

If someone
you know
is experiencing

Domestic Abuse

December 2008



Note: To both reflect the overwhelming majority and for ease of reading, this document refers to victims/survivors of domestic abuse as female, and perpetrators as male. However, this is not meant to imply that domestic abuse does not occur in same-sex relationships, or by women to men. If after reading this leaflet you need further information, please try:

National Domestic Violence Helpline 0808 2000 247

Women's Aid www.womensaid.org.uk

Refuge www.refuge.org.uk

If you think a friend or family member is experiencing domestic abuse, there are things you can do to help.

Below are some suggestions about how to do this effectively, based on what formerly abused women have said they found helpful. People often feel awkward about ‘taking sides’ and try to keep out of a situation, believing it’s not really any of their business. Friends and family may think that they are being ‘neutral’, but the abuser usually takes this as evidence that his behaviour is acceptable. In addition, an abused woman can easily interpret the ‘neutrality’ of those closest to her as blame for the situation.

Raise the issue

Don’t wait for your abused friend to tell you about her situation. Bring the subject up yourself when her abusive partner isn’t around. Let her know you are concerned about her and want to help. Try not to criticise her partner or the relationship. Instead, focus on the abuse and her safety. You don’t have to know all the answers. The importance of helping your friend break the silence and end the isolation should never be underestimated. Listen to what she says and let her show you how you can be supportive.

Giving support

You need to support your abused friend in whatever decision she is currently making about her relationship, while being clear that the abuse is wrong. It’s OK to be truthful or give your opinion, but bear in mind that your friend needs to be supported rather than judged. Maintain contact with her, helping her explore all the options on offer.

Supporting a friend in this way is a huge challenge. You don’t want to see her get hurt, but may have to watch her carry on with her partner when you think she should leave him or have him arrested. As her friend, make sure you offer her something the abuser doesn’t. For example, if he tells her what to do all the time, it’s no use you doing the same.

Supporting your friend may prove frustrating: she may not take the course of action that you favour. You may find yourself wondering why she stays or how she puts up with it. It is important, however, to remember three critical things:

- You are not the person who has to live with the consequences of any decision. She is. Therefore, it isn't surprising that she makes decisions in her best interests (as she sees them), rather than doing what you may want her to do.
- Leaving is an extremely difficult decision to make, involving both emotional and practical considerations. Moreover, most women are in the position of attempting to make this decision within the context of an abuser who begs them to stay and promises to change.
- Often, leaving a violent partner only signifies the end of the relationship - not the end of the violence. Two women are killed every week by a current or former male partner. Of these, most were in the process of attempting to leave a violent relationship, or had recently left one. If you try to offer help to a friend, remember that you are putting yourself in a dangerous situation. Whatever else you do, be sure to keep yourself safe.

What to say

The following messages will all help your friend if you can get them across when talking about her situation.

- **Domestic abuse is totally unacceptable.** Every woman has the right to live her life free of violence, abuse, intimidation and fear.
- **Domestic abuse is very common.** One woman in four experiences domestic abuse at some point in her life.
- **Domestic abuse is very dangerous.** Each week in the UK, two women are killed by a partner or ex-partner.
- **Domestic abuse is not just about individual men abusing individual women.** It is also about the systematic abuse and oppression of women in the society in which we live.

- **Domestic abuse is about power and control.** Abusive, violent and sexually abusive behaviour is wide-ranging and subtle in what it tries to achieve.
- **Domestic abuse is intentional and instrumental behaviour.** It is about scaring a woman into doing something that she doesn't want to do, or scaring her out of doing something that she does want to do.
- **The abuser is 100 per cent responsible for his abuse.** Alcohol, culture or unemployment are excuses for, not causes of, domestic abuse. His abuse is his problem and his responsibility.
- **It is not your fault.** No woman deserves to be abused, regardless of what she says or does.
- **Domestic abuse does impact on children.** Even when they are not being directly abused themselves, children are affected.
- **A man can change if he wants to.** His behaviour is within his control and he can choose to stop.
- **You cannot change him.** He himself is the only person who can stop his violence.
- **You don't have to put up with it.** A woman has the right to safety and respect, to put herself and her children first and to focus on her needs.
- **You can increase your safety.** If the man is intent on being violent, she will not be able to stop him. However, there are things she can do to increase her safety. Contact the National Domestic Violence Helpline or visit www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/domestic_violence/index.shtml for some ideas.

Above all, be patient. Your friend may need to talk about her situation numerous times. She may try to improve things or give her partner several 'last' chances. Remember that women often leave and return several times. If this happens, remember that each time she will gain a little more clarity, and may - given enough ongoing support - eventually make the break final.

Helping to build your friend's self-esteem can have great benefits. Remind her of her good points, challenge her if she puts herself down or blames herself, praise her for every step she takes, and let her know she has your support.

Practical help

On a practical level you could:

- agree a code word or action that your friend can use to signal that she is in danger and cannot access help herself
- offer to keep copies of important documents and other items for her. That way, if she has to leave in a hurry, she doesn't have to waste time collecting important belongings
- together or on your own, find out information about local services and help. Offer any practical help you are able (and feel comfortable) to give, such as the use of your telephone or address for information or messages, keeping spare sets of keys/overnight bags/important documents for emergencies.

Finally, get some support for yourself. You have to be strong if you're going to be able to help her. Most domestic abuse services are happy to help with any worries you may have or provide suggestions as to other actions you might take. Most importantly, don't give up on her. You might be her only lifeline.

Do...

- **approach her** about the abuse in a sensitive way, for example by saying, 'I'm worried about you because...'
- **believe** what she tells you: it will have taken a lot for her to talk to you and trust you
- **take the abuse seriously.** Abuse can be damaging both physically and emotionally, and is very destructive to someone's self-confidence. Her boyfriend or partner could be placing her in real physical danger
- **focus on her safety:** talk to her about it and how she could protect herself
- **help her to recognise the abuse** and understand how it may be affecting her. Recognise and support her strength and courage
- **help her to understand that the abuse is not her fault** and that no-one deserves to be abused, no matter what they do

- **listen to her** and help her to think about her relationship, whether she wants to break up or stay, and how she can protect herself from any more abuse
- **offer help to protect her** *but only if you are not putting your own safety at risk.* For example, you could offer to be around when the abuser is there or give her lifts home.

Encourage and help her to develop a safety plan. Agree with her concerns for her safety as well as that of her children. Offer your assistance in developing a plan that may even include you. Help her look ahead to a plan of action should the abuser become violent again. Suggest that she have an 'escape bag' somewhere which could include an extra set of car keys, ID documents, birth certificates, insurance cards, in case she needs them.

Encourage her to break the isolation. One of the most effective 'tools' for abusers is the victim's isolation from family, friends, co-workers or any type of support system. Help your friend contact local specialist domestic abuse agencies. Most can be accessed via www.thamesvalley.police.uk

Encourage her to take threats seriously. Express your concern for her safety and never minimise threats made by the abuser. Remember, however, that an abused woman is in the most danger when she has decided to leave. Respect her judgement as to the right time to leave. Leaving such a situation is a process, and the time must be right and safe.

Evaluate how she copes. Faced with violence and abuse, many women develop ways of coping that are themselves destructive. Your friend will need support in re-evaluating these negative coping mechanisms, and considering how to adopt more constructive ways of coping. The last thing she will need is another reason to be hard on herself, so real encouragement will be required.

Remember: if you feel overwhelmed or frightened yourself, get help.

Don't...

- **blame her or ask judgemental questions** such as, 'What did you do to make him treat you like that?' or 'Why don't you just break up with him?'
- **focus on trying to work out the abuser's reasons for the abuse.** Concentrate on supporting her and discussing what she can do to protect herself.
- **be impatient or critical of her** if she is confused about what to do, or if she says that she still loves him. It's difficult for anyone to break up a relationship, and especially hard if they are being abused.

Don't maintain a friendship with both the victim and the abuser. This part is hard for a lot of people, but the truth is that if you try to support both parties, you're not going to be much help to either. She needs to be able to talk to someone who believes her, who will not pressure her to 'see it from the other person's point of view', and who would never encourage her to get back together with the abuser. Placing yourself in the position of investigator or mediator is not going to help the situation.

Suggestions of questions to ask

- What can I do to help?
- How has his behaviour made you feel?
- How is it affecting you?
- How have you been coping with the abuse?
- What can you do to make yourself safer?
- What are you afraid of if you leave?
- What are you afraid of if you stay?
- Do you know when an incident is going to happen? Is there a pattern?
- What's your worst-case scenario for yourself/your children?
- What are your worst fears for yourself/your children?
- What do you already do to protect yourself/your children? (This is a good chance to help her see how much she may already be doing to stay safe.)
- Which of the things you do to protect yourself/your children work in practice, and which don't?
- What personal strengths do you have that help you to deal with this situation? (Explore how can these be increased, for example, by raising her self-esteem, self-belief and ability to trust her gut instincts)
- What external resources are there to help you cope (support networks of friends and family, access to money, access to alternative accommodation and so on)? How can these be increased?
- Can I help you find out about what other choices might be available?
- Which options would be most realistic for you? What do you see yourself as actually being able to do? (Focus on those.)

Men against domestic abuse

Men can play a particularly crucial role in helping to stop domestic abuse. As well as being part of the community that supports and interacts with families dealing with abuse, men are the majority of the judges, police officers, and doctors who work with families in crisis. Some are the neighbours, friends, and family members who support victims by reaching out and lending a hand.

Domestic abuse is everyone's concern, and there are many opportunities for men to be involved in making communities safer. Men are critical to abuse prevention efforts because they are more likely to listen to other men when it comes to the perpetration of domestic abuse. In addition, fathers have enormous influence over the development of their children.

Men can make a difference by:

- **being role models.** Men are uniquely positioned to reach out to male perpetrators of domestic abuse, letting them know that their behaviour is not acceptable, that they need help, and that help is available.
- **speaking out against domestic abuse.** This can have a powerful effect in helping change social norms that support and perpetuate abuse.
- **acting as a role model to a child** who lacks a positive male figure in his life. A male mentor and friend can provide consistent support, and even help a child make a safety plan.

If you would like this document in a different language please contact:

Tel: 01865 846578

Email: webmaster@thamesvalley.pnn.police.uk

Jeśli chciał(a)byś otrzymać ten dokument w innym języku, prosimy o kontakt

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For a large print, Braille or audio-tape version of this document please contact 01865 846578 or email:

webmaster@thamesvalley.pnn.police.uk

For more information about Domestic Abuse visit our website:

www.thamesvalley.police.uk/reduction/domestic



0845 8 505 505
the single number for
Thames Valley Police

*This number should be used
for all non-emergency calls
to Thames Valley Police.*

In an emergency call 999.

*It is an emergency if a crime
is being committed,
or is about to be committed,
or there is a risk of injury.*

www.thamesvalley.police.uk