**LANGUAGE MATTERS**

**Domestic Abuse:**

# Introduction

Our choice of language has a direct, immediate, and lasting impact on victims and perpetrators of Domestic Abuse. What we say, write and ultimately record sets the tone for any criminal investigation and can influence the criminal justice outcome. It can also influence how partner agencies respond to the victim and wider situation.

We recognise that the language we use in policing when talking or writing about Domestic Abuse has been ingrained across a long period of time. We want to change the language to enable a more conscious and trauma-informed approach.

Victims of domestic abuse may use language themselves that downplays or denies the abuse for several reasons which could include to avert pressure to make decisions, to avoid judgement or to protect the needs of others, e.g., children. Perpetrators will be deliberate in their choice of language to deflect responsibility and minimise their actions or the harm caused. It is vital our language is factual and objective, and we need to be mindful not to sub-consciously repeat the language victims or perpetrators use.

*Our language is like a window into our values and beliefs. Victims and perpetrators will note how you speak about them and the abuse. All written records have the potential to be viewed in court, by partner agencies and even the victim. It is crucial that both written and spoken language reflects our Force values of being Caring and Inclusive, and never inadvertently excuses, justifies or minimises Domestic Abuse*

This document outlines the following:

* Common language used in domestic abuse investigations
* The effect of such language and how it can be detrimental
* Alternative suggestions of more neutral and professional language

# Language used in DA Investigations

Women are more likely than men to experience repeat victimisation, be physically injured or killed because of domestic abuse and experience non-physical abuse - including emotional and financial abuse.[[1]](#footnote-1) We have sometimes used gendered language in our examples to reflect this, but we acknowledge that there is not only one type of victim or perpetrator and that there will be individual needs as a result.

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| **Inappropriate language** | **Effect** | **Alternative suggestions** |
| **Domestic Violence/ DV** | This term does not account for the many ways victims are abused beyond physical violence, e.g. Coercive and Controlling Behaviour, Economic Abuse etc. | Replace the word “violence” with “abuse”.  *Domestic abuse/ DA* |
| **Just or Only**    *“It was only a verbal domestic”*  *“He just pushed her”* | Everything after the word ‘just’ or ‘only’ minimises the abuse for the victim and provides an excuse for the perpetrator | Be factual about the circumstances. Remove the word.  *“It was a domestic incident with no evidence or report of a criminal offence being committed”*  *“He pushed her”* |
| **Minor or low level**  *“It was a low-level assault”*  *“It was a minor argument/injury”*  *“This is a low level domestic”* | The terminology ‘low-level’ can be used appropriately in the context of describing risk of harm, e.g. when completing the DASH.  The term ‘minor’ may be appropriately used to describe the level of injury, especially in a comparative sense when considering which offence should be investigated/ charged.  However, these are not appropriate terms to use when they subjectively presume the impact of an incident upon a victim.  In a domestic abuse context, the reported incident is likely to be one of many (previously reported or not) that overall, could have a severe detrimental impact on the victim’s life.  This terminology can minimise the incident and negatively influence the future investigative response. | Be explicit about describing the risk of harm. Acknowledge the impact this incident may have on the victim in the context of ongoing abuse. Be factual about any injuries.  *“There was an assault without noticeable visible injury. However, this incident when considered with previous incidents and any ongoing abuse is likely to have had a serious impact on the victim’s well-being.”*  *“The risk of serious harm to the victim from this incident is low.”*  *“It was an assault with ABH level injuries sustained”*  *“The DASH rating is Standard risk”*  *“This is a domestic incident with no evidence or allegation of a criminal offence being committed”* |
| **Only once or it was a one-off**  “*It was a one-off argument”*  *“He locked her out only once”* | We know victims of Domestic Abuse typically under report and it may take them years to be able to come forward. Just because it is the first time it has been recorded this doesn’t mean it was the first time it happened. | Be clear it is the first recorded incident or just remove the word.  “*This is the first recorded Domestic Incident”*  *“He locked her out”* |
| **Victim choice**  “*Victim won’t leave the relationship”*  *“Victim has chosen not to support a prosecution”*  *“Victim refuses to complete a DASH”* | This type of language suggests some fault on the victim or implies there is some blame that lies with them.  **We do not want to use victim blaming language.**  Be mindful that choice and consent are only true when there is no fear or duress involved. Perpetrators wield power and control over their victims, thus removing their choice.  In addition, the victim may have had previous negative experiences with the Police which act as a barrier to engagement. The victim’s wishes may not be for a criminal justice outcome but for the abuse to stop and/or for the perpetrator to get help for their behaviour. | Use language that is factual and/or reflects the lack of choice and barriers that the victim might be facing and language that accounts for the actions of the perpetrator.  *“The perpetrator continues to abuse the victim and concerns for the victim’s safety remain”.*  *“We are proceeding with an evidence-led prosecution.”*  *“The victim appears to be in fear/coerced and unable to support a prosecution at this time”*  *“The victim was not ready to talk about the abuse with officers so the DASH is based on officer observations only.”* |
| **Relationship descriptions**  *“This is an abusive relationship.”*  *“Both parties have been in a stormy relationship for some time”*  *“The couple recently went through an acrimonious separation”* | Placing blame on the relationship or relationship dynamics, rather than on the abuser, suggests that both people are equally at fault.[[2]](#footnote-2)  Often a perpetrator will present as a victim or seek to apportion blame on a victim’s actions and this type of language perpetuates that blame and reduces perpetrator accountability for the abuse. | Use language that places accountability on the actions of the perpetrator. If it is unclear who the victim is, be factual about previous reports.  *“The victim is in a relationship/ living with an abusive partner”*  *“There is a history of domestic abuse reports between both parties over the last 12 months. [Insert name] has been recorded as the victim on XX occasions. [Insert name] has been recorded as the suspect on XX occasions.”* |

1. [What is domestic abuse? - Women’s Aid (womensaid.org.uk)](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Media-Guidelines-on-Violence-Against-Women.pdf (zerotolerance.org.uk)](https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Media-Guidelines-on-Violence-Against-Women.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)