

LET'S TALK ABOUT DOMESTIC ABUSE

We recently marked over 20 years since Amber Women's Refuge officially opened. Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee TD joined us to honour this milestone and pay tribute to the 1,040 women and 1,460 children from Kilkenny and surrounding counties who sought and received refuge since we opened. That's 2,500 women and children, enough sadly to fill over 12 737 airplanes.

We must also not forget the 1000s of others who we had to turn away when we were full, 111 women last year alone.

This year's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence is almost upon us. #16Days is the UN's annual international campaign calling for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls. It launches on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and runs until 10 December, Human Rights Day. The theme of this year's campaign is "UNITE!".

In support of the "UNITE!" theme, we're calling on the citizens of Kilkenny to unite against the scourge of Domestic Abuse and talking about it is a good place to start.

"Domestic Abuse is a private matter."

Thankfully, gone are the days when Domestic Abuse was thought of as a "private matter". We recognise that silence imprisons victims and protects abusers. But too often, abuse is still a secret kept by the abused, where shame, fear of judgment and the threat of more abuse are used to buy their continued silence.

The pandemic shone a spotlight on abuse and its effects, not only on victim-survivors, but on families and communities throughout Ireland. Most people now understand that to meaningfully tackle this issue we need a whole of society approach. We can all play our part. So, let's start by talking about it.

Signs someone may be experiencing abuse

One in four Irish women and one in seven Irish men will experience abuse from their intimate partner in their lifetime. They may be your family member, friend or work colleague. They may be you.

These are some of the key signs to look out for :

Are they anxious or afraid a lot or all of the time?

Are they nervous around their partner/ex?

Have they stopped seeing family/friends?

Have they stopped doing normal day to day activities?

Does their partner/ex continually phone or text them?

Have they little or no cash or don't have their own bank card?

Have they unexplained injuries?

This is not an exhaustive list and it may not be abuse. Look for behaviour changes, patterns or concerns over a period of time.

Ask questions

If you have concerns or knowledge that a person is being abused, asking questions can help them to talk about it and seek support if/when they are ready and it's safe for them to do so.

If and when it's safe to talk, you could start a conversation by asking a direct question in a sensitive way. "I've noticed you're anxious, is everything ok at home?" can be a good way to start.

Responding to someone experiencing abuse

If someone chooses to tell you they are or have been in an abusive relationship, here are some phrases you can use in response :

"What you are describing sounds like abuse."

"You do not deserve to be treated this way."

"I believe you." "It's not your fault."

"That must have been very frightening for you."

"I'm here to support you."

"Thank you for telling me this."

"You have options and I/we can help you find support."

Remember to be aware of their personal circumstances and any additional needs, like immigration issues or children, they may have. Consider any extra barriers to support they may face including disability, discrimination and racism.

Offering support

You can offer them local & national Domestic Abuse helpline numbers and/or safety information 999/112 or the local Garda station. You could also encourage safe ways for them to document their experience or incidents. Let them know they have options and allow them to choose the ones that are most appropriate for them.

Respect their decisions and keep the door open

It's very important to respect their decisions. They may not be ready or feel safe enough to disclose the abuse or seek support at the time. Always keep the door open and let them know they can speak with you at another time if they want to.

Some do's & don'ts

Do

Talk to the person in a safe place

Listen, without judgement

Emphasise they are not to blame

Put the responsibility on the abuser

Don't

Make assumptions

Speculate about the cause of the abuse

Tell them what to do

Give their details to anyone without consent

Let's break the silence around Domestic Violence and Abuse. Asking a question, offering a non-judgmental ear and letting them know you are there for them, can make a huge difference to someone experiencing the fear, shame and isolation of an abusive relationship. And remember, you don't need to be an expert, you just need to be a friend.

Lisa Morris, Manager, Amber Women's Refuge

Amber Women's Refuge 24/7 Helpline : 0818 42 42 44

Men's Aid Ireland Helpline : 01 554 3811

Donate at www.amberwomensrefuge.ie

Please support Amber's community based activities running locally throughout the #16Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence 2022 :

Visit : "365 Days – Violence Against Women" exhibition in MacDonagh Junction Shopping Centre from 25 November – 10 December.

Donate : "Amber Friday" fundraising campaign. Amber's donation boxes will be in participating local, independent businesses in Kilkenny from late November until Christmas.

Weave : stars to tie to Amber's One Million Star's LOVE star installation and Selfie Star, returning to the Castle Yard for Yulefest 2022 from 26 November. Each star woven represents light, hope and solidarity against gender-based violence.