

Want to help a friend or family member who is in an abusive relationship? Showing genuine concern is the best place to start. If you are reading this brochure, you have already started.

How do I begin the conversation? Time and place is important. Privacy matters. You can begin with a simple statement like, "I'm worried about you." Be aware that denial has a purpose, and safety is central. If the conversation shuts down, at least an opening has been created.

How can I best support my friend/family member?

Believe what you hear. Listen without interrupting or asking a lot of questions. Accept the details as they are revealed. Be aware that your friend/family member may be struggling with deep embarrassment, guilt, or fear. Try not to judge the situation, the victim, or the abuser. This is difficult for most people; however, judging will often push your friend or family member farther away from you.

How do I know what my friend or family member needs most? First, establish a safe connection. Your friend or family member may not know what is needed most but he or she knows that staying safe is important. Providing a safe place to talk, demonstrating your respect for privacy, and confidentiality is essential. Offering advice usually isn't effective; offer your support and encouragement.

I listened and tried to help; my friend went back to her abuser. Now what? Unfortunately, this is too often the case. It is not your fault because it was not your decision. The important thing to do when this happens is to remain open and available; if you are able, let your friend or family member know that you are not passing judgment on decisions made. Be aware that relationship violence follows patterns of behavior, and that your friend or family member may be responding to the abuser's sense of remorse or promises to change. The dynamic between an abuser and his or her victim is unique to them as a couple or family. There may be pressures that are not understood by others in the family or community. Be genuine. Be available. Be open.

I really think my friend/family member is in danger. What do I do? First, understand your limitations. There are many things not in your control. Helping your friend assess the danger could be an important way to support his or her decision-making process. Does the abuser have a history of violence against others or against the police? Does the abuser have a history of drug or alcohol abuse? Has the abuser ever choked the victim? Has the abuser ever threatened the victim with a gun or other deadly weapon? If there are children in the home, have they seen the violence? If the answer to the above questions is "yes", the danger level is high. You can help your friend develop a safety plan. You can encourage your family member to keep phones charged in order to call 911.

What's a Safety Plan? A safety plan is a plan of action that the victim of violence can put into place in a moment's notice. For instance, where will a victim go if he or she has to flee? Where will the children be? Can a bag of clothing, money, important papers and other essentials be kept in a safe place? What support network is available; friends, neighbors, family? Advocates at Scars of Survival are experienced and available to help develop a safety plan.

My friend/family member doesn't want to call Scars of Survival. Can I call for her? You can call for yourself, because you are exposed to the trauma of relationship abuse. You also need support in order to support your friend. Don't hesitate to reach out and ask for the help you want to give your friend, as well as the help you may need for your own peace of mind. Your friend may be helped by the resources that you learn are available for victims of relationship abuse.

Actually, my friend/family member sounds nothing like the victim you describe who is in real danger. But I know that something is not right. What should I look for? Domestic and relationship violence are based on the abuser exerting power and control over the victim. Be aware of some of the tactics in the power and control dynamic: Control through isolation: the abuser seeks to isolate his or her victim from friends and family or from employment opportunities; this leaves the victim with fewer resources and a greater sense of aloneness.

Control through economic abuse: the abusive partner seeks to control finances; takes the victim's paycheck; makes it difficult for the victim to go to work or refuses to share the car for transportation to and from work; will not share in child care while the victim works outside the home, or uses the victim's credit cards for personal gain.

Control through fear: the abuser has the victim convinced that if she leaves she will never see the children; that friends and family members will hear what a terrible person she really is; that she will have no place to live; that she will have no health insurance, no money, no car, and no one will believe her.

Control through emotional abuse: the victim hears over and over his or her weaknesses and shortcomings; the victim is called names so often it almost becomes common-place; the victim is criticized and belittled in public and in private. Feelings are not honored and personal failings are exaggerated.

Control through mind games: the abuser says, "I was just joking" after an insult; or tells the victim's family and friends that he or she is actually the victim of abuse.

Control through using children. This is a devastating form of control because it uses a victim's sense of parenting as a weapon. The abuser tells the victim's child (ren) that she/he is a terrible and unreliable parent. The abuser tells intimate information about the victim to the children. Or the abuser demands from the children absolute loyalty and paints the victim as one who does not truly love her/his children. The ultimate fear of losing a child may drive the victim's decision making, thereby threatening personal safety.