

HOW TO HELP VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

For the purpose of this document, abusers will be referred to as men and victims as women, although abusers and victims may be either male or female.

You want to save the victim, but **you cannot save her.**

She knows how dangerous it is to leave her abusive partner, and only SHE knows when the time is right. As crazy as it sounds, it is an insult to ask the victim, “Why don’t you just leave him?” On some level she already knows she needs to leave, but she is either incapable of admitting it or following through.

The average victim leaves her abuser 7 times, before she leaves for good. She knows how dangerous it is. In fact, leaving him is the most dangerous time in their abusive relationship. WHY? The victim is in the process of escaping the clutches of his power and control. As a result, the abusive partner will take more desperate measures to keep her with him.

The victim has thus far learned how to survive the abuse and that has taken immense courage. She is strong and will absorb everything you say to her. What she will remember **most** is how you made her feel. Victims have unique journeys to safety, so there is no right way to help or support them. What is most important is that you care and are willing to try.

Leaving an abusive relationship is a highly personal decision but all victims benefit from having trusted people in their life during this time. Since the victim is often isolated by her abuser, it’s imperative to know how to support her on the path to safety.

Domestic violence is a strain on the people who witness, intervene, or recognize the tragic realities of relationship abuse. It can be painful and draining — physically, mentally, emotionally, and financially — to watch the people in your life be abused.

DO NOT talk to the abuser. It will likely put her in more danger. He has probably threatened her not to tell anyone about the abuse or else...

What you CAN do to help the victim:

First, learn everything you can about domestic violence. Contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline online or call at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). The hotline.org If you have never been in an abusive relationship, it is a very complex and difficult issue to understand.

Find a safe place to communicate with the victim. Cell phone or computer contact may be dangerous if the abuser monitors and reads her messages and sees her contacts. She is likely isolated from friends and family, and your connection can literally be lifesaving.

Be totally present for the victim; physically, mentally and emotionally. Turn off your phone or any other possible distractions. Schedule enough time so you don’t feel rushed. Avoid being pre-occupied with other things going on in your life.

Listen intently. Listen to her words and emotions. Avoid interrupting or offering unsolicited advice. Reflect on what you hear to show you're engaged. Ask open-ended questions.

Be non-judgmental. When you listen without judgment victims can feel understood and less alone in their struggles. If she feels judged, she will probably cut you off. This means not telling her that what she feels is wrong. She may share irrational thoughts and feelings. Avoid rolling your eyes and making her feel like she's crazy.

Suggested prompts when you talk to the victim:

- Please tell me more.
- I want to hear everything.
- What is the hardest part to talk about?
- What is your biggest fear?
- What does that feel like?

Validate the victim. As a result of being abused, she may experience shame, confusion, and fear. It is vital to validate her feelings without diminishing them. What victims need is a listening ear and a trusting friend or family member. Use phrases like "It's okay to feel this way" or "What you're feeling is completely understandable". This will affirm her emotions. You are reinforcing that her experiences are real and deserving of attention and care. You may be the first person she has confided in. If she told others prior to meeting with you, she may not have been believed. Domestic violence victims rarely exaggerate. If anything, they share only a fraction of what is really happening with their abusive partner.

Be compassionate and understanding. This is often very difficult because you have such strong feelings about wanting her to leave. You must leave your thoughts and feelings aside and focus on her. You see the danger, why doesn't she!

Respect the victim's boundaries. Trauma and abuse are very complex and not everyone is ready to talk about it. Let her lead the conversation and be sensitive to her needs. If she prefers silence or needs time to gather her thoughts, respect that. Don't rush the conversation. It is often scary for her to share this sensitive information. She may feel she is betraying her partner by talking with you. When you respect the victim's boundaries, you show her that you value her comfort and autonomy, fostering a sense of security.

Provide resources Don't be surprised if she cannot take them with her. Having resources on or with her could put her safety in jeopardy. If her abusive partner finds these resources, she may be more danger. He may have threatened her if she tells anyone about the abuse, or what he may refer to as, "what is happening in the privacy of our home."

Provide practical support. Help the victim find adequate housing, childcare, food and legal services. Many victims have limited financial resources which make leaving their abusers more challenging.

Don't give up on the victim. She is already feeling isolated, not believed and judged. No matter how frustrating and how much you need to repeat the same thing over and over, don't give up. She needs you, even though she may not know it at the time. Don't abandon her.

Encourage the victim to seek professional help if feasible. Counselors are non-judgmental professionals who listen and assist survivors in working through their trauma. In addition to coping with their anxiety, trauma specialists can also help survivors relieve stress and find ways to cope.

Offer ongoing help. Provide her with a list of counselors who specialize in domestic violence, or a therapist associated with the nearest domestic violence center. You can help her by researching local resources, offering to accompany her to appointments, or helping her find online support communities.

Don't Quit. Don't stop being present for her.