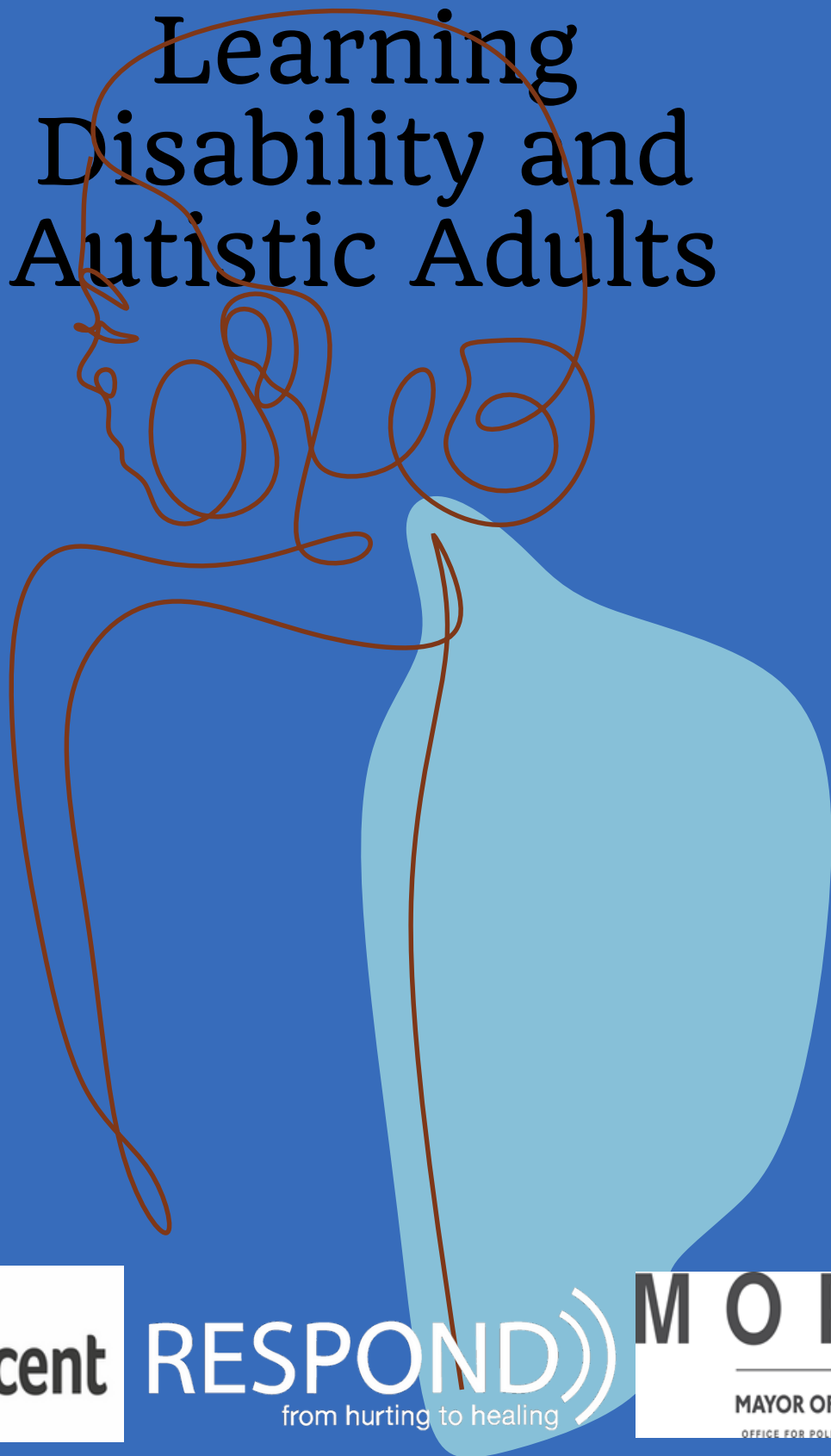


Domestic Abuse experienced by Adults with a Learning Disability and Autistic Adults



Introduction

Around 1 in 7 disabled people aged 16 to 59 years in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse in the last 12 months, compared with about 1 in 20 non-disabled people; disabled women were more than twice as likely to experience domestic abuse in the last year than non-disabled women (Office of National Statistics year ending March 2020).

Abuse is not always identified as abuse by client or professionals. The impact of society's attitude towards adults with learning disabilities and/or autism is devaluing and disempowering. We know in the past people with learning disabilities 'shut away' from society in institutions. As a result of these attitude many clients are not believed, and/or the impact of the abuse is negated both by the person and their support networks. This makes an already marginalised group more vulnerable to abuse. Professionals need to be vigilant and should be given specialised training to understand the barriers to disclosure.

In a study done by McCarthy et al, (2015) with women with learning disabilities that were victims of domestic abuse, it was found that partners/husbands did not usually have learning disabilities. This may indicate that women with learning disabilities are being targeted, because of the lack of social interaction, isolation, unaware of services, support or options available to them. This is compounded by the barriers to communication, which increase lack of understanding of their needs and further limiting their ability to access help.

Many women choose to remain in abusive relationships. Women require non-judgmental support, giving them the opportunity to explore options available to them. Domestic abuse services can provide advice around safety. If the person lacks capacity, then appropriate safeguarding processes need to be adhered to. You can get more information from Inform Adults' guides to assessing capacity.



McCarthy et al add's that perpetrators might exploit following traits in women with learning disabilities:

- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence;
- Compliance;
- Social isolation;
- Desire for companionship and intimacy;
- Lack of knowledge about how to leave, where to go and sources of support;
- Chaotic /poor parenting histories;
- Their fears about losing their children.

Reference:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2020>

McCarthy, M; Hunt, S and Milne-Skillman, K (2015) Domestic violence and women with learning disabilities NIHR School for Social Care Research

DOMESTIC ABUSE & LEARNING DISABILITY



SIGNS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Signs of coercive control and intimidation include: a woman with learning disabilities is no longer able to make decisions or voice an opinion; if her partner or carer always attend appointments and doesn't want her to be seen alone with a professional; or, if the partner also wants to control all communications such as phone calls, emails and meetings.

Physical signs of bruising and injuries which may be explained away too easily or seem to be happening too frequently; Women with learning disabilities visiting their GP frequently with symptoms of soreness in intimate areas or ill health, who can't explain why. These can be symptoms of sexual abuse that women do not identify themselves.

There may be a change in emotions or behaviours – (more introvert, more aggressive). There may be a change in sexual behaviours.

BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

Social workers and social care professionals may not recognise abuse because they are more likely to see the learning disabilities or autism first. This may make them less likely to ask about domestic abuse, as the focus of support will be elsewhere.

Communication issues may mean that what people with learning disabilities try to say is misinterpreted.

Women with learning disabilities may not be seen as credible witnesses. Their partners – who usually don't have learning disabilities – may be seen solely as carer rather than perpetrators, and professionals may sympathise with them.

Loneliness and isolation on the part of women with learning disabilities may lead to an acceptance of abusive relationships. They may show compliance because they fear losing the care and support that they depend on from their partner.

RED FLAGS

When working with women with learning disabilities, social workers and social care professionals should be aware of the 'red flags' put forward in the research from McCarthy et al (2015) which indicate that domestic abuse may be present. These are when the men they are in a relationship with:

- Have no learning disabilities
- Mental health problems
- Have drug/alcohol problems
- Do not work
- Move in with the women very early on in the relationship

DOMESTIC ABUSE & LEARNING DISABILITY



RED FLAGS ALSO INCLUDE

When the woman becomes more isolated, having less contact with family, friends, professionals or her children (if in care).

When the woman seems to have less money than before she met her partner.

Signs of physical injury (likelihood of multiple forms of abuse).

Top Tips from Respond

Don't assume that a woman with learning disabilities isn't capable of attending appointments, voicing her opinion or answering phone calls and emails without her partner. If he is always present, question why.

Be curious about any changes in behaviour and what they may mean or changes in routine.

Make publicity and information about services available that is inclusive and accessible to help people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

Match communication to the client's needs. Some language and meaning may not be familiar so check understanding. Use images, photos or pictures to open up discussion around domestic abuse.

A carer may claim they are acting in the client's best interest. In such instances, suggest alternative behaviours or strategies that would be more positive for the person with learning disabilities. For example, it could be part of a support package, for the client to attend meetings alone, the reason given to foster independence, social skills and abilities.

Make publicity and information about services available that is inclusive and accessible to help people with learning disabilities and/or autism and their support networks access the necessary support.

Be clear with them that you have concerns and this is why you are asking questions concerning their relationship with a partner/carers.

Wherever possible have meetings without the partner or carer. Think how this can be done safely; find a reason to meet the client alone.

Consider putting information in places that are easy to access, such as toilet doors in public places.

Be aware that someone with learning disabilities may answer questions and smile, but they may not have understood what they were asked, or they may want to please by being agreeable.

SUPPORT

Respond

Contact No: 0207 383 0700

Respond.org.uk

National Domestic Violence 24 hour

Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Solace Women's Aid

Helpline: 0808 802 5565

National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse

Helpline: 0800 999 5428

help@galop.org.uk

Rape Crisis

Helpline: 0808 802 9999

Beverley Lewis House

**Specialist Refuge Service for women
with learning disabilities on 0207 473
2813**

RESPOND)
from hurting to healing