

Domestic Violence and the Law: What is Required of You?

A Publication for Bristol Law Society

Domestic violence is a subject people are still very unwilling to discuss. This applies to professionals as well as those who have experienced abuse. It is, therefore, very important to ensure that you, and your practice, are prepared for when somebody discloses abuse to you. In my professional opinion, all professionals working with victims of domestic abuse should undergo basic awareness of domestic violence training to instil a fair understanding. A basic awareness outline was given in the previous article, which can be found at www.martintrainingandconsultancy.co.uk, however this will still only provide a glimpse into the subject.

By advertising domestic violence services in your offices and reception area is a great way to show clients that you have an awareness and an ability to discuss the topic. Many victims may not raise the topic unless prompted, which visual aids will do. Many services are now piloting an 'ask the question' policy, where all clients accessing services for divorce, injunctions or child contact proceedings are asked directly whether they have experienced domestic violence. If you were to put a policy such as this in place it is best to put a sign up in reception highlighting that 'All clients accessing family law services will be asked whether they have previously, or are currently experiencing domestic abuse, please do not take offence as this is in place so we can offer the best possible service.' However, if you are to have such a policy in place all staff will be required to be able to deal with the situation if the answer is 'yes'.

Organisation policies, such as an 'ask the question' policy, are very important. A domestic violence policy should be adopted by your organisation to clarify your stance on domestic violence and highlight your working practices and procedures whilst working with that client group. All staff should know their working capacity and also what professional support and self care services are in place for the professional when working with victims of domestic violence. A policy should also offer protection to staff if a client were to take offence. There have been many pilot projects in this field which highlight that victims respond well when the environment is safe and it is clear the professional is well informed.

Services should also have referral procedures in place. The 18 months after leaving an abusive partner is the most dangerous time for a victim of domestic violence; if a person is looking for a divorce, selling property in joint names or taking out an injunction they may be at further risk of abuse. In this circumstance it is crucial to have a basic knowledge of local or national services and help lines which may be able to offer further support. Women's Aid run a 24 hour helpline and can be contacted on 0808 2000 247, and Respect run the Men's Advice Line 10am-1pm and 2pm-5pm Monday to Friday for male victims of domestic violence and can be contacted on 0808 801 0327. However, if you are aware of a local domestic violence service it would be beneficial to contact them directly and create a referral pathway for your organisation/company.

Whilst working with a victim who has disclosed experiencing domestic violence they may request to work with a professional of a different gender. If you have the capacity to offer this service then you may do so, as it may encourage a victim to be more forthcoming. It may also be possible to highlight to a victim that all professionals are trained to the same standard and you can guarantee a professional and non-judgemental service. Some victims have felt comforted by having a

trainee/paralegal/receptionist of the requested gender sit in on meetings until the client feels more comfortable.

As specialists in your field you are not expected to have an in-depth knowledge on domestic abuse. However, by having a basic awareness of what it entails, and local services that can offer ongoing support, you are showing a willingness to offer the best service available for your client. You may be able to improve the chances of your client staying safe and enhance your professional relationship.

Although only a brief outline, it gives an insight in to the vast field of domestic abuse and lays a foundation for what will be discussed in this series of articles focusing on domestic violence and the law. For more information please visit martintrainingandconsultancy.co.uk or contact Luke Martin by e-mail martintandc@gmail.com.