

Helping a Domestic Violence Friend

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(Most, but not all, intimate partner violence involves a male controller and a female target, so I'll use those pronouns here. This is in no way meant to minimize the fact intimate partner violence can occur in any sort of intimate relationship to either partner.)

Friends help each other. It's what we do. When we see a friend struggling, we want to step in and fix it, or at least find some time to lend an ear.

If a friend is in a controlling or abusive relationship, these gestures of friendship can be hard to pull off. Handling it badly might complicate an already tense, even dangerous, situation. But there are some things you can do.

Before you offer help, do your own research. Learn about domestic violence, and learn about safety planning, especially when someone is leaving an abusive relationship. Think seriously and specifically about what help you are able and willing to offer.

When you approach your friend to offer help, approach her somewhere she has some space from her partner, and keep the conversation about her. Don't express anger toward her partner, judge her for staying, or tell her what she should do. Mostly, express that you're concerned about how your friend is being treated, and you're concerned for her safety. Then listen, even if she defends her abuser, or denies that there's a problem.

The main information you want to convey is this:

I'm concerned about your safety (and that of the children, if that applies).

No one deserves to be treated this way. It's not your fault.

It is likely to get worse.

I am here if you need help.

It is not important if she is unwilling to leave. Just keep reminding her of these key points whenever you can. Know that she has heard you, even if she doesn't act right away.

If your friend calls to ask for help, respond as soon as you are able. Sometimes windows of opportunity can be narrow. You may need to suggest specific ways you can help if she is scared or upset when she calls.

It is important to remember that victims of intimate partner violence leave their partners an average of seven times before they leave for good. Your offers of help may be called for more than once.

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