

Suggestions for Family and Friends

As friends and family members, it can be difficult to know what to do when someone you care about is experiencing domestic violence. Yet you play a very important role in the survivor's life. Some things you can do to support friends and family members include:

- **Understanding abuse:** Abuse is never the victim's fault. It is a pattern of physical and emotionally violent and coercive behaviors that one person uses to exercise power and control over another. Abusers may use verbal insults, emotional abuse, financial control, threats and/or sexual and physical violence as a way to dominate their partners and get their way.
- **Recognize the signs of abuse:** While abuse can look different in every case, certain behaviors are red flags that abuse might be present. The following characteristics might be present in a relationship where your friend or family member's partner is abusive:
 - Her partner acts very controlling and puts her down in front of people
 - Her partner acts very jealous of others who pay attention to her, especially men
 - Your friend becomes quiet when he is around and seems afraid of making him angry
 - Your friend stops seeing friends and family members, becoming more isolated.
 - Your friend often has unexplained injuries or the explanations she offers don't quite add up
 - Your friend often cancels plans at the last minute.
 - Your friend's partner controls her finances, her behavior, and who she socializes with
- **Understand why she stays:** There are many reasons a woman decides to return or to stay in an abusive relationship. In many cases, fear is the main reason. She may want the violence to end, not the relationship. She may want her children to grow up with both parents. She may not have the financial resources to take care of her family's needs on her own. Whatever the reason is, you can help by not judging her decisions, acknowledging the ways in which her choices are limited, helping her find resources to address her needs, and encouraging her to develop a safety plan for herself and her children.
- **How to help if she leaves:** The most important thing you can do is help her develop a plan in advance to leave the relationship. This might include saving money, getting copies of important documents, and deciding where she is going to go if she leaves. If she manages to escape her relationship, she may need money, help finding a place to live, a place to store her belongings or transportation to a battered woman's programs. Decide if you feel comfortable providing this type of assistance.

Talking about domestic violence with your family member or friend

Here's are some ideas you can use to help your friend talk about the abuse and get the help that is available. Remember: your friend may not see herself as a victim or her partner as an abuser. Try to avoid those words when talking to her.

- **Ask specific questions.** If you suspect domestic violence is occurring, ask how the relationship is going. Ask about disagreements and tension that you observe in the relationship. You can ask specific questions like, "Has he ever pushed or shoved you?" or "Has he ever called you or your children names?"
- **Be aware of the effects of domestic violence.** Domestic violence has serious and dangerous physical and emotional effects on everyone living in the household, including the children. Educate yourself on the effects of domestic violence so that you can share them with the victim/survivor in a non-judgmental way that lets her know that you are concerned. Information can be a powerful tool in helping her recognize and mobilize herself against future violence.
- **Trust her knowledge.** Victim/survivors are the "experts" on their relationships and are typically aware of the patterns of violence that occur in the relationship and the batterer's behavior, so trust her to gauge when she is safest. Respect her choices about when she can or cannot take certain steps.
- **Give her positive feedback.** Physically abusive relationships are also emotionally abusive, and all types of abuse lower the victim/survivor's self-esteem. Some victims stay in the relationship because they believe that they are to blame for the abuse or do not see the possibility of a nonviolent relationship. She may also have fears of making it on her own. Remind her of her strengths and abilities and her importance to you.
- **Recognize her efforts.** Realize that the victim/survivor is doing something every day to try to improve her situation. Victim/survivors try many things to stop the violence in their lives. These may include talking with the abuser, calling the police, or contacting a mental health professional or clergy member. Recognize that although you might like to see her make different choices, she is trying to improve her situation. Change often occurs in small steps that eventually lead to large gains.
- **Do not criticize the abuser.** Saying critical things about the batterer also implies criticism of the victim/survivor as she may have chosen the batterer as her partner. Also, one of the ways that many abusers isolate their victims is by telling her that her friends and family don't like him and

want to break up the relationship. Criticisms of the abuser may convince her that he is telling the truth about this. Keep in mind that she may also see his positive qualities and continue to love him, despite the abuse. Criticizing the abuser can cause distance in your relationship making her less likely to come to you for support.

- **Don't make choices for her.** One aspect of abusive relationships is that the batterer limits the victim's ability to make choices. Try not to repeat this behavior by giving her ultimatums or orders. Issuing ultimatums or orders may lessen her ability to confide in you and get your support.
- **Learn about community resources.** You may want to help yourself by contacting a local shelter or domestic violence program to educate yourself about domestic violence and learn more about community resources. Expand your own support system so that you can share your feelings and frustrations with others.
- **Be patient and know your limits.** A victim/survivor may try to leave several times before she makes a final break, and this process can take years. While it can be difficult to maintain your patience with her, remember that leaving is a process that takes time. Develop personal boundaries for yourself so that you can be supportive, but not overwhelmed by a victim/survivor's needs. Make sure to take time for you to engage in self-care and get support.
- **Encourage her to start a log or journal.** This may help the victim/survivor to realize the frequency, severity, and duration of the abuse she has experienced and can be a helpful source of information later. You may also want to keep a log that can include information about the violent events or others who saw or heard the event, pictures, and information about injuries to the victim or property.
- **Encourage the victim/survivor to develop a safety plan.** Safety plans can help the victim/survivor to make important plans and decisions about her safety. Safety plans may include the "what" and "how" a victim/survivor will respond if violence is imminent. Safety planning is an ongoing process that changes and evolves as she makes difficult decisions about the relationship. Contact your local shelter to learn more specific information about safety planning.
- **Call the police.** If you witness or hear a violent episode, DO NOT try to intervene physically as this may result in injuries to you or others. Call 911 immediately. When the police arrive, cooperate, ask to fill out a statement, and prepare yourself to testify in court. Often the victim/survivor cannot cooperate with the police or follow through to take necessary legal steps due to her fear of the abuser.