

How to help a friend or family member who is being abused

Written by Lynda Harper, rural outreach coordinator for SHARE Domestic Violence Progr

When you know someone who is trapped in an abusive relationship, it's natural to want to help a friend. But in the case of domestic violence, it's hard to know what to do.

Do you ask about it? What if you're wrong? Do you offer help? What if you're accused of interfering? On the other hand, what if something you say makes an important difference that helps her break free of the violence?

The first thing we can do is to have a better understanding of what domestic violence is. "Family and Friends' Guide to Domestic Violence: How to Listen, Talk and Take Action When Someone You Care About is Being Abused" is a new book written by Elaine Weiss, Ed.D. In it, she discusses the stereotypes about women in abusive relationships and helps friends and family understand what they can do to help.

One of the first things Weiss points out is abused women do leave. She says, "They leave all the time. Against all odds, often at enormous risk, they leave."

Weiss talked with hundreds of women who told her their stories of how they broke free of an abusive relationship, and she writes, "One important lesson I have learned from women who broke free is that a well-chosen word or action from a worried colleague, friend, or family member made an important difference."

Domestic abuse is complicated

As Weiss explains, "domestic abuse is not anger gone haywire. It is, in fact, rarely caused by anger at all. The people who inflict domestic abuse do not have an 'anger management' problem. Some abusers are violent everywhere and truly can't control their temper. ... Most abusers are only abusive in private and only target their intimate partners and children."

Arguments are not domestic abuse, and even constant bickering is not domestic abuse. Not all bad relationships are domestic abuse, not even all destructive relationships are domestic abuse.

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But “there are relationships where one partner uses a combination of physical, sexual and psychological tactics to gain complete control of the other. The victims in these relationships live in constant fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. These are the true abusive relationships,” according to Weiss.

Leaving is not usually a single act, it’s a process, and you can learn how you can help your friend or family member along in the process of breaking free of domestic violence. Weiss says to those who want to help, “you are not alone.” There are other people who can help, for example domestic violence advocates, lawyers, doctors and police. “But because of your special relationship with the victim, you can help in ways no one else can. You also have to walk a much finer line.”

A victim of domestic abuse may not see your silence as an attempt to give her privacy—she may see it as disapproval of her, approval of the abuse or disinterest.

Domestic abuse is a constant state of affairs

Weiss describes a victim of domestic violence as being always on her toes. “What was right yesterday may be wrong today.” If you want to understand what she is living through, you must “imagine a home where there is a rule about everything ... and the rules keep changing. You must imagine a relationship where differences of opinion are never tolerated, and compromises are never negotiated. ... You must visualize a woman who puts all her energy into ‘getting it right.’ Only there is no way she can ever get it right. Because he needs her to get it wrong.”

Weiss says, “Domestic abuse is not just a curse, a slap or even a severe beating. It is an intentional, ongoing, purposeful effort. When pushes, slaps, shouts, threats, insults, jeers, accusations, punches, jealous rages, bites, pinches, unreasonable demands, curses and rapes are a constant presence in the relationship, this is no accident.” This is a campaign. And campaigns are ongoing.

Abusers use a wide range of tactics to achieve control. Weiss outlines control through criticism, isolation, money, mind games, decision making, jealousy, children, blame, verbal threats, sex, physical threats and physical assault used as a means of control. Any single instance of these does not necessarily mean it is domestic abuse. In an abusive relationship, the tactics shape

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themselves into a pattern. Weiss explains how to recognize these patterns.

She discusses and dispels the myths, for example, that the woman's problem is that she just has low self-esteem, or that all victims were raised in abusive homes, or have a psychological problem. Another important part of the book covers the tactics the abuser uses to try to regain control of the victim after she leaves.

The book also covers understanding psychological abuse, understanding abusers, talking and listening, taking action and special circumstances which include pregnancy, disability and teen dating.

You may get more information, including where to order this book, or how to help someone you know is being abused by calling SHARE, a domestic violence program in Morgan County and northeast Colorado at 970-867-4444 or toll free at 1-877-867-9590.