



When isolating from one danger increases another

Whether you call it self-quarantining, social distancing or any number of other things, isolation has emerged as one of the most important things to do to try to limit the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). Unfortunately, for survivors of domestic violence, shielding oneself from this health threat means increased exposure to a different danger -- an abuser.

To understand why isolation is an increased threat for the safety and wellbeing of a survivor at a time like what we're seeing now, it's important to first understand how isolation is used as a tactic in an abusive relationship, even when the threat of a virus is not present. At the core of an abusive relationship is the batterer seeking to gain and maintain power and control over a partner. While that generally shows with physical violence, there are many other tactics that can be used.

Hubbard House provides life-saving and life-changing shelter and services to help survivors of domestic violence: the 24/7 hotline at (904) 354-3114, emergency shelter, court advocacy, job and housing help, and more. We work day-in and day-out to spread awareness of these resources. That's because the abusive dynamic can thrive when a survivor doesn't know to whom or where they can turn for help, or when they believe there is nowhere left to turn. To exploit that, an abuser can work to actively create and foster those feelings of isolation.

For example, as you are coping with your own "social distancing" right now, you may be with some close family members. What if your family has turned their back on you? It could be because your abuser actively sabotaged your relationship with your family, or perhaps because your family decided not to support you when you returned to the relationship. For a survivor of domestic violence, this is a dangerous isolation.

Perhaps you do have somewhere you can call for help -- a friend, a coworker, or maybe law enforcement. What if you don't have access to a phone? It could be because your abuser has taken your phone, restricted your access to it, or actively monitors your calls and messages. For a survivor of domestic violence, this is a dangerous isolation.

Maybe you need to get a break from your home, or you have a reason you need to leave, like a medical appointment. What if you don't have transportation? It could be because your abuser won't give you keys to your car, lies about whether a shared vehicle is working, or takes the car for themselves instead. For a survivor of domestic violence, this is a dangerous isolation.

Why is isolation so dangerous?

If a survivor isn't in public for an extended period, who will see the bruises or other signs of physical trauma? If a survivor isn't allowed to have company, who will spend time in the home to see a partner's abuse or other signs of distress? If a survivor is forced to

stay in close proximity to the abuser, how can that person try to protect themselves from the abuse? If a survivor doesn't have access to get help, who can possibly provide it?

Understanding here how isolation is a tactic of abuse experienced by many survivors of domestic violence, we can now see the magnified effect that "social distancing" measures can have. While this is by far the best step for protecting physical health against COVID-19, a survivor is dealing with these same tactics of abuse they've already experienced, and so much more. An abuser may manipulate the information the survivor receives about the virus, to induce further fear. An abuser may withhold access to medical care, to foster physical weakness. An abuser may limit access to household food and supplies, to promote dependence. And it all happens in the isolation of their home.

And while the survivor is dealing with this heightened risk, the threat of escalated abuse only compounds that. An abuser will often blame external factors as an excuse or justification for the abuse. An increase in stress in connection to the virus and the impact it is having on everyone's life, therefore, can become a reason the abuser can use to lash out. When a couple is isolated in a self-quarantine, an abuser also has a greater opportunity to choose behaviors of the survivor to criticize, because they may be with each other more. That criticism may be mentally and emotionally abusive or may continue to escalate to physical violence as well.

How to help and stay safe

All survivors of domestic violence are encouraged to safety plan (<https://www.hubbardhouse.org/safety>), from basic steps like determining a safe room to more complex considerations around travel or children. With coronavirus, there are even more elements to plan for. Hubbard House encourages anyone who needs help planning for their specific situation to call its free and confidential hotline, which operates 24/7. **The hotline is (904) 354-3114.**

There are steps that friends, family, colleagues and neighbors can take as well, including helping survivors secure supplies or offering to provide transportation. The most important step is that supporters simply let survivors know that they are there for them. Only a survivor can determine the best and safest things they can do, so when they make those decisions, it is important to know who can provide help.

While coronavirus continues to lead to disruptions for everyone's lives, Hubbard House's hotline will never stop operating, around the clock, to provide services and guidance for survivors in need or concerned family and friends looking for guidance. Hubbard House is now, and always will be, here, for survivors, for their supporters, and for our community.