

## Friends and Family Guide

Everyone deserves a healthy relationship. It can be really troubling when someone you care about is being hurt or abused by their partner. This guide will help you support someone who is struggling in their relationship. People are more likely to turn to their community (friends, family, YOU) than they are to professionals. Survivors often say that what matters most is having someone in their life who is there for them without judgment, to get support and lean on when things are tough. You can be that person.

### Is what you do important?

Your help can make a great difference to someone who is abused. Your response to their situation is really important. If a victim feels supported and encouraged, they may feel stronger and more able to make decisions. If they feel judged or criticized, they could be afraid to tell anyone else about the abuse again.

*“My best friend really helped me. She never judged me or made me feel like it was my fault. She helped me think about what to do, looked after my kids to give me a break, and was there when I needed her. It can’t have been easy on her. But her support made a big difference.” —*

Domestic Violence Survivor

### What is abuse?

Every couple has arguments or disagreements. In a respectful and equal relationship, both partners feel free to state their opinions, to make their own decisions, to be themselves, and to say no to sex.

But this is not the case when someone is abusive. In an abusive relationship, one partner tries to dominate the other through physical harm, criticisms, demands, threats, or sexual pressure. For the victim and their children, this behavior can be very dangerous, frightening, confusing and damaging.

Psychological or emotional abuse can be just as harmful as physical abuse. Abuse in a relationship is never acceptable, regardless of the circumstances, and is never the fault of the victim. Abuse is not caused by alcohol, or stress, or by the victim’s behavior. Abuse happens because the abuser wants to control and manipulate the other person. Physical and sexual assault, threats and stalking are crimes and can be reported to the police.

### How can I recognize abuse?

You might be unsure if what your friend or relative is experiencing is abuse. Maybe you have a sense that something is wrong in their relationship. Sometimes there may be signs that indicate that there is abuse. However, most times there will be nothing obvious.



## Signs that someone is being abused

- They seem afraid of their partner or is always very anxious to please him or her.
- They have stopped seeing their friends or family, or cuts phone conversations short when their partner is in the room.
- Their partner often criticizes or humiliates them in front of other people.
- They state that their partner pressures or forces them to do sexual things.
- Their partner often orders them around or makes all the decisions
- They often talk about their partner's jealousy, bad temper, or possessiveness.
- They have become anxious or depressed, have lost their confidence, or is unusually quiet.
- They have physical injuries (bruises, broken bones, sprains, cuts etc.) and may give unlikely explanations for their injuries.
- Their children seem afraid of their partner, have behavior problems, or are very withdrawn or anxious.
- They are reluctant to leave their children with their partner.

## Why don't they just leave?

It can be hard to understand why someone would stay in a relationship if they are being treated so badly. Leaving may appear to be a simple solution. You might think that the abuse is partly their fault because they put up with it, or that they are weak if they stay.

It is hard to imagine what it is like to be abused when you are not in the situation yourself. From the outside, it may seem easier to leave than it actually is. It can be very difficult to leave an abusive partner. This is an important thing for friends and family to understand.

## Reasons why it may be so hard to leave

- They are afraid of what the abuser will do if they leave. The person who is abusive may have threatened to harm them, their relatives, the children, pets or property. The abuser may threaten to commit suicide if they talk about leaving. Many victims find that the abuse continues or gets worse after they leave.
- They still loves their partner, because he or she is not abusive all of the time.
- They have a commitment to the relationship or a belief that marriage is forever, for better or worse.
- They hopes their partner will change. Sometimes the abusive person might promise to change. The victim might think that if the abuser stops drinking, the abuse will stop.
- They think the abuse is their fault.
- They feel that they should stay for the sake of the children, and that it is best that children live with both parents.
- They may have a lack of confidence. The person who is abusive will have deliberately tried to break down their partner's confidence, and make them feel like they are stupid, hopeless, and responsible for the abuse. The victim may feel powerless and unable to make decisions.

- They may not have the means to survive if the relationship ends. They might not have anywhere to live, access to money, or transport, especially if they live in an isolated area.

*"When I told her how he abused me, my friend said 'but you let him do it' like it was my fault.*

*That made me feel worse. She didn't know how much pressure he put on me to go back, how he said he loved me and would kill himself rather than live without me and the children. He made me feel so guilty. I thought how important it was for the children to have a father. It was all a way of manipulating me to come back.*

*My friend stopped talking to me after I went back to him, she said I was stupid.*

*I was really upset because she was my only close friend and I really needed someone to talk to, and help me to see that the way he treated me was wrong." —Domestic Violence Victim*

## **How should I approach my love one?**

Approach your loved one in a sensitive way, letting them know your own concerns. Tell them that you are worried and explain why. Don't be surprised if they seem defensive or initially rejects your support. They may not be ready to admit to being abused, or may feel ashamed and afraid of talking about it. Also, they might have difficulty trusting anyone after being abused. If the victim is a man, he may feel particularly embarrassed about speaking about the abuse as he may be seen as weak or unmanly.

Don't push the person into talking if they are uncomfortable. Let them know that you're there if they need to talk. Be patient, and keep an ear out for anything that indicates they are ready to talk about the abuse.

## **What can I do to help?**

You don't need to be an expert or have all the answers. Just being there and available is what domestic violence victims have mentioned that has helped the most. The below three strategies will help you give support to your loved one.

### **- Ask A Question -**

Asking questions and really caring about the answers is powerful. Here are a few sample questions you can ask your loved one.

- What do you need/want?
- Do you get to do the things you like?
- How are the kids doing?
- Is your relationship energizing or draining?
- What happens if you disagree?
- How can I help?

## - Listen Up -

Listen without having your own agenda. When you're listening deeply to someone, you are not trying to get to your point of view, you are trying to hear their perspective. You are listening to hear what the person is experiencing, what they want, and how you can help. Acknowledging another person's pain can help them feel supported. Here are a few suggestions to say to a loved one to show that you are actively listening.

- Thank you for telling me.
- I believe you.
- I am so sorry this is happening to you.
- Thank you for sharing this.

Risky things to listen for:

- Access to firearms
- Suicide threats
- Prior Strangulation



## - Stay Connected -

It can take a long time for things to get better, and it can be difficult to hang in there through it all. Staying connected is one of the most helpful things you can do. When someone is isolated, the abuser has far more power and control over their lives. You do not need to know all the answers or agree with every decision to be helpful. Instead, consistently show up, take on what you can, and ask for help with things that are difficult for you. Even if the person you're concerned about doesn't reach out, you can be the one to reach out. This takes some of the power away from the abuser and can be a lifeline for your loved one

Connection also means no ultimatums. Experiences have shown that tough love is not always what someone needs. You might be the only person they are reaching out to. If you give them an ultimatum that they can't live up to, they won't have anyone left. Instead, try to leave the door open to make it easy to keep coming back to you.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Helping other people with their relationships shouldn't take over your life. You need people to support your well-being too. If you are feeling afraid or feel like the situation is making you feel overwhelmed, talk to other friends or reach out to services for help. You don't have to be a victim to get support from the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Everyone can benefit from practicing self-compassion. Treat yourself as kindly as you try to treat other people.

Everyone has a role to play in ending domestic and sexual violence and the good news is that you don't have to be an expert to help. It doesn't take much to make an impact. Your continued presence, connection, and support are what people need to get safer and thrive. Know that you are appreciated and that there is help available for you if and when you need it. ***Together, we have the strength.***



## Resource Links

<https://wscadv.org/resources/friends-family-guide/>

<https://www.dvrcv.org.au/help-advice/guide-for-families-friends-and-neighbours>

<https://wscadv.org/resources/supporting-someone-experiencing-abuse/>