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Definitions, Signs and Indicators of Abuse

Abuse is a single or repeated act, or lack of action, that happens within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to another person or violates their human or civil rights.

It is the misuse of power and control and can be perpetrated by a wide range of people, including those who are close to the person or those who have no previous connection to them.

Each nation across the UK has their own statutory definitions of abuse which are defined within the legal framework for each nation. These are grouped together into categories or types.

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Sexual abuse
- Domestic abuse
- Financial abuse
- Self-abuse
- Modern slavery
- Discriminatory abuse
- Organisational abuse

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is the deliberate use of physical force by one person against another to cause harm.

It may result in physical harm or injury to the other person, or it may not, and may be a one-off act or ongoing.

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Physical abuse can include:

- Hitting, slapping, biting or pinching.
- Rough handling, shaking, pushing, or throwing.
- Burning or scalding.
- Drowning, or suffocating
- Poisoning, misuse of medication or the denial of treatment.
- Intentional exposure to extreme heat or cold, or force feeding.
- Misuse or illegal restraint, inappropriate physical punishment, or depriving someone of their liberty.

Physical harm may also be caused when a child's Parent/Carer fakes the symptoms of, or deliberately causes illness or ill health in a child.

Injuries caused by accidents such as trips and falls are not uncommon, especially in children, but these usually occur on bony or prominent areas such as knees, shins and elbows.

Abusive injuries tend to involve softer areas that are harder to damage accidentally e.g. upper arms, forearms, chest, back, abdomen and thighs.

Possible signs and indicators:

- Visible injuries and bruising.
- Unexplained cuts, marks or scars.
- Injuries that don't match the explanation given.
- Getting injured often
- Unexplained falls
- Subdued or changed behaviour
- Changes in weight, being excessively under or overweight or malnourished.
- Failing to get medical treatment or changing Doctors often.

Emotional abuse

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Emotional abuse (or psychological abuse) involves harming a person emotionally and includes any persistent emotional ill-treatment that causes severe and long-lasting adverse effects on a person's emotional development.

Some level of emotional abuse is present in all types of abuse and ill treatment of one person by another, but it can also occur on its own.

Emotional abuse can include:

- Consistently telling someone that they are worthless, unloved or inadequate.
- Using intimidation, coercion, and harassment.
- Having inappropriate expectations for a person's age or development.
- Seeing or hearing another person being mistreated, such as in domestic abuse.
- Not giving someone opportunity to express their views or to take part in normal social interaction.
- Bullying, including online bullying.
- Causing someone to frequently feel frightened or in danger.

Possible signs and indicators:

- Low self-esteem, attachment issues, depression, self-harm, and eating disorders.
- Signs of distress, tearfulness or anger
- Reluctance to be alone with a particular person

Neglect

Neglect (or acts of omission) is the failure to meet a person's basic physical or emotional needs which is likely to have a serious negative impact on their health or development.

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It happens when a person deliberately withholds or fails to provide an appropriate level of care and support which is needed by another person.

It can involve a Parent/Carer and can also happen during pregnancy e.g. as a result of maternal substance abuse.

Neglect may happen because of a lack of knowledge or awareness, or through a failure to take reasonable action whether deliberate or not.

In its extreme form, neglect can be a significant risk as it can lead to serious long-term effects and even be life-threatening.

Neglect is the most common form of child abuse in the UK.

Neglect can include:

- Not providing adequate food, clothing, or assistance with personal hygiene.
- Not providing adequate shelter and heating.
- Failing to protect someone from harm or danger.
- Not ensuring appropriate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers)
- Failing to give prescribed medication or provide access to appropriate health care or treatment.
- Failing to provide access to educational services.
- Ignoring a person's basic emotional needs.
- Failing to take action when a person is taking unnecessary risk (especially when the person lacks capacity to properly assess risk).

Possible signs and indicators:

- Poor appearance or hygiene e.g. being smelly or dirty
- Living in an unsuitable home environment e.g. having no heating
- Inappropriate or inadequate clothing
- Signs of malnutrition or not being given enough food
- Having frequent and untreated medical issues or an accumulation of untaken medication.

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- Body issues such as sores, skin complaints, poor muscle tone or prominent joints.
- Poor language or social skills
- Being left alone for a long time
- Being withdrawn, depressed or anxious
- Tiredness or finding it hard to concentrate or take part in activities
- Self-soothing behaviours such as drug or alcohol misuse and self-harm.
- Poor school attendance or performance

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse (or Sexual violence) is any behaviour perceived to be of a sexual nature which is unwanted or takes place without consent or understanding.

The abuse may involve physical contact and touching or non-contact activities.

Sexual abuse is found across all sections of society, irrelevant of gender, age, ability, religion, race, ethnicity, personal circumstances, financial background or sexual orientation. It can be perpetrated by family or non-family members, women, men and other children.

Children and young people

The sexual abuse of children or young people - also called **Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)** - is involving a child or young person in an activity for the sexual gratification or gain of another person, whether or not it is claimed they have consented or agreed.

Sexual abuse of a child can include:

- Forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts, whether they are aware of what is happening or not.

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- Including children in looking at adult sexual content or activities, or having their photo taken or being filmed for the production of indecent images.
- Using sexual language towards a child or encouraging them to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.
- Grooming a child in preparation for abuse, either in person or online.

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse where a child is sexually exploited for money, power or status.

Sexual abuse may awaken premature sexual feelings in a child that they find hard to deal with and feel guilty about and they may need reassurance that they are not to blame for the abuse.

Penetrative sex with a child under 13 years by an adult or another child is classed as rape.

One of the ongoing effects of childhood sexual abuse may be that adult survivors experience difficulties forming meaningful relationships with other adults.

Sexual abuse of adults

The sexual abuse of adults involves sexual acts to which the person has not consented or has been pressured into consenting to.

Sexual abuse of a adults can include:

- Penetrative or non-penetrative sexual acts, whether they aware of what is happening or not eg. sexual assault, oral sex, rape, attempted rape, and date rape.
- Indecent exposure, sexual harassment, inappropriate looking or touching, groping, sexual teasing or innuendo,
- Being made to look at or be involved in the production of sexually abusive material or being made to watch sexual activities.
- Stalking and grooming.

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Possible signs and indicators:

- Physical injuries and bruising, particularly to the thighs, buttocks, upper arms and neck.
- Bleeding, pain or itching in the genital area or when walking or sitting.
- Sexually transmitted diseases or infections.
- Pregnancy in a woman who is unable to consent to sex.
- Uncharacteristic or age-inappropriate use of sexual language or significant changes in sexual behaviour or attitude.
- Self-harming.
- Poor concentration, withdrawal, sleep disturbance.
- Excessive fear/apprehension of, or withdrawal from, relationships or being alone with a particular person.

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse (or Domestic Violence) is any incident of threatening behaviour, violence, or abuse by one person against another where they are or have been intimate partners or family members.

It can include violence by a son, daughter, mother, father, husband, wife, life-partner, or by an extended family member, and happens across all sections of society, regardless of gender, age, ability, religion, race, ethnicity, financial background or sexual orientation.

Both men and women can be victims, although a greater number of women experience all forms of domestic violence. Children and Young People can suffer this form of abuse directly or be impacted by the effects of witnessing or living in a household where domestic abuse is happening.

Domestic abuse is a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour by one person over another that is usually frequent and persistent. It can happen inside and outside the home and can continue even after a relationship has ended.

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Coercive control

Coercive control is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse used to harm, punish, or frighten another person. It is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Domestic abuse can include:

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Financial abuse
- Forced marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, and 'honour crimes'.

Possible signs and indicators:

- Low self-esteem, attachment issues, depression, self-harm, and eating disorders.
- Signs of distress, tearfulness or anger
- Reluctance to be alone with a particular person
- Visible injuries and bruising.
- Injuries that don't match the explanation given.
- Unexplained falls
- Subdued or changed behaviour
- Changes in weight, being excessively under or overweight or malnourished.
- Signs of coercive control
- Feeling that the abuse is their fault when it is not
- Isolation – not seeing friends and family
- Limited access to money

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Financial abuse

Financial abuse (or Material abuse) is the attempted or actual misappropriation or misuse of a person's money, property, benefits, or other assets, by means of intimidation, coercion, deception, or other ways to which the person does not or can not consent to.

Financial abuse includes having money or other property stolen, being defrauded or put under pressure in relation to money or other property and having money or other property misused.

Financial abuse can include:

- Theft, burglary, or fraud (including internet scamming).
- Exploitation and embezzlement.
- Coercion or being put under pressure concerning a person's finances (including wills, property, inheritance or financial transactions).
- Misuse or misappropriation of property, possessions or benefits.
- Withholding pension or other benefits.

Possible signs and indicators:

- Unusual financial activity such as making an unexpected change to a will, a sudden sale or transfer of a property, or unusual activity in a bank account.
- Sudden inclusion of additional names on a bank account or where a signature does not resemble the person's normal signature.
- Reluctance or anxiety by a person when discussing their finances.
- A substantial gift to a carer or other third party.
- A sudden interest by a relative or other third party in the welfare of the person.
- Bills remaining unpaid.
- Complaints that personal property is missing.
- Signs of coercive control or neglect.

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Self-neglect

Self-neglect is when an adult lives in a way that puts their own health, safety or well-being at risk.

It is an extreme lack of self-care that is often related to deteriorating health and ability in older age, poor mental health, or other issues such as addictions, however not everyone who self-neglects needs to be safeguarded.

Incidents of abuse may be one-off or multiple and affect one person or more. People who self-neglect will often decline help from others.

There are limitations to what help can be offered if the adult has **mental capacity** to make their own decisions about how they live, even if they may suffer significant harm or death as a result of their own action or inaction.

Any action taken should seek to minimise any risks while respecting the person's choices, trying to engage with the person to offer as much support as possible without causing distress.

It is important to all efforts to engage with and support the person are clearly recorded.

Self-neglect can include:

- Neglecting to care for personal hygiene, health or surroundings to the extent that it threatens personal health and safety.
- Inability to avoid self-harm
- Failure to seek help or access services to meet health and social care needs
- Inability or unwillingness to manage one's personal affairs
- Behaviours such as hoarding.

Possible signs and indicators:

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- Very poor personal hygiene
- Unkempt appearance
- Lack of essential food, clothing or shelter
- Malnutrition and/or dehydration
- Living in squalid or unsanitary conditions
- Neglecting household maintenance
- Hoarding
- Collecting a large number of animals in inappropriate conditions
- Non-compliance with health or care services
- Inability or unwillingness to take medication or treat illness or injury

Modern slavery

Modern slavery (or Human Trafficking) is the recruitment, movement, and holding of a person by improper means, such as force, threat or deception, for the purposes of exploitation or abuse.

Victims of human trafficking can be male or female, children or adults, and may come from migrant or indigenous communities.

Modern slavery is different from illegal immigration as people who are trafficked are tricked, coerced, lured or forced by criminals to work for them or others in their criminal networks around the world.

People are forced into and held by threats of violence and intimidation against them or their family, fear, debt bondage, isolation and the removal of identification or travel documents, or imprisonment and torture.

Children living in the UK can also be targeted and trafficked internally.

Modern slavery can include:

- Forced labour
- Domestic servitude
- Sexual exploitation such as prostitution and pornography
- Bonded labour (forcing someone to pay a debt that can't be paid).

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- Criminal activity
- Private fostering
- Forced marriage

Possible signs and indicators:

- Signs of physical abuse or emotional abuse
- Signs of neglect
- Isolation from the community
- Seeming under the control or influence of others
- Lack of personal effects or identification documents
- Avoidance of eye contact, appearing frightened or hesitant to talk to strangers
- Fear of law enforcers

Discriminatory abuse

Discriminatory abuse is when a person is treated unfairly, bullied, or abused because of a particular characteristic.

It is against the law to discriminate against someone because of:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

These are called protected characteristics.

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Discriminatory abuse links to other forms of abuse and may have similar effects e.g. Physical abuse motivated by racism would be classified as Discriminatory abuse.

Discriminatory abuse can include:

- Unequal treatment
- Verbal abuse, derogatory remarks or inappropriate use of language related to a protected characteristic
- Physical abuse and emotional abuse
- Denying access to communication aids, not allowing access to an interpreter, signer or lip-reader
- Harassment or deliberate exclusion on the grounds of a protected characteristic
- Denying basic rights to healthcare, education, employment and criminal justice relating to a protected characteristic
- Substandard service provision relating to a protected characteristic

Hate crime

Hate crime is any incident which constitutes a criminal offence perceived by the victim or any other person as being motivated by prejudice, discrimination or hate towards a person's actual or perceived race, religious belief, sexual orientation, disability, political opinion or gender identity.

Possible signs and indicators:

- Low self-esteem, attachment issues, depression, self-harm, and eating disorders.
- Signs of distress, tearfulness, anger or anxiety
- The person appears withdrawn and isolated
- The support on offer does not take account of the person's individual needs in terms of a protected characteristic

Organisational abuse

Adapted from 'thirtyoneeight.org' (accessed 24.2.23).

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Organisational abuse (or Institutional abuse) is when a person is abused or mistreated within an institution such as a care home or hospital, or by an organisation providing care in the person's own home.

It can include one-off incidents or long-term mistreatment, and can be through neglect or poor professional practice as a result of inadequate resources, structures, policies, processes and practices within an organisation.

The abuse may happen because of a culture that denies or restricts privacy, dignity, choice and independence, and involves the collective failure of a service provider or an organisation to provide safe and appropriate services, and to ensure that the necessary preventative and protective measures are in place.

Organisational abuse can include:

- A run-down or overcrowded environment
- Insufficient staff or high staff turnover resulting in poor quality care
- Abusive and disrespectful attitudes towards people using the service
- Not offering choice or promoting independence.

Possible signs and indicators:

- Signs of neglect
- Inadequate staffing levels
- Poor standards of care
- Lack of adequate procedures
- Absence of visitors
- Few social, recreational and educational activities
- Unnecessary exposure during bathing or using the toilet
- Lack of management overview and support
- Signs of physical abuse or emotional abuse

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