

#### Helping A Friend That Is Being Abused

**When a victim of intimate partner abuse pushes through the fear, guilt, shame, isolation and grief to reach out for support, you can be prepared to help. Most individuals who experience abuse in a relationship do not turn to “professionals” for help. They go to friends, family and acquaintances. Here are some important points to remember if you are that trusted person.**

1. **Believe the person.** People usually do not lie about abuse. (You may know the abusive partner, but keep in mind that many abusers are gracious and likeable in public. They often seek to control only their partners and/or children.) Listen with respect and care. Abuse is painful to experience and to recount to another person. If the pieces may not seem to fit together or make sense, remember that abuse is often arbitrary and irrational.
2. **Acknowledge and support the person for talking to you.** Talking about abuse is a risk. Abusers often escalate violence when the victim tries to leave or get help. Victims also fear rejection, disbelief and invalidation on the part of friends and family. Let the person know that you appreciate being trusted with this information and acknowledge the courage it took to come to you.
3. **Validate the person’s feelings.** Fear, confusion, guilt, shame, anger, sadness, numbness and hopelessness are all appropriate and normal feelings in the face of abuse.
4. **Do not blame the victim for the abuse.** “The abuse is not your fault. I’m sorry this is happening to you.” Abusers often convince the victim that they are to blame for the abuse, and victims expend a lot of energy trying to figure out how to avoid “triggering” abusive behaviors. On the other hand, your sensitivity to the victim’s confused feelings about the abuser is important. If you express too much anger towards the abuser, the abused person may defend and make excuses for her/his partner.
5. **Let the person lead the conversation.** Listen (and listen some more). Validate. Encourage.
6. **Ask “How can I help?”** The victim may or may not know what he or she needs. Ask anyway. If you are asked to do anything within reason, try to do it. If you are asked to do something you cannot or do not want to do, say so. Talk it over and try to find a compromise or another way to meet the victim’s needs. Remember, your idea of what’s helpful and the victim’s idea may be drastically different. Let the abused person identify what’s needed.

While being careful not to impose your ideas, you may:

- Offer to find resources for protection, support & advocacy
  - Call the police if there is immediate threat or danger
  - Accompany the abused person to the hospital or to a domestic violence agency
  - Get and give articles, books and brochures on domestic violence
  - With the abused person’s permission, enlist the help of other friends and family to provide transportation, childcare, loans or other support
  - Help to figure out a safety plan
7. **Express your care and concern with statements like “I think you are in danger.”** “I am worried about your safety.” or “I am worried about your mental health and well-being.” Let your friend know you care without passing judgment or giving advice.
  8. **Respect the person’s pace and be patient.** No one decides to give up a relationship over night. An abused person may have to face terrifying threats, increasing assaults or stalking when they try to leave. You can help with safety planning and by letting the victim make decisions.
  9. **Remind the person of her/his strengths, accomplishments and positive attributes.** Living in an abusive relationship can undermine and diminish an individual’s sense of self as competent and strong. As a friend you can help the victim recapture these lost parts of self. Notice and acknowledge when the abused person acts on her/his own behalf. Always avoid treating the person like a child or a helpless victim.
  10. **Wisconsin domestic violence laws protect people in same-gender relationships.** The law is written in gender-neutral language and includes individuals who are not married. Temporary Restraining Orders are available to anyone. Unfortunately, this does not mean that law enforcement or the courts always treat lesbians or gay men appropriately and respectfully. Fortunately, there are people available to advocate on the behalf of victims and help them through the process.

If at all possible, offer an opportunity to seek your support again. Even if the victim leaves the abuser and then goes back, don’t withdraw your support. Many victims leave a number of times before leaving for good. If you need additional information on resources or have questions about supporting the victim of intimate partner abuse, contact the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center’s Anti-Violence Project coordinator at 414-292-3072.