

WHEN SARAH\* HEARD the UK was going into a national lockdown, she was worried about the same things as the rest of us – homeschooling her two children, missing her loved ones. But her overriding emotion was fear: not of catching the virus, but of being locked down with her abusive husband.

‘At the start of our relationship, he was a total charmer, but once I fell pregnant with our first child, he developed a Jekyll and Hyde personality,’ Sarah says. ‘He became really controlling – he was never wrong about anything and I was constantly worried about how to do things to his standards. Little things, like what time dinner was ready and how the bed was made, had to be done right.’

‘I’d go through a mental checklist before he came home each night and was constantly on edge. He was forever criticising me and

Illustrations

STEFANIA INFANTE

would humiliate and shout at me in front of my friends. I was never clever enough or attractive enough; it destroyed my self-esteem. The children were wary of him too, wondering whether he’d find things he wasn’t happy with when he got home.’

From the outside, the couple were the picture of success. ‘You’d look at our life and think we had it all,’ Sarah admits. ‘But behind the scenes, things were very different. I was so frightened, I couldn’t eat – my legs would be trembling at the dinner table. Although he hadn’t laid a finger on me, his constant bullying, unpredictability and hostility had made me scared to death of him. So when lockdown was announced, I became really terrified.’

With an estimated 1.6 million women aged 16 to 74 suffering domestic abuse – whether physical or psychological – in the year up to

March 2019, the pressure-cooker environment of lockdown, alongside issues such as furlough, unemployment and money worries, has led to a surge in the number of women contacting domestic abuse charity Refuge for help. Although it will be months before the full impact is known, a call to police relating to domestic abuse was made every 30 seconds in the first seven weeks of lockdown. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge, recorded more than 40,000 calls and contacts during the first three months, while in June, the number of women, family members and professionals getting in touch was almost 80 per cent higher than pre-Covid.

‘Even without lockdown, domestic abuse is the biggest issue affecting women and children in this country,’ says Lisa King, Refuge’s director of communications. ‘So when some-

# ‘When lockdown was announced I was terrified’

The pandemic has shut abused women indoors with their partners, leaving them more vulnerable than ever – and with fewer escape routes.

Rosie Mullender finds out how coronavirus has exacerbated the domestic violence crisis, and how Refuge is responding





thing like Covid-19 happens, it's very frightening. For many women, their homes are not safe places, and lockdown and other restrictions give perpetrators of domestic abuse a way of tightening the grip of their control. We're hearing that, in many cases, it's made pre-existing behaviours much worse. Women are being monitored by their partners more than ever, and with some perpetrators no longer going to work, those women aren't getting any respite.'

As a result, Refuge has seen a marked increase in the number of women seeking help, with visits to its website increasing tenfold on some days. Although the charity runs 48 refuges across the UK, its services are available in many forms. The freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline (0808 2000 247) is female-operated and can be reached 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Refuge launched its live chat service on [nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://nationaldahelpline.org.uk) earlier than planned to cope with demand; it now runs Monday to Wednesday, 3pm to 10pm. Additionally, a web form to arrange a callback is available, with a code word agreed to ensure women can talk safely.

'As well as more women making contact, we've noticed they want to speak to us for longer, too – perhaps because services such as GP visits, women's groups and health visitors, as well as friends and family, aren't as accessible,' says Charlotte, who manages an army of women taking calls on the helpline. 'Women have lost some of that face-to-face support, and for someone with an abusive partner, increased isolation can be very dangerous.'

Not only is domestic abuse on the rise, but trying to leave an abusive partner becomes even harder in a lockdown, or under other tier restrictions. The helpline has been providing women with information on how to stay safe in their relationships.

'We offer support tailored to each situation,' Charlotte says. 'This may include arranging a code with a friend – "If you receive a blank text from me, I need help" – staying away from rooms where you might get trapped if an argument escalates, and empowering women to call the police if they need support.'

As well as facing increased isolation, Charlotte says coronavirus itself has created extra anxiety for Refuge's clients: 'Some perpetrators engage in risky behaviours, such as flouting social-distancing rules, which could put women at risk of Covid-19. We've heard from women worried about travelling during lockdown, about the rules around staying with friends and family, and the prospect of getting fined. Some women are even reluctant to go into hospital after an assault, because they don't want to add to the pressure on the NHS.'

'In many cases, lockdown makes leaving a partner a lot more challenging,' adds Mariana\*, a service manager at one of Refuge's 48 safe houses. 'Women who want to leave aren't always able to prepare – for example, by hiding a packed bag somewhere – be-

cause their partner doesn't leave the house. We've seen women forced to pretend to go to the shops, then leave with nothing.'

The risk of financial and tech abuse – if a man withholds money or has access to a partner's texts or emails – raises even more practical considerations. 'We can't give women our address in case they put it into Google Maps and their phone is compromised, so we have to arrange an alternative meeting place,' Mariana says. 'And even then, women might not have the money for a train or bus.'

During a lockdown, refuges face the additional challenge of finding laptops for children to use for homework and coping with rehousing delays that prevent women from moving on. In cases where a space isn't available, refuge workers will refer women to alternative sources of support, such as other refuges with available space or community-based services in the local area.

'Fleeing domestic violence is an emergency,'

### 'Lockdown gives perpetrators of domestic abuse a way of tightening the grip of their control'



Mariana says. 'And although, yes, we're doing things a bit differently at the moment, it's important for women to know that we're still here to help them.'

For some, lockdown has proved to be the catalyst for leaving an abusive partner. 'The majority of perpetrators abuse women by stealth over a period of time,' says Lisa King. 'Women can end up blaming themselves or coming up with excuses for their partner's behaviour. What lockdown has done is intensify that behaviour and created an opportunity for them to identify it as domestic abuse.'

For Sarah, lockdown turned out to be 'a blessing and a curse', as it shone a light on her husband's behaviour that she could no longer ignore. 'When lockdown happened and we were shut in together, it finally forced me to acknowledge what was happening,' she says. Thanks to a Facebook advert, she found herself on Refuge's website, reading a

list of signs of domestic abuse. 'I was stunned – it was like somebody had watched our relationship and written about it. It was a real light-bulb moment where I thought, "This isn't normal, and it's not my fault."'

Until that moment, Sarah had assumed domestic abuse always involves physical violence. Although her husband never hit her, she admits she sometimes wished he would – 'then it would have been clear that something was wrong'. Since visiting Refuge's website, she has asked for a divorce and is moving out of the family home with her children: 'I didn't want them thinking this is a normal, healthy relationship. It's not going to be easy, but it would be a lot harder to stay.'

Lisa King hopes that lockdown will lead to increased awareness of the different types of abuse women can suffer, which is defined by the Crown Prosecution Service as 'any incident of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse.'

'Everyone thinks domestic abuse means physical violence, but it's actually about any form of control,' she says. 'Essentially, if you change your behaviour because you're frightened of your partner's reaction, that's domestic abuse, whether that's financial control, emotional control, being isolated, prevented from doing what you want to do or changing the way you look. It's important that we get that message out there and let women know Refuge is there to help them.'

She's also hopeful that the lockdowns have shone a spotlight on a crisis that's usually hidden behind closed doors – and will encourage the public to donate to Refuge.

'The world became so small for so long,' she says. 'There weren't many things for people to do and they consumed media like never before. It gave us an opportunity to talk about domestic abuse and people could really empathise with what that might be like for women.'

'Abused women are already living a life of lockdown – they're prevented from doing what they want, going wherever they like, and can be isolated from friends and family. By talking about that now, it's given people the opportunity to step into somebody else's shoes.'

Call Refuge's freephone 24-hour helpline 0808 2000 247 or visit [nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://nationaldahelpline.org.uk)



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