



Montgomery County Women's Center

24-HOUR HOTLINE (936) 441-7273



*Supporting Victims
of Domestic Violence*

SUPPORTING VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

If you know or suspect that someone is a victim of domestic violence, you might feel unsure about the best way to help. Don't let the fear of saying the wrong thing prevent you from reaching out. Waiting for the perfect words could keep you from seizing the opportunity to change a life. The world for many domestic abuse victims can be lonely, isolated, and filled with fear. Sometimes reaching out and letting them know that you are there for them can provide tremendous relief.

Make Time for Them

If you decide to reach out to an abuse victim, do so during a time of calm. Getting involved when tempers are flaring can put you in danger. Also, make sure to set aside plenty of time in case the victim decides to open up. If the person decides to disclose years of pent-up fear and frustration, you will not want to end the conversation because you have another commitment.

Start a Conversation

You can bring up the subject of domestic violence by saying "I'm worried about you because" or "I'm concerned about your safety..." or "I have noticed some changes that concern me..." Maybe you've seen the person wearing clothing to cover up bruises or noticed that the person has suddenly become unusually quiet and withdrawn. Both can be signs of abuse. Let the person know that you will be discreet about any information disclosed. Do not try to force the person to open up; let the conversation unfold at a comfortable pace. Take it slow and easy. Just let the person know that you are available and offering a sympathetic ear.

Listen Without Judgment

If the person does decide to talk, listen to the story without being judgmental, offering advice, or suggesting solutions. Chances are if you actively listen, the person will tell you exactly what they need. Just give the person the full opportunity to talk. You can ask clarifying questions, but mainly just let the person vent their feelings and fears. You may be the first person in whom the victim has confided.

Learn the Warning Signs

Many people try to cover up abuse for a variety of reasons, and learning the warning signs of domestic abuse can help you help them:

Physical Signs:

- Black eyes
- Busted lips
- Red or purple marks on the neck
- Sprained wrists
- Bruises on the arms

MONTGOMERY COUNTY WOMEN'S CENTER 24/7 HOTLINE : (936) 441-7273

Emotional Signs:

- Low self-esteem
- Overly apologetic or meek
- Fearful
- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Anxious or on edge
- Substance abuse
- Symptoms of depression
- Loss of interest in once enjoyed activities and hobbies
- Talking about suicide

Behavioral Signs:

- Becoming withdrawn or distant
- Canceling appointments or meetings at the last minute
- Being late often
- Excessive privacy concerning their personal life
- Isolating themselves from friends and family

If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1 (800) 273-8255 for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911.

Believe the Victim

Because domestic violence is more about control than anger, often the victim is the only one who sees the dark side of the perpetrator. Many times, others are shocked to learn that a person they know could commit violence. Consequently, victims often feel that no one would believe them if they told people about the violence. Believe the victim's story and say so. For a victim, finally having someone who knows the truth about their struggles can bring a sense of hope and relief.

Offer the victim these assurances:

- I believe you.
- This is not your fault.
- You don't deserve this.
- Validate the victim's feelings

It's not unusual for victims to express conflicting feelings about their partner and their situation. These feelings can include:

- Guilt and anger
- Hope and despair
- Love and fear

MONTGOMERY COUNTY WOMEN'S CENTER 24/7 HOTLINE : (936) 441-7273

If you want to help, it is important that you validate her feelings by letting her know that having these conflicting thoughts is normal. But it is also important that you confirm that violence is not okay, and it isn't normal to live in fear of being physically attacked.

Some victims may not realize that their situation is abnormal because they have no other models for relationships and have gradually become accustomed to the cycle of violence. Tell the victim that violence and abuse aren't part of healthy relationships. Without judging, confirm to them that their situation is dangerous, and you are concerned for their safety.

Understanding Why Victims Stay

It can be hard to understand why someone you care about would seemingly choose to stay in an abusive or unhealthy relationship. Here are a few reasons why it's not easy to part ways.

- Fear of harm if they leave
- They still love their partner and believe they will change
- Their partner promised to change
- A strong belief that marriage is "for better or worse"
- Thinking the abuse is their fault
- Staying for the children
- Lack of self-confidence
- Fear of isolation or loneliness
- Pressure from family, community, or church
- Lack of means (job, money, transportation) to survive on their own
- Offer Specific Support
- Help the victim find support and resources. Look up telephone numbers for shelters, social services, attorneys, counselors, or support groups. If available, offer brochures or pamphlets about domestic violence.

You'll also want to help them get information on any laws regarding protective orders/restraining orders and child custody information. You can search state by state for legal information on WomensLaw.org.

If the victim asks you to do something specific and you are willing to do it, don't hesitate to help. If you are unable to, try to find other ways the need can be met. Identify their strengths and assets, and help them build and expand upon them, so they find the motivation to help themselves.

The important thing is to let them know that you are there for them, available at any time. Just let them know the best way to reach you if help is needed. If possible, offer to go along for moral support to the police, court, or lawyer's office.

Let the person know they are not alone and help is available. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1 (800) 799-7233 or our 24/7 Hotline at (936) 441-7273 for immediate assistance and a referral to nearby counseling services or support groups.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY WOMEN'S CENTER 24/7 HOTLINE : (936) 441-7273

Help Them Form a Safety Plan

Help the victim create a safety plan that can be put into action if violence occurs again or if they decide to leave the situation. Just the exercise of making a plan can help them visualize which steps are needed and to prepare psychologically to do so.

Because victims who leave their abusive partners are at a greater risk of being killed by their abuser than those who stay, it is extremely important for a victim to have a personalized safety plan before a crisis occurs or before they decide to leave. Help the victim think through each step of the safety plan, weighing the risks and benefits of each option and ways to reduce the risks.

What Not to Do

Although there is no right or wrong way to help a victim of domestic violence, you want to avoid doing anything that will make the situation worse. Here are some "don'ts" we suggest you avoid:

Don't...

- Bash the abuser. Focus on the behavior, not the personality.
- Blame the victim. That's what the abuser does.
- Underestimate the potential danger for the victim and yourself.
- Promise any help that you can't follow through with.
- Give conditional support.
- Do anything that might provoke the abuser.
- Pressure the victim.
- Give up. If they are not willing to open up at first, be patient.