

Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women

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Helping Battered Women: A Guide for Friends & Family

Millions of women are abused by husbands, boyfriends, or intimate partners* each year. Chances are, someone you know—your mother, your sister, friend, co-worker, or neighbor—is a victim of domestic violence. Perhaps you feel your friend's problem will work itself out. Not so. The violence won't end until action is taken to stop it. All intimate relationships have problems, and sometimes it's difficult for others to decide when it's appropriate to intervene. Have you ignored these signs that your friend is possibly being abused and needs help?

- Have you accepted her explanations for visible injuries such as black eyes, bruises, or broken bones?
- Do you tend not to press her further about frequent "accidents" that cause her to miss work or other obligations?
- Does her partner exert an unusual amount of control over her activities? Are you reluctant to discuss his control over family finances, the way your friend dresses, and her contact with friends and family?
- If her partner ridicules her publicly, do you ignore his behavior or join the laughter at your friend's expense?
- Why are you unwilling to stand up for her? Do you sense the volatile nature of her partner's comments?

I shouldn't get involved in a private family matter. Domestic abuse, also called spousal abuse, battering, woman abuse, and wife beating, is not just a family problem. It is a crime with serious repercussions for your friend, her children, and the entire community.

The violence can't really be that serious. Domestic violence includes emotional abuse, threats, pushing, punching, slapping, choking, sexual assault, and assault with weapons. It is rarely a one-time occurrence and usually escalates in frequency and severity. Any act of domestic violence is something to be taken seriously. Domestic violence results in more injuries that require medical treatment than sexual assault, auto accidents, and muggings combined. And battering can be deadly: 30% of women murdered in the U.S. are killed by intimate partners.

She must be doing something to provoke her partner's violence. A victim of battering is never to blame for another person's choice to use violence against her. Problems exist in most relationships, but the use of violence to resolve them is never acceptable.

If it's so bad, why doesn't she just leave? For most of us, a decision to end a relationship is not easy. A battered woman's emotional ties to her partner may be strong, supporting her hope that the violence will end. She may be financially dependent and in leaving she will likely face severe economic hardship. She may not know about available resources and social, and justice systems may have been unhelpful to her in the past. Religious, cultural, or family pressures may make her think it's her duty to keep her marriage together. If she has tried to leave in the past, her partner may have used violence to stop her.

Doesn't she care about what's happening to her children? Your friend is probably doing her best to protect her children from violence. She may feel that the violence is only directed at her and does not yet realize its effects on her children. She may believe her children need a father, or lacks the resources to support them on her own. The children may beg her to stay, not wanting to leave their home or their friends. She fears that if she leaves she will lose custody of her children.

I know him. I don't think he could hurt anybody. Many abusers are not violent outside of their intimate relationships and can be very charming in social situations, yet be extremely violent in the privacy of the home.

He must be sick. Battering is learned behavior, not a mental illness. An abuser's experience as a child and the messages he gets from society tell him that violence is an easy way to get power and control over his partner's behavior. Men who batter (and women who batter in same-sex relationships) choose this behavior and viewing them as "sick" wrongly excuses them from taking responsibility for it.

I think he has a drinking/drug problem. Could that be the cause of the violence? Alcohol or drug use may intensify violent behavior, but it does not cause battering. Batterers typically make excuses for their violence, claiming a loss of control due to alcohol/drug use or extreme stress. Battering, however, does not represent a loss of control, but a way of achieving it.

If she wanted my help, she'd ask for it. Your friend may not feel comfortable confiding in you, feeling you may not understand her situation. Talk to her about battering in a general way. Tell her you're concerned about women who are abused and that you do not blame battered women for the violence.

What you can do:

Lend a listening ear. Tell your friend that you care and you are willing to listen. Don't force the issue, but allow her to confide in you at her own pace. Never blame her for what's happening or underestimate her fear of potential danger. Focus on supporting her right to make her own decisions.

Guide her to community services. Gather information about domestic violence in her area. These programs offer safety, advocacy, support, legal information, and other needed services. Let her know that she isn't alone and that people are available to help her. Encourage her to seek the assistance of battered women's advocates. Assure her that they will keep information about her confidential.

Focus on her strengths. Battered women live with emotional as well as physical abuse. Your friend is probably told continually by her abuser that she is a bad woman, bad partner, and a bad mother. She may believe she can't do anything right and that there really is something wrong with her. Give her emotional support to believe she is a good and worthy person. Help her examine her strengths and skills. Emphasize that she deserves a life free from violence.

Help her make a safety plan. Help your friend contact the nearest battered women's program. They can help her examine her options and find a safe place. Not all communities have safe shelter and if there is one available it could be full, so she may need to rely on friends or family for temporary housing. But take caution. A battered woman frequently faces the most danger when she tries to flee and you could face threats and/or harm from her abuser. Talk to your local battered women's program about how you can help your friend in a safe way.

Get Help and Find Safety:

For assistance in finding help for all types of abuse, call the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women during business hours at **(651) 646-6177** or our after hours crisis line at **(651) 646-0994**. Out of the Metro area? Call the Minnesota Domestic Violence Crisis Line toll-free at **866-223-1111**.

Adapted from "Helping the Battered Woman, A Guide for Family and Friends," National Woman Abuse Prevention Project, 1989.

***This material addresses violence in heterosexual relationships, but violence occurs in lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gay relationships, too.**