your children's – pet is a form of physical and emotional abuse. Pets provide comfort for many people. In the context of abuse, targeting pets or support animals is intentional. Safety planning with a VS must include consideration of animals, particularly if a period of separation occurs. (Please see the section below on 'Safety planning'.)

Strangulation (sometimes referred to as 'choking') prevents blood and oxygen from entering the brain, leading to hypoxic and sometimes anoxic injury.[9] It typically involves using hands, arms, knees or feet to put you in a chokehold. PUVs may also use a type of ligature (e.g., a belt or cord). Strangulation is common in DFV contexts and sexual assaults. Non-fatal strangulation is a key indicator of future serious harm or death, increasing the risk that you'll become a homicide victim by 800%.[10] In 2016, Queensland recognised non-lethal strangulation in DFV as a stand-alone criminal offence. It is now an offence in all Australian States.

Sexual abuse involves any unwanted sexual behaviour, such as inappropriate touching or being forced into sexual activity against your will. It includes being coerced, manipulated or forced to perform sexual acts (including accessing, reading or watching pornographic material). A PUV may shame you or make you feel guilty about doing or not doing something sexual. They may accuse you of not loving them, if you don't do what they want. Sexual abuse also includes having

sex with you when you're asleep or unconscious, knowingly passing on a sexually transmitted infection, and refusing to wear a condom or practice safe sex. A PUV may also seek to isolate you from others by accusing you of sexual infidelity or cheating.

Reproductive abuse is when a PUV uses threats or manipulation to control your reproductive choices. It includes forced sterilisation, controlling your reproductive or pregnancy choices (such as hiding or interfering with your contraception), and not using birth control.

Forced marriage is when someone coerces or threatens you into marriage against your will or without your consent. It may involve physical violence, threats to harm you or other forms of DFV listed here. Forced marriage is not a marriage between consenting adults, arranged with the support and involvement of your family. In Australia, children cannot legally consent to marriage.

Outing is when a PUV threatens to reveal your sexual orientation or gender identity to family, friends or others to isolate you, which can lead to increased abuse. Being 'outed' is also a form of emotional and psychological abuse in the LGBTIQA+ communities.

Legal and systems abuse involves using legal or government processes to harass you, cause you financial difficulty, or force you to defend yourself against false claims. It includes hiding assets, prolonging legal proceedings by not providing relevant documents and other tactics designed to create anxiety and increase your costs. A PUV may also make or threaten to make false reports with child protection agencies or court systems or lodge cross domestic violence applications to intimidate you into withdrawing a genuine application. Legal and systems abuse is consistent with coercive controlling behaviours that occur after separation.

Stalking is behaviour that harasses and is intended to intimidate you. It includes repeated phone calls and messages unwanted or obsessive attention, or someone following or monitoring you in person and/or online.

Family violence can occur between partners, siblings and across generations, including parent to adult/teenage child and adult/teenage child to older parent. Many of the abusive tactics used by the PUV in these scenarios are like those used by adult intimate partner perpetrators.

Neglect is a form of DFV directed at anyone who requires support, including people with a disability and children. It involves not meeting your basic daily needs, including your emotional needs. A PUV may also isolate you from support by withholding or tampering with your assisted living devices. Withholding or threatening to withhold care and facilitating the withdrawal of services are both also types of emotional abuse.

Elder abuse involves targeting and controlling vulnerable elderly family members using any of the forms of abuse listed here. It may also include using excessive force when assisting an Elder with activities, treating an Elder like a child, forcing them to sign documents, neglecting emotional needs, or providing an inappropriate environment or nutrition.

Child abuse can be direct or indirect. A PUV may harm a child using forms of abuse listed here. Children can also be harmed indirectly by witnessing physical or nonphysical forms of abuse, including seeing a PUV belittle or disregard the other parent or supportive family members. It is important to understand that children are victims of DFV. Witnessing and experiencing DFV have harmful and life-long implications for a child's safety, wellbeing and development. Female genital mutilation is a particular form of child abuse which is illegal in Australia.

Post-separation abuse may include any of the forms of abuse listed here, continuing after a relationship ends. During and after separation can be extremely dangerous times because the PUV may perceive a loss of control and become more unpredictable. Violence often escalates in this context. You may be more at risk than you were before the separation.

The first six months after separation is a particularly high-risk period. However, the risk can be ongoing for many years post-separation. Many VSs report experiencing new types of abuse after separation, including PUVs using child support processes to control them financially.[11]

Reactive abuse happens when someone experiencing DFV tries to defend themselves or simply reacts to having experienced ongoing abuse. It is often impulsive and out of character. Although you may experience shame as a result. You are not considered abusive in these contexts (despite the term 'reactive abuse'). However, PUVs often use reactions to their advantage and paint you as the cause of the problem. It can be difficult for services and supports to recognise what's happening, particularly if the PUV remains calm and appears in control.



Power and Control Wheel (The Duluth Model) [12]

Who is most at risk?

DFV exists in many types of intimate partner, family and kinship relationships around the world. It does not discriminate. While it is true that men can be victims, DFV disproportionately impacts women.

THE GENDERED NATURE OF DFV[13]

- Women experience more frequent, severe and fear-based domestic violence.
- Almost 9 in 10 hospitalisations for assault by a partner involve female victims.
- Domestic violence is the leading contributor to homelessness for women and children.
- More than one in 3 Australian men (35%) aged 18–65 years have used intimate partner violence in their lifetime, with an estimated 120,000 men nationally each year starting to use it for the first time.[14]

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDE[15]

- On average, one woman per week is killed by a current or former partner in Australia.
- Most domestic homicides are committed by male intimate partners.

Research has shown that DFV and Sexual Violence disproportionately impacts:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women
- women in rural and remote communities
- people living with disability, including mental health, particularly women
- women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- women who are pregnant
- children
- people who are young or elderly
- people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual or otherwise diverse in gender or sexual orientation
- temporary migrants.[16]

Many people fall into more than one of these high-risk groups and experience additional barriers to accessing specialist supports. People living in the same community may also experience unique challenges, due to their personal circumstances. For example, a VS experiencing violence on a rural farm where the PUV is a licensed weapons holder will face some different challenges to those faced by a temporary migrant living and working in the same rural area without access to free healthcare or specialist cultural/linguistic services.

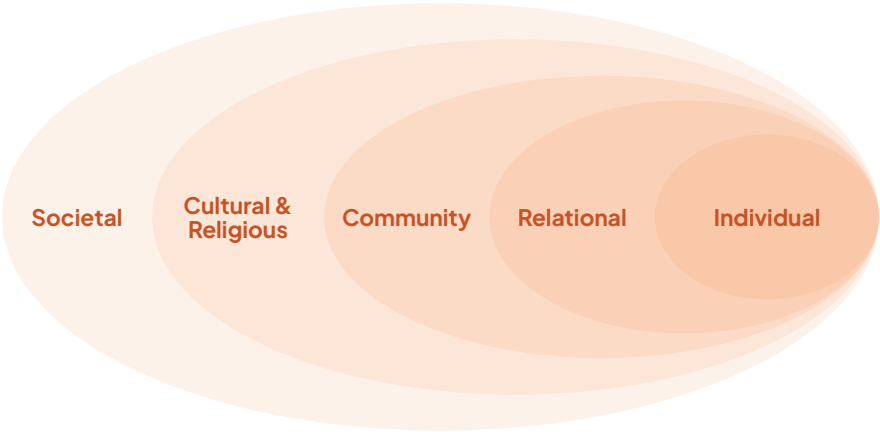
What causes DFV?

Contrary to popular opinion, DFV is not caused by financial strains, illness, adverse childhood events, substances (alcohol or other drugs) or any other difficult external factors. Nor are these factors an excuse for violence. Many people go through significant life stressors or use substances without abusing other people. However, these factors can increase not only the risk of DFV but also both the frequency and escalation of DFV incidents.

Gender inequality is a major cause of DFV.[17]

Research shows that individual PUVs are influenced by their own unique combination of multiple factors:[18]

- **Social systems** – including legal and structural authorities, as well as beliefs and attitudes about gender, relationships and who owns power.
- **Cultural/religious beliefs and practice** – including morality, customs and traditions. Violence against women in particular is demonstrably linked to rigid gender stereotyping; limits to women's public and private independence; views of masculinity and male peer groups that endorse aggression, dominance and control (e.g., of partners, families, decision-making); and communities that make light of and/or condone violence.
- **Local community dynamics, expectations and ways of behaving** – including unwritten rules and norms.
- **Layers of interpersonal relationships and influences** – including a lack of accountability and/or boundaries in relating to others and peer expectations and influences.



- **Highly personal factors** – including (but not limited to): unhealed/unaccounted for experiences of childhood violence or neglect that have gone unhealed or unaccounted for; addiction and dependence; and a lack of emotional and relational skill development.

None of these factors alone causes DFV. Rather, they interact and can culminate in personal tendencies that increase the likelihood that someone may use violence.

Like both love and justice, violence and coercive control are experienced wherever human beings relate to each other – in cities and country areas; in homes and workplaces; and, unfortunately, in every type of religious community. DFV doesn't discriminate with respect to socio-economic status, education, culture, religion, gender, sexuality or ability.

> **However, one thing is very clear:**
> **The use of violence is always a choice.**



Why is violence so hard to see from the outside?

People who use violence (PUVs) rely on several recognisable tactics to achieve power and control over a VS, while trying to hide what they're doing.

First, PUVs are likely to be violent only against specific people (e.g., an intimate partner) in certain contexts. It is highly uncommon, for example, for a PUV to be violent against their male friends or boss at work.

Second, PUVs go to great lengths to make sure their violent and controlling behaviour is never disclosed or discovered. For example, they typically use violence towards a VS when no one else is around. When in public, a warning look can convey threat to a VS. PUVs also often isolate a VS from their social supports, including any family or friends who might interrupt the abuse. This leaves the VS more vulnerable to manipulation and control.

Third, PUVs use manipulation ('grooming') before, during and even long after their relationship with a VS ends. One goal of this behaviour is to minimise the PUV's exposure to public scrutiny, judgement or consequences. Another goal is to reduce the VS's belief in themselves. PUVs impose their own version of reality, in which they are always in the right and the VS can't be believed or trusted. They may even depict a VS as mentally unstable. When one person controls another's perceptions, the VS is trapped with little room to contemplate escape.

Fourth, in addition to grooming a VS, PUVs often groom a VS's family, friends and wider community, including church leaders and friends. They may present themselves as model Christians or citizens, ensuring that any disclosure is not believed, and the VS's credibility is ruined. This kind of manipulation may continue long after the relationship has ended.

Finally, if a VS does manage to disclose abuse, PUVs will often blame the VS to exonerate themselves. **This behaviour is often called 'DARVO'**[19] because it involves:

Denying any wrongdoing – *'I didn't do it', 'It wasn't like that', 'I just lost it that one time', 'I never actually hit her'.*

Attacking the VS – *'She's lying', 'I'll ruin you', 'I'll take the children', I'll tell them all you had an affair'.*

Reversing Victim and **Offender** ('victim blaming') – *'How could you accuse me of such a thing?', 'I'm the real victim here', 'She's ruined my reputation'.*

What are the impacts of DFV?

DFV has far-reaching physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, social, health and financial impacts. DFV is also the leading cause of women's homelessness. These impacts can make it very difficult for a VS to speak up, seek help, or move on with their life.

> **'Violence against women has serious short and longterm physical, sexual and mental health consequences, including injury, chronic pain, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use and increased risk of suicide.'** [20]

Shame, embarrassment and reduced self-esteem may also cause a VS to withdraw from family/friends and lose important social supports.

A VS may not be aware of or safely able to access support services. Many VSs are denied access to medical help and other services. If a VS can attend appointments, the PUV may monitor them very closely or speak for them. The VS may not be able to report other versions of events for fear of retribution.

Every time a VS discloses their experiences or seeks help, the risk of escalated abuse and further harm increases.

FURTHER IMPACTS MAY BE EXPERIENCED BY SPECIFIC COHORTS:

Christians often feel pressured to stay in violent relationships, to forgive and not speak ill of their spouse. They may fear letting down God, their family, their church community and/or their children. Many Christian VSs have had their wellbeing compromised by trying to keep their relationship/family together due to views such as 'God hates divorce' or accusations that they haven't prayed, tried or been faithful enough to God.

In rural areas, it can be hard for a VS to lead a safe and fulfilling life because the dynamics of small communities include increased isolation and difficulty maintaining confidentiality. PUVs in regional areas may be more likely to hold

licensed weapons. And, if the PUV is well known or regarded in the community, a VS may fear that other people won't believe their experiences. Support services may be unavailable or hard to access due to long waiting lists. Options for finding a new living arrangement, job, school and/or church may also be extremely limited.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may face ongoing danger and difficulty in leaving a violent relationship because of their familial roles and responsibilities in kinship systems. Those who do leave may experience further distress due to a loss of connection to Country.

People living with disability may be targeted and groomed into violent relationships, while also experiencing communication barriers that increase the difficulty of seeking and receiving help. A PUV may disregard or disbelieve a VS's diagnosis, particularly if the disability is a psychosocial disability or the VS has a mental health diagnosis.

LGBTIQA+ people often have trouble accessing help that meets their needs. Not all professionals supporting VSs have relevant training or experience working with the LGBTIQA+ community. LGBTIQA+ people face increased psychological distress and risk of suicide due to experiences of discrimination and prejudice. LGBTIQA+ people also experience increased risk of familial abuse. In Christian contexts, a VS or PUV may experience pressure to participate in harmful conversion therapies. LGBTIQA+ VSs also experience increased isolation in small or rural/remote communities.

Culturally and linguistically diverse VSs may face cultural and/or linguistic barriers to accessing support services, including misunderstanding or fear of legal/government systems. Emotional abuse may be more frequent due to cultural expectations around 'saving face' or not allowing 'private issues' to be aired. Fear of being shunned by community members may further increase isolation.

Temporary residents experiencing DFV may be faced with threats or fear of deportation, difficulty understanding service systems and limited access to finances. VSs may also fear letting down or being unable to support their families 'back home'. Depending on their visa status, a VS may also lack access to free healthcare and/or income support.

Children and adolescents may be witnesses to DFV, experience violence directly and even be coerced into perpetrating violence. In each case, they typically experience similar fears, intimidation and threats to their safety as the VS. Further impacts on children and adolescents may include:

- heightened emotional distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal, guilt, shame and a sense of responsibility for the violence and/or not being able to stop it)
- low self-worth
- mistrust of adults
- poor school attendance

- learning difficulties (e.g., reduced concentration, lack of problem-solving skills)
- frequent physical ailments.

Children exposed to DFV may also:

- learn to 'keep up appearances'
- avoid inviting friends over for fear of them seeing or experiencing the violence
- bring friends home so that the PUV will 'behave' in front of them
- learn to keep quiet, avoid showing emotion, be secretive and/or complicit
- learn or display aggressive and/or socially inappropriate behaviours
- regress in their development or behaviour.

Parents experiencing DFV may lose confidence in their parenting abilities, with negative impacts on the connection with their children. A PUV may also actively undermine this relationship by

- undermining the other parent's authority
- ridiculing or putting the other parent down in front of children
- coercing children into insulting their parent
- telling children the other parent doesn't love them
- preventing the other parent from attending to children when they need comfort or help
- bribing children with gifts or treats
- comparing themselves favourably to the other parent
- blaming the other parent for anything that goes wrong.

A VS may need to develop and practise a safety plan with and including children. Places of worship, education and recreation may need to be alerted to and mindful of relevant safety planning.

Bystanders and loved ones are also profoundly impacted by DFV and experience the consequences of a PUV's behaviours. Some of the greatest advocates in the DFV sector are people who were thrust into new heartbreaking realities after losing a family member or other loved one to DFV. In non-lethal cases, a 'loss of the living' can also occur. Loved ones experiencing DFV may become isolated or impaired, living with long-term impacts, which may be seen or unseen. A loved one or bystander may experience:

- feelings of helplessness or guilt from witnessing a loved one experience DFV and associated mental and emotional distress
- poor physical health (for the VS and themselves)
- social and emotional wellbeing impacts
- a strain on family resources, as pre- and post-separation costs can lead to financial stress in the tens of thousands of dollars
- physical violence or threats to their own safety and wellbeing, greatly impacting their life and routines.

How can the law help people who are experiencing DFV?

A Domestic Violence Order (DVO) (also known as a 'Protection Order') is an official document issued by the court ordering a PUV to refrain from threats or acts of domestic violence, in order to prevent further harm to the protected person. A DVO sets out rules for the *respondent* (PUV). For example, they may be restricted from approaching or contacting the *aggrieved* (VS).

Around the world, different countries have different laws related to DFV and Protection Orders.

- In Australia, a VS can apply for a DVO. Police can also apply for a DVO, if they have evidence of violence occurring and further ongoing risk. DVOs taken out in one state and territory are recognised in all states and territories. DVOs remain enforceable even if a PUV moves themselves or the VS around the country.
- In some other countries, there are no means to apply for a Protection Order. Consequently, culturally and linguistically diverse VSs may not know that they can seek legal protection from DFV in Australia – particularly if they arrived in Australia recently. They may also face further barriers, if they don't know how to apply for a DVO or worry that doing so might negatively impact their ability to stay in Australia.





The absence of a DVO does not mean that DFV has not occurred. Nor does it mean that someone's life is not in danger or being adversely impacted.

In some areas and communities, it is especially common for VSs not to report DFV to police. In First Nations communities, for example, the past trauma of colonisation, which caused significant harm and mistrust of government agencies, can prevent VSs from engaging with support services.

A DVO does not guarantee an end to the abuse. The DVO provides legal protection only but includes consequences for a breach of the order, such as being arrested or detained by police. There are cases of VSs continuing to be abused even while the PUV is incarcerated. However, DVOs provide a strong deterrent and communicate to the PUV that the law requires them to stop their abuse.

As a lot of DFV occurs in private, a VS must make statements to police for a PUV to be found to have breached a DVO. Many VSs are known to withdraw complaints made to police due to threats of further violence from the PUV (or others) and increased coercion to drop charges.

Due to the hidden and complex nature of DFV, it can be difficult for police to determine when and for whom a DVO should be taken out. Courts are a key part of determining who is at risk and what orders are needed.

Further information about DVOs can be obtained from police stations and local courts across Australia, as well as relevant State and Territory websites.

SECTION TWO

Myths About DFV

What can I know for sure?

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is a wicked problem. Don't believe the myths. That it takes two to tango. That it's caused by alcohol, anger or stress. Or that people are pushed to their limits by difficult, provocative partners. None of this is true.

DFV is intentional, patterned, targeted behaviour that leaves victim-survivors (VSs) living in fear. Overwhelmingly, it's men's violence against women and children. And it's not only morally wrong. It's criminal behaviour. The person using violence (PUV) has to honestly choose to change and keep doing that work for life. This is not the VS's responsibility.

> "We all have a right to relationships that are loving, safe, respectful and mutually supportive. Domestic and family violence is not loving, not safe, not respectful, not mutually supportive."


KHU VỰC
HÚT THUỐC

MYTH #1

DFV happens only to certain people or in certain areas.

FACT: People of any class, culture, age, religion, sexual orientation, marital or relational status can be a VS or a PUV. The choice to exert power over another person is not bound by any of these factors.

MYTH #2

DFV doesn't happen in churches or Christian communities.

FACT: There is no doubt that DFV occurs in Christian communities of all kinds. Indeed, research has shown that DFV is, unfortunately, at least as common in churches as it is in the general population.[23]

MYTH #3

If it's that bad, why don't they just leave?

FACT: The risk of harm to a VS and their children becomes much higher after they leave an abusive relationship. In fact, some VSs will choose not to leave because they know they will be in more danger if/when they do. But it can also be hard for VSs to leave for other reasons. Some VSs don't seek help because of shame, fear or having nowhere to go. Homelessness and lack of finances are often the VS's new reality. Others have been so demoralised by their experience of abuse that they don't feel anyone will believe them. A VS may also have happy memories from previous good times and even experience some enjoyable times in the present. A PUV may persuade them to stay with repeated promises to change and short-term positive behaviours. It would be easier for a VS to leave if the abuse had been obvious from the outset and everyone could see it. Sadly, this is not usually the case. And – even if a relationship ending is the right thing – it is a very painful process and grief is a common response.

MYTH #4

Women commit DFV just as much or more than men – men just don't report it.

FACT: Although men can certainly be victims of domestic, family and sexual violence, the evidence shows that DFV is an overwhelmingly gendered issue in which the PUV is most often male and the VS is most often female. Research indicates that:

- one in 4 women and one in 14 men have experienced violence by an intimate partner since the age of 15, while one in 4 women and one in 7 men have experienced emotional abuse by a current or previous cohabitating partner since the age of 15.[21]
- men perpetrate sexual abuse, physical violence (including near fatal strangulation), coercive control and stalking with psychological aggression significantly more often than women.
- men's violence against women – including intimate partner violence – is more prevalent, more often used repeatedly, and more likely to lead to serious injury, disability or death.
- men's domestic violence is largely driven by gender control motives.
- women's violence is usually a response to violence against them by their male partner (e.g., self-defence or using force to survive/mirror the PUV's behaviour).

When men are VSs, don't assume the PUV is automatically a woman – fathers perpetrate violence towards sons too. Many people in the LGBTIQA+ community also experience violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime.[22] Victim-blaming cultures make it difficult for both men and women to report DFV.

MYTH #5

Christian beliefs are harmful for victim-survivors of DFV.

FACT: Christianity does not condone DFV. However, some people misuse Christian beliefs to justify abuse or prevent a VS from leaving an abusive relationship. The manipulation of Christian beliefs can have a huge and lasting impact. Some Christian VSs hold onto their faith, despite inadequate responses from church communities or Christian family/friends. But others find their faith incompatible with the hurt of not having been believed or supported.

MYTH #6

Children aren't impacted by DFV if they're not there to see it.

FACT: DFV has significant consequences for children/young people. Even if they don't directly see or experience abuse, children/young people are still impacted by seeing things like injuries to a parent or damage to property. Children are also impacted by an awareness that their parent is experiencing constant stress, emotional strain or hypervigilance. DFV can impair their physical, emotional and neurological development, as well as their sense of security in relationships, mental health and ability to cope with life stressors. Although children can be incredibly resilient, the impacts of DFV potentially have long-term consequences for their ability to relate well to others and participate in the community.

MYTH #7

Christian women are obliged to have sex whenever & however their husbands want to.

FACT: The Bible teaches that husbands and wives are mutually accountable – both people need to love and respect each other. No one should use the Bible to coerce their spouse into sex (or specific sex acts). A loving spouse won't seek their own sexual satisfaction in ways that cause their partner physical or emotional harm. Rape can occur within marriage, and it is a crime: 'The fear that men may not have as much sex as they want should not supersede women's need to feel safe.'[25]

MYTH #8

Some people are responsible for the violence they experience – they provoke it.

FACT: No one deserves to be abused. The only person responsible for DFV is the person choosing to use violence. It is important to remember that PUVs commonly blame VSs for their actions, to avoid detection and accountability. Overwhelmingly, VSs go to great lengths to placate PUVs and head off the abuse. Rarely, a VS may act to protect themselves by using violence against the PUV, either preventatively or in reaction.

MYTH #9

Christians who leave abusive relationships are sinning because God hates divorce.

FACT: Many VSs remain in abusive relationships, risking their own safety and wellbeing in hopes that the PUV might change. It is important to remember that it was the PUV who is responsible for breaking the marriage covenant (by abusing their partner), often long before the VS was able to leave. Seeking refuge and healing from a harmful spouse is not a sin. (For more information, please see the section below on 'What does Christianity teach about Relationships?')

MYTH #10

If you are faithful and obedient to God, your relationships will be safe and healthy.

FACT: Unfortunately, your own Christian faith won't automatically protect you from being targeted by a PUV. In fact, a PUV may try to control you by manipulating your faithfulness. People who choose to control others are not expressing faith as God intended. If you are targeted by such a person, you can honour God and express your faith by respecting your inherent value in God's eyes, acting to protect your own safety/wellbeing, and allowing others to be accountable for their choices.

MYTH #11

Christian churches are safe places for victim-survivors of DFV.

FACT: Faith communities can be pivotal in helping VSs find safety and continue healing. Unfortunately, this is not every VS's experience. Many VSs report not receiving the support they needed from a church community. Some were not even believed. Many Christians lack awareness or training about DFV. They struggle to recognise DFV and don't know how to respond helpfully. Research shows that churches are often ill-equipped to address DFV.[24] They may put a VS's safety at risk by restricting their capacity to seek help or failing to hold PUVs to account appropriately.



SECTION THREE

Christianity and DFV

What does the Bible say?

The Christian Bible's message sees everyone as equally loved by God. Jesus' ministry lifted people up, and the early church empowered women freeing them from many social restrictions.

In contrast, abusive relationships diminish and restrict victim-survivors (VSs). This state does not reflect God's heart. Jesus listened closely to marginalised people – including women – treating them with respect and often entrusting them with important missions. As Jesus explained in the synagogue, God's mandate was for him to bring good news to all people, liberating and leading them towards a full life.

> "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the suffering and afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."
> (Luke 4: 18–19)



One Woman's Story

As a professional in a small rural area in Australia, my church and trusted Christian leaders were places I initially sought help from – due to the complexity of accessing support amongst peers in a small community, but also due to how important my Christian beliefs are to me. I wanted support that entailed my Christian faith journey.

Prior to my professional life and marriage, I had completed two years at Bible college, worked in a church, and volunteered on missions' trips. These were dreams since being a young girl who was raised attending church and loving Jesus. It was during a 3–month missions' volunteering trip that I decided to undertake a career in social work, after several years of working in the human services field. I undertook university studies over the period of meeting my first boyfriend in church, then being married, and having children.

My Christian faith, personal values, and professional identity were all targeted in forms of verbal, emotional, sexual, social, physical, spiritual, and post-separation abuse.

I was advised by my church Pastor, when I sought help, to watch a movie on praying more; at that time of reaching out for help, the only prayer I could muster up to God was simply 'help'. I was also recommended a book on leadership.

> **I was questioned by the PUV if I was even a Christian anymore. I was accused of being feminist and too influenced by Westernised ideologies.**

On further request for support – where I sought a meeting with my Pastor for help and took evidence of abuse that was occurring – I was met with the most harmful advice, that 'it was wickedness to seek legal support'. I was, however, assured that I was loved and being prayed for.

At that time, one of my children was wetting their pants as a result of the impact of the abuse occurring in the household. Another, at a young age, was talking about wanting to die and had attempted to run away on two

occasions. Over the years, there had been prior incidents such as the PUV throwing a remote at the television and smashing it due to 'making him angry'. The next morning, the PUV purchased a new television. Issues like these were never resolved, and I stayed quiet and sank deeper into shame. On another occasion at a theme park, a disagreement over what time to leave led him to tell me – in front of the children – that I was a 'fucked up woman'. This phrase I repeated over and over in my head in the years that followed.

> **As usual, there was no repair for the harsh words and they landed deeply in my spirit, causing me to question my worth and not doubt his version or description of me in his cruellest moments.**

The PUV is a clinical psychologist, he told me that anyone with sense would be able to see his points of view. He told me whilst still in the relationship that he had to live a life of misery because of me, post separation he told me that I ruined his life.

The PUV told my children, aged under 10 at the time, that 'Mum is choosing to break her vows of marriage' and 'Mum made a promise on Jesus Christ to not leave the marriage, but Mum lied'. On another occasion the PUV told the children, 'Mum just has to say, "We will start living together as a family again," and we will.' The children were told that Mum had divorces in her family and that there were none in the PUV's family.

I was told that I had no empathy or compassion, which caused me to doubt deeply who I was and what I did for work. Finally, I confronted my feelings of shame and sought help internationally from a social worker on an online platform, who I felt was a safe and confidential option. After our first session, the PUV asked what I was discussing that could help our marriage. After six sessions, the PUV made comments and questioned why I was continuing to engage in therapy. He told me further that he helped people for work in his daily professional role, who were actual victims and in need of genuine help. The PUV was a church volunteer, who attended and maintained relationships with multiple church groups and other Christians.

When I requested marriage counselling early in help seeking, the PUV told me I was just trying to get him to jump through a hoop. Later, when I had help to see the patterns of behaviour and declined his offer of joint counselling, the PUV was able to tell people I had refused counselling and to work on the marriage. The PUV was also quick to contact members of my family, informing them that he didn't know if I was going to let him see the children, despite my communicating clearly that I was not going to prevent him from having time with our children.

Members of my family were serving overseas in permanent missions' positions. I received emails in bold capital letters stating scriptures out of context and that I was causing wounds in my children that would last and impact generations. I was reminded of the vows I took – that no one had forced me to make marriage vows and that I had done so willingly. I was reminded that a 'three bound cord could not easily be broken'.

I believe in marriage – and that it is sacred. I was also experiencing guilt in relation to whether I was being a good witness of Christ, as the PUV's family of origin are from another religion and country, and divorce there is considered taboo.

The loss of friends or ability to make new friends in a small community in the Christian faith communities was partly a direct result of the PUV intentionally telling people things that were not true. Post-separation, the PUV emailed me that I never actually entered the marriage. I was accused of being an absent mother multiple times, or that I was just like my own mother. And, on one occasion, the PUV stood with our young children and in front of them told me that they didn't need me and that he didn't need me.

The post-separation abuse was unexpected and took on differing forms including financial abuse.

I requested the documents from the national head office of my church denomination, after receiving harmful advice, and I sought a meeting with the Pastors to discuss it. Despite the advice in the denominational documents being sound and inclusive of information to refer VS to professional supports, one Pastor simply stated that the document may not stay in its current form and was under review. I'm thankful for the female Pastor, who – in scenarios like this with the male Pastor – tried to respond appropriately in those moments and at other times showed grace and responded with love and belief.

> **Thanks to God, in the midst of help seeking, I was able to be linked in with professional Christian supports, and programs with practitioners who were highly experienced in recognising and responding to abuse – particularly spiritual abuse.**

I also overcame shame and eventually engaged with domestic violence services and other community supports locally, which helped me rebuild in the aftermath. I knew that seeking help involved confronting deep shame that was not intended by God for me to carry. I became able to see the reality of the situation and recognised what was mine to work on and what was not my responsibility to carry. The impact of the abuse on my children was what drove me to seek appropriate and professional supports and help.

What is Christianity's stance on DFV?

Christianity teaches that all people are created in the image of God.

As such, every person has inherent dignity and is worthy of respect. Consistent with this belief, Christian denominations and organisations worldwide have repeatedly made official public statements that DFV is unacceptable. Christian faith communities carry a responsibility to seek to prevent DFV, both individually and socially; to care for VSs of DFV; and to hold people who use violence (PUVs) to account.

Many Australian churches have published unequivocal statements regarding DFV, including:

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA, FAMILIES AND CULTURE COMMISSION

"Violence in our communities is unacceptable, whether that violence occurs in the street, in our home, in our workplaces or in our church communities, and whether it is perpetrated by men or women. Our Christian scriptures proclaim the equality of every human being and demand that our behaviour towards others is characterised by the behaviour of God towards us – of justice, love and mercy, compassion, patience and a mission to heal the sick and mend the broken hearted. The Anglican Church of Australia (ACA) wants to prevent and to help address the terrible injustice of domestic and family violence, responding with care and compassion towards those affected."[26]

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA, AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

"The Australian Catholic Bishops' 2022–23 Social Justice Statement, Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse, unequivocally condemns domestic and family violence as a sin and a misuse of power that violates the dignity of the person. It calls for a whole-of-Church response, urging parishes to support victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and reject scriptural justifications for abuse."[27]

Although official statements such as these very clearly condemn DFV, individual congregations may still be coming to terms with how to implement them. Christian faith communities hold diverse perspectives, resources, capacity and influence across Australia.[28] At times there may not always be a consistent approach in preventing or responding to DFV.[29]

Some local churches have a good understanding of DFV and provide strong leadership because they have equipped themselves in both prevention and response. This is to be encouraged and supported. VSs need to see this kind of awareness, commitment and support.

Unfortunately, other local churches are yet to integrate these or other similar official statements. They may be ill-equipped to respond well to DFV. They risk repeating – and even exacerbating – the harm of DFV.

PASTORAL CARE

Christian leaders hold significant influence over beliefs about marriage and relationships, which positions them as potential contributors to stopping DFV. Pastoral care is at the heart of Christian service. It centres the wellbeing of people, through spiritual support in times of need, whereby God's grace is present in every human encounter. Pastoral care can offer much healing to people who have experienced DFV, and encourage reflection, repentance and change from people who engage in such violence.

For women VSs, it can be healing when a Church leader engages with them around the interpretations of 'headship' and 'submission', offering explanations built on equality and mutual submission before God, not justification for abuse. Prayer can also be healing and transformative, when it is focused on love, safety and God's grace.

For men who use violence, it can be powerful to hear from a male leader:

1. that their theological interpretations and thinking about gender inequality and violence are not justified – and that there are alternative ways of being.
2. the historical and cultural reasons for such interpretations – and that there is no scriptural basis for abuse or violence towards women.

The opportunity for pastoral care practice to support healing and recovery for people experiencing DFV – and for leaders to support perpetrator accountability and safety of victims through theological interpretation – is a powerful way to change the social and structural drivers informing the context of DFV.

Christian leaders can play an important role in providing safe places for VSs to be supported and begin healing.[30] They can also hold PUVs to account and press them to seek their own healing. And Christian leaders have a responsibility to set an example in their own relationships. Their behaviour and attitudes can influence the behaviour and attitudes of others.

The rest of this booklet aims to give clear, practical, Christ-centred information to help church communities and their leaders educate and equip themselves to respond faithfully and well to DFV.

What does Christianity teach about relationships?

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Christianity understands marriage as a 'covenant' relationship – a mutual relationship entered freely by two parties, based upon love, commitment and trust.

Church traditions differ in how they celebrate this special relationship, but they are unanimous in recognising that God intends marriage to be mutually beneficial.

Shared love and honour – given and received by both partners – is a central element in Christian understandings of marriage. Christians commit to this lifelong covenant, believing that marriage is meant to embody God's unchanging faithfulness and love.

> **The Bible should never be used to justify DFV or force you to stay in an unsafe relationship. Taking steps to protect your own safety is entirely consistent with Christian faith.**

Three passages in the New Testament refer to husbands being the ***'head'*** of their wives and wives needing to ***'submit'*** to their husbands *(1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22–23; Colossians 3:18)*. Based on these verses, some – but not all – Christians believe the husband should be the leader in any marriage. Some people go even further, misusing these verses to demand that wives do anything and everything their husbands want them to do. Research has identified parallels between these ideas and features of coercive control.[31]

But Biblical verses about 'headship' and 'submission' must be read alongside other New Testament verses that offer important instruction to husbands:

> ***'love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.'*** *(Ephesians 5:25)*

> ***'love your wives and do not be harsh with them.'*** *(Colossians 3:19)*

They must also be read alongside Jesus' own teaching on human relationships:

> ***'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.'*** *(John 13:34)*

In the Christian tradition, Jesus is seen as the fullest revelation of God, the embodiment of God on earth. Throughout his time on earth, He consistently showed compassion, respect and healing towards women and marginalised people.

Thus, Biblical 'headship' is not about being 'the boss'. Rather, it's about exhibiting Jesus' love, expressed in service. As Jesus said:

> ***'I am among you as one who serves'*** *(Luke 22:27)*

So, even if you believe that male 'headship' in marriage is God's design, there is no excuse for DFV.

PUVs who abuse their spouse disrespect the sanctity of their marriage vows. And, if they call themselves 'Christian', they dishonour God by misrepresenting God's character and love.



> ‘I got married in a church and I was brought up to believe my marriage vows were sacred. But my husband has no respect for me. Also, he is violent. He keeps hitting me even though I’ve left twice for short periods because of his violence. I think I’m going to have to consider divorce for the sake of the kids if nothing else. I feel pretty guilty about it though. What should I do?’

Jesus’ teaching about marriage and divorce seems very strict: ***‘…what God has joined together, let no one separate’*** *(Matthew 19:6)*. Christian churches have traditionally interpreted these words as prohibiting divorce. So, the possibility of divorce – much less actually filing for divorce – is very difficult for many Christians.

Yet, the marriage relationship is meant to be an expression and revelation of God’s love. When considering separation or divorce because of DFV, it’s important to remember that marriage is a covenant and that the PUV is the one breaking that marriage covenant by choosing to abuse their partner.[32]

Most churches now recognise that separation or divorce may be necessary – even recommended and encouraged – if staying in the relationship means enduring abuse.

Jesus himself put people’s wellbeing before the ‘letter of the law’. In one case, he healed a woman on the Sabbath, when the law and tradition prohibited all forms of work. When religious leaders criticised him, Jesus said:

> ***‘You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman … be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?’*** *(Luke 13: 15–16).*

The same principles apply in de facto/long term relationships.

No matter your background, most people enter intimate relationships based on love, commitment and trust. When one partner engages in violent/abusive behaviour, the relationship can become unbearable. Even without marriage vows, the idea of leaving can be extremely difficult. You may feel a sense of shame or failure. But the Bible condemns abuse in all human relationships. No matter who is controlling or harming you, you have the right to be safe.

FORGIVENESS, REPENTANCE AND RECONCILIATION

VSs often describe unhelpful responses in churches advising them to forgive the PUV and persevere in the relationship. But this advice doesn't recognise how dangerous DFV can be. It confuses forgiveness with reconciliation and fails to recognise the importance and complexity of repentance.

Forgiveness is a central tenet of Christian faith. Ultimately, only God can pardon sin. But Jesus teaches his followers to be forgiving people. Because God forgives us, we are called to show mercy to others. *(Matthew 6:14–15; Matthew 18:21–35; Ephesians 4:32)*

Forgiveness does NOT mean:	Forgiveness does mean:
• forgetting, denying, minimising or excusing harm • exposing yourself to ongoing harm • that the person who harmed you should avoid facing the consequences of their actions	• acknowledging that harm was done to you • exercising self-compassion rather than nurturing anger

Telling the truth about what happened to you is not wrong or abusive. Getting legal protection from harm – for yourself or your children – is not wrong. Choosing to remove yourself from (or not return to) an abusive relationship is not sinful.

'I left my husband after years of beatings. I think he finally realises that I'm serious about not coming home. Now, despite never being willing to go to worship with me, he has been going to his mother's church. He says he's "saved." Both he and his Pastor have been putting pressure on me to go back to him. But I don't trust him. I'm afraid. What should I do?'

It is not uncommon for PUVs to claim they have repented/changed and want to resume the relationship. In such cases, you may feel pressured – or even be told – to 'forgive and forget'.

Forgiveness should never mean that you forget the abuse. Indeed, forgetting can be very dangerous. It may not be safe to return.

> **A PUV's 'repentance' may be genuine, but it could also be just another strategy to control you.**
>
> **Forgiving someone who chooses to hurt you does not mean you have to keep living with them or endure further abuse.**

A genuinely repentant PUV will understand that they have no right to demand you continue in the relationship. Don't be rushed into a decision. If your partner puts you under pressure or appears insensitive to your needs, this suggests they still have a long way to go before you can return safely – if at all.

A genuinely repentant PUV will also recognise and accept responsibility for their abusive behaviour – then make concerted, long-lasting efforts to change for the better. They will understand that it might not be possible to restore the relationship. A repentant PUV will not apologise and then pick up where they left off, acting as if nothing happened. They will respond differently and alter their behaviour patterns.

Changing a pattern of abusive behaviour takes months, if not years. A PUV may feel shame, which makes acknowledging and changing their abusive behaviour even more difficult and lengthy. If your partner seriously wants to change their abusive behaviour, there are specialist counsellors and programmes which can help.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness should not necessarily mean returning to the relationship.

Jesus taught his disciples, *'If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, "I repent," you must forgive them.'* *(Luke 17:3–4)*

But he also said, *'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.'* *(Matthew 10:16)*

Jesus does not want us to be fooled by 'wolves in sheep's clothing'.

> **‘I feel bad that I stayed in an abusive relationship as long as I did. My friends have been telling me to forgive myself, but I don’t know how.’**

VSs often feel shame and guilt that they became a victim, as though they are a lesser person to allow this to happen to them. They may also feel guilty about the impact on any children. A PUV may have convinced them that they deserved the violence, and they may have internalised this self-blame. As a VS undertakes their healing journey, this shame and guilt can be very painful and difficult to shift.

In addition, there are cases where the PUV’s power and control extend to forcing the VS to participate in things they would not otherwise choose to do. It could be that you complied because the consequence of not complying was too dangerous. This can be hugely damaging for a VS. They may see it as a betrayal of their values and their sense of who they are, because the power to make their own choices has been seriously eroded.

Psychological research shows that there are two types/stages of forgiveness.[33] The first is decisional (head) forgiveness, a conscious commitment to forgive. The second is emotional forgiveness from the heart. This kind of forgiveness is more difficult – and may even feel impossible. The process can take years. For some VSs, it may take a lifetime.

The long-term benefits of emotional forgiveness are worth pursuing. Emotional forgiveness frees a VS from focusing on anger and regret, allowing the VS to look forward to a free and fulfilling future. If forgiveness is something you are struggling with, counselling with a Christian DFV specialist or DFV-informed and trauma-informed accredited therapist may help you work through it and refocus on the future.

THE VALUE OF WOMEN

Violence against women and girls is a global issue. The World Health Organisation reports that 30% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence.[34] The extent of this violence suggests not only that women and girls aren't being valued as equal to men and boys, but also that violence against women and girls has been normalised in many cultures and communities. For example, the so-called 'manosphere' – an increasingly prominent, loose grouping of online content creators and influencers who promote male supremacy – has been found to cause real-world harm to women and girls.[35]

While Christians may vary in their theological understandings of the place of women in the family, the church and society, Jesus' example was one of really seeing and respecting women in a culture and time when women were often invisible.

Despite strong opposition throughout his ministry, we see Jesus overturning the sexist conventions of his day consistently elevating women. While his own disciples may be ***'surprised to find him talking to a woman',*** Jesus gladly eschews social taboos to have a life-changing conversation with a Samaritan woman *(John 4:7–42).*[36]

If everyone valued women like Jesus did, violence against women and girls would be a thing of the past.



How can the Church help prevent DFV?

As God's hands and feet on earth, Christian people across the globe have a mandate to stand up to DFV.

Despite the rise of secularism, denominational leaders still have a significant voice in society. They have a platform to uphold moral action and call for social justice.

Some Christian denominations have already developed official statements documenting a strong stance against DFV. Some have also developed training to help Christians understand and respond appropriately to DFV.

Denominational statements and training often address the following actions:

1. ADVOCATE PUBLICLY FOR A VIOLENCE-FREE SOCIETY.

- Speak up on issues of gender inequality and harmful definitions/expressions of manhood and womanhood.
- Explore ways to encourage a culture of dignity and care.

2. ENCOURAGE ACTIVE CULTURAL CHANGE WITHIN YOUR DENOMINATION.

- Develop specific policies and training resources on DFV for your denomination.
- Review all denominational policies and practices that intersect with DFV, to centre VS safety and wellbeing and hold PUVs to real account.
- Engage with DFV experts. There is existing expertise even within the Christian context. No need to reinvent the wheel. Always include the insights of lived experience experts.
- Integrate DFV awareness into recruitment and training for all leadership/pastoral care roles.
- Encourage and practice a culture of speaking up whenever disrespect/harmful behaviour appears.



3. MODEL AND TEACH HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS.

- Study Jesus' command to love one another and how to live it out.
- Recognise the inherent value of – and uphold equality for – all members of your community (e.g., male, female, young, old, every background, every ability).
- Pay particular attention to vulnerable and marginalised people.
- Promote inclusivity and exhort your churches and organisations to find God's image in every member, especially the marginalised and vulnerable.
- Explore and evaluate how power/authority are held and exercised in your denomination. Ensure there are provisions for reflection and accountability.

4. RECOGNISE YOUR CHURCH'S PAST MISTAKES IN RESPONDING TO VSs, INCLUDING MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO HOLD PUVs TO ACCOUNT.

- Check any complaint processes and investigative bodies for transparency and accountability.
- Make public your denomination's position on DFV and your action plan to address it, including apologising to VSs who were mistreated by the Church.
- Review your progress over time and publicise the results.

How can local churches support people experiencing DFV?

People of faith often seek help from a church they trust when faced with the impacts of DFV. But churches can also do a lot to support VSs in the wider community. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) models going beyond one's own community and reaching out to anyone who has been hurt. Your role as a Christian supporter is highly valuable and could make all the difference to a VS.

Here are some practical steps you can take to stand up against DFV in your local church and its surrounding community:

1. BE AWARE OF CHURCH RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS:

- If your church has a DFV policy, follow it.
- Many denominations have their own DFV training. These are often excellent courses and resources developed by experts, designed to help Christian people address this complex and high-risk issue.
- Some denominations also have expert helplines or advisors.

2. EQUIP YOURSELF AND OTHERS IN YOUR CHURCH WITH AWARENESS AND TRAINING:

- Make sure at least a few people in your church community are trained and supported to respond to DFV.
- Learn how to support VSs and how to deal with PUVs. Know your role, including both its strengths and limits.
- Get to know your local DFV experts and services. Partner with them in caring for VSs in your local area. Know whom to call when you reach the limits of your own knowledge and role. Many organisations provide DFV education that is also directed towards community groups and members such as faith communities.

3. ESTABLISH YOUR CHURCH AS A SAFE PLACE TO BE HONEST ABOUT DFV.

- Raise awareness that DFV happens in churches too.
- Preach and teach with care and sensitivity when dealing with subjects such as forgiveness, repentance, suffering, marriage and the roles of men and women in relationships and families.
- Make sure that preaching and pastoral conversations offer consistent, sensitive, well-informed messages about DFV.
- Be aware that people seeking to coercively control someone may make use of scripture to enhance their control.
- Directly reject the misuse of scripture.

4. GET TO KNOW LOCAL SERVICES AND SUPPORT THEM.

- Find local DFV services and ask what their priorities are. They have inside knowledge of what current needs are and where your church can best direct its efforts.
- Think about your neighbourhood and use your imagination. The opportunities are endless!
- Initiatives already implemented by some churches include:
  - Safe Phone programs, where VSs can access phones that they know are not being tracked.
  - Raising money for local services and awareness campaigns.
  - Care packages for VSs, such as household and pantry items for new homes.
  - Handmade quilts for residents in refuges.
  - Art materials, books and toys for child VSs.
  - A free drop-in café for women and children.

What should I do if someone tells me they're experiencing DFV?

Your first response to a disclosure of abuse can have a huge influence on whether or not a VS seeks further help. When supporting a VS, it's important to recognise that they are the expert in their own lives. The best outcomes happen when a VS is supported to develop a safety plan and review it as things change.

Safety planning is a way for VSs to manage the risk of harm to themselves and any children by identifying safe places and emergency procedures specific to their context. The more intense or severe the abusive behaviours are, the more important it is to act immediately on the possibility that a PUV will attempt to kill their partner, children or someone else. If you are providing long term pastoral care – whether supporting a VS or dealing with a PUV – it's wise also to seek support for yourself.



The high-risk factors listed below are used by professionals to assess the possibility of an imminent threat to life and safety. Seek expert help for risk assessment and safety planning if a VS is experiencing one or more of these factors, or fears for their own life or the safety of others:

HIGH RISK FACTORS (SERIOUS HARM/FATALITY)[37]

* Threats to kill or seriously harm * Choking or strangulation * Threats to use/use of weapons and access to weapons * Use of violence during pregnancy * Forcing participation in sexual acts * Tried or threatened to harm the children * Tried to take children (against parenting arrangements) * Harmed or threated to harm a pet or animal * Isolation/Deprivation tactics * Degradation, harassment, threats * Monitoring/Surveillance * Manipulation, gaslighting, identity management * PUV threating to kill themselves * Planned, recent, or attempted separation * Pregnancy or child under the age of 1 * PUV affiliated with motorcycle gang * PUV significantly older in age (where there is CALD victim-survivor)

OTHER RISK FACTORS:

* PUV previously used physical violence towards victim-survivor * PUV threatened or tried to harm other people known to VS * PUV breached conditions of a protection order/court order * PUV used violence towards previous partners, other family members or non-family members.

Safety Planning

WHAT IS SAFETY PLANNING?[38]

Safety planning is a type of risk management which involves working with a victim-survivor to develop strategies to increase their safety across a wide range of situations. Safety plans should be developed in collaboration with the victim-survivor based on their goals, resources, priorities and the strategies which have worked for them in the past. Safety plans should be unique and tailored to the victim-survivor's individual circumstances, and should consider all relevant dependents and other family members. It may also be appropriate for separate safety plans to be prepared for children or even each individual child.

Here are some practical steps you can take to make sure you respond appropriately to any disclosures of DFV:

1. IF THERE IS IMMINENT DANGER, PHONE 000.

2. MAKE SURE YOUR FIRST RESPONSE INVOLVES LISTENING AND BELIEVING.

Recognise that the VS may be distressed, afraid and confused. They may not be sure if what they are experiencing is really abuse.

Many initial disclosures are clouded by the PUV's manipulation. The VS may have been told 'it's not really that bad', that they are the real problem, or that no one will believe them.

Be alert to a PUV's manipulation tactics: they may attempt to recruit priests, pastors or others who have any type of influence over the VS. Many PUVs are also very proactive in image management strategies, especially as a VS gains more courage to seek help from outside the relationship.

If your church has a DFV policy and procedures, follow them. If not, the following steps may be helpful.

3. PRIORITISE THE VS'S SAFETY AND CHOICE.

Victim-survivors are the best experts in their own experience. They can tell you what risk they believe they are under. They deserve to have the dignity and respect of choice when it comes to planning their next steps.

For many VSs, staying in the relationship while pursuing support (e.g., counselling or legal options) is the safest way forward. If this is their decision, support them to find strategies to minimise risk and seek expert help. Risk is dynamic and may change regularly depending on each individual circumstance.

If children are at risk of harm, always follow your reporting obligations.

4. SEEK EXPERT HELP.

Counselling: Ensure that any counselling support is given by people who are professionally trained in working with DFV. This may include online or phone support if local services are scarce.

Marriage or couples counselling can risk facilitating ongoing abuse and is, therefore, NOT appropriate for abusive relationships.

Legal services and police: Local police will generally have a DFV specialist to help VSs understand and navigate their legal options, including immediate safety concerns (e.g., Protection Orders) and longer-term separation and parenting options. In rural areas, free national DFV hotlines such as 1800RESPECT may be able to link you to services nearby that can organise immediate refuge, if a VS needs to flee.

Domestic and family violence services: Most areas will have a service that can help with practical challenges and provide specialist support, including safe housing, advocacy, financial support and court support. Local services may also offer counselling and survivor groups to help VSs come to terms with and make sense of their experience and evaluate their options.

5. EVALUATE RISKS AND PLAN FOR SAFETY.

Every experience of DFV is unique. All are damaging, but risk varies for each VS and can change suddenly.

Remind the VS that they have the best understanding of how much danger they are in. They have become highly tuned to the slightest changes in their home environment and are incredibly competent at managing the risks they live with. They can read their abuser's countenance, predict what will trigger abusive behaviours, and know their own best courses of action to keep as safe as possible.

Safety plans are encouraged, whether the VS chooses to leave or stay in the relationship. Safety plans are not just for when a VS leaves, and they aren't just developed as a once-off precaution.

Separation is known to be a time of high safety risk, including an increased risk of escalation in the violence. Because the PUV is likely to feel exposed and vulnerable, they may escalate abusive behaviours to regain control over the VS and protect themselves from exposure. In a church community, this may include increased attempts to smear or isolate a VS from their community.

Engage an expert whenever the VS is ready, but always ask how safe they feel, what can be done to improve their safety and how you can assist.

VSs need to know how they can contact safe people, such as a neighbour they know and trust or emergency services.

You may develop a code word – so that you know when a VS needs to leave a situation immediately and requires support.

A VS might have an emergency bag ready in case they need to leave quickly. If it is safe to do so, keeping emergency numbers close at hand (e.g., a 24–hour DFV support hotline and numbers for taxi services) can assist with a timely intervention. Being prepared may include the VS leaving sets of keys or important documents with trusted people.

6. SUPPORT THE VS'S DECISIONS ABOUT REPORTING TO POLICE.

As a VS feels able, they may choose to ask for police assistance in less urgent times. Reporting and making statements to police can be a time-consuming process. If a VS has children, finding safe care for children can be a barrier to working with police.

It can be helpful for the VS to have a support person with them, who can help advocate for their safety and ask to speak with the DFV trained/specialist officer.

For more information about legal support, please refer to the earlier section titled 'How can the law help people who are experiencing DFV?'

7. MAINTAIN PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY.

Be aware that the VS is investing enormous trust in you regarding a highly risky situation. Their safety is at stake if you share their story unwisely.

Obviously, if danger is imminent, calling police or reporting on children's safety takes priority.

Where the risk is less urgent, the VS's right to privacy protects their ability to weigh up their choices, seek help, and stay as safe as possible in the meantime.

Never approach the PUV unless you know the VS and any children are safe and it is appropriate to do so. Approaching PUVs can be extremely dangerous, triggering an escalation of violence and putting people at increased risk.

8. BE PREPARED TO OFFER LONG TERM SUPPORT.

As the VS comes to grips with their experience, makes heart-breaking choices, and seeks expert assistance, they can benefit from long-term emotional/spiritual support.

A VS will experience times of optimism and hope, but also times of fear and hopelessness. Everyone needs consistent, respectful and empowering care in these circumstances. This support may be needed over many years as the stages of recovery and new beginnings evolve.

The best way to be a long-term supporter (whether as a pastor or a friend) is to keep asking – as things change – what you can do to help. This dignity of ongoing respect and choice honours the VS's independence and survival and reminds them that they aren't alone.

Ongoing pastoral, spiritual and emotional care is integral for Christian survivors of abuse. Check in with them – that they feel safe and supported – even if they appear to be OK.

After leaving an abusive situation, a VS should be supported to update safety planning. It is important to continue offering support to link a VS with DFV services, legal services or police, to assess ongoing risks over time.

Consider getting support for yourself, including safe times and places to debrief.

How should local churches respond to people who use violence?

Responding to PUVs can be a daunting challenge for local churches. If you become aware that someone in your church community is using violence, your first priority must always be to support the VS's safety.

> **Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of anyone being harmed must always override any other action you take.**

Here are some practical steps you can take to make sure you respond appropriately to anyone using violence:

1. TAKE THE VS'S CHOICE SERIOUSLY.

- VSs deserve dignity and safety when dealing with any abusive behaviour.
- Ensure VSs have total control over whatever actions are taken and when.
- Bypass VS consent ONLY if there is an immediate risk of harm (call 000) or child protection reporting obligations.

2. USE EXTREME DISCRETION.

- To preserve VS safety, always be extremely careful about giving out any information, including the VS's contact details and personal circumstances.
- Be aware that many PUVs will use technology to try to track or continue to abuse a VS.[39]



If your church has a DFV policy and procedures, follow them. If not, the following steps may be helpful:

3. SEEK EXPERT HELP.

- Contact a DFV specialist as soon as possible for advice on prioritising your options and finding help, e.g., a local service provider, 1800RESPECT or Men's Referral Service.
- If the PUV is highly distressed, unpredictable or threatening self-harm, contact emergency services, the Mental Health Line or a GP.
- **Strongly encourage the PUV to seek help from a specialist program:** Contact the Men's Referral Service to find a program in your area that focuses on accountability, partner and family safety, and shifting core beliefs, rather than just managing anger. The "Find a Practitioner" page on the Australian Psychological Society's website also allows you to search for psychologists with expertise and experience in family violence/ behaviour change programs.
- Seeking specialist training, being reflective, and being supervised in your role are all ways of being accountable when working with a PUV.

4. BE ALERT TO MANIPULATION.

PUVs often attempt to recruit priests, pastors and others who may have influence over the VS, to help the PUV maintain (or regain) control over the VS.

Be aware that PUVs are highly likely to try to manipulate you by hiding their abusive behaviour. (This is often called 'grooming' or 'impression management'.) Indeed, a PUV may have been grooming you for some time before you learned about the abuse.

PUVs often try to manipulate others' beliefs about both them and the VS – and they don't stop when a disclosure is made.

Remember that PUVs often use the 'DARVO' strategy to claim that they are the real victim and the VS is attacking them. (For more information about the DARVO strategy, please refer to page 26.)

Jesus warned his followers: ***'Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them … every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.'*** *(Matthew 7:15–17)*

5. BE EXTREMELY WARY OF APOLOGIES/CLAIMS OF REPENTANCE.

PUVs often attempt to regain control by apologising or claiming to have changed.

Apologies/claims of repentance may be very convincing, but they need to be accompanied by changed behaviour.

A genuinely repentant PUV will accept help to change their abusive behaviour; invest in specialised treatment; allow the VS to move away from the relationship; make no demands on the VS.

Even if a PUV does seek help, change is likely to take many months – or even years.

6. CONSIDER YOUR OWN SAFETY.

Be aware that the PUV could be dangerous and don't put yourself at risk.

Err on the side of seeking advice rather than taking any risks.

If you do meet with a PUV, do so in a public place together with others.

7. CONSIDER SAFETY AT CHURCH.

If the PUV and VS attend the same church, be led by the VS in reviewing safety.

To protect a VS, you may need to tell a PUV to find a different church – or at least attend a different service.

Consider any risks to other church leaders or members and always put safety first.

These are difficult decisions. Consult an expert for support.

8. MAINTAIN SELF-CARE AND SEEK SUPPORT.

DFV experts take self-care and their own wellbeing seriously. VS experiences are harrowing, even second hand. Self-care and emotional support are important.

Seek professional support. A helpline like 1800RESPECT or Lifeline Australia can offer debriefing and emotional support.

9. DOCUMENT THE SITUATION CAREFULLY.

Keep a confidential log of all your interactions with the VS and PUV, including dates and actions taken. This information could become important for police or other investigations.

Stick to the facts (e.g., date, time), not what you think might be happening.

If you have a leadership role within the church, you may need to know enough about what's happening to respond appropriately when a VS and PUV are in the same congregation. But don't take on the role of an investigator or mediator. These roles belong to trained police and other experts and are accessible across Australia.

What if the PUV is a church leader, pastor, staff member or official volunteer?

It is a great sadness that Christian leaders are not immune to perpetrating violence and control. This produces a tragically complex situation because abusive behaviour is completely inconsistent with both Biblical and cultural expectations of Christian leaders.

The New Testament teaches that Christian leaders must be *'not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, … hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.'* (Titus 1:7–8)

When a church leader, pastor, staff member or official volunteer is abusive, they betray the authority and trust placed in them with devastating results – for the VS, as well as for church members and other onlookers.

A Christian VS may feel extra pressure not to disclose abuse by a church leader, torn between protecting their own safety/wellbeing and maintaining the church's stability. In reality, of course, it is always the PUV – not the VS – who is responsible for any damage to the church and Christian community arising from abuse.

> **Internal church reporting and accountability processes should not replace the usual police and legal reporting systems.**

Many Christian denominations have internal reporting processes for misconduct and abuse. You may be able to make an anonymous initial enquiry before lodging an official complaint. Dedicated staff may be available to investigate and discipline a PUV on a case-by-case basis, following an official report. VSs should be fully informed of their rights and all possible processes before committing to any action.

Some denominations also have funding available for VS counselling and other support.

Internal church processes should never be used to replace the usual police and legal reporting systems. DFV legislation and child protection laws always apply, irrespective of who the PUV is. Investigators must call upon these laws and ensure VSs have the opportunity and choice to draw on all systems of justice. PUVs must never simply be moved on to another church or community, in the hope that relocating them will stop their abusive behaviour.

Similar challenges exist when the PUV is a community elder, elected official, professional in their role, police officer or judge. In these circumstances, there are harrowing choices to make and systems that need to hold violence to account. Some of these leadership roles come with independent accountability, which VSs can access. Always ask for expert advice on options for reporting, support and justice.



A message for you...

IF YOU ARE SOMEONE EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

1. God loves you and wants you to feel safe and loved.
2. The abuse is not your fault – you didn't cause it and you don't deserve it.
3. You are the expert on your own life – trust your instincts.
4. Consider making a safety plan.
5. There is help available – see Further Resources at the back of this booklet.
6. Find someone you trust, who believes you and can help you get expert support.
7. Forgiving someone who harmed you doesn't mean you have to stay in the relationship.
8. Leaving an abusive relationship is not a sin.
9. If you choose to leave, get help and put your safety first because leaving can increase risk.
10. If you can't (or choose not to) leave, you can still get help to keep safe and find support.

IF YOU ARE A CHURCH LEADER

1. Use reliable, expert sources to learn about DFV and equip yourself to respond appropriately.
2. If someone discloses abuse to you, listen, tell them you believe them, and let them know you are there to help – don't judge them or tell them what to do.
3. Speak honestly to your congregation about the reality of DFV in church communities.
4. To avoid inflicting spiritual abuse, teach and preach mindfully on issues that intersect with DFV, such as marriage, forgiveness and gender roles.
5. Use the ideas in this booklet – and other specialist training/resources – to make your church a safe and healing place for people experiencing violence.

6. Know your own role – including its strengths and limits – and know when to refer to an expert.
7. Be aware that people who use violence often 'groom' or manipulate church communities (including you) to hide their behaviour and cast doubt on the person they are harming.
8. Never recommend couple's counselling for people in an abusive relationship.
9. Only ever refer someone who has used violence to specialist services – appropriate services can be found on the Men's Referral Service website.
10. Self-care and getting professional support are important for you too.

IF SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT IS EXPERIENCING DFV

1. Listen well and believe what they tell you.
2. Don't be judgmental or tell them what to do – remember, someone experiencing violence is the expert in their own life and they need the dignity of choosing how they will respond.
3. Keep confidential whatever they tell you and prioritise their privacy and safety.
4. Encourage them to seek professional support and help – and offer to help them find information and resources.
5. If they are in immediate danger and emergency help is needed, call 000 or offer to help them access emergency shelter.
6. Don't put down the PUV – this may cause the person experiencing violence not to disclose anything further.
7. Consider practical things you might do to help – but always be guided by what the person experiencing violence prefers.
8. Be prepared to offer support over the long term, as recovering from abuse can take many months/years.
9. Don't put yourself in harm's way or do anything that endangers you.
10. Seek professional support and guidance for yourself; you can access free 24–7 DFV advice.

IF YOU ARE A PERSON WHO USES VIOLENCE

1. God does not want you to control or harm other people. Using power and violence over another person is not only never OK, it's criminal behaviour.
2. Violence has consequences, including physical and psychological injury to people you love; loss of relationships; legal and financial losses; loss of trust from people around you; damage to your reputation.
3. You can choose to stop using violence.
4. Seek professional help, such as by using the list of specialist services at the start of this booklet. If you have a mental health, alcohol or other drug problem, seek help for those issues too. Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
5. Look for a reputable specialist counsellor or program, such as one run by a domestic violence service. A general counselling professional is unlikely to have the necessary training or skills to help. The "Find a Practitioner" page on the Australian Psychological Society's website allows you to search for a psychologist with expertise and experience in family violence/ behaviour change programs.
6. Allow the person/people you have harmed to find safety and healing.
7. Repentance is an appropriate response, but it doesn't give you the option to revert to abusive behaviour and it doesn't mean you can demand forgiveness or reconciliation from the person/people you have harmed.
8. 'Sorry' must be followed by ongoing evidence that you are seeking help, making better choices, and making amends wherever possible.
9. Children deserve a parent who puts their kids' wellbeing ahead of their own wants or needs; you can choose to be that kind of parent. Seek help from a reputable parenting program.
10. Change is within your control. Hope for change isn't wishful thinking. It's having the will and the way to change and doing the work. Change is more than possible. It's achievable if you put in the work.

IF YOU ARE A DFV EXPERT WORKING WITH A CHRISTIAN VS

1. You may find working with a VS who actively belongs to a Christian church or faith community challenging, especially if you don't hold a Christian worldview. Engaging in reflective practice in safe spaces (e.g., supervision) may help you manage this challenge.
2. There will be issues in Christian communities that are unique to this demographic. If you don't identify as a Christian – or if your understanding of Christianity differs significantly from that of the VS – remember that you are working cross-culturally, as with any other demographic that differs from your own.
3. Educate yourself about the VS's church or Christian community in a non-judgemental manner. Accessing resources developed for Christian communities by credible professionals will help give you confidence in working with Christian VSs. See the end of this booklet for examples.
4. Many Christian VSs only feel safe seeking help from Christian organisations. Be prepared with some reliable Christian options or resources.
5. Recognise that churches and other faith communities can be a source of safety, practical support and encouragement for VSs and their children.
6. If the VS's church or faith community is not helping (or if you sense they are compounding the abuse), be patient and provide information about all the VS's possible choices and next steps. As a VS learns more about healthy behaviours and gains agency, they may be able to separate themselves from unhelpful supports.
7. Avoid speaking negatively about the VS's church or the PUV. Address abusive behaviours and the impacts of abuse clearly and directly.
8. Don't assume that a Christian VS won't take your respectful interaction and information into account. A VS may be coming to terms with having pretended that everything is OK in their church or faith community. Remember that shame is a powerful factor for many VSs, not only Christians.
9. Christian VSs may maintain false hope that the PUV will change, based on their own faith or misguided advice to pray for a miracle. Gently encourage them to engage with professionals, alongside seeking help for their spiritual wellbeing. A VS shouldn't be made to choose between these options. Supporting a VS to seek holistic self-care is likely to be accepted.
10. Actively invite faith communities or representative bodies to engage with your DFV education sessions or awareness raising events. Relationship building and providing information about referral pathways could change – and even save – lives.

A Prayer to End Domestic and Family Violence

Loving God,

We thank you for inviting us to work together to end domestic and family abuse in our communities, and we ask for your wisdom and guidance in our efforts.

We pray for a society where all people are safe in their homes, families and close relationships, and where all relationships respect the equality and dignity of each person.

We pray for all those affected by violence and abuse, that they may find safety and healing.

We pray that all women and children will find a place and a life free from violence and abuse, and children will be cared for in nurturing protective and supportive ways.

We pray for young men that they may find models of respectful relationships and reject the abusive and demeaning images of manhood in many areas of society.

We ask for the courage to confront the causes of family violence and abuse, including the prevalence of violence in society, abuse of power and the unequal position of women in society.

We pray for right and just relations between people, so that together we may transform and overcome abuse in all its forms.

We long for the time you have promised, when violence and abuse are banished, women and men are open to love and to be loved, children are protected, and the work and wealth of our world is justly shared.

Through Christ our Lord,

Amen.

Further resources

Immediate Helplines & Emergency Services

- If you are experiencing DFV and are in immediate danger, move to a safe place and call the police (In Australia: **dial 000** for Police, Ambulance and Fire Station)
- **1800RESPECT** is a free and confidential 24–hour DFV support hotline. You can call 1800 737 732 or text 0458 737 732. Online chat and video chat options are also available on the 1800RESPECT website. If you need an interpreter, ask for a translation service or call 13 14 50. If you find it difficult to hear or speak, you can get support by phoning the National Relay Service (NRS) on 1800 555 677 and giving them the 1800RESPECT service number (1800 737 732).
- **DVConnect** is a free and confidential service for Queenslanders who feel unsafe at home because of domestic, family or intimate partner violence. You can call 1800 811 811. Men who want to change their abusive behaviours can also call DVConnect's Mensline on 1800 600 636.
- The **Elder Abuse hotline ELDERHelp** is a free and confidential hotline. You can call 1800 353 374 for information and advice. Hours may vary across states.
- The **Rainbow Sexual Domestic and Family Violence Hotline** is a free and confidential hotline supporting LGBTIQA+ people, family members, supporters and anyone impacted by sexual, domestic or family violence towards the LGBTIQA+ community. You can call 1800 497 212.
- **13YARN** is a 24–hour free and confidential service run by trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support workers. You can call 13 92 76.
- **MensLine Australia** is a 24–hour free online and telephone counselling support for men who are experiencing or using DFV. Support is also available for mental health, stress, anger and suicidal thoughts. You can call 1300 789 978.
- **Men's Referral Service** offers 24–hour advice for men about family violence. You can call 1300 766 491. Translation services are available upon request.

Online Training Opportunities

- **Ridley College** (affiliated with the Australian University of Theology) offers a free self-paced online course to better understand DFV and increase confidence in how to respond effectively when in a ministry role. The course offers information that will strengthen your theological framework when addressing and responding to DFV. The course and information can be accessed at https://certificate.ridley.edu.au/courses/responding-to-domestic-and-family-violence
- **The Anglican Church of Australia Families and Culture Commission** offers the 'Communities That Care' course about bystanding practices. Delivered by DFV experts and drawing from real life scenarios in Christian church contexts, the course aims to equip churches to be a better caring community in the area of DFV. Comprising six short interactive video modules, the course and information can be accessed at https://www.tencommitments.org.au/training
- **'The Safer Spaces Toolkit'** is an endorsed project of Australian Baptist Ministries. It offers online training sessions, preaching tools and videos that address DFV and aims to build relationally health communities. The course and information can be accessed at https://saferspacestoolkit.com.au
- **The Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research** has free online modules for the DFV sector. It also offers community groups to assist with recognising and responding to DFV whilst utilising Queensland's 'Common Risk and Safety Framework' tools, developed as a result of DFV reforms in the State. The course and information can be accessed at https://noviolence.org.au/learn
- **The Queensland Government** has two training modules that explore coercive control and new coercive control legislation. The modules and information can be accessed at https://www.qld.gov.au/community/getting-support-health-social-issue/support-victims-abuse/need-to-know/domestic-and-family-violence
- **DV-alert** offers free virtual workshops for participants across Australia (participants must be aged over 18 and have a USI number) and 'Brothers Standing Tall' training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males aged 18 and over. The website and information can be accessed at https://www.dvalert.org.au/application-landing/eligibility-application/eligibility
- **SSI Diversity Training** offers free training to help faith and community leaders feel more confident in recognising family, domestic and sexual violence, responding appropriately, and referring victim-survivors to relevant support services. The course can be accessed at: https://diversity.ssi.org.au/faith-and-community-leaders-training

Websites

- **The Queensland Government** provides information for Queenslanders impacted by DFV: https://www.qld.gov.au/community/getting-support-health-social-issue/support-victims-abuse
- **Good Shepherd Australia** can support VSs who have experienced DFV within the last 10 years with No Interest Loans (NILS). The website also provides links to further financial resources and services such as The Financial Independence Hub (a national free and confidential recovery service for VS recovering from financial abuse): https://goodshep.org.au/services/nils
- **Common Grace** hosts the Safer resource, which aims to equip Christians and Australian churches to respond to and prevent DFV with compassion, care and courage. The website offers valuable links to further resources and education which will increase understanding and capacity to recognise and respond effectively to DFV: https://www.saferresource.org.au/
- **Community Legal Centres Australia** is a national peak body representing over 160 community centres across Australia, which provide mostly free legal advice and services: https://clcs.org.au/legal-help
- **The National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence** provides information to help you understand sexual violence. The website also has an Australian Sexual Violence Support Directory: https://www.nasasv.org.au/support-directory
- **E-Safety** is the Australian Government's independent online safety regulator. The website includes extensive information about how DFV happens online or through digital technology: https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/domestic-family-violence
- **Services and Practitioners for the Elimination of Abuse Queensland (SPEAQ)** provides information about men's domestic violence behaviour change programs and what family members and partners may expect if someone close to them is attending one: https://speaq.org.au/seeking-help/for-partners-and-family-members/

Each Australian state and territory has services to support victims of crime:

- **New South Wales:** https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/victims-services
- **Victoria:** https://www.victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au/
- **Queensland:** https://www.qld.gov.au/law/crime-and-police/victim-assist-queensland
- **South Australia:** https://www.voc.sa.gov.au/
- **Western Australia:** https://www.wa.gov.au/service/community-services/counselling-services/victim-support-service
- **Tasmania:** https://www.justice.tas.gov.au/victims/services/victims-of-crime-service
- **Northern Territory:** https://victimsofcrime.org.au
- **Australian Capital Territory:** https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/victim-support

Books

- **The Renew Book** is an Australian guide for Christian women survivors of DFV edited by Esther Sweetman and Lynda Dunstan. Providing help and encouragement for women to rebuild their lives, it is readable online and available for order at https://heyzine.com/flip-book/ad025625bb.html#page/1
- **Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse** by Steven R. Tracy and Celestia G. Tracy provides a well-researched biblical and scientific overview of abuse trauma and its effects and a theological path for healing. https://www.mendingthesoul.org/mending-the-soul-book
- **Know domestic violence: Use and misuse of scripture regarding domestic abuse** by Anglicare's Safe Ministry shows how the Bible (when rightly understood and not misapplied) condemns DFV. The resource can be accessed at https://safeministry.org.au/wp-content/uploads/DomesticAbuse_Useandmisuseofscripture_A5Booklet_Sep19.pdf
- **The Emotionally Destructive Relationship** by Lesley Vernick helps you to see, stop and survive emotionally destructive relationships. Lesley Vernick is a licensed clinical social worker who has spent over 30 years working with Christian women who are in unhealthy and destructive relationships. https://www.harvesthousepublishers.com/books/emotionally-destructive-relationship-9780736918978/

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