

DRUGS OF ABUSE

The links between illegal drugs and domestic violence are strong. Yet services have found it hard to share expertise. **Sam Hart** reports on how a new project aims to help both victims and perpetrators by bridging the gap between the domestic violence and illegal drug use fields.

"Karl was starting out his new business and it was a stressful time," recalls Maggie, now 40, of a relationship she had in the late 90s. "We started doing lines of coke to relax and at first it was great. We had a brilliant time talking about our future and making plans."

But growing levels of stress and the intensity of drug-enhanced mood swings seemed to combine to push Karl, who had always been a jealous boyfriend, into a state of paranoia about Maggie's fidelity. This, in turn, ended in physical and emotional abuse.

"He would try to make me confess to sleeping with mutual friends. He'd play psychological games and be very verbally abusive. He'd scream in my face and hit me and call me revolting names. At one point he held me at knifepoint trying to force me into saying that I was having an affair with one of his mates."

Maggie says that although the violence to which she was subjected was caused in essence by Karl's changing



personality, the abuse occurred at times when he was high on, or recovering from, large amounts of cocaine. But when she tried to get help, she found services were limited in what aspects of her life they could deal with. "If I had just had a drug problem or just been being beaten up by a teetotaler, it would have been easier getting help. Unfortunately for me, it wasn't like that," says Maggie.

While the link between alcohol and domestic violence is well-established, there is limited research or expertise on the role played by illegal drugs. There is a growing body of evidence, however, that many victims and perpetrators of domestic violence are illegal drug users. Organisations which help those at the receiving end of violence are not as well-equipped as they could be to cope with drug problems, while drug-focussed services rarely have expertise in helping victims of domestic violence.

But a new four-year peer support project launched by the London Drug and Alcohol Network (LDAN) last month will bring together professionals from the domestic violence and substance misuse fields to share ideas, identify best practice and therefore improve services for both victims and perpetrators.

"The idea is for workers to get together and discuss the issues and see where the gaps in provision are," says Carlita McKnight, DrugScope's membership and development officer who is co-ordinating the project. "Traditionally there has been a much stronger emphasis on working with victims of domestic violence, but this project will also examine the work being done with perpetrators."

The lack of joint working between agencies may in some part be hampered by the complexity of the relationship between domestic violence and drug abuse. Although there are links, experts are quick to point out that it is not a simple matter of cause and effect.

Most women surveyed in the Mayor of London's 2005 report, *Domestic violence and substance misuse: overlapping issues in separate services?*, said that they had been abused by their partners were not under the influence of drug or alcohol. And research has shown that while reducing substance misuse may lessen the level of physical injury, it has not been shown to reduce the frequency of domestic violence episodes.

"I think he would have started hitting me without the drugs to be honest," says Maggie, who now runs her own business and lives happily with her two children by the coast. "But the drugs were like a

trigger – they made it happen quicker," she says.

And many perpetrators themselves are quick to point out that substance misuse is not an excuse for violent behaviour. Matthew, a perpetrator interviewed for the Mayor of London's report explained:

"I was so off my head, drunk, off any kind of substance, you know what I mean, it's like my mind, my brain, my head, wasn't really in the right frame of mind to make proper choices, you know what I'm saying?...But then having said that, at the end of the day, it's no excuse, do you know what I mean? It's like I did what I did and I shouldn't have done, basically."

"I THINK HE WOULD
HAVE STARTED HITTING
ME WITHOUT THE
DRUGS TO BE HONEST.
BUT THE DRUGS WERE
LIKE A TRIGGER – THEY
MADE IT HAPPEN
QUICKER"

Drug abuse can manifest in a violent relationship in a number of ways, according to the London-based domestic violence charity, the Stella Project. A perpetrator for example, may force his victim to act as a supplier, use her earnings to buy drugs or force her to take illegal substances. He may even attempt to sabotage his partner's efforts to reduce her drug use by preventing her from accessing treatment programmes. Women may also be afraid to seek help for domestic violence for fear of having their substance misuse exposed by their partner – particularly where children are involved.

Moreover, victims of domestic violence may have difficulty accessing appropriate services as many refuges will not accept women with substance misuse problems. In 2003, *Using Women*, a DrugScope report, found that only one in ten of the 450 women's refuges automatically let in women with drug problems.

The Stella Project and other agencies believe that tackling both issues is essential and argue that addressing the issues separately will have limited success. The Mayor of London report claims that: "Attempting to address a survivor's substance use without

also giving support in relation to their experiences of violence is unlikely to be effective."

"Part of the problem is that staff working in substance misuse may not have the necessary skills and training to deal with domestic violence. Similarly domestic violence workers may not feel confident about tackling substance misuse," says McKnight. "The project is about how best LDAN can add to the good work that is already being done."

The Stella Project has published a toolkit to help workers in both sectors to address the 'other' issue. It urges drug and alcohol workers to be up front with perpetrators about their capacity for violence and points out that there is a high likelihood that a woman using drugs may be living with a violent partner.

Similarly, drug and alcohol workers are warned that ignoring drug and alcohol issues could mean that a victim will be less likely to leave a violent partner and are encouraged towards joint working: "Working in partnership with drug and alcohol agencies will reduce your workload, increase your confidence that you are working effectively improve outcomes and reduce repeat victimisation."

Yet agencies agree that different working models and pressures on time and funding mean that partnership working is not always effective as it could be.

The Stella Project report, *Separate Issues Shared Solutions*, says that regular communication and strong working relations between DAAT and domestic violence chiefs is key to success. It also stresses the importance of involving service users when deciding on care and treatment plans.

And the Mayor of London's office report has argued for a much more holistic approach to dealing with the issues of substance misuse and domestic violence if interventions are to be effective:

"Without greater attention to the ways in which these issues intersect for individual men and women, intervention will be undermined," it warns. "At best, much work will be ineffective – at worst, it will be dangerous."

■ Sam Hart is a freelance journalist

For more details about the LDAN domestic violence peer support project, contact Carlita McKnight on carlitam@drugscope.org.uk