

*Helping a Woman Who
is Experiencing Abuse*





What is abuse?

People call abuse of women different things. Wife battering, spousal abuse, domestic violence and family violence are words that are sometimes used. Whatever it's called, abuse of women is an abuse of power, and it's wrong. It isn't simply about having an anger problem or having an addiction, it's about the abuser's efforts to exert control over another person.

Abuse can take many forms. It can be physical, sexual, verbal, financial, social, emotional, or psychological.

Anyone can experience abuse. However, there are some possible risk factors:

- women under 25 with young children or women who are pregnant
- alcohol or drug abuse by either partner
- a severe history of trauma or cognitive impairments for either partner
- a history of violence toward former partners, a violent criminal record, or a history of threats to kill or use weapons
- women with few supports or resources – few family or friends, isolation or lack of financial resources

Are you (or a woman you know) being abused? Asking the following questions may help you find out:

Does your partner (or other significant person...)

- get jealous when you're around other people?
- make fun of you in front of your friends, family or others?
- destroy, or threaten to destroy, your possessions?
- harm, or threaten to harm, your pet(s)?
- praise you one minute and put you down the next?
- call you names or threaten you?
- ignore you or not take you seriously?
- make you choose between your friends or family and your partner?
- blame you when things go wrong?
- push you around or hit you?
- threaten to take the children?

Do you...

- have to ask permission to spend money or go out?
- feel isolated from friends, family, and activities?
- have to do what your partner wants ... or else?
- feel it's your fault when anything goes wrong?

Do you feel...

- afraid to make decisions for fear of their reaction or anger?
- that you have to check in if you go anywhere?
- that your partner is trying to run your life?
- afraid to tell them if you have a good time?
- that maybe all the terrible things this person says about you are coming true or happening?
- that you have to put your dreams and goals on hold?
- afraid to express your own opinions or say 'no' to something?
- trapped, unable to go out without your permission?
- the joy in your life diminishing?
- afraid to break up with or leave your partner?

Discussing these questions with your friend may help her identify behaviours that are abusive.

*A woman you know is experiencing abuse.
What can you do to help?*

Take care of your friend AND yourself:

LISTEN TO HER. This might be the single most important and helpful thing that you can do. Let her talk without interruption or judgment.

BELIEVE HER. Tell her the abuse is not her fault and that she is not responsible for her partner's behaviour. Tell her that she does not ever deserve to be abused.

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS of violence. Help her recognize the abuse by asking questions about what is happening to her. Help her see that what is happening is not acceptable. Suggest a safety plan.

SUPPORT HER STRENGTH. Recognize the things she does to take care of herself. Do not encourage her to stay in the relationship, but do not judge her for staying.

PROTECT HER PRIVACY. Talk to her in a safe and private place. Respect her right to keep her concerns confidential.

KNOW YOUR OWN LIMITS. Violence is serious. You cannot 'rescue' your friend. Contact an expert on violence for your own support, and encourage your friend to do the same. Give your friend the number for Victim Services or a women's shelter and encourage her to talk to them about the abuse. Offer to go with her to talk with someone she trusts. Do not take it personally if she refuses your help or does not want to share what is going on with you.

OFFER YOUR HELP. You can accompany her to a shelter or to Victim Services. You can offer to help with transportation or housing.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. Parents, children and friends of those who are experiencing abuse can also experience trauma related to the abuse. Do not put your own safety or your friend's safety at risk. If you feel overwhelmed or frightened yourself, get help. Talk to someone at a community support agency. If your friend applies for a protective order, your name may be added to the 'no contact' list.

Give her clear messages:

- violence is never okay; her safety and her children's safety are the most important issues
- violence against women is a crime
- she does not cause the abuse
- the abusive partner is 100% responsible for their actions
- she is not responsible for her partner's behaviour; she cannot change her partner's behaviour
- abuse is not a loss of control, it is a means of control

Other ways to support her:

- help her make an emergency safety plan
- encourage and support her to make her own decisions
- focus on her well-being, rather than criticizing the abuser: she may still have an emotional attachment to him
- believe her – be non-judgmental
- find out about the resources in her community (see the Resource List)
- don't ask why she stays
- let her know there are no simple solutions, but that change is possible
- discuss different options and allow her to decide which is best for her
- let her know you'll stand by her no matter what she decides
- be patient if she is confused or unsure about what to do
- respect her decisions

