

Protecting your safety during COVID-19

Information for people experiencing partner abuse or sexual violence

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of partner, family and gender-based violence have increased. People experiencing violence are vulnerable to stress, anxiety, depression and substance use problems. These challenges may be greater during the pandemic, especially when there is violence in the home.

Strategies for people experiencing violence in the home during COVID-19, or supporting someone at risk

Seek supports in your community

See “Where can I find local crisis supports and helplines?” in the FAQ section that follows.



Find safe ways to seek support

It may be risky to seek support if the abuser is always close by. Safer ways to seek support without alerting an abuser may include asking someone you trust to help you get support, or emailing or texting an agency rather than phoning (be sure to delete the email in your Send and Deleted folders, or delete the text thread).

Know that you are not alone and not to blame

If you are experiencing violence, do not blame yourself. You did not make this happen. The person who is violent or abusive is responsible for their own behaviour.

Seek immediate help if you are unsafe

Contact [a local shelter](#) if you need a safe place to stay. Women’s shelters are still open during the pandemic.

If you feel you or someone else is in immediate danger, seek help right away. ***In an emergency, call 911.***

Find supports for children who have experienced violence or abuse, or are witnessing family violence

Many [support centres](#) have staff trained to help children who have experienced physical violence or sexual abuse. If the centre nearest you does not provide care to children, they can refer you to another agency.

[Information and resources](#) are also available for children and youth experiencing family violence.

Find ways to cope with mental health challenges, and seek mental health supports if needed

Try to stay in touch with others online or over the phone, if it is safe to do so. [Shelters](#) also provide online or phone support.



CAMH has some [tips for dealing with stress and anxiety](#) during this difficult time.



If you are having a mental health crisis, call 911 immediately or go to your nearest emergency department.



This information sheet is not intended to be a resource for people who require screening for COVID-19 or who are experiencing a mental health crisis. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, please call 911 immediately or go to your nearest emergency department.

For more information, visit www.camh.ca/covid19

FAQs

What is partner abuse?

Partner abuse happens when someone uses their power over their intimate partner to control them. It can happen in any relationship, regardless of gender, or sexual orientation or identity. Abuse may be physical, emotional, sexual, or may take other forms.

Source: [Ontario Network of Sexual Assault / Domestic Violence Treatment Centres](#)

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault is any kind of sexual activity with another person without their consent. It includes forced kissing, grabbing, fondling, sexual harassment, and attempted or completed rape (forced vaginal, oral or anal penetration).

Source: [Ontario Network of Sexual Assault / Domestic Violence Treatment Centres](#)

What is gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence is physical and other violence against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender. It mostly targets women and girls, LGBTQ+ people and other diverse or marginalized individuals.

Source: [Status of Women Canada](#)

Are these types of violence and abuse more common during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes, partner abuse, sexual assault and gender-based violence happen more often during crises like the current pandemic. This may be due to a combination of:

- financial stress because of reduced income
- anxiety about health risks
- public health measures requiring people to stay home, which may leave some people trapped in unsafe domestic situations.

These factors are also increasing children's experiences of violence and exposure to parental abuse.



How do partner abuse, family violence, sexual assault and gender-based violence affect mental health?



Being subjected to partner violence is linked with depression, substance use and mental illness. Childhood abuse is linked to mental health and substance use problems in adulthood.

Where can I find local crisis supports and helplines?

If you are experiencing partner violence or abuse, the [Ontario Association of Interval and Transitional Housing](#) lists local resources including crisis lines, emergency shelters, counselling programs, referrals to community resources, and programs for children and youth.

If you have been raped or sexually assaulted (including as part of partner abuse), the [Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres](#) lists sexual assault centres across the province that provide free counselling and information about sexual violence.

There are also [information and resources](#) for children and youth experiencing family violence.

What are crisis shelters doing to protect people's safety and health during COVID-19?

- Crisis lines and shelters remain open. They are increasing telephone support, and offering options such as emailing or texting for people seeking help.
- Shelters and centres are taking extra action to keep staff and clients safe, including increased cleaning and infection control, screening and physical distancing.



How can I support someone who is at risk of violence?

If someone you know is at risk of partner abuse, sexual assault or gender-based violence, here are some dos and don'ts:

- Do reach out to them as often as you can
- Do ask how their partner is handling the impact of the pandemic
- Do contact supports on behalf of the person, or to learn how you can better support them.
- Don't demonize the abuser, but also don't excuse their abusive behaviour
- Don't encourage the person to confront the abuser
- Don't encourage them to leave unless they have a clear safety plan
- Don't push them toward action if they are not ready.