



How to help and support a victim of domestic abuse or sexual assault

Supporting a friend or loved one who is a victim of domestic violence and/or sexual assault can be confusing, exhausting, scary and frustrating. *However, it is also incredibly important to the safety of the victim to have a strong support network of people who care about them, believe them, and support their decisions.*

There is no clear roadmap for what to “do” when someone close to you has disclosed that they have been or are being abused or assaulted. However, there is some basic information and specific behaviors that can help to decrease the victim’s isolation and enable the victim to explore additional community resources whenever they are ready.

What to know

- Abusers know what they are doing. Abusers choose to emotionally, physically, financially, sexually and/or psychologically harm the victim.
- Victims cannot ‘cause’ a person to be abusive, but abusers usually blame the victim (or alcohol, drugs, mental illness, etc.) for their behavior.
- Abusers continually attempt to gain and maintain power and control over their victim, often even after separation.
- 1 in 3 women are victims of domestic abuse in their lifetime.
- The most dangerous time for a victim is when they are leaving. On average, a victim will leave and return 7-10 times before leaving for good. The abuser may have threatened to take the kids if they leave, harm family members, or may have taken all financial means of leaving.
- Rarely do abusers always behave abusively. Often, they are described as good parents/partners/family members when they are not actively abusive.
- Abusers are clever at being abusive, no matter their IQ. An abuser will continually test limits, erode self-confidence, isolate and try to intimidate or harm the victim.
- Abuse and/or assault are traumatic. Trauma alters the way the brain functions. A victim may be more emotional (or emotionless), seem to ‘talk in circles’ and/or have trouble concentrating due to the abuse.

What to do



What to do

- Focus on the victim, not the abuser or the abuser’s violence. Focusing on the abuser may make the victim have to choose between defending the abuser or criticizing them, and they may not be ready to do either. It also takes everyone’s energy away from supporting the victim.
- Avoid “why” questions. “Why” questions can inadvertently feel like blaming. Instead, ask what, if anything, you can do to support them.
- Say “I believe you,” “The abuse is not your fault,” “Thank you for sharing with me,” “I am here for you.”
- Work within the victim’s timeframe; know and respect that the victim may not be ready to take actions that you may feel are already overdue.
- Take seriously any concerns about repercussions for contacting law enforcement, family or the courts. The victim knows the abuser best, and what the abuser is likely to do.
- Know that it is normal for a victim to have conflicting emotions: guilt over disclosing the abuse or setting a boundary, shame over being abused, sadness over what may feel like a ‘failed’ relationship, anger at being abused, love for the abuser for when they’re a ‘good parent/ partner/family member,’ relief at being able to tell someone, fear that no one will believe them.
- Be resource-oriented. What resources are available and of interest to the victim? What kind of support do they have? Which of the victim’s concerns might be able to be addressed by friends and/or family? Examples might include: taking in a pet, providing childcare or a ride, giving the victim an old phone to use as a 911 phone.
- Ask if the victim would like to explore any resources in the community. If yes, some are listed below. If no, let the victim know that is okay as well, and that you are there to support them.
- Avoid making decisions for the victim. Instead, make decisions with the victim. Making decisions for the victim uses the same framework the abuser probably used.
- Allow for the fact that the victim will probably make decisions that you do not agree with. Let the victim know you will continue to support them, whatever they decide.

Resources.....

Women’s and Children’s Alliance	343-3688
	(24-hour crisis line) 343-7025
FACES Family Justice Center	577-4400
Ada County Court Assistance Office	287-6963
Nampa Family Justice Center	475-5700
Idaho Legal Aid Services, Boise	345-0106
Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program	334-4510
Boise State Women’s Center	426-4259

The cycle of abuse

