

Helping a Woman Who is Abused

It's Natural to Help Your Neighbor or Family...It's Hard to Know What to Do

Millions of women are physically abused by husbands, boyfriends or intimate partners* each year. Chances are, someone you know—your neighbor, coworker, friend, sister, or mother—is a victim of domestic violence. Here are some signs that a woman may be in trouble:

- She often has bruises or injuries or she has frequent “accidents” for which she gives vague explanations. These “accidents” cause her to miss work.
- Her partner controls her activities, the family’s finances, the way she dresses, or her contact with friends and family.
- She frequently cancels plans at the last minute or seems afraid of making her partner angry.
- Her partner ridicules her publicly or you sense volatility in his comments.
- You notice changes in her or her children’s behavior. She appears frightened or exhausted.

Perhaps you feel her problem will “work itself out.” Not so. Domestic violence doesn’t usually end unless action is taken to stop it. But it can be hard to know what to do. People are often reluctant to discuss something so intimate, and they’re afraid of intruding. Consider these common causes for not offering to help:

I shouldn't get involved in a private family matter.

Domestic violence—also called spouse abuse, battering, woman abuse, and wife beating—is not just a family problem. It is a crime with serious repercussions for your friend, her children, and the entire community.

The violence can't really be that serious.

Domestic violence includes threats, pushing, punching, slapping, choking, sexual assault, and assault with weapons. It is rarely a one-time occurrence and usually escalates in frequency and severity. Any act of domestic violence is something to take seriously. Wife beating results in more injuries that require medical treatment than rape, auto accidents, and muggings combined. And battering can be deadly: 30% of women murdered in the U.S. are killed by husbands or boyfriends.

She must be doing something to provoke his violence.

A victim of battering is never to blame for another person’s choice to use violence against her. Problems exist in many relationships, but using violence to resolve them is never acceptable.

If it were really bad, she would just leave.

For most of us, a decision to end a relationship is not easy. Leaving a violent relationship is even harder. A woman’s emotional ties to her partner may be strong, giving her hope that the violence will end. She may be financially dependent—in leaving, she will likely face severe economic hardship. She may not know about resources, or social and justice systems may have been unhelpful to her in the past. Religious, cultural, or family pressures may make her think it’s her duty to keep her marriage together. Her partner may have threatened her with violence to stop her from leaving. If she is a migrant or seasonal farmworker, additional barriers to leaving may include a lack of transportation, lack of knowledge about the legal system and types of protection it offers, or lack of bilingual resources.

Doesn't she care about what's happening to her children?

Your friend is probably doing her best to protect her children from violence. She may feel that the abuse is directed only at her, and doesn't yet realize its effects on the children. She may believe her children need a father, or she may lack the resources to support them on her own. The children may beg her to stay, not wanting to leave their home or friends. She may fear that, if she leaves, she will lose custody of her children.

I know him—I really don't think he could hurt anyone.

Many abusers are not violent in other relationships and can be charming in social situations, yet still be extremely violent in the privacy of their homes.

He must be sick.

Battering is a learned behavior, not a mental illness. An abuser's experience as a child and the messages he gets from society tell him that violence is an easy way to get power and control over a partner's behavior. Men who batter choose this behavior and viewing them as "sick" wrongly excuses them from taking responsibility for it.

I think his drinking problem causes the violence.

Alcohol or drug use may intensify violent behavior, but it does not cause battering. Men who batter typically make excuses for their violence, claiming a loss of control due to alcohol or drug use or extreme stress. Battering, however, does not represent a loss of control, but a way of achieving it.

How can she still care for someone who abuses her?

Chances are, the man is not always abusive. He may actually show remorse for his violence, promising that he will change. Your friend understandably hopes for such changes. Their relationship probably involves good times, bad times, and in-between times.

If she wanted my help, she'd ask for it.

Your friend may not want to confide in you, feeling you may not understand her situation. She may even be ashamed of what's happening, and that may make her seem standoffish. Talk to her about abuse in a general way. Tell her you're concerned about women who are abused and that you do not blame women for the violence.

What You Can Do

You may be an important part of a woman's journey to safety. For many women, it takes a lot of time, planning, help, and courage to escape the violence. In the meantime, it is important for women to know that help is available from people who know and care about the situation.

- Lend a listening ear without judging. Tell your friend that you care and are willing to listen. If she is willing to talk, listen carefully and empathetically, in a safe place. Believe her. Never blame her for what's happening or underestimate her fear of danger. Let her know that no one deserves to be abused, beaten, or threatened.
- Allow her to make her own decisions. As you listen, try to understand the many obstacles that keep her from getting free. It's usually very complex. Focus on supporting her in making her own decisions. If she is being battered, he is exercising a lot of control over her life. Making choices for herself—even if it is staying with the abuser for now—is often the first step towards freedom. Even if she leaves him and then goes back, don't withdraw your support. Many battered women leave and return several times before leaving him for good.
- Guide her to community services. Many abused women who found freedom describe someone they knew (a neighbor, doctor, friend) offering support and referring them to an advocacy group. Gather information about domestic violence programs in your area that offer safety,

advocacy, support, legal information, and other services. If she asks for advice on what to do, share the information you've gathered with her privately. Let her know she is not alone and that people are available to help her. Assure her that they will keep information about her confidential. Many women first seek the advice of marriage counselors, psychiatrists or members of the clergy. Not all helping professionals, however, are fully aware of the special circumstances of abused women. If the first person she contacts is not helpful, encourage her to look elsewhere.

- Focus on her strengths. Abused women live with emotional as well as physical abuse. The abuser probably continually tells your friend that she is a bad woman, bad wife, and bad mother. She may believe she can't do anything right and that there really is something wrong with her. Give her emotional support and help her believe she is a good person. Help her examine her strengths and skills. Emphasize that she deserves a life that is free from violence.
- Help her make a safety plan. Your friend may decide to remain in the violent relationship or return to the abuser after a temporary separation. Do not pressure her to leave, but let her know that you are afraid for her and her children and help her consider how dangerous the violence may be. Encourage her to keep a log of what's happening to her or tell her doctor or nurse about the violence. Help her think about steps she can take if her partner becomes abusive again. Make a list of people to call in an emergency. Suggest she hide a suitcase of clothing, money, social security cards, bankbooks, birth certificates, and school records for future emergencies. Acknowledge that she may be in the most danger while she's trying to leave.
- Help find a safe place. Help your friend contact the local battered women's program. They can help her examine her options and find a safe place to go. Not all communities have safe shelter and sometimes they're full, so she may need to rely on family or friends for temporary housing. Be careful if you offer safety in your home. A battered woman frequently faces the most danger when she tries to flee and you could face threats and harm from her abuser.
- If you see an assault in progress, take action: Find the nearest phone and call 911. Don't assume that someone else has done so. If you are in your car, honk your horn until a group gathers, he stops hitting her, or the police come. These situations can be dangerous, so whatever you do, be sure to keep yourself safe. But do take action. At the very least, watch them. By being a witness in a way that lets him know that you see him, you may reduce the level of violence.

For crisis help or more information, call: Umbrella at 748-8645, 748-8141,

1-800-916-8645 or 676-3920 in Essex County. Ask to speak with an advocate.

*This material addresses violence in heterosexual relationships, but violence occurs in lesbian and gay relationships, too. Adapted and used here with permission from "Helping the Battered Woman, A Guide for Family and Friends," National Woman Abuse Prevention Project, 1989.