The Family Sunshine Center presents

addressing domestic violence

A Guide for Friends and Family
It can be distressing when you suspect someone you care for is being hurt or abused by their partner. How do you respond? How can you help?

Having someone in their life who is there for them, without judgment, to bounce ideas off, get support, and lean on when things are tough can mean the world to someone in an abusive relationship. You can be that person.

This guide will give you the tools you need to safely support someone who is struggling with abuse. Victims are more likely to turn to people they know (friends, family, YOU) than they are to professionals.
what is domestic abuse?

Every couple has arguments or disagreements, even in the healthiest of relationships. In a healthy relationship, both partners can freely state their opinions, make their own decisions, be themselves, and say no to sex, without fear of harm. In an unhealthy relationship, this is not always true.

Domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship. These can include

- Isolating them from friends and family
- Hurting, choking, pushing, or slapping them
- Calling them names and humiliating them
- Forcing them to have sex
- Controlling the finances
- Threatening to hurt loved ones, children, or pets

signs of abuse

The signs of abuse are not always as obvious as you might think. Often, domestic abuse goes undetected because we just don’t know what to look for. Here are some red flags to keep an eye out for:

- Excuses for injuries
- Major personality changes (i.e., an outgoing person becoming withdrawn)
- Checks in often with their partner
- Never having money on hand
- Overly worried about pleasing their partner
- Misses work, school, or social activities for no clear reason
- Goes along with everything their partner says and does

Even though statistically women are more likely to be abused than men, you should keep an eye out for these red flags no matter what their gender. Domestic violence does not discriminate. Victims can be both young and old, rich and poor, male or female, and people of all races, religions, and sexual orientations.
Talking to anyone about domestic abuse can be uncomfortable, especially if it is someone you suspect is being abused. These strategies will show your willingness to be available and provide support, no matter what. Remember, you don’t have to be an expert, or have all the answers to help. Being available is what people have told us helps the most.

As strange as it may sound, sometimes people don’t realize they are in an abusive relationship. They may think the demanding, controlling behavior is normal; or that domestic abuse is only a black eye or a broken arm. But if you’re thinking about it, there’s usually a reason. Someone’s life could be in danger.

**start the conversation**

If they haven’t reached out to confide in you, proceed carefully. Your main goal is to show love and support. Even if they are not ready to admit the abuse, they need to know that you see they might be unhappy, and you’re available to talk if, and when, they have something to say.

**If they aren't ready to talk right now, be patient, don’t get frustrated, and most importantly, don’t pressure them to talk.** Now is the time to worry about their needs and feelings, not yours. If they walk away knowing that you are trustworthy, supportive, and available to talk when they are ready, you’ve done all that you can.

This conversation is meant to start a supporting process for the victim. How you speak with or ask questions can make a difference in how they respond.
Instead of saying:  
Are they hitting you? Are you being abused?  
Why do you put up with this?  
You just need to leave...  
You can’t still be in love with them!  
If you don’t leave, I can’t help you.

say:  
Sometimes I’ve noticed ________, how do you feel about that?  
I can’t imagine how hard this is for you but I’m here to support you however I can.  
I’m really worried about what could happen to you or the kids.  
I understand things aren’t always bad. I’m here if you want to talk through this. I won’t judge.  
I know a lot goes into deciding to leave. I worry about what might happen if you stay, but I will always be here if you need me.

listen to their concerns
Admitting abuse takes tremendous courage. How you react to their vulnerability can affect whether they ever get help. **Your first responsibility is to say, “I believe you” – and mean it!** Make sure you communicate how much you care about their safety, that they don’t deserve this abuse, and that the abuse is not their fault!

Other helpful things you can say are:
- I am so sorry this is happening to you.
- Thank you for sharing this.
- I don’t even know what to say right now, but I am so glad you told me.
- You don’t deserve this. You are a valuable person.
- It’s not your fault.
- You are not alone.
- You get to choose what you do next.

Listen and give information, not advice. Focus on listening and supporting them to make their own decisions. They know their own situation best.

Offer support for whatever they decide and ask how you can help – watch the kids, find a nearby shelter, check into free legal counsel – and you’ll be giving them power to make their own decisions. But be careful about the information you provide them. **Providing lots of printed materials may not be the best idea. If the abuser finds any of those pieces, a confrontation could be dangerous for them.**

If they ask you a question that you don’t know the answer? Try saying: “Honestly, I don’t know. Let me do some research and then we can talk more tomorrow.”
commit for the long haul

Things will not get better overnight, and it can be difficult to hang in there through it all. Be patient. This process can take a long time, but it needs to be at the victim’s pace, not yours.

Maintain a level of regular contact: If someone is isolated, the abuser has far more power and control over their lives. When you stay in touch, it takes some of the power away from the abuser and can be a lifeline for the victim. It might be that they aren’t calling or reaching out because they can't, not because they don’t want to or don’t need support.

Don’t forget; normal means of communication these days can be easily monitored so you may have to get creative to safely keep in touch with them. For example, share an online game with a private chat room that you communicate through.

Schedule a regular check-in so you know they are okay. If the abuse has escalated and you haven’t heard from the victim, this is an easy way for you to know it’s time to call for help.

Help them think through how to stay safe. Safety planning is a good idea in case they need to leave in a hurry, or the abuse escalates. A safety plan outlines how to remain safe while still in the relationship, planning to leave, or after leaving. It includes information specific to them that will increase their safety at home, school, and other places they go daily. The National Domestic Violence Hotline at www.thehotline.org can help them create a safety plan unique to their needs.

Avoid suggesting therapy or third party mediation such as couples counseling or anger management, as they can be ineffective and may cause more harm than good.

Keep their secrets. Confidentiality is key to keeping the victim and their children safe. Never confront the abuser or hint that you know anything about the abuse. This could put the victim, their children, their loved ones, and YOU in danger.
You’ve had this awkward conversation and they denied the abuse. They might even be angry with you for bringing it up in the first place. Walking away may be the worst thing you can do but what do you do next?

**Apologize for overstepping or if you have offended them;** but share how important the person, their family, and their wellbeing are to you.

**Assure them you are available anytime if they decide to talk.** No matter what, you will always be there for them.

**Don’t get mad or frustrated with their decision.** It is important to know that they may not be ready to take the next step.

**Try to understand why they may be having difficulty getting help.** They may be ashamed of what has happened to them.

**Offer to go with them if they need additional information or support.**

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If you think they don’t feel comfortable talking to you about the abuse, don’t be offended. Provide them with the local domestic violence agency phone number and assure them that the call is confidential.
It can be difficult to watch someone you care about be abused, especially when it is by someone who is supposed to treat them with love and respect. You may be tempted to stage an “intervention” or attempt to forcibly remove them from the situation. After all, you’re just looking out for their best interests, right? But this is the opposite of what the victim needs. Why?

'Tough Love' is not what a victim needs. When you say “Let me tell you what you need to do”, or “You need to listen and do what I say”, you are NOT supporting the victim. You are essentially trying to control them by telling them that they are not strong enough, smart enough, or capable enough to take care of themselves, their children, etc. This is what the abuser is already doing to them at home.

They know their situation much better than you do. Leaving may not be the safest or most worthwhile choice for them right now. Abusers often threaten very real harm to family, friends, children, pets, property or even themselves if the victim leaves.

Leaving safely requires careful preparation and planning. Simply leaving an abusive situation without considering both immediate and long-term safety and emotional support needs can put a survivor in even more danger.

When you give a victim an ultimatum they can’t live up to, they possibly lose the only support person they have. You may be the only person they are reaching out to right now. If the victim is under excessive pressure or criticism from you, it can make them feel like they can’t turn to you when they do need support in the future. This response from you may play into their abuser’s need to isolate them even further from support systems.
Taking care of yourself is just as important as helping someone else. Helping other people with their relationships shouldn’t take over your life.

It’s not your job to change someone. You can’t make someone change or get help if they don’t want it.

Get Help! You don’t have to do this alone. You need people to support your well-being too. You can call your local domestic violence program. They can answer any questions you might have and be a sounding board if you’re feeling challenged and overwhelmed.

Everyone has a role to play in ending domestic abuse; the good news is that you don’t have to be an expert to help. It really doesn’t take much to make a positive impact and change the world. Together we can end domestic violence and create healthy relationships for us all.

**Hope and healing can start with you!**
The Family Sunshine Center
The Family Sunshine Center is dedicated to ending family violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking through comprehensive services and community-based outreach and prevention education. We foster hope and healing through immediate response, safe haven in crisis, advocacy, counseling, and support, so that victims may be empowered to lead safe, violence-free lives.
familysunshine.org · 334.263.0218 (collect calls accepted)

Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence
The Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ACADV) provides training, technical assistance, public policy and development, and support to domestic violence center programs across Alabama. ACADV is host to the Alabama Domestic Violence Hotline at 800.650.6522.
acadv.org · 334.832.4842

The National Domestic Violence Hotline
The National Domestic Violence Hotline is a nationwide organization providing information, crisis intervention, safety planning, resources, and hope to anyone affected by domestic violence and abuse, 24/7/365.
thehotline.org · 800.799.7233

If you or someone you know are suffering from abuse, help is available 24/7/365.
334.263.0218 (collect calls accepted)
800.650.6522