

Supporting someone experiencing domestic violence and abuse

A guide for
family and
friends



**Safer
Bristol**
Crime, Drugs and Alcohol
Partnership

NHS
Bristol

People who have experienced abusive relationships have suggested the following emotional and practical support that friends and family can give.

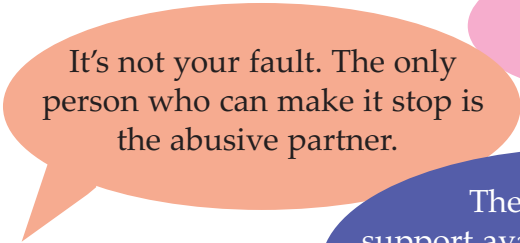
It can be hard to discuss people's relationships but be aware that by remaining neutral you may be giving the abusive person the message that you are accepting their behaviour and your friend or family member may feel they are to blame.

Raise the Issue

Don't wait for your abused friend to tell you about their situation

- Bring the subject up yourself when their abusive partner isn't around.
- Let them know you are concerned about them and want to help. Try not to criticise their partner or the relationship.
- Instead, focus on the abuse and their safety. You don't have to know all the answers.
- The importance of helping your friend break the silence and end the isolation should never be underestimated.
- **Listen** to what they have to say, giving support.

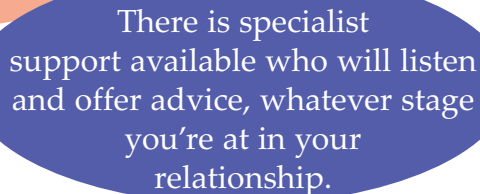
Three things to say



It's not your fault. The only person who can make it stop is the abusive partner.



I believe you.



There is specialist support available who will listen and offer advice, whatever stage you're at in your relationship.

Giving support

- You need to support your abused friend in whatever decision they are currently making about their relationship, while being clear that the abuse is wrong.
- Make it clear that you believe your friend. They know more about it than you do; they may be embarrassed or ashamed to tell you everything.
- It's okay to be truthful or give your opinion, but bear in mind that your friend needs to be supported rather than judged.
- Maintain contact with them, helping them explore all the options on offer.

Supporting a friend in this way can be frustrating. You don't want to see them get hurt, but may have to watch them continue with their partner when you think they should leave them or have them arrested.

As their friend, make sure you offer them something the abuser doesn't. For example, if the abuser tells them what to do all the time, it's no use you doing the same. Ask them what they want to do.

Give them time and space to talk.

Encourage them to get support; this can be confidential. See the contacts at the back of this leaflet.

Domestic violence is unacceptable.

Everyone has the right to live their life free of violence, abuse, intimidation and fear.

Domestic violence is intentional and intimidating

often leaving the victim confused and feeling they are to blame for the abuse.

You cannot change them.

The abuser is the only person who can stop their violence.

Domestic violence is very common.

One woman in four experiences domestic violence at some point in her life.

The abuser is 100 percent responsible.

Alcohol, culture or unemployment are not excuses. The abuse is the abusers responsibility.

You don't have to put up with it.

Everyone has the right to safety, respect, and to put themselves and their children first.

Domestic violence is very dangerous.

Each week in the UK, two women are killed by a partner or ex-partner.

It is not your fault.

No one deserves to be abused, regardless of what they say or do.

Increase your safety.

If the abuser is intent on being violent, you will not be able to stop them.

Domestic violence is about power and control.

Abusive, sexually abusive or violent behaviour is wide ranging and subtle in what it tries to achieve.

A perpetrator of domestic abuse can change if they want to.

Their behaviour is within their control and they can choose to stop.

Three critical things to remember

You are not the person who has to live with the consequences of any decision. Therefore, it isn't surprising that they make decisions in their best interests (as they see them), rather than doing what you may want them to do.

Leaving is an extremely difficult decision to make, involving both emotional and practical considerations. Abusers will beg them to stay and make promises to change.

Often, leaving a violent partner only signifies the end of the relationship - not the end of the violence and abuse. It is likely that their partner may continue to harass and even stalk them after separation so they will need support after the relationship, not just to end it.

There are things you can do to increase their safety.

Above all, be patient.

Your friend may need to talk about their situation numerous times.

They may try to improve things or give their partner several 'last' chances. They may leave and return several times. If this happens, remember that each time they will gain a little more clarity, and may - given enough ongoing support - eventually make the break final.

Helping to build your friend's self-esteem can have great benefits. Remind them of their good points, challenge them if they put themselves down or blame themselves, praise them for every step they take, and let them know they have your support.

Specialist services can support victims to write a more detailed safety plan if they:

- want to stay
- want to think about leaving
- have left the abusive partner.

On a practical level you could:

- Agree a code word or action that your friend can use to signal that they are in danger or distressed and cannot access help themselves.
- Offer to keep copies of important documents and other items for them. That way, if they have to leave in a hurry, they don't have to waste time collecting important belongings.
- Together or on your own, find out information about local services and help.
- Offer any practical help you are able (and feel comfortable) to give, such as the use of your telephone or address for information or messages, keeping spare sets of keys /overnight bags/important documents for emergencies.
- Make sure you don't give any information to the abuser.
- Finally, get some support for yourself. You have to be strong if you're going to be able to help them. Most domestic violence services are happy to help with any worries you may have or provide suggestions as to other actions you might take.
- **Most importantly, don't give up on them. You might be their only lifeline.**

Do:

...believe what they tell you. It will have taken a lot for them to talk to you and trust you.

...take the abuse seriously. It can be damaging both physically and emotionally and is very destructive to self-confidence. They could be in real physical danger.

...focus on their safety.

...help them to recognise the abuse and understand how it may be affecting them. Recognise and support their strength and courage.

...help them to understand that the abuse is not their fault and that no-one deserves to be abused.

...encourage them to talk to a specialist domestic abuse agency.

...encourage and help them to develop a safety plan. Agree with their concerns for their safety and that of their children. Offer assistance in developing a plan that may include you. Help them to look ahead to a plan of action should the abuser become violent again.

...suggest that they have an 'escape bag' somewhere which could include an extra set of car keys, ID documents, birth certificates and insurance cards.

...encourage them to break the isolation. One of the most effective 'tools' for abusers is the victim's isolation

from family, friends, co-workers or any type of support system. Help your friend find an agency offering counselling and support groups. Help them see how isolated they are.

...evaluate how they cope. Faced with violence and abuse, people develop ways of coping that can be destructive. Your friend will need support in re-evaluating these negative coping mechanisms and consider more constructive ways of coping. The last thing they will need is another reason to be hard on themselves, so real encouragement will be required.

Remember: if you feel overwhelmed or frightened yourself, get help.

Don't:

...blame them or ask judgemental questions such as, 'What did you do to make them treat you like that?' or 'Why don't you just break up with them?'

...focus on trying to work out the abuser's reasons for the abuse. Concentrate on supporting them and discussing what they can do to improve their safety.

...be impatient or critical of them if they are confused about what to do. It's difficult for anyone to break up a relationship, and especially hard if being abused.

...try to "change" the abuser, if they are also a friend or family member. Knowing what an abuser has done will strain your friendship/relationship with them. If you try to support both parties, you're not going to be much help to either.

Some questions you could ask:

How has their behaviour made you feel?

How is it affecting you?

How have you been coping with the abuse?

What are you afraid of if you leave?

What are you afraid of if you stay?

What can you do to make yourself safer?

Do you know when an incident is going to happen?
Is there a pattern?

What's your worst case scenario for yourself or your children?

What do you already do to protect yourself and your children? (This is a good chance to help them see how much they may already be doing to stay safe).

What are your worst fears for yourself or your children?

Which of the things you do to protect yourself/your children work in practice and which don't?

What external resources are there to help you cope?
(support networks of friends and family, access to money, access to alternative accommodation and so on)

How can these be increased?

Which options would be the most realistic for you?
What do you see yourself as actually being able to do?
(Focus on those).

What personal strengths do you have that help you to deal with this situation?
(Explore how these can be increased, for example, by raising their self-esteem and self-belief).

Useful contacts

Bristol Domestic Violence and Abuse Helpline

Free confidential 24hr advice line 0808 694 9999

Domestic Abuse Referral Team

Police 0117 945 4307

Men's Advice Line

Support, information and advocacy for male victims of domestic violence/abuse 0808 801 0327

Broken Rainbow LGBT National Helpline

0300 999 5428

Respect

Support and advice if you are worried about your own behaviour 0845 122 8609

Legal Advice Helpline

(Bristol, 24hrs) 0117 904 5999

Single Parent Action Network

0117 951 4231

Websites:

www.bdaf.org.uk

www.womensaid.org.uk

www.refuge.org.uk

www.respect.uk.net/mens_advice.php

South West Child Protection Procedures:

www.swcpp.org.uk

To request copies of this leaflet or more information, health promoters please contact the Knowledge, Resource and Information Service (KRIS) on 0117 323 5463.