



Advice for families and friends of people being violent/abusive to a partner

Many people become aware that a relative or a friend has been abusive/violent to their partner. When this happens, people feel a range of emotions and mixed loyalties. Family and friends may end up 'taking sides', trying to 'stay neutral' or thinking it's a 'private matter'. However, domestic violence is a complex matter and can be very serious for the person on the receiving end and any children in the home.

Domestic violence often continues because it remains hidden. Whilst you may be worried about doing the 'right' thing in the situation and not making matters worse, there are some things you can do to help when you do become aware of it. Below is some advice to help with this – you are welcome to discuss any of this by calling the Respect Phoneline on 0808 802 4040.

1. Keep safety as the priority:

It is essential to keep safety as your guiding principle in deciding if and how to intervene when you become aware that your relative/friend has been violent/abusive. For example, if you only know from your daughter-in-law, that your son was violent to her, she could be at risk if you challenge him about it. People who are abusive often try to keep it secret - if your son thinks people have been 'talking behind his back', he might 'punish' his partner for this, making it more unlikely that she would tell anyone in the future. Be guided by her as to the safest way to handle it. Think about your own safety and do not put yourself at any risk when speaking to either party.

Some people worry that calling the Police will make the situation worse. A good response from the Police can give a clear message that violence is unacceptable and against the law. Some victims have been relieved when someone else has called the police during an incident – others have not found it a supportive response. Always call the police in an emergency.

2. Be clear about responsibility in your conversations with them:

It is not easy to face that someone you care about has hurt their partner. If they are speaking with you about it, there may be times when you get drawn into their excuses (colluding) and other times when you despise what they have done (condemning). Your relative/friend may 'play down' or outright deny what is alleged. Many people who are abusive do this either out of shame or to avoid consequences. Be aware that no matter how well you know them, there may be more to the situation than they are able to admit at that time.

The following pointers might help you support your relative/friend in taking responsibility for their violence, which is the first step for them making changes in the long-term:

- a) When someone is violent/abusive, they are 100% responsible for their actions. Your relative/friend may paint a negative picture of their partner but even if this is true, this doesn't excuse their own violence/abuse. For example, if your son is saying that his wife kept 'nagging him' and 'following him around the house' before he hit her, he is blaming her for the violence he chose to use. In speaking

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with him, try and keep him focused on his behaviour and how he could have handled the situation non-abusively. If he thinks he had 'no choice', or that 'she made him do it' then he will never be able to stop his violence/abuse – there is always a choice, even if it is one he doesn't like, e.g. by listening non-defensively to her complaints, being honest with himself if there is truth to them, calmly putting his point of view and trying to reach some sort of agreement.

b) Many people who are abusive try to play down what they did or the impact it had on their partner – typical examples of this are comments such as 'she bruises easily', 'men can't be hurt', 'I'm not a violent person', 'I only slapped them once – it wasn't hard'. Once is enough and it does have an impact.

Violence/abuse is unacceptable.

c) When both parties are using violence, this is rarely of an 'equal' nature and one person's violence doesn't 'cause' or 'cancel out' the other's violence. Again, safety needs to be the priority, for both parties and any children in the home.

d) Stress, alcohol or drugs do not cause domestic violence – many people live very stressful lives, drink or use drugs heavily and are never violent. These are excuses.

3. If safe to do so, give information about what help is available:

For those experiencing violence/abuse:

- For female victims - the 24 hour National Domestic Violence Helpline on 0808 2000 247 <http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/>
- For male victims – the Men's Advice Line on 0808 801 0327 www.mensadviceline.org.uk

For those using violence/abuse:

Men or women using violence/abuse can call the Respect Phoneline on 0808 802 4040 or email us at info@respectphoneline.org.uk www.respectphoneline.org.uk

The Respect Phoneline can encourage a caller to get help by accessing a domestic abuse programme if there is one in their local area. These are designed to help clients change their abusive behaviours by addressing the underpinning attitudes and beliefs and to develop respectful, non-abusive relationships. They generally take place in a group-work setting on a weekly basis for at least six months.

We feel that the following are either not appropriate or are unsafe interventions to help people stop their violence/abuse to a partner although they may be helpful in other ways:

- Anger management
- Individual counselling;
- Couples counselling;
- Medication to treat other symptoms without attending a specialist domestic violence programme;
- Drug/alcohol intervention on its own.

4. Be realistic about change:

People can change if they want to. Most people who are abusive to their partners manage themselves fine with other people (e.g. their boss/friends) –they are choosing to do these things to their partner and can therefore choose not to. You cannot change them. They need to genuinely want to change for themselves. The first step for them is to stop making excuses/playing down their actions and reach out for some help with us.

Reviewed July 2012

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