

LIVING IN LOCKDOWN WITH AN ABUSIVE PARTNER

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought on many changes for us all, some changes have been positive and we can hopefully maintain these changes for a better quality of life. The realisation that we take things for granted and never stop to appreciate the smaller things we can be grateful for, or simply not having the pressure to run from one errand to the next. Perhaps the biggest change has been living under lockdown for months. While for some families the situation has meant isolation and monotony, for other families it has meant quality time spent together catching up and bonding, giving families a new zest for life. However for those who live with abuse and domestic violence the situation is exacerbated.

Under lockdown the worst-case scenario for people who live with an abuser has manifested. It's hard to imagine a set of circumstances that would facilitate abuse as much. People are now literally stuck indoors with their abusive partners. In addition many are stressed about getting sick, losing loved ones, being laid off, losing their income, and having to manage bored and restless children at home. Stress around financial insecurity has been linked to increases in the frequency and severity of domestic abuse. The pandemic's financial disruptions have also made it difficult for someone to escape an abusive household, even if they had been planning to do so for some time. One of the reasons that victims can't leave, or are afraid to leave, is because of the financial dependency they have on the abuser. Other research has suggested that the stress caused by catastrophic life-changing events like natural disasters (and covid-19) can also add to the risk of domestic and family violence.

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Currently stress around financial strain has increased enormously for many families, this stress has been linked to increases in the frequency and severity of domestic abuse. The pandemic's financial disruptions also make it harder for someone to escape an abusive household, even if they've been planning to do so for some time. One of the reasons that victims sometimes can't leave, or are afraid to leave, is because of financial dependency on the abuser.

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the risk of domestic and family violence. All of this adds up to a potentially dangerous situation for those who live with their abusers - even before you consider the current lockdown protocols.

In 'normal' times, someone living with an abuser and feeling unsafe might be able to place a phone call to a helpline, to police, or to a friend or family member who might be able to help, when the abuser is at work or out of the house. Under the stay-at-home orders however, the abuser may never leave the house long enough for that call to take place. The abuser may be on higher alert due to increased stress, agitation at being stuck at home, or even due to the fact that they are aware their partner may want to call for help. Feelings of utter distress, helplessness, desperation, danger and intense loneliness may follow leaving the victim in a pit of despair and fear.

Trying to survive this cycle of abuse in lockdown is harder than ever. While it may sound elementary, and easy to say from a distance, below are some ideas that victims could use to protect themselves and their children. While domestic violence and abuse may have increased during this time, perhaps for the victim it is a time of realising that they cannot live in this way anymore and this may be the start of a process of healing and recovery.

- It is important to try and identify at least one friend or family member who might be able to provide shelter in an emergency or who you can call when things are really bad. While in lockdown try identify this one 'safe' person who you can call on in an emergency or when you feel you need to flee. It is also a good idea to have this identified person on speed dial.
- Find the "safest room" (away from all weapons and near a door or a window) in the house or apartment to retreat to. Keep a spare cell phone charger in this safe room just in case you need it.
- Come up with code words to share with your children to let them know it's time to discreetly get ready to flee.
- Having a code word that you can message to your identified friend or family member may also be useful. You can send a message with this code word or in a desperate situation dial their number and say the code word so they know to come or send help.

Another important point to note is that victims often don't recognize abuse, either because the situation is just too fearful, or because of levels of denial, but abusers follow certain patterns. If you are in a position to identify these patterns start doing so now as this is the first step to regaining some of the power the abuser takes away from you. Identifying these patterns will help you to break the cycle and seek help. If you see such

patterns while you're home now, use the knowledge to defuse certain situations and walk away from others. This is a time for self-preservation. So, instead of taking your abuser head-on in arguments, or trying to physically obstruct them, simply walk away. Bravery, in such situations, constitutes keeping a cool head and thinking strategically. Your aim is to live another day, and then another, until you can finally escape safely. Of course this is only possible if your life is not in immediate danger.

Identifying triggers may also help you live through this lockdown with an abuser. Is it mention of your family that trigger them? Perhaps wait then for the abusive person in the house to be engrossed in their favourite show, or take a nap, to pick up the phone, and tell someone close that you are afraid in your own home and that you need help.

Most importantly recognise that you may be feeling desperately alone and afraid but that there is help out there- a friend, family, or community organisation that can come to your assistance and support you. You need not face this seemingly never ending nightmare of abuse alone.

While the above may not sound like the beginning of your path to healing these are some of the first steps you could take on this journey. Healing begins with reaching out and talking to someone, there are many community support groups that you could join. Joining a community of survivors - connecting with other people who have been in the same or similar situations to you gives you a sense of unity and strength, highlighting again that you are not alone.

Being patient with yourself is equally important. While this may sound simple it is not. We all set high standards and expectations for ourselves and when faced with a crisis such as abuse we can become critical of ourselves. It is an important part of the healing process to be patient with yourself, you are the most person in the process of healing and if you are putting unrealistic expectations on yourself you will not be able to heal. being patient with yourself is being kind to yourself, something we all forget to do, and especially when we are in a crisis.

If you or someone you know is living with an abusive person call Chev Social Services Intake Unit on 011 532 9701 between 8:30-4:30 Monday- Thursday, and 8:30-2:30 Friday. For after hours help call the Chev Social Services Helpline, operational after hours and on Shabbat and Chaggim, on 082 499 1010. Your confidentiality will be protected.

