



Beyond conflict: domestic
abuse within marriage and
faith



Welcome!

This booklet is designed to sit alongside the resources you are using for *The Marriage Course* (HTB Alpha version). At CFC, we take domestic abuse and the impact it has on people very seriously. The church has a vital role in responding well to this issue and supporting anyone involved in harmful domestic situations.

The Marriage Course is an excellent tool for building strong and healthy relationships. However, research shows that not all conflict is equal, and sometimes what begins as ordinary disagreement, or as one person's unhealthy behaviour can cross a line into harm or abuse.

According to official statistics from the **Office for National Statistics (ONS)**¹, around **two-thirds of victims of domestic abuse are female** and **one-third are male**. Research also shows that **four out of five perpetrators are male** and **one in five are female**. Research from the University of Chester² in 2023, evidenced that 1 in 4 people in a UK-based church is a victim/survivor of domestic abuse,

This booklet is designed to equip you with:

- A brief overview of what domestic abuse can look like in the context of marriage,
- A theological and pastoral understanding of why abuse is never acceptable,
- CFC's commitment to responding well to domestic abuse.
- Information and resources for support if you, or someone you know, may be affected by domestic abuse.

This resource will also be available via the CFC website.

¹ [Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview - Office for National Statistics](#)

² Oakley & Wright (2023) Developing understanding and effective responses to domestic abuse in the Christian faith community.



What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is a crime in Northern Ireland. It is defined in the *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy for Northern Ireland (2024–2031)*³ as:

"Threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member."

Spiritual abuse can also be a significant factor within Christian and faith contexts. It involves the misuse of scripture, theology, or spiritual authority to control, coerce, or silence another person.

In summary, **domestic abuse is about one person seeking to control another** within an intimate or family relationship. It is complex, often hidden, and can take many forms — but recognising the signs and knowing where to find help is essential.

Types of harm found in domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is rarely limited to one type of behaviour. Often, multiple forms of control and harm are used together. The table below describes some of the most common types of abuse experienced by victims and survivors.

Abuse type	What it means	Examples
Physical	Physical abuse affects the victim/survivor's body.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hitting, biting, kicking, or pinching• Pulling hair, restraining, or pinning someone down• Using physical force or intimidation to cause pain or fear
Sexual	Using force, threats, or manipulation to make someone perform sexual acts or view sexual material against their will.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coercing or forcing sexual activity• Using threats or intimidation around sex• Making someone view pornographic material• Humiliating or degrading behaviour related to sexuality
Threatening behaviour	May include physical actions just short of contact or injury, or verbal/written threats designed to cause fear or distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Destroying personal possessions• Threatening to harm or kill children or family members

³ [Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031 | Department of Justice](#)



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using physical size or presence to intimidate • Threats of suicide or self-harm used to control the victim
Emotional	Emotional abuse manipulates and undermines a person's self-esteem, confidence, and wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticism, ridicule, or humiliation • Guilting ("If you love me, you won't go out") • "Love-bombing" — overwhelming someone with affection or gifts to make them feel indebted • Isolating the victim from friends, family, or church community
Psychological (incl. coercive control)	This is an ongoing pattern of behaviour designed to instil fear and maintain control.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insults, humiliation, and intimidation • Isolating someone from support networks • Monitoring their movements or communications • Gaslighting ("I never said that"; "You're overreacting") • Dictating how the person dresses, speaks, or behaves
Financial	Financial abuse removes or limits a person's financial independence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controlling all spending or demanding justification for every purchase • Preventing the victim from working or accessing money • Taking out debt in the victim's name • Withholding or misusing joint funds or child maintenance payments
Stalking and harassment	Persistent and unwanted attention that causes the victim to feel frightened, distressed, or unsafe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demanding to know the victim's whereabouts at all times • Constantly calling, messaging, or checking in • Demanding that the victim share their live location • Turning up unexpectedly at places such as the workplace, gym, hairdresser, or school pick-up points • Using hidden tracking devices or spyware on phones, cars, or other belongings • Phoning the victim's workplace to check whether they are present



Cyber harassment and digital control	When a perpetrator uses technology to intimidate, threaten, monitor, or humiliate a partner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demanding access to a partner's phone, email, or social media accounts• Insisting that certain apps, friends, or social media profiles are deleted• Monitoring messages or browsing history• Sending excessive messages, threats, or degrading comments online• Accusing the victim of cheating or secrecy to justify online surveillance
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How is domestic abuse displayed within a marriage relationship?

At the very heart of domestic abuse is the **misuse of power to exercise control**. Abusers use a range of behaviours to limit a partner's freedom, restrict their choices, and maintain dominance within the relationship. Over time, these behaviours can erode the victim-survivor's confidence, independence, and sense of safety, leaving them feeling trapped and powerless.

The Cycle of Abuse

Most abusive relationships follow a recognisable pattern known as the **cycle of abuse**. This model helps us understand how abuse escalates and why it can be so difficult for victim/survivors to leave or even identify what is happening.

The cycle typically involves **five stages**, which may repeat many times within a relationship:

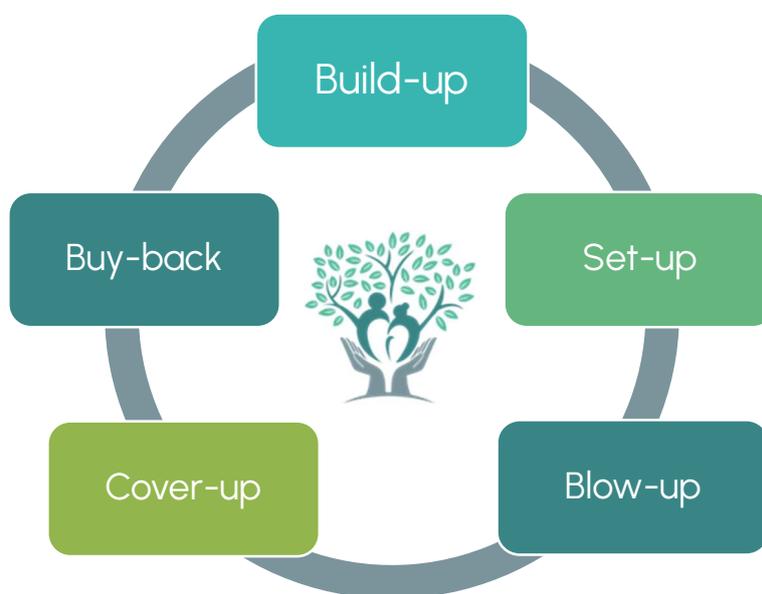
1. The build-up, in this stage, the abuser begins to perceive that the victim-survivor is somehow challenging or undermining their power or control. Tension builds gradually. The abuser may become increasingly irritable, critical, or withdrawn, sending clear signals that something is "about to happen."

2. The set-up, the abuser deliberately provokes a situation that can be used as an excuse for their anger or aggression. This may involve twisting the victim's words, inventing a grievance, or creating emotional tension to justify what follows. By the time the incident occurs, the abuser has often convinced themselves that their actions are reasonable or deserved.



3. The blow-up, this is the explosive incident; the point at which the abuse becomes overt. The trigger can be something trivial or unrelated, but it provides a launch pad for verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual violence.

The goal is to **intimidate and regain control**. Victim/survivors are often left reeling, fearful, and convinced that they are somehow at fault, even when they are not.



Cycle of Abuse model, adapted from J. Crippen and R. Davis, (2015)⁴

4. The cover-up, following an abusive episode, it is common for the abuser to show apparent remorse or contrition. They may apologise, cry, promise to change, or attempt to “make things right” by helping the victim recover or repairing damage. Excuses often accompany this stage: blaming stress, alcohol, external pressures, or even the victim’s behaviour.

Both the abuser and the victim/survivor may genuinely believe, in that moment, that it will not happen again.

5. The buy-back

Also called the “honeymoon phase”, this stage involves attempts to “buy back” trust and loyalty through kindness, affection, gifts, or spiritual language of peace and forgiveness.

In Christian contexts, this can become particularly complex: victim/survivors may feel encouraged to *pray harder, submit more, or try to please their partner* to restore harmony. Unfortunately, this reinforces the power imbalance and allows the cycle to restart.

⁴ Crippen, J (2015). *Unholy Charade: Unmasking the Domestic Abuser in the Church*.



While this model is widely recognised, it's important to note that **not every abusive relationship follows the same pattern**. Some victim-survivors describe the experience as a **continuum**, where abuse gradually escalates without any real pause. Others describe a **spiral**, where each cycle becomes more intense over time.

Each phase can last from a few minutes to several months — but regardless of duration, the outcome is the same: increasing control, fear, and harm.

The Impact of Domestic Abuse

Victims and survivors of domestic abuse can experience a wide range of physical, emotional, and psychological effects. Abuse is not simply a “relationship problem” - it is **a pattern of harm** that can have lasting consequences on every aspect of a person's life. Every individual's experience will be different, but some of the more common impacts include:

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** – flashbacks, hypervigilance, nightmares, and emotional numbness.
- **Anxiety and Depression** – persistent feelings of fear, panic, sadness, or hopelessness.
- **Lifelong Physical Injuries** – from physical or sexual violence.
- **Chronic Stress** – leading to sleep difficulties, headaches, or other physical health issues.
- **Fear and Isolation** – withdrawal from social networks, friends, or church community.
- **Low Self-Worth** – loss of confidence or belief in personal value.
- **Suicidal Thoughts or Self-Harm** – feeling that there is no escape.
- **Eating Disorders or Addiction** – using control of food or substances as coping mechanisms.
- **Serious Injury or Death** – in the most extreme and tragic cases.

Impact on Children and Young People

Children are not “witnesses” to domestic abuse - **they are victims in their own right** when they see, hear, or experience it. Exposure to abuse can profoundly affect their development, sense of safety, and understanding of relationships.

In younger children, impacts can include:



- Increased aggression or withdrawn behaviour
- Regression (e.g. bedwetting or clinginess)
- Anxiety or fearfulness
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Struggles with social relationships

In older children and teenagers, effects often become more visible:

- Boys may externalise distress through anger, disobedience, or truancy.
- Girls are more likely to internalise distress, becoming withdrawn, anxious, or depressed.
- Both boys and girls may experience difficulties trusting others or forming healthy relationships.

Research also shows that girls who grow up in abusive homes are statistically more likely to be targeted by abusers in adulthood, while boys may be more at risk of developing controlling or aggressive behaviours if they are not supported to process what they have seen.

Children and young people can and do heal, but this requires **safety, stability, and support** from adults who recognise what they have lived through and respond with understanding, consistency, and care.

How will CFC create a safe, brave, and supportive space for those impacted by domestic abuse?

At CFC, we believe that the **welfare of the victim(s)** is paramount. We seek to **stand against domestic abuse** in all its forms, by working intentionally on prevention, raising awareness, enabling safe, brave spaces, and providing compassionate support for anyone affected.

Our commitment to prevention

We are committed to breaking the silence that too often surrounds domestic abuse. We will:

- Include information and resources about healthy and unhealthy relationships in **pre-marriage** and **marriage courses**.
- Encourage **open, honest conversations** about conflict, communication, and safety within relationships.



- Ensure our **safeguarding policy** clearly identifies any form of abuse as unacceptable.
- Promote **awareness and training** among our staff, leaders, volunteers and community to recognise signs of abuse and respond appropriately.

Our theological foundation

We believe that domestic abuse violates the sanctity of marriage vows and grieves the heart of God. No person who experiences abuse is ever to blame for the breakdown of a marriage or relationship caused by that abuse.

From the very beginning, Scripture teaches that all people are made in the **image of God (Imago Dei)**, created with equal worth, dignity, and value (Genesis 1:26). Every individual deserves to live free from fear, harm, and control.

As a church community, we are committed to **living out this biblical mandate** by treating all people as image-bearers of God and by ensuring our spaces and relationships reflect His justice, compassion, and love.

Scripture contains over **2,000 references** to God's thoughts and voice on oppression, justice, and care for the vulnerable — each carrying a **strong call to action**. We believe this call includes **standing against domestic abuse** and **standing with victims and survivors**.

At CFC, we hold to the biblical principles of **unity, equal worth, and the shared value of women and men**. Every person is created in the **image of God (Imago Dei)** and should be treated with dignity, respect, and compassion.

We also recognise that when Scripture is taken **out of context**, it can be **misused or weaponised** to condone, minimise, or excuse abuse. This is never acceptable. The Bible does not support control, violence, or coercion — these are distortions of God's design for love and relationship.

Created in God's image

In **Genesis 1:26–27**, we read that both male and female were created in God's image. The fundamental truth of these verses is that **men and women are equal before God**, partners in reflecting His character and care within creation.

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

(Genesis 1:26–27, NIV)



From the beginning, God's intention was one of **mutuality and shared purpose**, not hierarchy or domination.

A suitable helper

In **Genesis 2:18**, God declares, *"It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him."* The Hebrew phrase used here is *"ezer kenegdo."*

- *Ezer* means **helper**, but not in the sense of inferiority. In fact, this same word is used to describe God Himself as our helper, He is our source of strength and protection.

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1)

- *Kenegdo* conveys the idea of corresponding to or alongside, suggesting equality and complementarity.

Together, *ezer kenegdo* describes **a partner of equal strength and worth**, not a subordinate role. The biblical text affirms that woman was created as man's equal counterpart, standing face to face — not above or beneath him.

Shared responsibility in the fall

In Genesis 3, when sin enters the world, Eve is often depicted as bearing sole responsibility for the fall. Yet the text shows that Adam was also present and shared in the decision. God's original command not to eat from the tree was given **before Eve was created** (Genesis 2:16–17), meaning Adam held that instruction directly.

When he later blames Eve, *"The woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit, and I ate it"* (Genesis 3:12), it reflects the beginning of blame-shifting and broken relationship, not God's intention for male and female dynamics.

Difficult stories in the Old Testament

The Old Testament includes many difficult narratives where women experience harm, inequality, or exploitation. While these accounts are part of the biblical record, their inclusion does **not mean that God endorses such behaviour**. Instead, they expose the reality of sin, power misuse, and injustice within human history.

They also reveal that **the Bible speaks truthfully about violence and injustice**, naming it for what it is and it calls God's people to respond differently: with compassion, justice, and action.

Jesus: the restorer of dignity

Jesus' life and ministry modelled **restoration, equality, and compassion**. His attitude toward women consistently challenged the patriarchal culture of His day.



- In **Luke 8:40–48**, Jesus healed the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years – publicly restoring her health, dignity, and voice. Despite social and religious taboos, He honoured her faith and made her story visible to all.
- Whilst on His way to heal the daughter of an important leader, He paused for this woman, demonstrating that **status does not determine worth** in the Kingdom of God.
- In **John 4**, Jesus chose to speak with the Samaritan woman at the well, she was a person ostracised by her community and burdened by shame. She had been married 4 times, but her status in society had become so low that her then partner would not marry her. In this encounter, revealed His divine identity to her. This was a countercultural approach at the time, and it would have not gone unnoticed as a radical act.

Through these encounters, Jesus **brought dignity to those who had been devalued**. He consistently lifted up those harmed by social, spiritual, or relational injustice. Jesus' example is clear: **Abuse, coercion, and domination have no place in the Kingdom of God**. The heart of God is always to heal, restore, and bring freedom to the oppressed

Our commitment to responding well

We recognise that domestic abuse is both **a safeguarding issue** and **a pastoral concern**. CFC is committed to:

- Providing **safe, confidential pathways** for anyone to seek help or disclose abuse.
- Responding **without judgement**, ensuring those affected are listened to and believed.
- Connecting individuals with **appropriate professional and specialist support services**.
- Offering pastoral care that prioritises **safety, empowerment, and recovery**.
- Creating and maintaining **safe, brave spaces** where people can be honest about their experiences and begin to heal.
- Our first response is always **safety first**.
- We will never take any action that increases the risk of harm to a victim-survivor or their children.
- We will **believe** the person who discloses abuse, and we will **not** approach or confront the alleged abuser without first considering the victim's needs, their safety, and any relevant legal obligations under Northern Ireland legislation.



Domestic abuse is **not a “relationship problem.”** It is an issue of power and control, and therefore must not be handled in the same way as ordinary conflict within marriage.

Because of this, we recognise that **counselling, mediation, or marriage courses are not appropriate first steps** in cases of domestic abuse. These approaches assume **mutuality** - that both parties have equal power and a shared desire for resolution. In an abusive relationship, mutuality does not exist. The abuser does not respect or value the victim/survivor's autonomy, and is not seeking reconciliation, but control.

Abuse is **not a shared problem**; it is **the problem of the abuser**.

For this reason, interventions designed for couples can cause further harm by minimising or misdiagnosing abuse as poor communication or “marital difficulty.”

Instead, our response will always prioritise:

- **Immediate safety** for the victim-survivor and any children involved.
- **Belief, validation, and respect** for the person's experiences and choices.
- **Practical information and signposting** to relevant specialist support services (listed at the back of this booklet).
- **Support within a trauma-informed framework**, ensuring that any children or adults affected are protected in line with CFC's safeguarding policy and the legislative framework of Northern Ireland.

We recognise the controlling and coercive nature of domestic abuse and the deep harm it causes. Our commitment is to ensure that all responses within CFC reflect a safe and compassionate response.



Support

If you are in immediate danger, **contact the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)** by dialling **999**.

If you are unable to speak, dial 999 and press **55** when prompted to indicate that you need help, the call handler will prioritise your call and track your location by using the location tracker in your phone..

You are **not alone**, and support is available. The following organisations can provide confidential advice, practical help, and emotional support.

- **CFC Safeguarding**
 - ✉ safeguarding@thisiscfc.com
 - ☎ 07895 446091
- **Kaizen Safeguarding**
 - ✉ info@kaizensafeguarding.org
 - ☎ 07735 164774
 - 🌐 www.kaizensafeguarding.org
- **Northern Ireland Women's Aid**
 - ☎ 028 9024 9041
 - 🌐 www.womensaidni.org
 - ✉ info@womensaidni.org
- **Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline** (*freephone, 24/7*)
 - ☎ 0808 802 1414
 - ✉ help@dshelpline.org
- **The Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre**
 - ☎ 0800 389 4424
 - 🌐 www.therowan.net
- **Nexus NI** (*support for anyone affected by sexual abuse or trauma*)
 - ☎ 028 9032 6803
 - 🌐 www.nexusni.org
 - ✉ info@nexusni.org
- **Men's Advisory Project (MAP NI)**
 - ☎ 028 9024 1929
 - 🌐 www.mapni.org.uk
 - ✉ info@mapni.org.uk



- **Men's Alliance Northern Ireland**
☎ 0800 024 6991 (*Crisis Helpline*)
🌐 www.mensallianceni.co.uk
- **Restored** (Christian organisation supporting survivors of domestic abuse)
🌐 www.restored-uk.org
- **Childline** (*Freephone, 24/7*)
☎ 0800 1111
- **Hourglass Northern Ireland** (*Formerly Action on Elder Abuse*)
☎ 0808 808 8141
🌐 www.wearehourglass.org/ni

Boots chemists across Northern Ireland offer **Safe Spaces**, where survivors of domestic abuse can access a private area and contact specialist services. Go into any Boots store and ask to speak to someone in a consultation room. Once in the room, you can then reach out to for support (staff are trained to respond)

Free travel for the purpose of fleeing domestic abuse is available on **Translink** bus and rail. This can be accessed via Women's Aid, the Domestic and Sexual Abuse helpline or the NI Housing Executive.

Concerned about your own behaviour?

If you recognise that your actions, words, or attitudes are causing harm, **help is available**. Taking responsibility and seeking support is an essential step toward change and healing.

- **Respect** (*UK charity working with perpetrators to stop domestic abuse*)
🌐 www.respect.org.uk
- **Drive Project** (*working to challenge and support high-harm perpetrators*)
🌐 www.drivepartnership.org.uk

Remember, **abuse is a choice**. Change is possible — but only when responsibility is taken, and support is sought from those equipped to help.