

How To Support Someone Experiencing Relationship Abuse: A Guide by the National Domestic Violence Hotline

Suspecting a friend or family member may be experiencing relationship abuse (also known as domestic violence or intimate partner violence) is difficult, and knowing what to do can be a challenge. Friends and family members sometimes see what is happening before anyone else and even before the survivor is ready to share their experience.

Here are some common warning signs that relationship abuse may be occurring:

- Telling the survivor that they never do anything right.
- Showing extreme jealousy of the survivor's friends, family, hobbies, or time spent away from them.
- Preventing or discouraging the survivor from spending time with friends, family, or peers.
- Preventing the survivor from making their own decisions, including about working or attending school.
- Using their phone to track the survivor's location and continually checking in on where they are and who they are with.
- Controlling finances in the household without discussion, including taking the survivor's money or refusing to provide money for necessary expenses.
- Pressuring the survivor to have sex or perform sexual acts they're not comfortable with.

It is one thing to recognize abuse, and another thing to talk about it. If you believe that someone you know is experiencing abuse, here are some tips to talk to them about your concerns. These tips can help you best support the person experiencing abuse while also helping them remain as safe as possible.

Talk to the person alone if possible.

It can be challenging to talk to someone about relationship abuse. If possible, it is best to talk to the person experiencing abuse in private and away from their partner. This may mean calling them when you know the abusive partner is away or asking them to meet somewhere to talk in private.

Focus on the behaviors, NOT the person involved.

When someone we care about is being hurt, it is natural to get defensive of them and angry at the person causing harm. We may want to call their partner names or lash out at them and force them to treat our loved one better. Unfortunately, this rarely works out well. Remember that your loved one may still have feelings of love, connection and compassion for the person who is harming them. This is normal. Speaking badly about their dating partner could discourage them from seeking your help in the future.

If you are talking to someone who is experiencing abuse about their situation, be sure to focus on the harmful words or actions that occur. If we name-call the abusive partner or talk about how much we hate them, the person experiencing the abuse may feel the need to defend them.

By focusing on the behaviors instead of the person, you can help the individual experiencing abuse understand that what is going on is not okay and they deserve better. Here is an example:

“It seems to me that when you and your partner argue they are always putting you down and name-calling. It's normal to argue, but it's important that you talk about the issue instead of just getting yelled at or called names. Do you feel like they try to understand your point of view?”

“I know that people can get angry or upset, but that is never an excuse for someone to get physically aggressive with you! It seems scary when that happens. How do you feel when your partner throws things when they are angry?”

Conversation Starters:

Some of the things I have seen in your relationship are a bit scary. No one deserves to be treated this way. Has this been going on for a while?

When you talk to someone who is experiencing abuse, it is important to focus on the actions they are experiencing instead of attacking the person causing harm. Due to complicated feelings that come up in an abusive relationship, a survivor may feel like they need to defend the person who is abusing them. Be sure to focus on the actions and how they are harmful and wrong instead of the person.

Be supportive and non-accusatory or judgmental in conversations about their relationship. Reassure them that their partner's behavior is not their fault and that no one deserves to experience a lack of respect, harassment and/or abuse. If they do not open at first, don't be disappointed, blame them, or overreact. It may take multiple attempts in order for them to feel safe enough to share their experience. Let them talk to you on their own terms and meet them with understanding when they do.

How are things going in your relationship? I've noticed that some of your conversations can get a bit heated, how do you feel when that happens?

Doing regular check-ins with your friends or family is important. By asking how things are going you can get a better idea of the situation. Asking questions about how the survivor feels when abuse happens can help them get a better sense of the relationship dynamic.

If the survivor says they feel overwhelmed, disrespected, or hurt by their partner's actions, that is a sign that the relationship is not healthy. You can remind them that their partner should make them feel cared for, supported, and loved, not disrespected or upset. This can help a survivor better understand that what is going on is not healthy or right for them.

I believe you, and I am so sorry this is happening. How can I help you?

Knowing that someone believes what a survivor is going through can be important. Oftentimes abusive partners will **gaslight** their partner, which is a form of emotional abuse that causes a survivor to question their own feelings, instincts, and sanity, which gives the abusive partner a lot of power. Acknowledging that you believe what they are saying can help a survivor feel more grounded. Asking how you can help allows the survivor to determine what is best for them and what support they will receive.

Unsupportive Reactions and Responses:

Responding to a loved one that told you about their abuse in this way is victim-blaming. People experiencing abuse already receive this from their partner and other people – they are blamed or scrutinized because people think they played a role in their own abuse. Responding in this manner can further isolate a survivor and break any trust within your relationship.

Instead of:

- Bad-mouthing abusive partner
- Forcing ultimatums
- Judging survivor
- Instantly calling police

- Forcing protective orders

More helpful:

- Focus on the behavior, not the person.
- Let survivors make choices; ask how you can help.
- Empower survivors with information and support.
- Consider possible consequences – the situation may become more dangerous.

- Discuss how order may not be enforced – violence may escalate.