



Thoughts about what you might say or do when a friend or relative is experiencing abuse at home

Most people know someone who is experiencing physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse in a personal relationship. It is difficult for abuse survivors to talk to others about the abuse. As a friend, you may be the one she or he will find the courage to speak to. You may feel you need to have a lot of answers to help this person, or that you have the answers. You may find it difficult to suppress anger against the abuser or even the survivor who remains in the relationship. Finding helpful words and supportive actions when people disclose they are victims of family violence is a challenge. It is difficult to learn of another's pain. When the survivor is the target of another's frustration, the survivor is re-victimized. What is really important is that you recognize the things you can and should do, as well as what you should not do and the boundaries you should not cross.

When you feel there may be some abuse happening, ask some thoughtful, caring questions

Victims of domestic abuse tend to avoid disclosure of abuse but they may make a tentative statement to someone they trust. They may say something like: "My husband won't let me go," or "My partner has quite a temper" or "I am worthless."

It may be helpful to the person if you simply enter the door the person opens. Respond by asking "Why do you say or think that?" or "Tell me what is happening?" or "How can I help?"

If your friend does not acknowledge any problems at home...

- Believe her or him.
- Take advantage of later opportunities to support or ask other questions.
- Maintain confidentiality.

If your friend acknowledges an unhealthy or violent relationship, listen and believe.

- Be an active, respectful, supportive listener.
- Listen thoughtfully with concern, objectivity and openness.
- Allow the person to confide at her or his own pace, don't force the issue.
- Believe what you are told. Initially, victims may share pieces their stories and minimize what is happening. They may fear not being believed, particularly if the abuser is a pillar of the church, community leader or professional person. Your acceptance of their story can be extremely helpful.
- Avoid showing shock. It can cause more shame and embarrassment.
- Never blame the survivor for what's happening or underestimate any fear of potential danger.

When a victim/survivor discloses abuse, affirm her or him. Suggested comments might include:

- You do not deserve this treatment.
- You did not cause this to happen to you, it is not your fault.

- I am so sorry this is happening to you.
- You are a good person. You deserve to be treasured.
- It must have taken a lot of courage to share this. Thank you for trusting me.
- There is free, confidential help available in the community.
- I will support you.

Provide the victim with any of the following options as suggestions:

Remember the victim/survivor is the one who must make the decisions!

- Call a crisis line.
- Contact a domestic abuse advocacy agency for free, confidential services. Many agencies have 24-hour crisis lines.
- Seek individual counseling. Some counselors are skilled at working with spiritual needs as well as having expertise in family violence.
- Develop a safety plan. Advocacy agencies can help with that.
- Join a support group.
- Call law enforcement to report abuse and/or file an order for protection.

If you have concerns for your friend's safety

- Say: "I am concerned for your safety and the safety of your children."
- Ask: "Are you afraid of your partner?"
- Tell your friend that typically, abusive or violent behavior tends to escalate rather than go away.
- Explain that domestic abuse agencies will discuss issues of safety in confidence.

Challenge violence

- State clearly that violence is not acceptable.
- Abusers must be held accountable for their behavior.
- Abusers must be willing to seek help.

Spiritual support

- It is helpful to recognize that many individuals in abusive relationships use their faith to seek support and courage in troubled times.
- Victim/survivors may benefit from statements that address the person's safety, well-being and empowerment from a spiritual perspective if their faith community has individuals who can meet this need.
- Avoid giving messages derived from spiritual perspectives or principles, they can skew the intent of these principles and be harmful to the victim/survivor.
- Be with the victim in her or his suffering and healing. Acknowledge feelings you are having in regards to the victim's safety and pain you feel as you hear the stories.
- Affirm the victim's faith regardless of where that person is at that point.
- Praise and support the victim as she or he moves towards wholeness.

Considerations if the victim feels she or he must forgive the abuser

- Respectfully suggest that if the abuse is ongoing, the abuser has not accepted responsibility for the abuse, so forgiveness may not be appropriate at this time.
- Suggest that forgiveness is the end, not the beginning of the healing process. There are times that the survivor may need to be able to forgive in order to heal.
- Say: "I know and care about both of you, but I cannot condone this violent behavior towards you."
- To forgive does not mean to forget.

Continue to support the victim

- Stay in touch but be sure you are not putting yourself at risk.
- Give her or him the gift of patient time.
- Be prepared for frustration. Those experiencing abuse need time to sort through spiritual, social, emotional and economic issues. They need your support to rebuild their self esteem. This takes time.
- Support the choices the survivor makes. It is difficult to see someone stay in a potentially dangerous situation. However, that person has the right to make that choice.
- ***Remember, leaving usually does not end the abuse.***
- ***Assure confidentiality:*** do not discuss circumstances with others else unless the survivor consents.
- Do not confront the abuser. Confrontation may endanger victims, children, others or yourself.

Give serious credence to the potential for danger

- Verbalize your concerns.
- Give a warning that, while victim/survivors may believe the violence won't happen again, it almost always does, and often gets worse with time.
- Affirm the validity of fearfulness on the victim/survivors' part.
- Stress the value of contacting an advocacy agency.
- Encourage the victim/survivor to find a safe place to go (shelter, motel), possibly leaving town with the guidance of a domestic violence advocate.
- If the victim/survivor is afraid, discuss that fear and suggest contacting an advocate to have them help with development of a safety plan.
- Domestic violence advocates can assess the situation and provide information which may help the victim/survivor seek safety.

Avoid:

- Putting yourself in danger.
- Saying anything that questions the validity of what you are being told such as "What did you do to make your partner so angry?" or "I can't imagine (name of partner) behaving that way." This assigns guilt to the wrong person, the survivor, and implies you do not believe what you are being told.
- Do not say anything that suggests an accusation e.g.: "What did you do to cause this?" or anything that suggests the victim can be blamed for the abuse.
- Saying things like "Just keep hoping and believing" may not be helpful, tends to put the survivor in a victim position and contributes to powerlessness.
- Shaming or assigning blame.
- Giving up.
- Criticizing the abuser.

If the victim is male...

There *are* services for men but they are not as prevalent. Most domestic abuse agencies will provide phone crisis counseling and referral resources to males and females. Homosexual males may be best served over a period of time by a gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender agency (GLBT). Out Front Minnesota at: 612-822-0127.

If you feel angry or frustrated, remember.....

Anger and frustration is more appropriately directed towards the abuser, you may need to step back, recognize your limitations to help when abuse is happening to a competent adult, don't blame the survivor for decisions that person needs to make.

When the violence is bad, why doesn't she or he just leave?

For most people in **any** situation, ending a relationship is not easy. Often, someone in a battering relationship has strong emotional ties to the partner that support hopes that the violence will end. There are numerous financial, social, familial, emotional and other pressures that make leaving difficult. Sometimes leaving is a significant risk to the survivor and sometimes the children.

Leaving usually does not end the abuse!

DO NOT:

- Tell the victim/survivor what to do.
- Criticize the abuser.
- Be hurt if the abused person reacts in anger.
- The anger may be a mechanism the survivor uses to avoid looking too closely at what is happening or response to the difficulty of sharing such painful information.
- Assume a counselor role, leave that to the experts.
- Tell the person you know how they feel (unless you are also a survivor, and then
- be careful not to get caught up in your own story and overshadow the victim/survivor's
- story.
- Be silent. Silence may feel like rejection or judgment.

Do not give up!

If your friend/family member chooses to remain in an abusive environment, consider discussing your concerns with an advocate who can be reached by calling local advocacy services. They might have some suggestions that can help you help your loved one.

Resources available to individuals in abusive situations are of continuing support to the victim/survivor and can be a lifeline leading to ultimate ending of the abuse.

Alexandra House 24-Hour Crisis Line:

763-780-2330

or

888-780-2332