



# Dementia and Domestic Abuse

## Briefing for Professionals

### 1. What is dementia?

There are various types of dementia and it is possible for someone to have a combination of these types, which can make accurate diagnosis difficult. The four most common types are – Alzheimer's, Lewy body, vascular dementia and frontotemporal dementia.

A person with dementia will have cognitive symptoms (to do with thinking or memory). They will often have problems with some of the following: day-to-day memory, concentrating, planning or organising, language – for example, difficulties following a conversation or finding the right word for something, visuospatial skills, problems judging distances (such as on stairs) and seeing objects in three dimensions, and orientation.

### 2. Impact on behaviour

A person with dementia will also often have changes in their mood. For example, they may become frustrated or irritable, apathetic or withdrawn, anxious, easily upset or unusually sad. With some types of dementia, the person may see things that are not really there (visual hallucinations) or strongly believe things that are not true (delusions).

Dementia is progressive, which means the symptoms gradually get worse over time. How quickly this happens varies greatly from person to person. As dementia progresses, the person may develop behaviours that seem unusual or out of character.

### 3. Dementia and abusive behaviour

When a person with dementia is abusive it's less likely to be about power and control which is a factor in many 'conventional' domestic abuse cases, unless they were already using abusive behaviour in their relationships .

- The person with dementia may develop abusive behaviour towards others including their partner or family members when there is no history of abusive behaviour.  
*"The dementia has changed him — he's not the same man I fell in love with and married so many years ago. He gets suspicious and angry a lot. He screams at me, he yells at our son, he shouts at the postman. He has even punched the caregiver who comes to help him bathe".*
- Or someone who was a perpetrator of domestic abuse in the past may start behaving like this again as their long term memory becomes more prominent.
- If a perpetrator of domestic abuse develops dementia then the abusive behaviour may continue or get worse
- A person living with dementia may become a victim of abuse due to their vulnerabilities and inability to protect themselves.

#### 4. Carers and dementia

- The carer may previously have been a victim of domestic abuse and now the perpetrator is dependent on them, so the roles can reverse.
- Carer stress may lead to incidents of abuse towards someone as a result of frustration and this may be heightened due to isolation during COVID 19.  
*“Dad is a nice guy, always has been. But now, because of the Alzheimer’s, he’s confused most of the time — and Mum isn’t coping. She doesn’t know what to do and she is frustrated. It started with her twisting his arm to get him to do things, but now she even hits him sometimes.”*

#### 5. Role of Adult Social Care

Adult Social Care have a statutory duty under the Care Act to help safeguard adults with care and support needs, who are unable to protect themselves, and are at risk from domestic abuse. Our statutory duty also applies to adults who do not meet the definition of an ‘adult at risk’ but may have adults at risk living with them. This duty also means responding to immediate risks. If a carer is the victim and they do not meet the Care Act criteria, consider a holistic approach and seek support from domestic abuse services. For early assessment for the diagnosis of dementia contact the Memory Service via [sheffmemory.service@shsc.nhs.uk](mailto:sheffmemory.service@shsc.nhs.uk) 0114 2716015

#### 6. Working with families

Be sensitive about how the abuse is referred to as it may not be intentional or motivated by power and control like other forms of domestic abuse. Look at the care needs of the person with dementia as well as the carer, **one of the most effective ways of protecting the carer if they are experiencing abuse is to put in services for the person with dementia. And remember to refer them for a Carer’s Assessment.** For advice or info contact the Carer Advisor team. Tel: 0114 272 8362

#### 7. Safety Planning

Don’t just look at services and support, **remember to undertake safety planning.** This needs to be tailored to the individual, think creatively if it is the victim who has dementia—what protective factors can be put in place? This will depend on their level of understanding and ability to protect themselves. Who else can be part of the safety plan? Complete the [DASH](#) if risk of domestic abuse is ongoing and get advice and support on safety planning and other options from Domestic Abuse Services. [www.idas.org.uk](http://www.idas.org.uk) 0808 8082241

More resources can be found at <https://coercivecontrol.ripfa.org.uk/>, <https://safelives.org.uk/spotlight-1-older-people-and-domestic-abuse> and <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/campaigning/no-age-limit/>