

AAFDA

Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse



AVA  
Against Violence & Abuse

2021

RESOURCE  
FOR  
CHILDREN  
& YOUNG  
PEOPLE

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Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse (AAFDA) is a dedicated charity who support people after a death when it's connected to domestic abuse and violence in relationships.

When the death is connected or the police believe it is connected to abuse or violence in the relationship there is a special responsibility to understand how it happened. If someone dies during or after domestic abuse, people want to find out how it could have been stopped and what might make other families safer. We do this through a Domestic Homicide Review.

This booklet introduces you to the idea of these reviews and sets out how and why you might want to get involved. We have also described trauma and how it works and how it might make you behave and feel. AAFDA have created a separate “coping with trauma resource” that might be useful for you. Alongside this at the end of the booklet we've given you sources of further help and support.

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## LET US KNOW YOUR THOUGHTS

We'd love to know how you found the information in this booklet and what might help other young people in your situation in the future.

Do email us your thoughts at [info@aafda.org.uk](mailto:info@aafda.org.uk)

## WHAT IS DOMESTIC ABUSE?

Let's start at the beginning, domestic abuse is any kind of behaviour that happens within a relationship that is controlling, aggressive, frightening or violent. Domestic abuse covers physical and sexual abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse and other forms of taking power away from someone else through controlling behaviours. It is important to remember that it does not only happen at home, it can happen over the phone or through social media. It can carry on when a relationship has ended. It can be very confusing, scary and overwhelming living in a household where there is domestic abuse, especially when you love the people involved. Many survivors talk about 'walking on eggshells' and trying hard to 'keep the peace'. It is never your fault or responsibility. It can have an immediate and long-term effect on your feelings, emotions and behaviour and result in you experiencing trauma.

## WHAT IS DOMESTIC HOMICIDE?

Domestic Homicide is the killing of one person by another within the household or family. Every Domestic Homicide is different because every family is different but statistically it is most often one parent that kills the other. It is the closeness of these relationships and the fact that they often happen after many years of abuse that makes domestic homicide a uniquely traumatic experience.



# TRAUMA

A trauma is something that happens to you that you think you won't survive. It can be a physical thing like an accident or an emotional thing like an argument. Trauma can be a one-off event or it can come from lots of events joined together. Many people experience traumas in their life times and adapt ways to cope, but for some people the depth and frequency of the traumas they have experienced have a more long-lasting impact on their brains and their bodies.

People are incredibly skilled at surviving traumas. Our brains and bodies are complex and creative and have a number of strategies to deal with situations that are overwhelming. It can be helpful to know a bit about the common reactions so that you identify how you respond and what might help you when you feel overwhelmed with thoughts and feelings.

**BEGIN**  
TO MAKE SENSE OF TRAUMA...

People often talk about how the body reacts to trauma being like a cat with a mouse. When the mouse realises that the cat is stalking them their first instinct is to figure out whether they can reason with or fight off the cat. Once they've realised the cat is too big they will try and run away. If that strategy is also unsuccessful, they will play dead. Playing dead bores the cat, it means that their bodies receive less damage and increase their chances of survival.

We call these responses fight, flight and freeze/flop.



There is one other common response to trauma that humans display which is often overlooked. Psychologists talk about the ‘attachment cry’ we feel when we are traumatised. In plain speak this means that we have a physical need to go back to those familiar comfortable people who offer us protection and support. The reason it’s important for us to remember this instinct and dimension is that when we are living with domestic abuse the people that you rely on for comfort and security can also be a source of trauma and danger. Living in these conditions impacts on your ability to trust people and how you perceive where and what is safe.

Finding new people who are soothing without being a source of trauma can be a real challenge. Talking things through with a professional like a trusted teacher, counsellor or social worker can be useful in assessing who is trustworthy and how you know.



## WHAT IS TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT?

The death of a loved one can take over our lives for a long time. Grief and loss is an individual experience and can result in a range of powerful and overwhelming emotions that mean things you used to enjoy don’t seem to matter anymore. If the death has occurred in traumatic circumstances, such as domestic homicide, then the added trauma responses are likely to include shock, disbelief, horror and anger which make the feelings of intense grief harder to cope with. This is a form of ‘complicated grief’ where the manner of the death needs to be understood and processed alongside the death itself. Sometimes people can get stuck on thinking about what their loved one experienced, feel they may be to blame or feel anger towards the person responsible for the death, which may also be someone they love. It is this ‘complicated grief’ which can be helped by a compassionate and insightful Domestic Homicide Review.

# DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REVIEWS

When someone dies, or is thought to have died, at the hands of their partner, or another family member there is a responsibility for a local council to carry out a Domestic Homicide Review.

Domestic Homicide Reviews have a special focus on understanding what happened in the lead up to a death. They are an important way to improve responses to people experiencing domestic violence and abuse, as well as contributing to ending abuse in the future.

They are separate from criminal cases and their main purpose is to understand what happened and prevent what happened to your family from happening to others.

After a domestic homicide there can be a range of media coverage, sometimes it can be very negative and the needs of the people left behind are forgotten. Domestic Homicide Reviews try to re-balance some of this, by creating a more balanced account. An insightful review will create an action plan with recommendations to ensure that public services, like the police and doctors, understand what happened that led to the death of your family member and identify where responses to the situation could be improved.



DHRs are not about finding someone to ‘blame’; they allow space to consider what happened and what could have been done differently. They look for solutions to improve responses to families.

DHRs are often focused on what services and agencies knew about your family. Even the most caring and understanding professional can’t ever know what it was like for you, so your opinion is really important.

Review panels are made up of people who have no direct connection to your family to ensure that they are independent and able to see things clearly. This means that you and your family are the only voices involved in the review with direct experience. This gives your views and experience a special weight and power. You have detail and background that professionals might not have known or written down. Being involved in the review can give you a chance to have your say about your family, it can give you a chance to represent what you knew about the people you loved and what mattered to them.

# HOW CAN I BE INVOLVED?

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

Maya Angelou

When you are recovering from a complicated and traumatic event it is important that you feel you have choices.

No one will force you to contribute to a DHR, but if you want to your experiences will be listened to, respected and form an essential part of the Review document.

A specialist advocate will help you decide how to be involved. You can talk to them about what you want to say and what you don't want to say. An advocate is someone independent who understands the systems and processes, so they can help you to talk about your wishes and give you options.

Your advocate will give you options on how you want to talk to them and through them, the Review Panel and Chair. It's important for you to think about where you feel most safe and where you want to speak about these memories - there might be a safe place at school, or at a friend or family member's house. You could invite your advocate to meet you or talk by email, WhatsApp or any other form of communication which is best for you.



It's important to remember that it's not a court process, you don't have to take an oath and it's not 'evidence' - it's learning. Your input can be confidential, you don't need to be named in the report, your experiences should be treated with dignity and respect. The Review will produce a document that builds a full picture of what led up to the death of your loved one. Accompanying this document will be set of recommendations for change and an action plan to make these recommendations happen.

You should be given a chance to read through these documents, with plenty of time, to check that they are right and that there isn't anything missing and that you are happy with how your experiences have been represented. You don't have to do this on your own, you can ask to have the documents sent to you via your advocate and you can discuss it with them.



# WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IF I WANT TO BE INVOLVED?

- You can ask to meet with a specialist advocate at AAFDA to talk through how you want to be involved, this will be led by you, so you can decide how involved you are during each step of the process and how you want to communicate. Your advocate can meet with you at school, at your home or via phone/email to answer questions and enable you to fully understand what they do, how the process works and feel part of it.
- You can decide what information you want the Chair of the Review to know, you can decide in advance what you don't want to talk about, you have the right to choose what you think is important for people to know about what happened as you are the expert of what happened to you and your family.
- You can also suggest other people for the Chair to speak to, who would know who was trusted by your family and who can give insight into what happened.
- You can tell your story in a way that is comfortable for you. It's hard to answer questions about difficult memories and you might find that it makes you feel worse before it feels better - you can always ask to stop, take a break or finish on another day. The person you are meeting with might ask you questions to help them fill in gaps in their knowledge, there is no pressure to answer these, the process is about what information you want to share. You might also find that you don't have answers to their questions, trauma impacts on the way you store memories - there is no judgement if you don't know the answer to questions, don't put pressure on yourself, focus instead on what is important to you to share and why.
- You will be regularly updated about what is going on and can ask questions whenever you want, Domestic Homicide Reviews can take a long time to complete, your advocate will be able to tell you what is going on during the process and will let you know if there is more than one opportunity to share your experiences with the panel.
- You will have the opportunity to read and check your contribution to the review with support from your advocate, this way you can check that everything you said is correctly recorded and told in the way you want it to be.
- Your contribution will honour the memory of your loved one and could help to contribute to a change in the way other children and families experiencing domestic abuse are supported in the future.



# RESOURCES

Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse's website

[www.aafda.org.uk](http://www.aafda.org.uk)

The Mix's website

Essential support for under 25s - [www.themix.org.uk](http://www.themix.org.uk)

Young Mind's website

A children & young people's mental health charity - [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

Winston's Wish's website

Giving hope to grieving children - [www.winstonswish.org](http://www.winstonswish.org)

Book

8 Keys to Safe Trauma Recovery: Take Charge Strategies to Empower Your Healing by Babette Rothschild

Book

The PTSD Workbook for Teens by Libbi Palmer.

