

How to help a domestic violence victim

By FOCUS Ministries

- Listen to her story and validate her feelings. Even if you know her husband and can't believe he would do what she is telling you, keep an open mind and give her an opportunity to tell her story.
- Be aware that she may not see herself as an "abused woman." Let her know that abuse of any kind is wrong, and name the behaviour for what it is without verbally attacking the abuser.
- Acknowledge her bravery and courage in breaking the silence and seeking help. Realise that she may feel like she is betraying her husband by talking about the abuse. Help her understand she has done the right thing for the whole family to seek help.
- Assess her level of safety by asking questions about what is currently going on and what abuse has taken place in the past. Ask her to describe her husband's behaviour in various scenarios.
- Be supportive, but do not tell her what to do. Give her options that will help her make decisions for herself. If she decides to go to a shelter, call a crisis hotline, or make other arrangements to leave, give her the phone number and let her make the call herself. This allows her to be responsible for her own decisions. Exception: In a crisis when she is in danger, take action to help her get to safety.
- Keep your conversation confidential, and DO NOT contact the abuser to tell him you have been talking to his wife (unless she gives you permission to do so). If he contacts you, DO NOT divulge any information, especially if she has been taken to a safe location. You could endanger her life!
- Never advise a woman to return home to work things out with her abuser if she has been physically battered or if her life has been threatened. You will place her in greater harm!
- If the victim chooses to return home against your advice, make sure she knows how to contact you if she needs help. Find out when it would be okay for you to call and find out how she is doing. Don't try to force her into making a decision she is not ready to make.
- Realise that you have only heard a part of the story. Don't minimise the seriousness of the situation just because the victim appears to be strong and brave, or because you can't believe her husband would act that way. Ask questions and be an attentive listener as the story unfolds.
- Don't spend much time deciding who provoked whom. When you see dynamics of fear and control at work in the marriage, it is the abusive behaviour that must be confronted.
- Never counsel the abuser and victim together. It puts the victim in more danger and gives the abuser more power. Most victims will not feel free to talk about what is really going on in the home if the abuser is sitting next to her. He will try to control the conversation and intimidate the victim with words or a look that lets her know she should keep her mouth shut if she knows what's good for her.
- Marriage counselling does not work in domestic violence situations.
- Anger management classes do not work in domestic violence situations. The abuser may learn how to divert his anger from physical abuse to verbal or emotional abuse, but unless his opinions about women and feelings of entitlement are changed, he will repeat his behaviour.
- If the abuser is a member of your church and wants to meet with you, do so in a location where he will not come into contact with his wife.
- Do not expect him to admit being abusive. He may suggest his wife is mentally unstable and demonstrate a false concern about her mental health. He will minimise his behaviour or blame his actions on his wife's behaviour.

- Refer the victim and abuser to professionals who are experienced with domestic violence issues. Don't try to deal with the problem alone.
- Don't fall for the abuser's claim that he has changed, even if he does admit being abusive. He may claim a conversion experience, and even if it is real, he should still be held accountable for his actions. An apology, tears, promises or a religious experience does not eliminate the need for maintaining safety until the change can be verified by time and professional counsellors.
- Do not encourage reconciliation too soon. In the case of physical abuse, safety is the priority. If the abuser has truly changed and wants to do whatever is necessary to restore the marriage, he will be willing to wait as long as it takes to prove himself and rebuild trust.

Ask questions!

- When the two of you argue or have a very bad fight, what happens?
- Do you ever feel frightened of him?
- Are you free to speak freely to him? What happens when you express an opinion that is different from his?
- Does he ever throw things or punch holes with his fist?
- How does he speak to you when he is angry or frustrated?
- Does he pressure you to have sex when you don't want to?
- How does he react when you want to go out with friends or family?
- Has he ever slapped or pushed you, hit you or threatened you?
- Have you told anyone?

A woman is in imminent danger if:

- He has threatened her life. Take it seriously!
- He has weapons in the house or has recently bought a gun.
- He has locked her in the house.
- He has killed or injured her pet.
- She sustained multiple injuries each time he battered her in the past.
- She has threatened to leave, and he has threatened to hurt or kill himself, the children and her if she leaves.
- He talks about dreams involving murder (either hers or his).

Wrong things to say to a battered woman:

- What did you do to provoke him?
- Pray harder – prayer changes things.
- Go home and cook your husband his favourite meal, put on your best dress and give him a little more attention.
- You must do whatever you can to hold your marriage together, even if it means suffering for Jesus.

- The Bible says your husband is the head of your household. If you submit to him and become more obedient, he will not resort to violence.
- Your children need a father, so it is up to you to keep the family together.

Statements of affirmation to the victim:

- You are not alone.
- Abuse is wrong. It is not your fault.
- You did not deserve to be hit.
- You are not responsible for his behaviour.
- You have a right to see your family.
- No one deserves to be talked to that way.
- Your first responsibility is to protect yourself and your children.
- God does not condone abuse. He wants you to be safe.
- God will not abandon you, regardless of your choices.

Statements to confront the abuser:

- I am here to support you, but I want you to know that I think it is wrong to hit or hurt another person.
- I will not desert you, but I will not excuse your behaviour either.
- As long as you choose to be violent, I will not provide joint counselling. We cannot discuss relationship issues until you stop being violent.
- By not stopping the abuse, you may go to jail or lose your family. If you want to stop the abuse, you must join a group treatment program where you will learn to value your wife's freedom and worth as a person more than your need to control.

If you or someone you know is a victim of domestic violence or any kind of relational abuse, we encourage you to contact 1800RESPECT or go to <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>