

Safer at home? What to do when home is not a safe space

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In an effort to control the spread of COVID-19, several states have issued stay-at-home orders. But for domestic violence victims, staying at home may not mean safer at home.

According to FIU psychologist Dionne Stephens, the National Domestic Violence Hotline has reported an increased volume of calls to their victims support hotline. This is a pattern experts witnessed during other times of national upheaval including the 2008 recession, after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and during intense hurricanes.

"People's sense of well-being becomes strained under mandates to stay [home](#), job losses and school closings, making already unstable relationships even more volatile," said Stephens.

Stephens provided FIU News with insight of what victims and those that love them can do to help during this time of uncertainty.

What can those who are experiencing abuse do during this time?

It is important that people in this situation realize that they are not alone and there are options. Their willingness to use these options will depend on where they are in their ability to take the next steps. For those who are just trying to keep things as balanced as possible, simply talking to someone is a big, albeit sometimes risky, first step. Advocates at The National Domestic Violence Hotline [call center](#) understand how intimidating it is. Callers can speak to advocates who speak over 200 languages. All calls are free and confidential.

If it is unsafe to speak on the phone, victims can use the live chat service, which provides the same one-on-one, real-time, confidential support. There is no record or history of the communication stored on computers. For FIU staff and students, the Victim's Empowerment Program can be contacted over the phone or by videoconference (through a HIPAA-compliant platform). When they return calls, it may appear to be from a private or blocked phone number.

Is leaving home an option under these circumstances?

It is a difficult time to have to decide which is a greater risk: being exposed to COVID-19 or remaining in an abusive situation. This is a decision each individual has to make based upon their own situations. Fortunately, there are advocates available to help figure out what options are out there and what is best for each individual. The Florida Domestic Violence Hotline (FDVH) provides the most comprehensive information about your legal options. They can also connect people to the various shelters. Currently, shelters are categorized as essential services and are functioning as normally as they possibly can. You can call or use the [FDVH website](#) to reach out. There is an escape button in the upper right corner if you need to quickly hide your screen. The National Domestic Violence Hotline's website also has details on what to expect when contacting a shelter, and how to prepare for this change during this stressful time.

If someone is concerned a family member, friend, coworker or neighbor may not be safe in their own home, what can they do while still adhering to the stay-at-home mandates?

The best thing you can do is let them know that they are supported and that you care. Knowing that someone is going to be there when needed is critical for helping victims start thinking about leaving an abusive situation. At the most basic level, just checking in with them daily can make a huge difference: a quick phone call or Facebook update can be an important lifeline. Knowing that you are willing to listen and believe what they say, is critical for helping victims feels supported. You can also reach out to the National Domestic Violence Hotline to get some situation-specific suggestions or just speak to an advocate confidentially about your concerns.

Provided by Florida International University

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