

How to Help a Loved One: Do's and Don'ts

Are you worried a friend or family member may be involved in an abusive relationship? There are many steps you can take to help.

Most domestic violence victims feel very alone and confused as a result of the abuse. Victims often feel they have nowhere to turn – they may worry no one will believe them, they may blame themselves for the abuse, and they may fear their abuser will hurt them, their children, or their pets if they reveal the abuse to anyone outside their home.

You can take steps to help. Each of us has the power to reach out to someone we love and tell them that abuse is not their fault. Love shouldn't hurt. And safety is possible.

If you worry someone you care about is in an abusive relationship, there are steps you can take to help. Consider the following do's and don'ts when approaching a friend, family member, co-worker, neighbor, or other loved one.

Do:

- Approach the other person at a time and place that is safe and confidential.
- Start by expressing concern (i.e., "I am concerned someone may be hurting you, and I am worried about your safety.")
- Take the time to listen and believe what your loved one.
- Communicate that you care about your loved one's safety, that they do not deserve to be hurt, and that the abuse is not their fault.
- Tell your loved one they are not crazy. A person who has been abused often feels upset, depressed, confused and scared. Let them know that these are normal feelings.
- Tell them good things about themselves. Let them know you think they are smart, strong and brave. Their abuser may be tearing down their self-esteem.

- Respect the victim's choices.
- Encourage them to build a wide support system. Help find a support group or encourage them talk to friends and family.
- Be patient. Self-empowerment may take longer than you want. Go at the victim's pace, not yours.
- Connect them to resources. If your area does not have its own Help Line, you can direct your loved one to the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE.
- Consider calling your local domestic violence Help Line yourself — not on behalf of your friend, but to learn more about the kinds of help available, to ask questions specific to your situation, and to learn how you can be an effective and supportive ally.

Do Not:

- Do not accuse, diagnose, or judge your loved one's choices; do not draw conclusions about what they may be experiencing or feeling; and do not judge or criticize their abuser.
- Do not pressure your friend to leave the abusive relationship. There are many reasons they may be choosing to stay. It is possible their abuser has threatened to hurt them or their children if they try to leave. The abuser may control all of their finances and may have isolated the victim from friends and family, leaving the victim with very few resources of their own. The abuser may have promised to change, and the victim may still love him/her. It is never as simple as encouraging a victim to "just leave"—but by all means, communicate to your loved one that help does exist, and that people in their community care about them and their children and want them to be safe.
- Do not feel the need to be an expert. Do not try to provide counseling or advice, but do connect your friend to trained people who can help.