

When Someone Is Afraid at Home

Caring well when someone may be experiencing domestic abuse

Sometimes caring for Christ's sheep means sitting beside someone in grief, bringing a meal, visiting the lonely or praying with someone who is ill.

Sometimes it means recognising that a person who appears capable and composed may be living in fear in their own home.

Scripture does not treat the care of the oppressed as optional. Isaiah calls God's people to "*seek judgment, relieve the oppressed*" and to defend those who are vulnerable (Isaiah 1:17). And Ezekiel's condemnation of Israel's shepherds is strikingly pastoral: they had not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured or sought those who were lost. Instead, some had ruled "with force and with cruelty" (Ezekiel 34:4).

Those passages give us a useful starting point. Good pastoral care does not preserve appearances while somebody remains frightened and controlled. It seeks to understand what is happening and responds in ways that protect rather than add to the burden.

Domestic abuse is often misunderstood because it does not always look like physical violence. It may be a continuing pattern of intimidation, isolation, humiliation, financial restriction, sexual pressure, surveillance, spiritual manipulation or other behaviour by which one person progressively controls another.

This is not conflict — this is control.

Ordinary marriages can contain disagreement, anger, selfishness and poor communication. Coercive control is different. One person increasingly loses freedom, voice and agency. The question is therefore not merely, "What happened in this argument?" We also need to ask:

What is the pattern? What is it doing to the other person? What fruit is it producing?

Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20).

In a healthy relationship we should expect to see the fruit of love, peace, gentleness and self-control. Where the continuing fruit is fear, secrecy, confusion, self-doubt and shrinking freedom, something quite different may be happening.

By Their Fruit: Seeing and Responding to Coercive Control develops this Scriptural way of seeing and responding.

If someone tells you they are being abused

Your first task is not to investigate the case, confront the other person or repair the marriage.

- Listen.
- Take what you are being told seriously.
- Ask whether the person — and any children — are safe.
- Protect their confidentiality.
- Help them obtain appropriate professional domestic-violence support.
- Ask what practical help they need.

Do not pressure them to confront their partner, attend mediation or couples counselling, return home, forgive quickly or reconcile. These responses may unintentionally expose them to further control or danger.

Taking a disclosure seriously does not require a friend or ecclesia to reach an immediate judicial conclusion about every disputed fact. We can recognise uncertainty while still responding prudently to fear, risk and vulnerability. Safety and pastoral support should not depend upon an untrained carer first conducting an amateur trial.

Ezekiel 34 provides a searching standard for those exercising pastoral responsibility. The shepherd's task is to strengthen, heal, protect and seek. It is difficult to reconcile that picture with a response which places the burden upon an already frightened person to prove their case before we will help them.

Help without taking control

People experiencing coercive control may have spent years having their decisions questioned or taken away from them. Good care therefore restores rather than further diminishes their autonomy.

We can help someone obtain information, accompany them to appointments, provide meals, transport or accommodation, help with children, remain in regular contact and simply be a safe person who listens without judgement.

This is one practical expression of Isaiah's instruction to *"relieve the oppressed"*. It is not enough merely to disapprove of oppression. God calls His people to respond to it.

The appropriate pastoral role is spiritual care, safety support, accountability and practical assistance. Legal issues, trauma treatment and specialist domestic-violence work should normally be referred to appropriately skilled professionals.

What about the person who has caused the harm?

They need pastoral care too — but care is not the same thing as protecting them from consequences.

Scriptural repentance produces fruit.

Words, tears, apologies and professions of faith may be sincere, but genuine change is demonstrated over time: taking responsibility without blaming the victim, understanding the harm caused, respecting boundaries, accepting consequences, engaging willingly with specialist help, ceasing attempts to control contact and making practical repair.

John the Baptist's instruction remains a powerful pastoral test:

"Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8).

We should therefore ask not only, "Has this person apologised?" but:

- Has the control stopped?
- Has the blame-shifting stopped?
- Are boundaries respected?
- Is responsibility accepted without qualification?
- Is there patience rather than pressure for reconciliation?
- Is there sustained change when nobody is watching?

Repentance is ultimately known by its fruit.

Hear. Believe. Act.

Caring for someone experiencing domestic abuse does not require us to become domestic-violence professionals.

It asks us to **hear carefully, take seriously, act safely and know when to seek skilled help.**

Scripture gives the pastoral direction clearly: seek justice, relieve the oppressed, strengthen the vulnerable and do not allow those entrusted with care to become another source of force or pressure.

Sometimes taking care of Christ's sheep means helping someone find safety, truth and a voice again.

Resources for carers, friends and ecclesias

Start here

- [**Adelphicare — Family and Domestic Violence Protocols**](#)
Practical guidance for recognising and responding to domestic abuse, including confidentiality, referral, safe pastoral responses and the limits of reconciliation processes.
- [**Adelphicare — DV Safety Plan**](#)
A practical safety-planning resource for someone who may need to prepare for or respond to danger.
- [**Hear Believe Act — For friends & family**](#)
A concise first port of call for people supporting someone experiencing abuse: safety, reassurance and assistance to obtain help.
- [**By Their Fruit: Seeing and Responding to Coercive Control**](#)
A Scriptural framework for recognising coercive control through pattern, function and fruit, and for assessing repentance over time.
- [**Breaking the Cycle: A Scriptural Approach to Domestic Violence**](#)
A fuller resource on recognising abuse, responding to disclosures, supporting survivors, ecclesial responsibilities, repentance and accountability.
- [**Wilderness Conversations — “Breaking the Cycle”**](#)
An accessible audio introduction to the issues for those who prefer to listen rather than read.

If there is immediate danger, contact the emergency services or an appropriate local domestic and family violence service.