

Support services of the social sector

Factsheet

Help in a crisis¹

Social professionals are often confronted with individuals experiencing crises in their lives, who are or have been victims of domestic violence.

Common indicators of a crisis include:

- Inner imbalance
- Loss of coping mechanisms that typically help navigate difficult situations
- Shifts in thought patterns and emotions
- Fixation on single thoughts or rapid fluctuations in thinking
- Emotional responses range from numbness to overwhelming feelings
- Struggles to control intense emotions like fear or anger
- Feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, and sadness may be present
- Severe cases may involve thoughts of self-harm, suicide, or excessive substance use

The intensity and duration of symptoms can vary, lasting from days to weeks.

People deal with crises in different ways and also experience the consequences of stress in different ways. While some can deal with crises on their own or with the support of a person they trust, others may require professional help to process their experiences. In such cases, social professionals can encourage victims to seek medical help.

The job of social professionals includes supporting those affected by listening closely and showing empathy:

- **Address their concerns:** Listen attentively and try to build a trusting environment.
- **Stay calm:** Stay calm and convey a sense of safety.
- **Show empathy:** Try to understand their distress and validate their feelings. Minimise expressing your own stress and worries, focus instead on empathising with theirs.
- **Explore their coping mechanisms:** Inquire about activities or strategies that have helped them in the past. Encourage them to engage in activities that promote well-being, such as going for a walk, enjoying a cup of tea, exercising, sharing time with loved ones, or listening to music.
- **Refrain from giving unsolicited advice:** Avoid phrases like “*Why don’t you just...*” or “*If I were you...*”. Instead, focus on empathetic listening and refrain from offering advice unless explicitly asked for.



Find information on how frustration and stress can lead to burnout and vicarious trauma in [Module 9](#).



Find more information about the indicators of domestic violence in [Module 2](#).



Learn more about different strategies that can improve your listening skills to become a better listener [in this video](#).



Find specific measures on [how to support victims of domestic violence](#) in [Module 4](#).



Learn more about the procedure in women's shelters in cases of domestic violence [in this video](#).



Find more information on [trauma related disorders, retraumatisation and trauma therapy](#) in [Module 4](#).

- **Maintain personal boundaries:** While providing support, remember to prioritise your own well-being. Only make commitments you can fulfil and seek help from a trusted person or support services if needed.

Support services for victims of domestic violence

Social professionals should contribute to the identification of incidents of domestic violence, assist the victims in coping and recovering from the trauma they have experienced and explain the options available to them so that they can make an informed decision about what steps to take next.

Social professionals can undertake the following measures to support victims of domestic violence²:

- Identification
- Referral
- Protection
- Documentation
- Co-ordination

Support services differ both in how accessible they are, and with regard to the type of support they provide. Here is an overview of the main support services:

- Crisis services and social psychiatric services
- Phone services
- Online services
- Psychosocial services and counselling centres
- Medical help and psychotherapy
- Outpatient clinics
- Shelters

In case of an emergency, call the emergency service or the police.

Help with trauma³

For many victims, domestic violence causes trauma:

- “**Trauma**” is an ancient Greek word meaning wound or injury. In psychology, trauma refers to a severe psychological injury.
- Trauma often arises from experiences where a person is subjected to significant threat and helplessness. Observing such threats can also be traumatic.
- When children are exposed to such significant threats and experience trauma, it is colloquially referred to as **childhood trauma**. If this disrupts a child's development, it may be termed **developmental trauma**. When the threat comes from a close person, **attachment trauma** can also occur.
- Especially in cases of severe, prolonged, or repetitive threats, the likelihood of individuals developing **trauma-related disorders** increases.



Find more information on

general and specialised domestic violence counselling centres in [Module 4](#).

- Trauma can also affect the next generation, known as **transgenerational transmission**. It is believed that trauma is not simply inherited but that traumatised parents may interact differently with their children in some areas than non-traumatised parents.

If someone is experiencing an acute flashback or acutely dissociating and you are concerned, call the emergency service. This may be necessary if you cannot rule out the possibility of the person harming themselves.

Counselling⁴

Counselling centres offer valuable support to individuals in need, whether they are dealing with general challenges or specific issues such as domestic violence. These centres may specialise in various areas of support. Individuals can reach out to them if they have experienced domestic violence themselves or suspect someone else may be experiencing it, seeking information and practical support.

Counselling sessions at these centres are typically provided free of charge, with voluntary donations occasionally requested. Confidentiality is assured, and individuals can choose to remain anonymous if they prefer. Individuals should be encouraged to share their situations and suspicions, and to ask any questions they may have, even if they are uncertain.

Many counselling centres specialise in specific target groups. These can include:

- Gender and age
- People with a migration or refugee background
- People with disabilities
- Catchment area

First contact to counselling centres

Contacting a counselling centre is an important step for victims of domestic violence in accessing support. Usually, victims reach out to the centre by phone or email to schedule an appointment. However, this does not apply universally to all countries. For instance, in Austria, domestic violence reports are submitted to the police when certain protective measures are implemented. Following these reports, counselling centres take a proactive approach in contacting the victims. This initial contact should allow them to get a sense of the counsellors and to provide them with a specific date to mentally prepare for their visit. Additionally, many centres offer online advice services and have open office hours, allowing victims to drop in without an appointment. While this option may suit many people, it can sometimes involve a waiting period.

When reaching out to a local counselling centre, victims should be able to:

- inquire whether their concern aligns with the centre's expertise and whether the centre can help them.
- have the option to choose whether they prefer to speak with a female or male counsellor.
- have the option to change the counsellor.



Learn more about [outpatient psychotherapy](#) and [inpatient and semi-residential treatment](#) in [Module 4](#).

- feel being taken seriously, understood, risk-free/safe and protected.
- feel that the atmosphere is calm, confidential and that they interact as equals.
- feel that their boundaries are respected.

Therapy⁵

Social professionals should be informed about therapy options, useful points of contact, and how to guide victims in finding the appropriate support.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a treatment approach that seeks to improve people's mental and emotional health, including the psychological consequences of domestic violence. It is grounded in scientifically recognised methods. Psychotherapy is a collaborative treatment based on the relationship between an individual and a psychologist. Grounded in dialogue, it provides a supportive environment that allows people to talk openly with someone who's objective, neutral, and non-judgmental.⁶ Unlike psychiatrists, who are medical doctors and can prescribe medications, (psychological) psychotherapists focus on therapeutic interventions. These sessions involve interactions between the patients and the psychotherapist (mostly one-to-one but also group interventions), and may include different approaches, including explanations, exercises or games, especially when working with children.

An initial psychotherapy consultation can help determine if psychotherapy is needed, which type of therapy is best, and how costs can be covered.

Types of therapy

Psychotherapists usually specialise in one specific method. These include:

- **Behavioural therapy** focuses on changing negative behaviours and thought patterns.
- **Depth psychology-based psychotherapy** explores underlying psychological processes.
- **Analytical psychotherapy** involves in-depth exploration of past experiences and unconscious processes.
- **Systemic therapy for adults** looks at individual issues within the context of relationships and systems.

These therapies can be conducted in individual or group settings.

Specific therapy methods for trauma patients include trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy or Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR supports the processing of traumatic experiences through guided eye movements. Other therapy types include conversational psychotherapy, Gestalt therapy, and body-oriented therapy.

Psychotherapy for adults

Individuals who have experienced domestic violence, either recently or in the past, or those close to an affected person, may exhibit symptoms that psychotherapy can address. Therapy can help process the trauma immediately

after an event or even years later. It can be beneficial for those experiencing sleep problems, flashbacks (vivid reliving of traumatic events), difficulty managing daily tasks, or challenges at work. Psychotherapy might be a suitable option when close relationships are in conflict and the sense of fear and anxiety is present.

Psychotherapy for children and adolescents

Children and adolescents often respond to domestic violence in various and unique ways. Young children might regress in their behaviour, such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, or needing to sleep with their parents. They may show extreme attachment to their parents, or express psychological distress through physical symptoms like stomach aches and headaches. Mood swings, withdrawal from social interactions, irritability, and tantrums are common responses. Previously manageable situations might become sources of anxiety and overwhelm, leading to noticeable declines in school performance or, occasionally, unexpected improvements. Some adolescents might engage in self-harm to cope with intense internal stress.

These symptoms are not exclusively caused by experiences of domestic violence and can have other origins. However, psychotherapy can be highly beneficial when children or adolescents are struggling with distress, difficulty in daily interactions, school challenges, or other aspects of their lives.

Legal considerations^Z

Victims of domestic violence often have many questions when it comes to the law. Social professionals can provide them with information and show them where they can find support.

During a counselling session, social professionals can discuss:

- **Their objectives:** What do they hope to achieve through legal action?
- **Available legal steps:** What legal actions can they take to reach their objectives?
- **Pressing charges:** Do they need to press charges, and what would that entail for them?
- **Expectations:** What can they expect to happen during the legal process?
- **Entitlements:** What are their rights and entitlements towards the perpetrator?
- **Duration:** How long might a lawsuit take?

If victims need legal advice, they can take advantage of free legal consultation services offered by many counselling centres or seek help from specialised lawyers. Lawyers specialise in various legal fields, such as criminal law, civil law, or social law. Depending on the victim's objectives, whether they want to request safety and protection, file criminal charges, claim damages, or seek victim compensation, it makes sense to look for a lawyer who is a specialist in the relevant area. Many lawyers offer a free initial consultation.

Criminal proceedings can be complex and very time-consuming, often spanning several months or even years from the time an offence is reported. This duration



Find an overview of the [criminal procedures in the IMPROVE and VIPROM partner countries](#) in [Module 7](#).

can be even longer in cases involving offences committed long ago or those with numerous witnesses.

Victims should be made aware that criminal proceedings can be lengthy and stressful.

Financial assistance⁸

Victims of domestic violence can apply for financial assistance. Financial assistance can help alleviate some of the burdens associated with experiencing a traumatic situation such as the need for psychological and medical support over an extended period. Nevertheless, obtaining financial assistance may be a complex process as many judicial and administrative requirements must be met. As a social professional, you can help victims understand the benefits available and navigate the application process.

To receive these benefits, victims must apply for them. Specialised counselling centres can assist them with the application, and lawyers can also provide support.

Self-help⁹

Self-help groups provide a space where victims can learn from and support each other. These groups bring together people who have experienced similar problems to share their experiences, learn collectively, provide emotional support, and offer practical advice. These groups are often led by a psychotherapist.

Spotlight on the school sector: Documentation & Legal aspects

Please note, that the information provided in this section may vary substantially from one country to another.

Documentation¹⁰

If you work in a school and you detect that a child or adolescent may be a victim of domestic violence:

- Establish a dialogue with the child or adolescent to find out how they feel and gather information about their self-perceived situation.
- Do not rush the situation and clarify any suspicion.
- Compile your observations and keep records.
- Document the child's or adolescent's behaviour, expressions and actions.
- Discuss possible causes for the child's or adolescent's behaviour and further action steps with a team at work and/or by speaking with a colleague.
- Use your observations and documentation as a basis when communicating with the parents and with other



Find more information on [financial assistance](#) and [self-help](#) in [Module 4](#).

institutions/organisations (e.g., the institutional service responsible for the care of children and youth victims of domestic violence).

Professional assurance¹¹

The help that a child or adolescent affected by domestic violence and their family need is usually very complex and time-consuming. They cannot be provided by one person or institution alone. Cooperation with other support institutions is necessary.

If you work in a school and you detect that a child or adolescent may be a victim of domestic violence, you have the following options (whereby anonymous counselling is possible for all of the following offers):

- Establish an ongoing dialogue with the child or adolescent about how they are experiencing the situation. Consider their feelings and demands in the approach to the case.
- Stay in contact with your colleagues and superiors, especially in phases when you feel insecure. Conduct case conferences with your colleagues (possibly including the contact person of the institutional service responsible for the care of children and youth victims of domestic violence).
- Take advantage of telephone or personal counselling by the police. However, you should note that the police are obliged to prosecute criminal offences. If the police become aware of a child's or adolescent's well-being being endangered by abuse or neglect, criminal measures must be taken.
- Contact the institutional service responsible for the care of children and youth victims of domestic violence if there are indications that the child or adolescent is at risk in the family and the persons concerned cannot or do not want to seek help of their own accord. Here, too, you can first take advantage of counselling by telephone or in person. Institutional service responsible for the care of children and youth victims of domestic violence are not obliged to report such offences or to inform the police. Priority is given to the protection of the best interests of the child. In the case of adolescents this is often perceived in consultation with social services and counselling centres in such a way that individual help and protection concepts are developed with the adolescent's support.
- Authorities or counselling facilities of independent institutions should always be informed with the child's or adolescent's and the legal guardians' consent. However, authorities can also be involved without this consent if the child's or adolescent's well-being is at high risk. Making the case anonymous is a way of obtaining competent advice without breaching confidentiality. Facilities in the field of youth welfare such as child and youth emergency services, child protection centres, educational counselling centres and a partner, marriage, family and life counselling service offer advice and help.
- School psychological counselling centres can also be involved in conflict management. They advise those seeking advice and can establish contacts with other specialised counselling centres.



Find frequently asked questions about the legal obligations of teachers in [Module 4](#).

- Health care facilities such as public health offices, paediatricians and general practitioners, children's hospitals and child and youth psychiatric facilities have the important task of investigating the causes of health hazards and eliminating harmful factors. The opportunity to do this is particularly offered within the framework of school health care, especially during school enrolment examinations.
- Take the respective cultural background and the question of residence status into account in every offer of help.

Helpful sources

They can be found [here](#).