



When Someone You Know Is Abused: Information for Family and Friends

Understanding why it might be difficult to leave an abusive relationship can help you identify ways to support your loved one.

Situational Factors

- **Financial dependence** on the abuser.
- **Lack of a support system** to assist victims in recognizing and escaping the abuse
- **Lack of a community response** in understanding and protecting victims.
- **Threats by the abuser** when a victim tries to separate, including threats to kill the victim, the children, or other family members, and/or to commit suicide. Knowledge of women who were killed after separating from their abusers heightens this fear.

Psychological Factors

- **Emotional ties to the abuser.** Abuse doesn't necessarily mean that feelings of love will automatically end. These feelings are typically reinforced by periods of time in which there is no abuse and their partner is loving, or at least civil.
- **A belief that victims should understand their abuser** and help them to stop their destructive behaviors.
- **A belief in the value of holding the family together** and putting this belief above their own personal pain, fear, etc. Victims may, also, feel pressure from family and religion.
- **Feelings of personal incompetence and self-doubt** that lead victims to believe that they must have a partner to survive, even if that person is abusive. Over time, many increasingly question their own value, judgment, capabilities, and attractiveness as the effects of abuse eat away at their self-esteem.
- **Self-blame and the need to defend the abuser.** Because abusers punish victims for their inability to act "properly" or to meet their expectations, victims often believe that they are, in part, responsible for the abuse.
- **The belief that violence is a normal part of all relationships.**
- **A belief in the total power of the abuser** to act on threats made.

The Reality of Leaving a Domestic Violence Relationship

- Victims and survivors of domestic violence have trouble finding apartments because they may have poor credit, rental, and employment histories as a result of their abuse. Susan A. Reif and Lisa J. Krisher. 2000. "Subsidized Housing and the Unique Needs of Domestic Violence Victim." *Clearing House Review*. National Center on Poverty Law. Chicago, IL.
- In a 2002 report by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, 44 percent of the cities surveyed identified domestic violence as the primary cause of homelessness. The United States Conference of Mayors. 1999. *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities*, p.39.
- Batterers often use child custody as a forum for further abuse through harassing and retaliatory legal actions. Report of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family. *Violence and the Family*, 40 (1996).

- Eighty percent of women who are stalked by former husbands are physically assaulted by that partner and 30 percent are sexually assaulted by that partner. Center for Policy Research, Stalking in America, July 1997.

How Can I Help?

- **Be supportive and non-judgmental.** Listen to your friend or family member; what they need most is someone who will believe them.
- **Acknowledge that he or she is in a difficult and scary situation.** Let them know that the abuse is not their fault. Reassure them that nothing they did or did not do caused the abuse.
- **Don't be afraid to express your concern for their safety.**
- **Help them create a safety plan.** Read safety planning tips and discuss them with your friend.
- **Be supportive when your friend or family member is feeling alone or mourning the loss of the relationship.** This is a normal part of the healing process.
- **Encourage them to participate in activities outside of the relationship** in order to support healthy attachments and to reduce their isolation.
- **Encourage them to talk to people who can provide help and guidance.** Offer to accompany them to talk with other family and friends. Find a local domestic violence agency that provides counseling and/or support groups. If they need to go to the police, to court, or to see an attorney, suggest going with them for moral support.
- **Don't try to rescue your friend or family member.** The decision to leave the relationship is ultimately theirs. But you can help when they decide to reach out.
- **Focus on your concerns for your friend instead of criticizing the abuser.** Your friend may not be receptive to your help if she feels she has to defend why she is in the relationship.

You Can Make A Difference!

- Urge your members of Congress to support additional funding for domestic violence programs through the Violence Against Women Act, the Victims of Crime Act Fund, and the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act.
- Work with policy advocacy groups, such as state coalitions against domestic violence, to influence your state legislature to pass progressive domestic violence laws and ensure that local programs receive funding for prevention and intervention services.
- Volunteer at a domestic violence shelter or make a donation to a local program.
- Serve as a language translator for local domestic violence programs.
- Offer professional services such as legal services and tax preparations for survivors, fundraising, event planning, or other services for domestic violence programs.
- Educate your community and arrange speaking engagements at schools, churches, or civic groups to address the problems of domestic violence.
- Become a member of a local, state or national domestic violence organization to learn more about what is happening in the effort to stop domestic violence in your community and country.

Please call the 24-Hour National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or TTY 1-800-787-3224 to discuss your concerns and questions.