

WHEN SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS BEING ABUSED

Safety and Well-Being Tipsheet Series

Knowing that someone you care about is being abused can be very painful. You may feel helpless, fearful, or frustrated because you don't know what you can do to help. Below are some suggestions.

Start the conversation: It can be hard to know what to say to someone whom you think is being abused, but talking about the abuse can be very helpful for her.* You can start the conversation by...

- Telling her that you care about her
- Telling her that if someone is hurting her, you are available to talk about it
- Telling her that you want to help in whatever way she thinks is best
- Assuring her that you won't share what she tells you with anyone unless she wants you to
- Letting her know that she can talk to you about it later if she doesn't want to talk about it right now

What to say if someone talks to you about abuse: If someone confides in you that he is being abused, **LISTEN** to him and assure him that you care and that you want to help in whatever way he thinks is best.

- Remind him that the abuse is not his fault
- Remind him that he does not deserve to be abused
- Acknowledge that talking about it takes a lot of strength and bravery
- Ask how you can help

What not to say if someone talks to you about abuse:

- Do not say things that are judgmental or blaming
- Do not tell him what to do; instead, ask how you can help
- Do not ask why he doesn't "just leave"

Talk with them about safety: If you are concerned about someone's safety or their children's safety, don't be afraid to say so. Ask them if they want to talk with you about their plans for keeping themselves and their children safe. If so, you might talk about the following:

- **Places:** Where do they spend their time? (Examples are home, work, car,

* A note on pronouns: The National Center believes that intimate partner violence is rooted in and upheld by gender oppression and other forms of oppression. We use the pronouns she, he, and they interchangeably in this tipsheet to bring forward the experiences of survivors who identify as women and survivors who identify as genderqueer, trans, and masculine.

bus, train, church, family members' or friends' homes, childcare provider, and school.)

- **Actions:** What steps will they take to keep themselves and their children safe while they are at each of these places?
- **Allies:** Whom can they trust to help them? What can those people do that would help? What should they *not* do? Encourage them to talk with their allies about their safety plan and offer to help contact them.

Encourage her to speak with an advocate: An advocate at a local domestic violence program can help your family member or friend to think through her options and develop strategies to keep herself and her children safe and, if she wants to, to leave her partner. The National Domestic Violence Hotline and many local domestic violence programs provide advocacy and safety planning services over the phone. You can find the name and number of a local domestic violence program in your area by calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE (7233) or (800) 787-3224 (TTY).

Discuss how abuse can affect a person's mental health: Experiencing abuse can make a person feel frightened, hurt, sad, confused, angry, ashamed, hopeless, or like he is losing his mind. If a person is living with a mental illness, experiencing abuse can make his mental health symptoms worse. Abusers may use their partner's mental health condition to undermine their partner with friends, family, the police, mental health providers, or attorneys and judges. If you are supporting someone who is being abused, you can...

- Ask him how the abuse is affecting him
- Let him know that many people who experience abuse feel sad, hurt, confused, angry, ashamed, or hopeless
- Let him know that these feelings are common responses to abuse and that there is nothing "wrong" with him
- If he wants to talk with someone about how the abuse is affecting him, offer to help him find a therapist who is knowledgeable about abusive relationships

Whether or not they leave, be supportive: There are many reasons why someone might stay in an abusive relationship. For example, it might be more dangerous to leave than to stay, leaving might mean that they risk losing custody of their children, or they might love their partner even though he is abusive. Even if someone wants to leave, it can take time to do so. If you are supporting someone who is currently in an abusive relationship...

- Assure them that you are there to help, regardless of whether they decide to leave the relationship
- Acknowledge that there are many factors to consider when thinking about leaving, and offer to help them think through them
- Acknowledge that *only they* can make the decision about whether, and if so when, to leave an abusive partner

- If you are concerned about their safety or their children's safety, don't be afraid to say so, but remember that they are the best judge of their situation and their safety

Take care of yourself: Supporting someone who is in an abusive relationship can be a long and difficult process, and taking care of yourself is a critical part of this process. Taking care of yourself includes making sure that you have your own support, knowing your limits and respecting them, and continuing to engage in activities that are meaningful to you. This may be especially important if you are also a survivor of intimate partner violence or other trauma and hearing about someone else's experiences of abuse brings up your own experiences. Taking care of yourself is a sign of strength, not weakness.

If you are being abused, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE (7233) or (800) 787-3224 (TTY).

For more information on the intersection of domestic violence, trauma, mental health, and substance abuse, contact the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health at (312) 726-7020, 312-726-4110 (TTY), or info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org.