

COVID crisis: Sheltering in place with an abuser

How do you find a safe haven when staying home poses a life-threatening danger?

By EVELYN MERTENS

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to upend the rhythm and routine of our daily lives, instructions to avoid the potentially lethal COVID-19 are clear and prominently posted. We are told to: Stay Home, Stay Safe. Stay Home, Save Lives. Shelter in place.

But where does one go if trapped in an abusive relationship where the threat of domestic violence turns staying home into a prison sentence, family into a source of fear, and shelter into a space sought outside, not within, familiar closed doors?

Domestic violence, increasingly called “intimate terrorism,” is becoming a sub-crisis within the crisis. While it’s far from grabbing headlines to the degree of COVID, attention is being paid on global, national, state and local fronts.

Reported data suggests domestic abuse is rising worldwide along with the COVID-19 crisis and U.N. Secretary General António Guterres has asked governments to combat the surge.

On Friday, April 3, during Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s daily briefing on New York’s COVID-19 response, secretary to the governor Melissa DeRosa addressed the topic and Cuomo said, “Women should know that they don’t have to stay in those situations ... We will help them find safe shelter ... It’s unacceptable on any day and I want people to know that in every single case that is reported, the state police is going to investigate fully and bring the full bear of the law behind it.”

Local organizations are stepping up to the plate. Lauren Pomerantz, LCSW, coordinator of Safe Coalition, a violence prevention resource that operates under the umbrella of Scarsdale Edgemont Family Counseling Service, said, “It’s all about power and control. Any time you have stress put on relationships there is the potential for an exacerbated situation, there’s more isolation ... Everyone is living under extreme circumstances. Tensions build and there’s no release.”

She added, “If you’re living with someone whose answer is abuse, there’s no break in the cycle. The abused person is living a life of fear and powerlessness.”

What recourse is there? First, practice savvy safety planning at home.

The abused person needs to scope out “What room is the least dangerous? Is there a door with a lock?” said Pomerantz.

She advised the abused individual to find a means to stay in contact with friends and family; to remember that, “It’s not your fault. You deserve support. You can reach out. No one should feel alone.”

Safe Coalition recently released an email message to children, families and the community, saying: “For many people, being forced to be at home is not only unsettling, but also dangerous ... We know the Scarsdale community will continue to consider the most vulnerable populations during this time ... community members can always provide emotional support, help create a safety plan even if it has to be in the house, and share resources.”

My Sisters’ Place, based in White Plains, has been helping domestic abuse survivors for more than 40 years. In 2019, My Sisters’ Place provided counseling services to 1,734 adults and 584 children. It also has a shelter in an undisclosed location.

Cheryl Greenberg, the organization’s chief development officer, explained that many clients were in the process of developing a safety plan — often synonymous with an exit plan — when the pandemic hit and orders to stay in place superseded.

“If it isn’t safe to use the technology — to connect with the lawyer, the advocate, the hotline,” then what do you do? asked Greenberg. “All those thinking of reaching out are now trapped with very limited resources.”

Lauren Shaller, MSW, senior director of programs for My Sisters’ Place, explained, “Before COVID, domestic violence was happening. Since the pandemic, it has been escalating. Clients are now even more isolated.”

Buying food, a logistic dilemma for most and an economic concern if the pandemic has resulted in reduced income, is most troubling for an individual who can no longer provide sufficient food for the table in an abusive household. While “domestic violence” refers to



RESOURCES

- Safe Coalition: sfcsinc.org, 914-723-3281
- Scarsdale Police Department: 914-722-1200 or 911
- My Sisters’ Place: mspny.org, 800-298-7233
- Hope’s Door: hopedoor.org, 888-438-8700
- Pace Women’s Justice Center: 914-422-4188 (Legal Clinic) or 914-287-0739 (Legal Helpline)
- New York State Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-942-6906
- Westchester County Office for Women: women.westchestergov.com/
- Westchester DA’s office: 914-995-3000 for legal assistance
- National Domestic Violence hotline: thehotline.org/help/

both mental and physical abuse, it is not uncommon, noted Shaller, for abusers to “amp up verbal abuse with physical abuse” during times of crisis.

Shaller said the shelter recently admitted a woman who was severely battered physically, adding, “We sense and predict that we will see more of this and there is the potential for lethality.”

Living in an affluent, family-oriented community carries its own set of issues. A mother will be very hesitant to disrupt the lives of children entrenched in the school system.

It’s important to note, however, while the abuser is generally male and the abused female, domestic violence does occur in same sex relationships and the abuser can be a woman and the abused a man.

Furthermore, said Shaller, “We have seen many circumstances where the abuser has access to money, connections. They will present themselves well in a courtroom. This can make the survivor feel more trapped. The abuser may have more control of the financial assets. The abuser might say ‘I have the lawyers, the connections, the friends in high places.’ This makes the abused person feel helpless and powerless.”

“We get calls from all over Westchester. Abuse happens in every socioeconomic status, every race, every ethnicity,” said Shaller.

CarlLa Horton, M.P.A., executive director of Hope’s Door based in Hawthorne, said, “Life is always dangerous for victims of domestic violence. That is even more true now. Many survivors, already isolated from friends and family by their abuser, are now trapped at home, creating an even greater danger.” She noted that “Lack of employment is a known risk factor for domestic violence homicides but, in Westchester, loss of socioeconomic status has also been seen as a time of increased danger for victims.” The organization’s shelter and hotline staff remains available 24/7. Counselors, advocates, attorneys, prevention staff are working remotely.

Victims of abuse are particularly vulnerable now, ac-

ording to Pace Women’s Justice Center (PWJC) Executive Director Cindy Kanusher, Esq.

“A victim of domestic violence not only has to be home because of what’s going on, but is potentially trapped” in an unsafe place, Kanusher said.

Social distancing further complicates an already dire situation for victims of abuse, who normally might rely on a visit to a friend’s house or trip to the grocery store as a temporary reprieve from their abuser.

The unique circumstances of the COVID-19 response also provide a new means of control and abuse. Kanusher shared a pair of recent incidents. In one case, an abuser was trying to force his partner to go to the store for supplies. When the frightened victim refused, a physical altercation occurred. In another situation, an abuser prevented police from entering the home by claiming he had COVID-19.

“The abuser is ... using the virus as a way to continue the abuse and maintain control,” Kanusher said.

Current circumstances also could prevent individuals from being able to safely contact a national hotline or local service provider. “Most of the time when someone calls, they are doing it at a time when the abuser is not there. That doesn’t exist anymore,” Kanusher said.

This is an important time for friends and family to check in with anyone who may be facing these issues, experts said. Making a phone call or connecting through a videoconferencing app like Zoom or Skype can go a long way toward helping someone feel less isolated and more connected.

PWJC offers consultation on orders of protection, custody, child and spousal support, divorce, public benefits, housing and more. Although the courthouses and offices where this business is usually conducted are closed, PWJC is offering remote electronic consultations. The sessions are limited to one hour with limited scope representation. Courts have transitioned to a virtual court system, allowing for remote legal representation in orders of protection cases, for example.

In his press briefing April 3, the governor noted an increase in domestic violence incidents, saying, “some reports as high as 15 to 20 percent.” Yet some believe those numbers don’t tell the whole story because it may be harder for victims to report incidents.

Capt. Ed Murphy of the Scarsdale Police Department said, “We haven’t seen an uptick.” There have been just two more reports since January; yet, since March 15 there have been fewer reports. However, the potential exists. “When people are together, the anxiety could cause it,” said Murphy.

Anyone who feels threatened should know that resources are still available.

Said Greenberg of My Sisters’ Place, “Our counselors and lawyers are on the ready for new intake ... All our counselors now have phones at home and can reach out to clients. They have become even more creative. Everything we do is around safety.” She noted too that clients have shown enormous resourcefulness. “[They] are brilliant at figuring out how to manage tools.” They know to save 9-1-1 on their cellphone, to keep their keys and checkbook hidden.

— with reporting by Jackie Roman

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SMARTPHONE APPS FOR THE HEARING IMPAIRED

Over the past twenty or so years, millions of apps have been developed that offer smartphone users tools for functioning in today’s world. They can even be helpful for people suffering hearing loss. For instance, there are several apps that recreate the “Text Relay” service used by landlines, by turning the caller’s speech into readable text. Some apps even use the microphone on a smartphone to translate speech to text for in-person conversations. Forgot to put your hearing aids in this morning? There are apps that amplify sound through headphones that can get you through the day. Most of these apps are free or available for a small fee, and all can be found in your phone’s app store.

Smartphones are prevalent in just about everyone’s life. The right apps and services can be valuable tools in helping one to live well with hearing loss. Consulting with your audiologist and keeping up with tech blogs are good ways to stay in the know about current app developments. Recognized as a leader in audiological care in New York City, we believe that diagnosis of a hearing impairment and decisions about the best kind of hearing aid for individual needs are best left to a skilled, specially trained audiologist. Helping you achieve your optimum hearing potential is our only business.

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