

HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT A VICTIM OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Friends and family are often the first place victims of domestic violence seek help. Such support can make an important difference for those trying to free themselves from an abusive relationship.

KNOW THAT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DOESN'T DISCRIMINATE

People from all walks of life are impacted by domestic violence, regardless of race, education, income, age, marital status, or family history. Most victims spend a lot of time and energy to hide the abuse they are suffering. If you don't believe that people you know, people close to you, can be abused, you may ignore all the red flags. You may see all the signs and accept the stories that explain away injuries or excuse an abuser's behavior.

LEARN ABOUT THE DYNAMICS OF ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Many of the people who surround a victim of domestic violence don't understand what her life is really like - they only see the public image, not the violence that is taking place when no one else is watching. Though they sincerely want to say and do the right thing, friends and family can make the situation worse through their ignorance of the issue. You can share what you learn with the victim.

STAY IN TOUCH

Abusers work diligently to isolate their partners from the people around them, making it easier for them to control their partner. However, few victims of domestic violence live in total seclusion.

LISTEN

Friends and family members struggle when someone they care about is in an abusive relationship. "Do I ask about it? What if I'm wrong? Do I offer help? What if I'm accused of interfering? Do I take action? What if I put my family at risk?" These are all legitimate concerns. The best way for a friend or relative of an abused woman to start the conversation is by listening. An abuser will always control and devalue his partner's perception of reality by making her doubt what she sees and hears. She needs support and encouragement from someone she knows and trusts to hold firmly to her truth. BUT, she knows things about her relationship that her friends and family do not.

BELIEVE HER

Many victims reach out for help only to have people doubt their stories. "That can't be true. He'd never do something so cruel. Are you sure you're not exaggerating or being dramatic?" When a victim hears such things, she may feel that no one will believe her or help her, just as her batterer has told her. This may prevent her from ever reaching out in the future.

ACCEPT THAT ONLY THE VICTIM CAN MAKE CHOICES ABOUT HER LIFE

Many friends and family members feel so helpless about the situation that they feel better by taking control - By telling the victim what to do, or what choices to make. Telling her to leave is something that every victim has heard a million times, and it only works to alienate the victim from you. A victim is coming from a place of being controlled and having decisions made for her, and having someone else come in and do the same (regardless of intent) is not empowering. Victims often need to become strong (emotionally, financially, etc.) within the relationship before they are able to successfully get out of it.

VICTIM BLAMING

Victim blaming is not limited to victims of domestic violence. All victims, whether raped, burglarized, beaten, or mugged, receive subtle messages that something they said (or did not say), something they did (or did not do), contributed to their assault. If they made a mistake that I wouldn't make, then something like this can't happen to me. They will believe and hope that in her shoes, they would have left after the first insult, the first threat, or the first slap. They will pass judgment on her, not out of malice, but out of a need to feel safe.

WORDS THAT HURT

✘ *IF IT'S THAT BAD, WHY DON'T YOU LEAVE?*

Translation: You're probably exaggerating and being dramatic - otherwise you would have left. But if what you say is true, stop complaining and do something about it.

✘ *WHY DO YOU PUT UP WITH IT?*

Translation: There is something wrong with you. You're a masochist.

✘ *IF MY PARTNER EVER PULLED THE STUFF THAT YOURS DOES, I'D BREAK HIS LEGS AND HE KNOWS IT!*

Translation: If you'd only set better limits, you wouldn't get abused. It's up to you to stop the abuse.

✘ *WHAT MADE HIM FREAK OUT ON YOU LIKE THAT?*

Translation: There must be a good reason why he behaved this way. Maybe you did something to cause it, or perhaps it was drugs or alcohol.

✘ *YOU NEED TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO MAKE THIS RELATIONSHIP WORK FOR YOUR CHILDREN.*

Translation: All couples have relationship problems, and this is no different. Get over it. Your children will suffer more if you separate from their father.

✘ *TRY TO UNDERSTAND THINGS FROM YOUR PARTNER'S POINT OF VIEW.*

Translation: If you could only understand your partner better, you'd stop doing the things that make him so angry.

✘ *IF YOU DON'T END THINGS WITH THAT JERK, I'VE HAD IT WITH YOU.*

Translation: I can't be friends with someone as messed up as you.

✘ *SAYING NOTHING AT ALL.*

Translation: I don't care about you. I don't see a problem with what's happening. You're imagining things. I won't help you or believe you.

WORDS THAT HEAL

While the wrong words hurt, the right words can heal. Once the conversation begins, it will likely go on for many months, even years, if she realizes that the person talking to her understands some of what she is going through, does not blame her for tolerating his behavior, and will not pressure her to leave.

✓ *I'm worried about you.*

Be as specific as possible. Refer to specific incidents you have witnessed, don't attack the entire relationship. "When he was so sarcastic about your makeup yesterday, I could see it really embarrassed you. Then when he grabbed your arm, it made me feel scared. I'm worried for your safety."

✓ *I'm here for you if you ever want to talk.*

She may not be ready yet, but she will remember that you cared enough to make the offer. DON'T make her feel ashamed or embarrassed, don't be judgmental or tell her what to do. She'll end up apologizing for his behavior and dropping you as a friend.

✓ *What is this like for you?*

Every abused woman experiences abuse differently. Listening shows you respect her, and provides her with a safe place for her to shape her thoughts and feelings.

✓ *You don't deserve this.*

This is the message that a victim needs to hear. Not that she's perfect, no one is, but that no matter what she has done, she doesn't deserve to be abused. It can be terribly difficult for a woman in an abusive relationship to see the mismatch between her mistakes - assuming they are mistakes-and her abuser's response to them.

✓ *You're a strong person.*

Battered women show enormous strength both while they are in the relationship and as they work to leave the relationship. She has to be strong to survive her abuser's on-going campaign of control, to survive his regular assaults on her spirit and dignity.