

How to Help a Woman In An Abusive Relationship – For Friends and Family

Helping someone in an abusive relationship can be a process, not an event. Listening without judgment, offering options, or just being a constant source of support can make the difference for many women.

There are several ways you can assist someone who has reached out to you. Before you offer assistance, remember that escaping a violent relationship is a complicated, difficult and often dangerous process. Don't expect immediate results from your efforts to help, and if you have your own outcome in mind about what *should* happen, be prepared to let it go! Be patient, and remember that regardless of the decisions she ultimately makes, your support will have a subtle impact, even if you are unaware of it.

In order to be an effective helper, it is important to remember that, even though a woman dealing with abuse is in crisis, and she can make her own decisions and determine her own fate. It is appropriate to offer support, and review the information, resources, and strategies that she has already considered. Susan Schechter, author of *Women and Male Violence*, explains that "empowerment means gaining control over the decisions affecting one's life and finding access to the resources needed to live decently." While you can certainly help a woman in crisis, it is ultimately up to her to change her own life and to create her own future.

1. If a woman is in immediate danger, call 911 or the police. Be careful about directly intervening if you witness a woman being assaulted. Batterers can be dangerous, and jeopardizing yourself will not be of benefit to you or the woman you are trying to help.
2. If a woman has reached out to you for help, maintain some level of ongoing contact with her. Physical and psychological isolation are powerful control tactics used by batterers. An open line of communication between you and the battered woman can be a lifeline.
3. Convey respect to her in every way possible. Don't admonish or negatively judge her. Repeat clear statements about her value and rights as a person, such as "You don't deserve to be treated that way," and "No one, not even your husband or partner, has the right to mistreat you."
4. Avoid giving advice, and using statements such as "you should," "you need to," and "you have to." Instead, use "I" statements such as "I'm concerned," "I'm worried," and "I'm afraid."
5. Offer resources such as the telephone number of a local battered women's hotline or shelter. The National Domestic Violence Hotline, at (800) 799-SAFE, can help put you in touch with local battered women's shelters and other resources.
6. Listen with love. Be completely present with the woman, listening to her words and emotions. Don't interrupt, and don't fear silences. Suspend judgment and assumption, and refrain from blaming and giving advice. As the woman shares her story, reflect back to her your interpretation of what she's saying. Begin with phrases like "It sounds like," and "It seems that." Be honest with her and with

- yourself; do not pretend to have all the answers, but try to be a warm, patient, approachable listener who is sensitive to her feelings and needs.
7. Believe what the woman tells you. Do not discount her fears. Telling her story may be very embarrassing for her, and she is not likely to exaggerate. By offering a safe, accepting place to talk, you will help her begin to break the silence.
 8. If the woman decides to stay with her abusive partner, she may need a safety plan to protect herself and her children from further violence. If she expresses interest in a Safety Plan, ask whether she would like your help in creating a plan.
 9. Use the SPAN 24-Hour Crisis Line for your own support and information: 303-444-2424. No one needs to face the abuse alone – including the helper!

Parts of this section were adapted from *When Violence Begins at Home: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding and Ending Domestic Abuse*, by K.J. Wilson, Ed.D., Hunter House Publishers, 1997.