

## Workplace responses to domestic and family violence during COVID-19

May 2020

In times of crisis, incidents of domestic and family violence typically increase.<sup>1</sup> This document provides suggestions for how workplaces can support impacted employees and respond to domestic and family violence during the COVID-19 crisis.

### 1 Domestic and family violence during COVID-19

Domestic and family violence frontline services in Australia and other parts of the world are experiencing an increase in rates of domestic and family violence in the community in the wake of COVID-19. This is expected to increase the longer the pandemic continues due to factors including:

- ◆ Increased exposure to the abuser as a result of a shift to mandated working from home, self-isolation due to COVID-19 quarantine / diagnosis, and job losses
- ◆ Escalation of the use of violence by abusers as they experience stress/pressure, uncertainty and changes in routine including with children being at home
- ◆ COVID-19 being used by abusers to instil fear, isolation and to manipulate (e.g. threatening to expose the victim and/or children to the virus, withholding protective items, withholding medical or health care, or using COVID-19 as an excuse to not return children after visitation).

In addition, COVID-19 is also reducing opportunities for victims to access support. Victims have fewer opportunities to access unmonitored technology and to seek help safely given their abuser may be home with them, there are fewer opportunities to engage with others outside the home, and because of increased caring responsibilities (including as a result of many children being home from school/childcare).

It is important to note that the increased stress, family disruption, social isolation and increased financial pressures do not in themselves 'cause' or drive violence against women. They can however exacerbate the underlying driver of violence against women – gender inequality – and increase the severity and frequency of this violence, as we have seen in countries at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as in Australia.<sup>2</sup>

### 2 What can workplaces and leaders do?

#### Reassure employees regarding their job security and invest in their well-being

Increased uncertainty and insecurity can lead to an escalation of domestic and family violence. Where possible, workplaces can ensure their communication with employees provides reassurance regarding their job security and explains how the organisation is supporting this.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the 'Gender and Disaster Pod' at <https://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/themes/family-violence-disaster/>. Note, disasters disproportionately affect women because they are more likely to be in vulnerable jobs than men, to be underemployed and have less access to financial resources.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/our-watch-statement-on-the-covid-19-crisis>. See also <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/concerning-violence-against-women-during-covid-19-and-a-reminder-to-media-our-watch>



Employers can invest time in the well-being of employees including through regular check-ins, proactive communication of well-being strategies and access to professional support services such as Employee Assistance Programs.

Where job security cannot be guaranteed, employers can help employees to understand options available to them including the relief packages being provided by Governments.

For employees experiencing domestic and family violence, workplaces can ease anxiety by clearly communicating to all employees, particularly those with increased caring responsibilities, that they recognise and understand they will be unable to work at full capacity during this period.

## Ways of working

### *For those experiencing or at risk of experiencing domestic and family violence*

Given the increase in the need for employees to be working at home, it is particularly important to ensure there are options available for people who don't feel safe at home, and that employees are aware of those options.

Where possible, provide an opportunity for all employees to disclose if they do not feel safe working from home or request an alternative arrangement to working from home without having to disclose that they are experiencing domestic and family violence (e.g. enable employees to request working from the office and/or home without having to provide in depth reasoning). Some employees might not be ready to disclose that they are experiencing domestic and family violence yet and ensuring employees are aware of their options upfront reduces pressure to disclose this information. It is important not to 'force' a disclosure but seek to provide suitable alternative arrangements that do not compromise the safety of people affected by domestic and family violence.

Alternatives to working from home may include:

- ◆ Where possible and appropriate (including in the context of evolving measures in response to COVID-19), enabling the worker to continue working from the office or other site/asset (with appropriate social distancing in place)
- ◆ Providing short-term alternative accommodation.

For example, at Rio Tinto, those affected by domestic and family violence can be included as "essential office workers" so they are able to continue working from the office. In addition, Rio Tinto is reminding people leaders of the package of support available under their Domestic and Family Violence Policy including self-contained accommodation.

Ensure employees have the option to access work-provided phones and laptops/computers to enhance their autonomy and digital security.

### *For those who use or are at risk of using domestic and family violence*

If you become aware that an employee might be using domestic and family violence against a partner or family member, consider alternative arrangements to them working at home (e.g. office/other site or asset).<sup>3</sup> Ensure visibility of resources about healthy relationships are available including online support services (e.g. Men's Line and Men's Referral Service listed below).

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on how to respond in these situations, MCC has developed a resource 'A Workplace Response to Employees Who Use Domestic and Family Violence' (to be released end of April). Please contact your Program Director for more information in the interim.



If speaking with an employee who is talking about the stresses of working from home, guide them to a support service to discuss (e.g. your EAP, Men's Referral Service etc see below). They may not disclose domestic and family violence but this might be their way of seeking help. Recognise and communicate that feeling increased stress in this situation is normal but provide actions, avenues and resources to help employees address it. As noted above, increased stress, family disruption, social isolation and increased financial pressures do not in themselves 'cause' or drive violence against women, however they can increase the severity and frequency of violence and be an entry point for employees seeking help to stop using violence and abuse.<sup>4</sup>

## Communicate workplace policies, procedures & support available

Continue to raise awareness and educate employees on your organisation's policies, procedures and support available including whole of workforce communication regarding:

- ◆ What constitutes domestic and family violence (see below)
- ◆ Domestic and family violence policy and internal support available
- ◆ External specialist domestic and family violence support services available and their contact details (see below)
- ◆ Code of conduct and behaviour expectations
- ◆ Health and safety guidelines, including tools and resources to help keep employees safe, healthy and well wherever they are working
- ◆ Expectations regarding use of company time and resources
- ◆ Leave and flexible work policies and any additional flexible work options introduced in response to COVID-19.

Encourage employees to read through all of the organisations wellbeing/risk/safety/HR policies and monitor levels of engagement. This is an opportune time for employees working from home to use this time to "catch" up on policies and procedures and an indirect way of providing information to victims and employees who may use domestic and family violence.

Employers can also ensure all people managers and team leaders understand existing Domestic and Family Violence policy and the provisions available under it and are equipped with the language to communicate with staff around wellbeing. Consider establishing a buddy system to ensure employees who may be at risk are regularly contacted. Trained first responders within the workplace should understand the increased risk and refresh their knowledge on support offered by the organisation and referral pathways.

### **Example language you may like to adapt in your communications including in relation to working from home, access to technology, well-being, and communications from CEO/leaders.**

- ◆ We know COVID-19 may be creating additional stresses for some of our employees. If you are struggling or working from home is difficult for you, please don't hesitate to contact <insert> to discuss your circumstances and explore options

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/our-watch-statement-on-the-covid-19-crisis>



- ◆ **Work from home communications/toolkits/policy:** If you feel unsafe working from home because you are experiencing domestic and family violence, please inform <insert contact> and we will work with you to make alternative arrangements
- ◆ **Communications from your CEO:** I know that we may have team members who are experiencing domestic and family violence and may need a safe place outside of the home to work. If you do not feel safe working from home, please let <insert> know and we will help to make alternative arrangements. We offer a range of support to those experiencing domestic and family violence as outlined in our Domestic and Family Violence Policy along with links to specialist referral services [Link]. Please inform <insert> if you require any additional support.
- ◆ **Working from home/OHS checklist:** Include a question such as “Do you feel safe working from home (including free from domestic and family violence)?”, “Do you require access to a work-provided phone and/or computer?”

### **Example: Extract of Rio Tinto’s email to leaders on responses to COVID-19.**

#### **Work arrangements**

Some of our employees are currently working from home, or spending more time at home than normal, due to the COVID-19 crisis. This may increase their risk of being affected by family and domestic violence. As their leader, you can take either of the following actions:

- ◆ Employees affected by family and domestic violence can be designated as “essential office workers” and will then be able to work in a Rio Tinto office location. Please discuss with your regional HR representative to provide a safe office location in accordance with COVID-19 safety protocols as well as any documentation required to address local government requirements.
- ◆ Rio Tinto can also provide self-contained accommodation as per our Family & Domestic Violence Guidance Note. Please reach out to your regional HR representative to understand the steps involved in this process.

#### **Rio Tinto’s Family & Domestic Violence Guidance Note**

The following support is available as per our Family & Domestic Violence Guidance Note:

- ◆ Leave arrangements – up to 10 days paid leave (additional paid leave may be granted at the discretion of the employee’s General Manager).
- ◆ Emergency accommodation – our Guidance Note provides for 3 days however more can be approved at the discretion of the employee’s General Manager.
- ◆ Emergency financial assistance – approved at the discretion of the employee’s General Manager.
- ◆ Safety plans – it is important that this is done in partnership with the employee. Please reach out to your regional HR representative for guidance.

#### **External support providers**

There are several options for employees seeking support through external services and service support cards for the different areas of Australia (see below).

#### **Don’t be a bystander**

At the moment, when a large number of us are working from home, the lines between work and home are more blurred than usual. We may have employees who are affected by domestic violence and the sobering reality is that we may also have employees who use violence or abuse at home. The same will be true in our neighbourhoods and communities at this time of heightened anxiety and pressure.



The first priority in the event of any incident must always be the safety of the individual and their family. Call the Police if danger is imminent. Don't be a bystander, don't rationalise or make excuses for a situation if you think someone is at risk.

At Rio Tinto we believe everyone should be safe at work and at home. As leaders, this means having the courage to live our values, to speak up, to ask someone if they are OK and to offer support. Intervention is critical to breaking the cycle of violence.

### **Example: CSIRO**

#### **A message from Larry Marshall, CSIRO Chief Executive and Male Champion of Change.**

Your health and wellbeing is always our top priority, but we know that for some of our people, working from home or self-isolation coupled with the possibility of familial unemployment and rising stress increases the risk of domestic family violence and abuse.

As a Male Champion of Change and on a human level, this is an issue I'm committed to acknowledging and want to help alleviate.

So I'm asking you, as leaders, to be mindful that the relationships and connections you have with your teams could be the lifeline needed in these unprecedented times. Our Leaders guide to domestic and family violence outlines what's required to have a conversation, provide referral pathways and references to relevant workplace frameworks and policies.

We understand that as leaders you are not counsellors. The information and resources on this page will assist you as a leader to support your team, and you can access further support through the managers EAP hotline.

## **Regular check-ins**

Encourage all managers to check-in with their team including through video conferencing where possible.

Where it is known a team member is experiencing domestic and family violence, connect daily or twice daily via phone or video-conference as well as via email to check-in on their wellbeing and safety.

EAP can also be used as an outside support tool to potentially disguise the conversation from perpetrators. For example, "my workplace has asked all employees to touch base with support services".

Consider developing a safety plan with the employee that may include an action such as use of a 'safe word' that signals to the employer that a pre-arranged action should be taken (e.g. the employer makes a call requesting the employee come into work to complete an immediate task, or the employer calls the Police).

Consider also encouraging the employee to download the 'Daisy' app (or the 'Sunny' app for women with disability) if safe for them to do so, which connect people experiencing domestic and family violence with their local service providers. These apps have features enabling safe exit, emergency texts to selected contacts and safe browsing.

For **tips communicating with survivors of domestic and family violence using technology** see:

- <https://techsafety.org.au/blog/2020/03/18/covid19-resources-for-dfv-agencies-wanting-to-use-technology/>
- <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/blog/covid-19-online-safety-help-for-women>



## If a domestic and family violence incident occurs while working at home

*If danger is immediate, call 000.*

During this period of social distancing, an employee may share that they have experienced violence in their home. In this situation, as always, the first priority is the safety of the employee who is experiencing domestic and family violence. Workplaces can recognise and respond to domestic and family violence and refer their employees to support services. Be guided by the employee on the type of support that they need, given the additional complexity of providing support during the COVID-19 crisis.

### Employees who use violence

Statistics show that most employers will have employees who use violence or abuse at home and this may occur during the hours of work and/or using company resources. Evidence may include visual evidence through video checks, a disclosure, police intervention, medical intervention, or the requirement to go to court. Such incidence may be a breach of an organisation's code of conduct and expectations of its employees. It is important to remember in this unprecedented time that a workplace intervention may escalate the use of domestic and family violence in the home. How you might respond in normal circumstances when the employee is attending the office may be different to how you respond during COVID-19. For example, you may consider providing accommodating for a user of domestic and family violence for a few nights to give the family a break. Providing accommodation to a user of domestic and family violence can be part of a victims safety plan and therefore reducing the risk posed by the user.

For further information on how to respond in these situations, MCC has developed a resource 'Workplace Responses to Employees Who Use Domestic and Family Violence' (to be released in May 2020). Please contact us if you require more information in the interim. No to Violence can provide expert advice on how to address a specific situation of an employee using domestic and family violence. Contact details for services supporting men who use violence are provided at the end of this document.

### Communicating support available for employees using domestic and family violence

#### Suggested language you may like to use/adapt:

You may find yourself under increased strain under physical distancing or you may find that disagreements and arguments with your family have become more common and things you once considered small may now seem huge. If you are concerned about your relationship(s) below are services that can help:

**Better Man** is a confidential website broken into three modules, focusing on relationships, values and communication. All modules have online messaging and feedback tailored to your responses. <http://public.betterman.org.au>

**Men's Referral Service** provides a specialist family violence response to those using family and domestic violence  
1300 766 491 or Livechat - <https://www.ntv.org.au>

**MensLine** is a professional telephone and online support and information service for Australian men.  
1300 789 978 - <https://www.mensline.org.au/>



## Support for frontline domestic and family violence services

Domestic and family violence support services, including refuge/crisis accommodation, are experiencing an increased demand on their services. In addition, many refuges who have relied on a shared accommodation model are being forced to reduce their capacity to comply with social distancing requirements.

Refuges rely on donations, fund-raising, and in-kind support. With the cancellation of many donation-drive activities due to social distancing/COVID-19 risk reductions (and limited access to some essential items), the refuges require assistance now more than ever.

Additionally, with many frontline advice, counselling and refuge services having to move to telephone and online advice, many services are short on phones and computers.

Refuges are also experiencing increased demand on their time from their existing clients due to the fears and anxiety about COVID 19 and increased self-isolation. Women and children in refuges are not only recovering from the trauma of the domestic and family violence but are now also facing increased social isolation and anxiety. Refuges are attempting to recruit casual staff and train them quickly to step in when their core staff teams are exhausted and/or ill.

Useful ways to support frontline services:

- ◆ Speak with individual refuges to understand their specific shortages/needs and help to fill these gaps (e.g. phones/computers, and essential items such as toilet paper, sanitary items, hand sanitiser, nappies, formula etc)
- ◆ If possible, provide cash donations to enable/support continuation of counselling services, care packages, emergency accommodation etc.
- ◆ Provide or pay for maintenance services to the refuges
- ◆ Offer assets such as additional short-term accommodation for refuges.

### **Example: Telstra – safe mobile phones for survivors of domestic violence**

Telstra and WESNET, in partnership since 2014, work together to help women impacted by domestic and family violence to stay safely connected. Telstra donates smartphones with \$30 of pre-paid credit to WESNET to give to women impacted by domestic and family violence. WESNET provides the phones through its network of specially trained frontline agencies across the country.

This April, Telstra has provided WESNET with 6,000 additional smartphones. This will bring the number of devices provided so far in 2020 to 8,000. For survivors, having access to a smartphone that is safe and knowing how to keep it secure, is a lifeline. During COVID-19 this has become even more essential.

For more information see <https://exchange.telstra.com.au/staying-safely-connected/>





### Domestic and family violence can take many forms

We know from the Australian and International evidence that violence against women is driven by pervasive gender inequality, which is sustained through structures, norms and practices that unfairly distribute economic, social and political power and resources between women and men. During times of crisis, like COVID-19, these existing social inequalities exacerbated and disadvantage is reinforced.<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of all domestic and family violence is one person exerting **power and control** over another that causes harm and disadvantage to that other person. Domestic and family violence includes intimate partner violence, elder abuse, violence and abuse against children, and domestic and family violence perpetrated by carers of people with disability. It takes many different forms, and is always underpinned by a context of abusive patterns and strategies, including:

- ◆ **Physical violence**
- ◆ **Sexual violence**
- ◆ **Using economic abuse** (e.g. preventing an (ex-)partner from getting or keeping a job; making an (ex-)partner ask for money; giving an (ex-)partner an allowance; not letting an (ex-)partner know or have access to the family income, and running up debts in the (ex-)partner's name)
- ◆ **Using coercion and threats** (e.g. making and/or carrying out threats to do something to hurt or kill the (ex-)partner, children or other family member; threatening to leave, commit suicide or report the (ex-)partner to welfare services; making the (ex-)partner drop charges; making the (ex-)partner do illegal things)
- ◆ **Using intimidation** (e.g. making an (ex-)partner afraid by using looks, actions or gestures; smashing things; destroying an (ex-)partner's property; abusing pets; displaying weapons)
- ◆ **Using emotional and psychological abuse to erode confidence** (e.g. putting an (ex-)partner down; making an (ex-)partner feel bad about themselves; calling an (ex-)partner names; making an (ex-)partner think they are crazy (commonly referred to as 'gaslighting'); playing mind games; humiliating an (ex-)partner; making an (ex-) partner feel guilty; cheating on an (ex-)partner and telling them of the infidelity)
- ◆ **Using isolation** (e.g. controlling what an (ex-)partner does, who they see and talk to, what they read, and where they go; limiting their outside involvement; using jealousy to justify their actions)
- ◆ **Stalking** (e.g. monitoring an (ex-)partner's movements, either in person, through others or using technology)
- ◆ **Using spiritual or cultural abuse** (e.g. preventing someone from practising their religion or cultural practices, or misusing spiritual, religious or cultural beliefs and practices to justify other types of abuse and violence)
- ◆ **Minimising, denying and blaming** (e.g. making light of abuse and not taking concerns seriously; saying the abuse didn't happen; shifting responsibility for their abusive behaviour; blaming the victim for the abusive behaviour)
- ◆ **Using children** (e.g. committing violence and abuse in front of the children, making the (ex-)partner feel guilty about the children; using the children to relay messages; using visitation to harass the (ex-)partner; threatening to take the children away)
- ◆ **Using privilege** (e.g. treating the (ex-)partner like a servant; making all the major decisions; being the one to define men's and women's roles)

Increasingly, people who use violence are **using technology** to perpetrate violence including:

- ◆ Tracking and stalking an (ex-)partner (e.g. using mobile phones and tracking devices to track their location)
- ◆ Using technology to threaten, coerce and harass an (ex-)partner (e.g. abusive phone calls and text messages, accessing online banking).

<sup>5</sup> See Our Watch statement at <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/our-watch-statement-on-the-covid-19-crisis/>





## Referrals and further resources

Australia	<p><b>1800RESPECT</b> 1800 737 732 Online chat: <a href="https://chat.1800respect.org.au/#/chat/questions1">https://chat.1800respect.org.au/#/chat/questions1</a> 24 hour, national sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for any person who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault</p> <p><b>Lifeline</b> 13 11 14 Lifeline has a national number who can help put you in contact with a crisis service in your State.</p> <p><b>WESNET</b> 1800 WESNET (1800 937 638 <a href="https://wesnet.org.au/telstra/">https://wesnet.org.au/telstra/</a></p> <p><b>Men's Referral Service</b> Men's Referral Service provides a specialist family violence response to those using family and domestic violence 1300 766 491 ACT NT QLD SA VIC and WA - Monday to Friday 8am - 9pm; Weekends 9am - 5pm NSW and TAS Open 24/7 Live Chat now (National) - Monday to Friday 8am - 9pm; Weekends and Public holidays 10am-3pm</p> <p><b>MensLine</b> MensLine Australia is a professional telephone and online support and information service for Australian men. <a href="https://www.mensline.org.au/">https://www.mensline.org.au/</a> 1300 789 978 (Australia-wide, 24/7)</p> <p><b>No to Violence</b> <a href="https://www.ntv.org.au">https://www.ntv.org.au</a></p> <p><b>Police &amp; Ambulance</b> Dial 000 in an emergency.</p>
Other countries / global	<p><b>Global Network of Women's Shelters and Helplines</b> See the below link for a list of women's shelters and helplines globally. <a href="https://www.gnws.org/index.php/find-help/links">https://www.gnws.org/index.php/find-help/links</a></p>

*Please share any materials, practices and experiences so we can update this resource and continue to support our staff and communities.*

*MCC would like to thank Our Watch, No to Violence, Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia, WESNET, Australia's CEO Challenge and MCC organisations for their feedback and contributions to this document.*