

“...the forgotten heroes”: a qualitative study exploring how friends and family members of DV survivors use domestic violence helplines to seek support

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Abstract

Many women who experience domestic violence (DV) seek support from friends, relatives, colleagues or neighbours. For these informal supporters there are substantial knock-on effects, and since they are neither neutral nor unaffected by the situation, they may want to seek help themselves. Tailored services for this population are rare, but domestic violence helplines can provide listening and signposting support. The aim of this exploratory study was to understand which groups of informal supporters call DV helplines, and what forms of support they seek.

Three focus groups were conducted with staff and volunteers for DV helplines. Discussions were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into NVivo10 software. Transcripts were coded line-by-line, and a thematic analysis carried out. All participants were female, aged between 22 and 54 and had between 1 month and 8 years' experience of taking helpline calls.

Findings indicate that a broad range of people in connection with survivors contact helplines. Calls are often triggered by: disclosures, escalation of abuse, witnessing incidents, feeling overwhelmed by the situation, and DV being highlighted in the media. Informal supporters call helplines to: reduce feelings of helplessness, express emotions, solidify plans for action/support, seek validation regarding their own needs within the situation, gain knowledge, and reduce feelings of isolation.

Domestic violence helplines have an important role in helping informal supporters of DV survivors. The help requested is predominantly to equip and empower informal supporters so they feel better able to cope themselves and, are thus, better able to offer support to survivors.

Patient and Public Involvement (PPI)

The idea for this piece of research came from previous studies involving friends and family members of survivors