

FREE COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Delivered as part of our Corporate Social Responsibility to our community



**MORGAN HILL
SOLICITORS**

London | Essex | Manchester

DOMESTIC ABUSE

Your Rights and Where to Get Help

*A plain-language guide for people affected by domestic abuse
including what domestic abuse is, your legal protections, immigration rights,
how to get help safely, and where to call right now*

★ This guide is provided entirely free of charge ★

It is published by Morgan Hill Solicitors as part of our Corporate Social Responsibility commitment to the communities we serve across London, Essex and Manchester.

You do not need to be a client to read, share or use this guide.

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London | Essex | Manchester

Updated: June 2026

*This guide provides general information only and does not constitute legal advice.
If you need legal advice about your personal situation, please contact us or another qualified solicitor.*

Morgan Hill Solicitors

London | Essex | Manchester

Compiled by Rao Manzoor-ul-Haque Khan, Managing Director & Principal Solicitor

In an emergency

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 999.

National Domestic Abuse Helpline (Refuge): 0808 2000 247 — free, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Men's Advice Line: 0808 801 0327

If you cannot speak safely, text 999 (register first at [emergencySMS.net](https://www.emergencySMS.net)) or dial 999 and press 55.

This guide is published by Morgan Hill Solicitors free of charge as part of our Corporate Social Responsibility commitment. We believe access to clear, honest information about domestic abuse should be available to everyone in our communities, regardless of financial means.

You do not need to be a client to use this guide. Please share it freely with anyone who may benefit.

About Morgan Hill Solicitors

We are a full-service law firm with offices in London, Essex and Manchester. We provide specialist legal advice on immigration, family law, housing, employment and civil matters. We are committed to access to justice and regularly provide pro bono and subsidised legal services to those who need them most.

Contact us

If you need legal advice about your own situation — including immigration status, housing, family law or any aspect of domestic abuse law — please contact us. We offer confidential initial consultations.

Note on this guide

This guide reflects the law as at June 2026 in England and Wales. It provides general information only. It is not legal advice for your particular situation. Laws can change. If you are unsure about your rights, please speak to a solicitor.

Compiled by: Rao Manzoor-ul-Haque Khan, *Managing Director & Principal Solicitor, Morgan Hill Solicitors*

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A note on language

This guide uses the word 'victim' and 'survivor' interchangeably, and refers to the person experiencing abuse as 'you'. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of gender, age, background, immigration status or relationship type. This guide is for everyone.

1. What is Domestic Abuse?

Domestic abuse is not just physical violence. Under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 — the main law on domestic abuse in England and Wales — domestic abuse includes a wide range of harmful behaviour between people who are personally connected.

The law says that domestic abuse has happened when:

- Both people are aged 16 or over, and
- They are personally connected (see below), and
- One person's behaviour towards the other is abusive.

Importantly, domestic abuse can be a single incident — or it can be a pattern of behaviour over time.

What does 'personally connected' mean?

You are personally connected to someone if you are, or have been:

- Married or in a civil partnership
- Engaged to be married
- In an intimate relationship (whether you live together or not)
- Parents of the same child, or both have parental responsibility for the same child
- Relatives

You do NOT have to live together. You do NOT have to still be in the relationship. Abuse that happens after a relationship ends is still domestic abuse.

What counts as abusive behaviour?

Type of abuse	What it can look like
Physical abuse	Hitting, punching, kicking, pushing, choking, restraining, throwing objects, or stopping you getting medical care.
Sexual abuse	Rape, sexual assault, pressure to do sexual things you don't want to do, or controlling your reproductive choices.
Emotional and psychological abuse	Constant put-downs, humiliation, making you feel worthless, gaslighting (making you question your own memory or sanity), threats.
Controlling behaviour	Deciding what you wear, who you see, where you go, what you eat, or monitoring your every move.
Coercive behaviour	Using threats, intimidation or fear to control what you do. This includes threatening to hurt you, your children, pets or family.

Type of abuse	What it can look like
Economic abuse	Taking your money, stopping you working, running up debts in your name, controlling access to your bank account or benefits.
Tech abuse	Reading your messages, tracking your phone or location, accessing your email or social media accounts without permission, sharing intimate images.
Honour-based abuse	Abuse linked to family or community pressure, perceived dishonour, or attempts to control behaviour through threats in the name of 'honour'.

It's important to know

You do not have to have been physically hit for it to be domestic abuse.

Coercive control — using fear, threats and manipulation to control you — is a serious form of abuse and a criminal offence.

There is no minimum number of times abuse has to happen. Even one incident can be domestic abuse under the law.

2. You Are Not Alone

Domestic abuse is far more common than many people realise. It can happen to anyone — regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, income, disability or immigration status. It happens in all kinds of relationships.

In the year ending March 2025, an estimated 3.8 million people in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse. Around 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives. These are not unusual situations — they are things that happen to ordinary people.

Common myths — and the truth

Myth	The truth
'It only happens to certain types of people.'	Domestic abuse happens across all backgrounds, incomes, professions, religions and relationships.
'It's only abuse if you are hit.'	Most domestic abuse does not involve physical violence. Coercive control, economic abuse, emotional abuse and threats are all forms of domestic abuse.
'If it were really that bad, they would leave.'	Leaving an abusive relationship is often the most dangerous time. People stay for many reasons: fear, financial dependence, children, immigration status, love, shame, or lack of safe options.
'Domestic abuse only happens to women.'	Domestic abuse affects people of all genders. Men and LGBTQ+ people are also victims.
'It's a private family matter.'	Domestic abuse is not a private matter. It is a serious crime and a public health issue.
'Alcohol or stress causes domestic abuse.'	Alcohol and stress do not cause domestic abuse. The cause is the abuser's choice to use power and control over another person.
'Going to the police will make things worse.'	The police have specialist domestic abuse officers. You can also get help without involving the police if you prefer.

Remember

Whatever has happened, whatever you have been told, the abuse is not your fault. You deserve to be safe.

3. Recognising Abuse

Abuse often starts gradually and gets worse over time. It can be hard to recognise, especially when the abusive person is someone you love or depend on. Here are some signs that a relationship may be abusive.

Warning signs in a relationship

- Your partner constantly criticises you, puts you down, or makes you feel stupid or worthless.
- You feel afraid of your partner's moods or reactions.
- You change your behaviour to avoid upsetting your partner.
- Your partner controls who you see, where you go, or what you wear.
- Your partner monitors your phone, email or social media.
- You are not allowed to have your own money or access to a bank account.
- Your partner threatens you, your children, your family, or your pets.
- Your partner threatens to report you to immigration authorities.
- You have been physically hurt, or are afraid you will be.
- Your partner pressures you into sexual activity you do not want.
- You feel isolated from friends and family.
- Your partner makes all the decisions in your relationship.

It's important to know

If you recognise any of these signs in your own relationship — or in the relationship of someone you know — help is available.

You do not need to be certain that it is 'bad enough' to ask for help. If something feels wrong, it's worth talking to someone.

Coercive control — what it means

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour where your partner (or former partner) uses tactics to scare, isolate and control you. It does not always involve physical violence. It can include:

- Monitoring your every move — where you go, who you speak to, what you spend money on.
- Cutting you off from friends and family.
- Controlling what you eat, wear, or how you look.
- Threatening to take the children away, or to report you to immigration.
- Making you feel that you are worthless, ugly, stupid or mad.
- Destroying your belongings or hurting pets to frighten you.

Coercive control is a criminal offence in England and Wales under the Serious Crime Act 2015. The perpetrator can face up to five years in prison. You do not have to prove physical violence — the pattern of controlling behaviour is itself the offence.

4. Children and Domestic Abuse

Children are deeply affected by domestic abuse — even when they are not directly hurt. Under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, a child who sees, hears or experiences the effects of domestic abuse between adults is recognised as a victim of domestic abuse in their own right.

This means you do not need to show that a child was physically harmed. If a child has:

- Heard shouting, threats or violence
- Seen injuries or the aftermath of violence
- Been used by an abuser to monitor or control you
- Had their routine disrupted by fear and instability
- Been made to feel responsible for keeping the peace

... they may be affected as a victim, and support and safeguarding services should be considered.

Telling children about domestic abuse

Children often know something is wrong even if they don't say so. They may blame themselves. It can help to reassure them that:

- What is happening is not their fault.
- You love them.
- There are people whose job is to help keep families safe.

If you are worried about your children's safety

If you believe your children are at risk, you can contact:

- The police (999 in an emergency; 101 for non-emergencies).
- Your local authority children's services — they have a duty to investigate concerns about children's welfare.
- The NSPCC helpline: 0808 800 5000 (free, 24 hours).
- A domestic abuse helpline — they can advise you on next steps.

It's important to know

The fact that you are in an abusive relationship does not mean your children will be taken away from you. Social services' primary aim is to keep families safe, not to separate them.

If you are worried about involving social services, a domestic abuse organisation or solicitor can advise you before you take any steps.

5. Protecting Yourself: Legal Protections and Orders

There are a number of legal tools that can help protect you from an abusive partner or ex-partner. You do not need to have reported the abuse to the police to apply for many of these.

Non-molestation order

A non-molestation order is a court order that prohibits the abusive person from harassing, threatening, pestering or using violence against you. It can also stop them from contacting you. It is available in the Family Court and can be applied for urgently, sometimes on the same day. Breaching it is a criminal offence.

Occupation order

An occupation order can require the abuser to leave the family home, or stay away from it, even if they own or rent the property. It can be applied for in the Family Court.

Restraining order

Restraining orders are made by criminal courts, often after a conviction or even an acquittal. They can prohibit contact or attendance at specified locations.

Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs) and Notices (DAPNs)

These are newer tools introduced by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. DAPNs are issued by the police immediately after a domestic abuse incident. DAPOs are ordered by the court and can include a wide range of conditions — including requiring the abuser to attend a behaviour change programme. As at June 2026 these are available in a small number of areas in England as part of a pilot scheme. If DAPOs are not yet available in your area, the other orders above are still available.

Clare's Law — your right to know

Under the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (Clare's Law), you have a legal right to ask the police whether your current or former partner has a history of domestic abuse or violent offending. The police can also proactively tell you if they believe you are at risk. This is a legal right — not just a policy that can be refused.

To use Clare's Law, you can go to your local police station or contact your local police force.

Reporting to the police

You have the right to report domestic abuse to the police. You do not have to report it if you do not want to. But if you are in immediate danger, call 999.

If you are not in immediate danger but want to report abuse, you can:

- Call 101 (non-emergency police line).
- Go to your local police station.
- Report online via your local police force's website.
- Ask a domestic abuse organisation to help you report.

In an emergency

If you are in immediate danger, call 999.

If you cannot speak, dial 999 and press 55 when prompted. The operator will know you need help.

If you cannot call, text 999 (you need to register at emergencySMS.net first).

It's important to know

You do not need to have a police report, a conviction, or a court order to get help from a solicitor, a refuge, or a domestic abuse service.

Getting a court order does not mean you have to go to prison, but breaching an order is a criminal offence that can lead to arrest.

6. If You Are a Migrant or on a Visa

If you are in the UK on a visa that depends on a partner who is abusing you, you are not trapped. There are specific legal protections and routes to help you.

Your abuser cannot use your immigration status against you

It is a form of abuse to threaten to report you to immigration authorities, to withhold your documents, or to make you believe you will be deported if you leave or report the abuse. If someone is doing this to you, please speak to a solicitor or domestic abuse organisation as soon as you can.

The Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC)

The MVDAC is an emergency scheme that can give you three months of independent immigration status in the UK and potential access to public funds, so that you can leave an abusive relationship and make safe arrangements. You do not need to stay in the abusive relationship to remain in the UK.

The scheme has recently been expanded. It is now available to people who came to the UK as a partner under a number of routes, including as the partner of someone on a work visa or student visa (from February 2024). If you are unsure whether you qualify, please speak to a solicitor.

Settlement as a victim of domestic abuse — Appendix VDA

If your relationship has broken down permanently because of domestic abuse, you may be able to apply for settlement (indefinite leave to remain) in the UK through a route called Appendix Victim of Domestic Abuse. This is available to people who had permission to be in the UK as a qualifying partner.

To qualify, broadly:

- You must have had permission to be in the UK as a partner under certain immigration routes.
- Your relationship must have broken down permanently.
- The breakdown must have been because of domestic abuse.

If you are not sure whether you qualify for MVDAC, Appendix VDA, or another route, please get legal advice. The rules can be complex and getting them wrong can affect your status. Morgan Hill Solicitors can advise you confidentially.

It's important to know

If you are in an emergency and worried about your immigration status, call the National Domestic Abuse Helpline (0808 2000 247). They can help you get safe first and work out immigration options later.

Your immigration status does not reduce your right to protection from domestic abuse.

If you report domestic abuse to the police, they do not routinely share your details with immigration enforcement.

Where to get help

National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 (free, 24/7)

Southall Black Sisters (specialist support for Black, Asian and minoritised women): 020 8571 0800

Karma Nirvana (honour-based abuse and forced marriage): 0800 5999 247

Forced Marriage Unit (government): 020 7008 0151

Morgan Hill Solicitors — immigration and domestic abuse advice: contact via our website

7. Evidence: What You Might Need

One of the most common worries people have is: 'I have no proof.' You do not need to have proof in a particular form. There is no single document that you must have.

When you make an application for legal protection or immigration status, the decision-maker must look at all the evidence together and reach a fair conclusion. Your own account and statement carry significant weight.

What can count as evidence?

Any of the following can be relevant. You do not need all of them, or even most of them.

- Your own written account of what happened, in your own words.
- Text messages, emails, voicemails or social media messages from the abuser.
- Photographs of injuries or damage to property.
- Medical records or a letter from your GP.
- A letter from a domestic abuse service, refuge, or independent domestic violence advocate (IDVA).
- A letter from a social worker, children's services, a school or health visitor.
- Police records, crime reference numbers, or records of call-outs, even if no arrest was made.
- Court orders (non-molestation orders, occupation orders, and so on).
- Bank records showing financial control.
- A letter from a friend, family member or community figure who has witnessed the abuse or its effects.
- Evidence of abandonment abroad: lack of money, withheld documents, travel records.

What is NOT required

You do not need any of the following for your account to be believed or for your application to succeed:

- A police report or criminal conviction.
- Medical evidence of physical injury.
- A perfect or consistent timeline — trauma affects memory.
- To have left the relationship immediately.
- Witnesses.

It's important to know

Abusers often deliberately prevent victims from collecting evidence — no bank account, no phone, no freedom to see a doctor. Decision-makers are expected to take this into account.

If you have been in an abusive relationship, the most important piece of evidence is usually your own clear and detailed account.

8. Your Safety Plan

A safety plan is a practical, personalised plan for keeping yourself (and your children) as safe as possible — whether you are still in the relationship or planning to leave.

Leaving an abusive relationship can be the most dangerous time. Please consider getting support from a domestic abuse organisation before you leave, if at all possible. They can help you plan safely.

If you are still in the relationship

- Identify the safest room in your home (one with an exit, not the kitchen where there are knives).
- Memorise important phone numbers.
- Have a trusted person you can call or go to.
- Keep a phone charged and accessible.
- If possible, keep important documents somewhere you can reach them quickly.
- Use a safe phone or email address that your abuser cannot access to communicate with services.

If you are thinking about leaving

- Contact a domestic abuse helpline or IDVA for advice before you go. They can help you plan safely.
- Try to have a bag packed somewhere safe (or at a trusted person's address) with: passport or ID, children's documents, medication, money, phone charger, clothes.
- Open a separate bank account at a bank your abuser does not know about.
- Keep a record of incidents and evidence where it is safe to do so.
- Know where your nearest refuge is — call the National Domestic Abuse Helpline to find one.

After you have left

- Tell only trusted people where you are.
- Consider applying for a non-molestation order or occupation order.
- Change passwords for email, social media, banking and other accounts.
- Check your phone and devices for tracking apps or shared accounts.
- Contact your bank to secure your accounts.
- Keep a log of any continued harassment, threats or contact.

In an emergency

If you are in immediate danger, do not wait. Call 999 or leave if it is safe to do so.
National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 — free, 24 hours a day.
They can help you find a refuge, make a plan and access legal advice.

9. Talking to Professionals

Reaching out for help can feel frightening, especially if you are worried about being judged, disbelieved, or about what might happen to your family. Here is what you can expect from different professionals.

Domestic abuse services and IDVAs

Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs) are specialist workers who provide confidential support. They will listen without judgement, help you understand your options, assist with safety planning, and support you through any legal or police processes. Contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline for a referral.

The police

The police have specialist domestic abuse officers and units. When you report domestic abuse:

- You should be treated with respect and without judgement.
- You will be asked about what happened and your safety.
- The police may carry out a risk assessment (DASH).
- If there is an immediate risk, they can arrest the perpetrator, apply for a DVPN, or take other protective steps.
- You do not have to give a statement to make a report.

If you are unhappy with how the police handle your report, you can contact a domestic abuse organisation for advocacy support, or contact the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC).

Solicitors

A solicitor who specialises in domestic abuse, family law or immigration can:

- Advise you about court orders and how to apply for them.
- Represent you in court proceedings.
- Advise you on your immigration rights if you are on a visa.
- Help you understand your housing rights.
- Assist you with any aspect of leaving and rebuilding safely.

Legal aid may be available to cover your solicitor's fees if you have experienced domestic abuse and meet financial eligibility. Please ask a solicitor about this.

Confidentiality

Anything you tell a domestic abuse service or solicitor is usually confidential. There are limited exceptions — mainly where there is a serious, immediate risk of harm to a child or a risk to your life. A professional should explain this to you before you speak with them.

Speaking to us

Morgan Hill Solicitors can advise you confidentially on immigration status, family law, housing, civil matters and any other legal aspect of a domestic abuse situation. We can tell you about legal aid eligibility and other funding options. You do not need to be a client already. Please contact us.

10. National and Local Helplines

All the services listed below are free of charge, confidential, and available to people across England and Wales. You do not need to be a client of any solicitor to use them.

Emergency

Service	Contact
Police — emergency	999
Police — non-emergency	101
If you cannot speak: dial 999 and press 55 when prompted	The operator will know you need help without you speaking.
Text 999 (must register first)	emergencySMS.net

Domestic abuse helplines

Service	Contact
National Domestic Abuse Helpline (Refuge) — free, 24/7	0808 2000 247
Men's Advice Line	0808 801 0327
Galop (LGBTQ+ domestic abuse)	0800 999 5428
SafeLives (risk assessment and MARAC referral)	safelives.org.uk
Women's Aid online chat	womensaid.org.uk

Specialist services

Service	Contact
Southall Black Sisters (Black, Asian and minoritised women)	020 8571 0800
Karma Nirvana (honour-based abuse and forced marriage)	0800 5999 247
Forced Marriage Unit (government helpline)	020 7008 0151

Service	Contact
Imkaan (specialist support for Black and minoritised women)	imkaan.org.uk
Hestia (London — IDVA services and refuge)	hestia.org
Refuge (refuge spaces and outreach)	refuge.org.uk

Children and families

Service	Contact
NSPCC (child protection helpline)	0808 800 5000
Childline	0800 1111
Family Rights Group (parents and children in care)	0808 801 0366

Legal and immigration

Service	Contact
Morgan Hill Solicitors (immigration, family, domestic abuse)	morganhill-solicitors.co.uk
Citizens Advice	citizensadvice.org.uk or 0800 144 8848
Law Society — find a solicitor	solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk
Legal Aid eligibility checker	gov.uk/check-legal-aid
Rights of Women (free legal advice for women)	rightsofwomen.org.uk 020 7251 6577

In an emergency

If you are in immediate danger, call 999 right now.

National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 — free, 24 hours, 7 days a week.

11. Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Is it still domestic abuse if I was never physically hit?

Yes. Domestic abuse includes emotional abuse, coercive control, economic abuse, sexual abuse and threatening behaviour. You do not need physical injuries for it to be abuse — or for you to get legal protection.

Q: My partner says if I leave, they will take the children. What can I do?

This is a common form of coercive control. Threatening to take children away to control you is a form of abuse. If you are worried about your children's safety, or your right to keep them with you, please speak to a family solicitor. Urgent court orders can be made where a child is at risk.

Q: I am on a visa that depends on my partner. What happens to my immigration status if I leave?

You may be able to apply for the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC), which provides three months of independent immigration status and potential access to public funds. If you had a qualifying partner visa, you may be able to apply for settlement as a victim of domestic abuse. Please get legal advice as soon as you can — Morgan Hill Solicitors can advise you.

Q: Will I get in trouble for not reporting the abuse sooner?

No. There is no obligation on you to report domestic abuse. Support services and legal processes exist to help you, not to question why you did or did not report earlier. Trauma, fear, financial dependence and many other factors make it hard to report.

Q: My partner has threatened to contact immigration enforcement if I call the police. Should I still call?

The police do not routinely share victims' details with immigration enforcement. You are entitled to police protection regardless of your immigration status. If you are worried, you can contact a domestic abuse organisation or solicitor first, and they can advise you before you contact the police.

Q: I have left but my partner keeps contacting me. What can I do?

You can apply for a non-molestation order, which is a court order prohibiting your ex-partner from contacting you or harassing you. Breaching it is a criminal offence. You can get legal advice from a solicitor or from a domestic abuse helpline.

Q: I am not sure it is 'bad enough' to ask for help. How do I know?

You do not need to meet any threshold to ask for help. If something in your relationship makes you feel unsafe, controlled or afraid, you are allowed to reach out. Help is available even if you are not sure yet whether it counts as abuse.

Q: Can I get legal aid to pay for a solicitor?

Legal aid may be available if you have experienced domestic abuse and meet financial eligibility requirements. A solicitor can advise you on this. You can also check your eligibility at gov.uk/check-legal-aid.



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For legal advice, contact us via our website or visit one of our offices.

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