

VERMONT NETWORK
AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT
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I KNOW SOMEONE WHO'S ABUSED.
HOW CAN I HELP?

A battered woman¹ needs support and validation, not judgment. She has been under his power and control for a very long time. She is judged and found inadequate every day by her abuser. As one survivor described it: “*It's hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.*” She can only leave when she believes that it's safe for her and her children to do so. She can only leave when *she* takes control of her life — no one can *give* her her life back.

Help her recognize the abuse. Let her describe her situation. Reflect it back to her by using active listening skills. Use the words she uses: don't call her a “victim” or use the term “domestic violence” until she does. Point out the different kinds of abuse in relationships. Often, victims don't see the “big picture” of their situation until they put it into words for someone else.

Express your concerns. Tell her you're glad she confided in you. Let her know you are sorry it's happening to her. You can never say the following too often:

- “It's not your fault. You deserve better.”
- “I'm glad you told me about what you're going through. I'm here for you.”

Support her. Acknowledge her strengths: the ways she has protected herself and her children, the methods she used to escape the abuse or maintain her sanity, the courage she has shown by telling you about the violence or by reaching out to resources and support systems.

Don't judge her: Tell her you're worried about her safety. Don't become upset if she is not ready to break off the relationship. Try to see that she is dealing with some difficult emotions: love and security from a partner, parenting, financial security, housing for herself and her children — and fear from the abuse. If she wants to stay in the relationship, or keeps returning to the abuser, refrain from telling her she's wrong. Help her see she is not to blame for the violence and that changing her behavior will not stop the abuse. Help her see that the abuser's excuses for his violence are just excuses — not *reasons*.

- Tell her: “you're not alone. Many — perhaps a majority — of women face abuse. Millions create violence-free lives for themselves every year.”
- Explain the Cycle of Violence and the escalating nature of abuse.
- Tell her: “I'm afraid for you and your children” — and *mean* it. Don't try to make her feel guilty

¹ It is clear that there are men abused by female and male partners, and there are women abused by female partners. However, because analyses of police and court records in North America and Europe persistently show that women constitute 90-95% of the victims of assaults in the home reported to the criminal justice system, herein the victim will be referred to as female and the perpetrator as male. The bottom line is that *pain has no gender* since human beings exposed to psychological torture react similarly, regardless of sex, race, class, culture, etc. Therefore, the author asks readers to mentally translate the term “battered women” into “battered women or men.”

if she's not ready to leave yet. Remember the victim who said, "Telling me to leave is like telling me to turn my back on a loaded gun."

- Tell her: "Getting free isn't easy, but help *is* available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year from your local domestic violence program at **1-800-ABUSE 95 (228-7395)**. You can always speak to someone there anonymously and without having to promise anything in return."
- Tell her that you can give her information about how she can help herself — but that you will not abandon her if she cannot take action right away.
- Assure her that you will not desert her if she stays — or leaves and returns. Unsuccessful reconciliations give her insight and strength to move forward.

Work on a safety plan she can use when she's ready or needs to escape. Help her think of ways to be safe, to look for patterns in the abuser's behavior to figure out when he is explosive or violent.

Tell her about the basics of a safety plan:

- If at all possible, save a nest-egg of funds for an emergency and keep it in a safe place.
- Pack and hide a small suitcase with necessities for yourself and your children for an emergency. Perhaps you can leave it with a friend or neighbor.
- Keep a list of important phone numbers and addresses in a secret place: police, your local battered women's program, friends, social services agencies, courts, etc.
- Make a mental list of your options for protection (family, friends, clergy, etc.) and imagine what you'll say and do when you are ready to reach out.
- If you have to leave in a hurry, try to bring as many of the following items as possible:

I.D. for yourself	Birth certificates	Food
Insurance papers	Precious belongings	Food Stamps
Social Security cards	Medical cards/records	Medications
Set of house/car keys	Marriage license	Credit cards
Any available cash	Savings passbook	Checkbook
Court orders	Divorce papers	Car title
Driver's license	Children's favorite toys	

Be there. Listen. Stay there. She may feel like a broken record, that no one's listening. But keep supporting her. By avoiding blame, she will know you're beside her. When she is ready to end the relationship, continue to be supportive and help her get involved in activities and supportive services. It takes a long time to get over any relationship, especially one that is violent. Help her resist pressure from other friends, family members, etc., to get back together.

Reach out for help yourself. Call your local domestic violence program for ideas on how to help. Talk to a trusted friend about what you know.

Educate yourself on domestic/dating violence. *Getting Free* by Ginny NiCarthy and *Coping with Dating Violence* by Nancy Rue are two of many good resource books. Check your local library or domestic violence program to borrow these or other materials.

IF YOU ARE FRIGHTENED OR FRUSTRATED, GET SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF.

REMEMBER, YOU CAN'T RESCUE HER OR SOLVE ALL OF HER PROBLEMS.