

# Christmas & Domestic Violence

## "Year End, New Beginnings"

**C**hristmas is magical. Curbing the excitement just about enough to drift to sleep before Santa's arrival, the innocent dreams of what waits beneath the tree and families coming together with full bellies and even fuller hearts. Albeit it's not always perfect - What family hasn't had an annual collision over Monopoly or threatened the dictionary in Scrabble at some point? Despite that, tensions are easily and playfully dissolved - the home is a warm, joyous and safe place to be.

In homes where domestic violence takes place, those tensions are of a very different type. Like the rest of the year, Christmas is another time when victims walk tirelessly on eggshells out of fear and hope for the holiday to pass without the eruption of violence. The emotional abuse continues to simmer underpinned by the exertion of power and coercive control.

The PSNI often report a spike in domestic violence incidents over Christmas, and we understand why. Increased time spent at home, added stresses, financial pressures and excess alcohol consumption can be a deadly recipe for already present abuse to manifest and escalate.

At Women's Aid, the period before Christmas is a busy time. We are so grateful for such generous donations we receive. As a result, we can work to ensure that no woman or child engaged in our services goes without at Christmas. We are also of sound knowledge that Santa visits our refuges as well, so all children can sleep in the peace of knowing they won't be forgotten about, even if they are away from home.

What we have found, however, is that domestic violence services can actually see a dip before Christmas. Women are likely to endure abuse by placating her abuser in order to hold the family together for Christmas and out of love for her children. There are often pressures to create a perfect family Christmas that societal norms portray, feelings of guilt and shame can also play a role preventing women coming forward at this time. Both the commercialised and traditional perceptions of what Christmas should be or look like, can make the internal feelings of sadness, isolation and hopelessness, all the more poignant for women.

Victims of domestic violence often experience financial abuse all year round - combine this with the added pressure of paying for children's toys, putting food on the table and heating the house in the midst of winter.

The intensity of Christmas means women are often more closely monitored and may not have the physical freedom or time to pick up the phone to specialist support services that are available.

Regardless of these data trends and the pictures they convey, the lives and safety of women and children affected by domestic violence are our utmost priority. That is why we want women to know that support is available 365 days a year, 24 Hours a day by ringing **0808 802 1414**. 999 should always be used in the case of an emergency. Our refuges open their doors to women and children fleeing domestic violence all year round offering a warm, supportive and lifesaving service- even at Christmas time.

When the magic of Christmas subsides, the real magic is the opportunity of a new year that follows and the new beginnings which that can entail. *Sarah Bruce*

*women's aid*

Belfast and Lisburn