FRIENDS & FAMILY GUIDE

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

WASHINGTON STATE COALITION
WSCADV
AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

wscadv.org/friends

Everyone deserves a healthy relationship.

Do you:

- Know someone who is being hurt?
- Know someone who is causing harm?
- Feel worried about what might be happening in a loved one's relationship?

You are not alone—we are here to help!

This guide will help you support someone who is struggling in their relationship—and to take care of yourself while you're doing it. People are more likely to turn to their community (friends, family, **YOU**) than they are to professionals.

Survivors tell us that what matters most is having someone in their life who is there for them, without judgment, to bounce ideas off, get support, and lean on when things are tough. You can be that person. These tips and tools will help you get started.

ASK A QUESTION

LISTEN UP

STAY CONNECTED

we want
everyone
to be ok

What are we talking about when we talk about abuse?

Abuse is a pattern of behavior that one person uses to gain power and control over the other. These behaviors can include:

- isolation
- emotional abuse
- monitoring
- controlling the finances
- physical and sexual assault

The fundamental harm of abuse is a loss of autonomy. Autonomy means independence and freedom from external control. Everyone should be free to make their own choices in relationships. As friends and family who want to help, we can restore those choices that have been restricted or taken away by abuse.

controlling the finances

physical and sexual assault

monitoring

emotional abuse

isolation

How do I know if it is abuse or just a bad relationship?

In some ways, it doesn't matter if it's abuse or not—if someone is being hurt or controlled, they deserve better. We want everyone to be in a healthy relationship, and people may need support to get there. The strategies in this guide can help in either case.

But it is helpful to know if it is abusive for a couple of reasons:

1. You might need some help to support the person from a local domestic violence or sexual assault program.

2. You will need different strategies to address safety concerns.

People who are abusive to their partners believe that:

- they have a right to control their partner,
- their behavior is justified, and
- their partner is to blame for all the problems in the relationship.

They also tend to manipulate others to further their control by:

- Confusing people by saying that they are the victim. This makes it harder for their partner to get support and be believed.
- Using systems to limit their partner's options. For example, calling the police to get their partner arrested or getting CPS involved to question and undermine their partner's parenting. This entangles survivors in those systems and ensures they cannot access them for help in the future.

We know this is complicated. You can talk with an advocate anytime (you don't have to be in crisis) to sort out how to help someone who is in an abusive relationship. You can call, chat, or text the National Domestic Violence Hotline or reach out to your local domestic violence or sexual assault program to get support.

You don't have to be in crisis to get help from an advocate.

The National Domestic Violence
HOTLINE
1.800.799.SAFE (7233) • 1.800.787.3224 (TTY)
thehotline.org

What can I do to support someone experiencing abuse?

These three strategies show your willingness to show up and support someone. You don't need to be an expert or have all the answers. Just being there and available is what people have told us helps most.

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Ask a Question

Asking “How’s it going?" and really caring about the answer is powerful.

Some other possible questions to ask:

- What is your biggest concern?
- What are you most worried about?
- What do you need or want?
- What do you need from your community?
- How can I help?
- What is life like with [partner's name]?
- How are the kids doing?
- Is this relationship energizing or draining?
- Do you get to do the things you like to do?
- What happens if you disagree?
- What does arguing look like in your relationship?

Listen Up

Really listen.

Listen without having your own agenda. Being heard helps. Acknowledgment makes all the difference.

When you're listening deeply to someone, you are not trying to get to your point of view, you are trying to hear their perspective.

You're also listening for what the person thinks about risks, priorities, and concerns.

Bottom line: you are listening to hear what the person is experiencing, what they want, and how you can help.

Things to say to people who have experienced harm:

I believe you.	I am so sorry this is happening to you.	Thank you for sharing this.
I don't even know what to say right now, but I am so glad you told me.	You don't deserve this.	Thank you for telling me.
It's not your fault.	You are not alone.	You get to choose what you do next.

Stay Connected

It can take a long time for things to get better, and it can be difficult to hang in there through it all. But staying connected is one of the most helpful things you can do. When someone is isolated, the abuser has far more power and control over their lives. You do not need to know all the answers or agree with every decision to be helpful.

Consistently show up, take on what you can, and ask for help with things that are difficult for you.

Connection also means no ultimatums. We've learned that tough love is not what folks need. You might be the only person they are reaching out to. If you give them an ultimatum that they can't live up to, they won't have anyone left. Instead, try to leave the door open to make it easy to keep coming back to you.

Even if the person you're concerned about doesn't reach out, you can be the one to reach out. This takes some of the power away from the abuser and can be a lifeline for your loved one. It might be that they aren't calling or reaching out because they can't, not because they don't want to or don't need support.

That said, we know that it's really hard to stay connected when you're worried and scared and nothing seems to be changing. It is not helpful to sacrifice your own well-being in the hopes of helping someone else.

If you need help, talk to your trusted people and reach out to experts. If you need to take a break, take it.

staying connected is one of the most helpful things you can do

Feeling nervous about what might come up?

Get through those awkward moments with these tips.

Conversation going nowhere? When you're getting silence or one-word answers, it's best to back off and try again a different day. Just asking questions lets people know you are someone they can turn to when they are ready.

Don't know the answer? Try saying: "Honestly, I don't know. Let me do some research and then we can talk more tomorrow."

Totally freaked out by what you just heard? Let them know you need a little time: "I'm really glad you're talking to me. I want to keep talking, but it would help me to have some time to think about all this. Can we check in again another time?"

Not feeling great about your own relationship? You don't need to have it all figured out to support someone else. Remember, you can always reach out to domestic violence advocates and think about who might be open to listening to you, even if they've never asked you about your relationship.

Still worried?

If you're hearing something (they're isolated, being monitored or stalked, the person has a weapon) that makes you concerned they are in immediate danger, you (or both of you together) can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline to come up with a plan to stay as safe as possible.

Some particularly risky stuff to listen for:

- access to firearms
- prior strangulation
- suicide threats

How do I talk to someone about their abusive behavior?

No one wants to imagine that someone they care about is hurting another person. If there is one thing that we've learned from the #MeToo movement and from our work with survivors, it's that abuse, coercion, and control are incredibly common and that people who cause harm can be the same people we love and care about. This can be hard to reconcile, but what we've learned is that people are not just one thing.

People who are abusive are not only made up of their bad deeds, just as non-abusive people are not only comprised of the good stuff. Acknowledging this is not easy, but it can help you understand how someone you care about can do harmful things and still be worthy of love and support.

The reality is, if we are going to end domestic and sexual violence, we must figure out how to talk to people who cause harm, too.

Taking the time to acknowledge that what you're seeing in someone's relationship is not ok or is abusive can be an incredibly powerful action. Simply saying: "Hey that's not cool." or "I don't like how you are treating them." can be the first step in helping people do and love better.

Looking for other tangible things to say to someone who is harming their partner? We created conversation cards to help you talk with a person in your life who is struggling in their relationship, who isn't their best self, and who has the will to change. You can find this tool at wscadv.org/howsyourrelationship.

Feeling uneasy about reaching out to someone who has hurt someone else? Ask yourself: How would you want to be treated if you caused harm? You can use the same advice we gave earlier on supporting someone in an abusive relationship: ask a question, listen up, and stay connected. Many of these strategies are also helpful for conversations with someone who has caused harm.

Supporting teens to have healthy relationships

Chatting about love with people you love is always a good idea. We have some helpful resources to help you get that conversation started. You can use our *How's Your Relationship?* conversation cards and our *Love Like This* materials to unwind and talk. You can find these tools at wscadv.org/howsyourrelationship and wscadv.org/llt. And teens are human too, so asking questions, listening up, and staying connected holds true for teens too.

When you fall in love for the first time, or second, or gazillionth, everything feels possible. Your opportunities expand, your world broadens. You get to try new foods because you're dating someone from a different culture. You get to celebrate in different ways because every family does things a bit differently. You meet new people because your circle of friends gets bigger. In a word, everything feels roomy.

When you're in an unhealthy relationship, things don't feel quite as possible. Your world tends to narrow, your opportunities to hang out with people or do things you used to enjoy decrease. The person you're dating doesn't like your friends, so you stop hanging out with them.

You stop spending time on your hobbies because the person you're dating wants to spend all their time with you. You start wondering what you should wear because the person you're dating always comments on your outfits. Things feel squished.

Talking to teenagers about how their relationship makes them feel can be a window into seeing if things are healthy or unhealthy. **We want young people to feel like the world is wide open to them**. Their relationship should help that, not hinder it. You can use our *Love Like This* tools to help guide your conversations.

LOVE *feels like* THIS

ROOMY

Staying connected at a time when it is literally your teen's job to separate from you can feel difficult and overwhelming. And yet, it really is the most critical thing you can do. Simply being present can be a huge point of connection even if words are not exchanged. Being someone they can depend on and rely on is hugely helpful during a time in their lives when everything feels like it is in flux and constantly changing.

There is a special hotline devoted to supporting teens called Love is Respect. You or your teen can reach out by calling 1-866-331-9474, texting LOVEIS to 22522, or chatting online at loveisrespect.org.

Taking care of yourself

Helping other people with their relationships shouldn't take over your life. You need people to support your well-being too. You can call your local domestic violence program—they can answer any questions you might have and be a sounding board if you're feeling challenged.

You also don't need to be a victim to get support from the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And remember: just letting someone know that you'll be there if and when they want to talk is a huge thing.

If you're feeling overwhelmed or anxious, try this 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise: Find five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can smell, two things you can hear, and one thing you can taste. Connecting to your senses can help settle your mind.

Everyone can benefit from practicing self-compassion. Treat yourself as kindly as you try to treat other people.

Resources

Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
wscadv.org

Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs
wcsap.org

Love is Respect
loveisrespect.org

The National Domestic Violence Hotline
thehotline.org

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verizon

Jacksons

Thank you!

You can do it!

Everyone has a role to play in ending domestic and sexual violence and the good news is that you don't have to be an expert to help. It doesn't take much to make an impact. Your continued presence, connection, and support are what people need to get safer and thrive.

Know that you are appreciated and that there is help available for you if and when you need it.

You've got what you need: **ask a question, listen up, and stay connected.**

ASK A QUESTION

LISTEN UP

STAY CONNECTED

Together
we can end domestic
and sexual violence
and create
healthy relationships
for us all!

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If your friend or family member has concerns about working with the Division of Child Support, please contact our Community Relations Unit at 360-664-5200. For more resources, please visit https://www.domesticviolenceinforeferral.org/.

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