

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic violence: The dark side of home isolation during quarantine

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Abstract

Domestic violence is a global public health problem. It takes many different forms and leads to significant physical and psychological consequences for the victim and the whole family. Situations that may prompt episodes of violence in the family include stress, emotional disappointment, economic factors, bad and cramped housing, and alcohol or drug abuse. How does the government's forced home isolation to contain Covid-19 infections impact on this type of abuse? Numerous articles have reported a decrease in reports of domestic violence since quarantine began but how reliable is these data? Is it a potential wake-up call for public institutions? We discuss the risks associated with quarantine measures during the pandemic and suggest the measures to prevent and improve the reporting of abuse cases.

Keywords

Domestic abuse, hidden, Covid-19 and quarantine, impact of forced isolation with an abuser, prevention and detection, strategies

Introduction

Domestic violence is abusive behaviour occurring in a family or a couple relationship that presupposes cohabitation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), violence within the home can be perpetrated in various forms:

1. physical (beatings, torture, murder);
2. sexual (unwanted intercourse, harassment, sexual jokes);
3. psychological (manipulation, threats, humiliations, intimidation);
4. economic (obsessive control of finances; money subtraction);
5. stalking (persecution, obsessive control of phone calls or messages).^{1,2}

Anyone can be a victim of abuse in a relationship. However, the literature demonstrates that women and children are most at risk, while elderly and disabled

people suffer negligence or neglect more often.³ Therefore, a multitude of behaviours, often subtle, which aim at controlling the other person, fall within the scope of domestic violence. Mistreatment does not always manifest itself openly but generally follows a 'scale of violence' that begins with intimidation, continues with isolation, devaluation and finally full-blown abuse. The sector studies confirm that, in most cases, the perpetrator does not suffer from a recognised psychiatric condition. On the other hand, in cases where the abuser suffers from a full-blown psychological or psychiatric disorder, the restrictions due to the pandemic could be used as an excuse to evade

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psychological support or taking psychotropic drugs, making the disorder more acute and dangerous. Analysis of the intra-family setting reveals a relational dynamic of chronic frustration, stress and disappointment, which is driven by the abuser's possessive and destructive control.⁴ To escape this spiral, it is essential that the victim recognises she/he lives in a violent relationship, but frequently the victim never brings a complaint for fear of repercussions or because they fear the impact on the family. The failure to report these crimes means they are too often underestimated and go unpunished which enables the abuse to continue and to damage undermining the psycho-physical health of the victim and the home environment. Today, the forced isolation of families in their homes due to the Covid-19 pandemic may create a dangerous situation with the potential to trigger domestic conflicts and episodes of abuse within the family which⁵ risk going unpunished, given the increased opportunities for an abuser with his captive cohabitants and reduced contact outside the home.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic violence in the world.

The forced cohabitation of many families around the world has shown signs of a real 'emergency in an emergency'. The statistical data that emerged from China, now at the end (for now at least) of the extraordinary isolation measures, have prompted brought increased instances of reports of domestic abuse, especially of women who were forced to live for months within an abusive relationship. Many newspapers reported episodes of couple violence that followed with dramatic abuse vented on their children. Forced isolation inside very small apartments or houses like those in China where there was a daily fear of abuse caused great stress and psychological harm. In addition, there was lack of police surveillance for this type of abuse due to the need to manage public order issues. In the USA, as the emergency developed, there was a rush to purchase firearms and alcohol (a dangerous combination). How will all of this impact on a family currently isolated in their home with an abuser? In Italy, where we are still in the midst of the emergency and isolation measures, we are witnessing a diametrically opposite phenomenon, namely a drop in calls to toll-free anti-violence numbers. It is clear that the decrease in reports does not reflect a reduction in violent incidents, but that, on the contrary, the greatest risk during the Covid-19 pandemic is that the victim remains trapped inside the home with the abuser, with no escape route or the opportunity to contact outside help. The same applies to children who are the victims of violence and where isolation has prevented them going to school and abuse being reported by teachers or friends.

Conclusions

The data that show a decrease in the number of reports of violence are an alarm call. It is reasonable to believe that personal restriction measures during the pandemic pose a dangerous risk factor for domestic violence which may be fuelled by elements such as:

- a. close contact between the victim–abuser in terms of shared space and time;
- b. the increase in stress caused by social, economic, psychological factors;
- c. the lack of opportunities for the victim to escape abuse;
- d. a reduction in the victim's contacts with outsiders.

We believe that it is essential that the competent authorities and the associations in charge remain vigilant and find and maintain new communication strategies with victims.^{6,7}

Accordingly, we propose that information programs and support initiatives through all mass media (TV, social networks, cell phones) are increased:

- promote the reporting of violence during the rare moments the abuser is absent;
- maintain online contact between teachers and educational institutions with young people, even during periods of isolation;
- allow faster reporting by victims by sending simple codes or symbols to dedicated toll-free numbers;
- encourage the reporting of cases by family members, acquaintances, neighbours who have news or suspicions;
- protect victims who report episodes of violence.

Greater focus should be directed towards families in which there have been previous episodes of violence and who are already known to the authorities.

In these cases, it would be desirable to set up an online social assistance service that intervenes periodically and compulsorily, even where there is no current active request for help, in order to verify the security of the family environment.

If these initiatives are adopted, they would both protect victims and bring to light hidden instances of domestic violence, and some crimes would be prevented altogether.

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Psychological support and psychotherapy via digital devices in Covid-19 emergency time: Some critical issues

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting fear, quarantine and lockdown measures implemented in Italy and other countries to contain the risk of contagion have seriously impacted the mental health of a large number of people. The need to offer psychological and psychotherapeutic support to these people, while respecting the government's pressing calls to "stay home", have led many psychologists and psychotherapists, both in the public and private sectors, to provide their professional services via teleconference, telephone, smartphone, etc. The aim of this work is to highlight some critical issues related to the sudden switch from the traditional method of providing psychological services to the digital one in Italy.

Keywords

Covid-19, e-psychological care, criticism, privacy, informed consent, professional responsibility

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