How to Support Domestic Violence Survivors During COVID-19

Family & Community Health

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In one quick week in March, schools closed, daycares sent children home and workplaces had to figure out how to get everyone from cubicles to home offices. Everyone struggled to find a new way of transforming our homes into mini schools, daycares and offices. We were all told that the best thing to do was to go be safe at home.

At our office, however, we talk all day about what people should do when home is *not* safe. As the City of Philadelphia's Office of Domestic Violence Strategies, our role is to make sure that the voices and experiences of domestic violence survivors are present in the decisions, trainings and policies that impact survivors.

As the project manager for this office, I also went home in March to follow the COVID-19 "stay at home" guidelines. I found myself at home with a full-time job, a partner who is an essential worker, a toddler and a school-aged child. The need to identify a strong community suddenly felt urgent. Finding community for me doesn't mean just whatever neighborhood I happen to live in. For me, community means the idea that you are part of a bigger group than just your immediate family and that group doesn't function unless all members are safe and well.

"Community" for domestic violence survivors is often how they reach and maintain safety. Isolating someone from their friends and family is a common tactic of abusive partners, and one of the ways that they ensure their partner won't leave. Abusive partners will isolate someone to ensure that their voice is the only one the survivor hears.

Imagine you are home with the person that you love the most. You want this relationship to work and are hopeful that it can change for the good. Now imagine that all the other people in your life have been cut off. That one person's voice becomes the most important and what they think about you is the only point of reference that you have. If the only person you are talking to tells you that something is your fault, that you don't make good decisions and are a bad person, after a while you might start to believe it and lose your sense of self.

This was the concern when we all were told to stay at home. The worry was that for survivors of domestic violence, their communities would shrink even more—leaving them without someone to call or talk to when they needed help. Abusive partners often control cell phone usage, monitor internet searches and listen in to phone calls. When a survivor wants to include counseling or support groups in their "community," domestic violence agencies have to be careful when reaching out to help in a safe way.

But survivors have been creative for years. They call for help when their partner is out. They go to the corner store and make a safety plan with their counselor. They attend support groups, save money on the side and plan for a future where the violence is over. An important part of survivors' ability to escape domestic violence is through building connections with others and a community of advocates, family and friends

The Office of Domestic Violence Strategies had to be creative during COVID as well. We focused on ensuring that those experiencing domestic violence would be safe at the city's quarantine sites and that survivors would know which services were still open. In collaboration with other city departments, we included flyers with the domestic violence hotline number in food boxes distributed all over the city, and took advantage of the daily press conference to share information about where and how to file for Protection from Abuse Orders (PFA) while the Courts were closed. Our office received an Innovation Fund grant to create decals with the hotline number to reach survivors in grocery stores. We shifted our collaborative work to be virtual, organized provider meetings and quickly disseminated information to the large domestic violence community through an electronic newsletter. As an office, we will continue to build community support through our leadership role in city-wide collaborative movements.

So, what can you do to be a strong member of your community and to help survivors this Domestic Violence Awareness Month and beyond? You can check on your neighbors. If you're in Philadelphia or another large city, one of the advantages is that you are often physically close to others by nature of row houses, small yards and apartment living. Ask how someone is doing and then stay quiet and let them really talk to you. Drop off socially distanced baked goods. Sit outside on stoops that are six feet apart and get to know each other. Have Skype calls with the friends that you are worried about. Let them know how to reach you if they ever need help.

If you are a medical/public health professional, ask the families that you encounter about domestic violence. You might be the only thing they have left the house for in weeks. Don't miss this opportunity to reach a survivor. You don't have to ask the perfect question. Show concern, ask directly and then offer resources if they disclose. This is a great time to get your team trained on domestic violence. Contact our office or your local DV provider to ask them to provide a training for your team.

If you, or someone you love needs support for an abusive relationship, please contact the Philadelphia Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-866-723-3014 (24/7).

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