

## HANDOUT...

## Helping a Friend Who is Being Abused

Many students are emotionally, physically, or sexually abused by their intimate partners each year. If you are concerned about a friend, perhaps you feel the problem will work itself out. This is very unlikely. Violence and abuse in relationships usually continues and often gets worse over time if no action is taken to stop it. You can help your friend by being honest about your concerns. Say something.

**Things that might be keeping you from saying something:**  
Myths and Realities of Dating Violence

- **“The violence can’t really be that serious.”**  
Dating violence includes threats, pushing, punching, slapping, choking, sexual assault, and assault with weapons. It is rarely a one-time occurrence and usually escalates in frequency and severity. Even if the violence is “only” verbal, it can seriously affect the victim’s health and well-being, so any act of dating violence is something to take seriously.
- **“My friend must be doing something to provoke the violence.”** A victim of dating violence is never to blame for another person’s choice to use violence against her/him. Problems exist in any relationship, but the use of violence is never acceptable.
- **“If it’s so bad, why doesn’t s/he just leave?”**  
For most of us, a decision to end a relationship is not easy. Your friend’s emotional ties to her/his partner may be strong, supporting the hope that the violence will end. Perhaps your friend doesn’t know about available resources, or maybe social and justice systems may have been unhelpful in the past. Perhaps when your friend has tried to end the relationship in the past, her/his partner may have used violence to stop her/him. These are just some of the many compelling reasons that may keep someone in an abusive relationship.
- **“I shouldn’t get involved in a private matter.”**  
Dating violence is not a “personal problem”. It is a crime with serious repercussions for your friend, your friend’s partner, your campus, and your entire community.
- **“I know the abusive person— I really don’t think he/she could hurt anyone.”** Many abusers are not violent in other relationships and can be charming in social situations, yet be extremely violent in private.
- **“The abusive person must be sick.”** Using violence and abuse is a learned behavior, not a mental illness. People who use violence and abuse to control their partners choose such behavior; viewing them as “sick” wrongly excuses them from taking responsibility for it.

## Helping a Friend Who is Being Abused (continued)

- **"I think the abusive person has a drinking problem. Could that be the cause of violence?"** Alcohol or drug use may intensify violent behavior, but it does not cause violence or abuse. People who engage in abusive behavior typically make excuses for their violence, claiming a loss of control due to alcohol/drug use or extreme stress. Acting abusively, however, does not represent a loss of control, but a way of achieving it.
- **"How can my friend still care for someone who abuses her/him?"** Chances are, the abuser is not always abusive. S/he may show remorse for the violence after it happens and promise to change. Your friend may understandably hope for such changes. Their relationship probably involves good times, bad times, and in-between times.
- **"If my friend wanted my help, s/he would ask for it."** Your friend may not feel comfortable confiding in you, feeling you may not understand her/his situation. Talk to her/him about the abusive behaviors you have noticed, tell your friend no one deserves to be treated in that way, and ask her/him how you can help.

### What You Can Do to Help:

- **Say something. Lend a listening ear.** Tell your friend that you care and are willing to listen. Don't force the issue, but allow your friend to confide in you at her/his own pace. Never blame your friend for what is happening or underestimate her/his fear of potential danger. Focus on supporting your friend's right to make her/his own decisions.
- **Become informed.** Find out all the facts you can about dating violence. Contact offices on campus that address sexual and dating violence, or contact the local program(s) in your area that assist victims of domestic violence. Look for books about dating violence in your local library. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE. If you live in Virginia, visit the Virginia Sexual & Domestic Violence Action Alliance website at <http://www.vsdvalliance.org> and/or call the Virginia Family Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline at 1.800.838.8238 (v/tty).
- **Guide your friend to community services.** Gather information about dating/domestic violence programs in your area. These programs offer safety, advocacy, support, legal information, and other needed services. If your friend asks for advice on what s/he should do, share the information you've gathered. Let your friend know your s/he is not alone and people are available to help. Encourage her/him to seek the assistance of dating/domestic violence victim advocates. Assure her/him that they will keep information confidential (this is generally true, but may vary by agency. Check on their confidentiality policy first).
- **If your friend decides to end the relationship...** Help her/him make a plan to be safe. S/he may want to call a local domestic violence hotline to help create a "safety plan". Domestic violence programs can help her/him look at her/his options and make a plan to be as safe as possible. Victims of dating violence may face the greater risk when they try to end the abusive relationship. If the abusive person feels s/he has lost control, s/he may become very dangerous.
- **Focus on her/his strengths.** Your friend has probably continually been told by the abusive person that s/he is a bad person, a bad student, or a bad friend. Your friend may believe s/he can't do anything right and that there really is something wrong with her/him. Give her/him emotional support. Help her/him examine her/his strengths and skills. Emphasize that s/he deserves a life that is free from violence.

*This document has been adapted several times by several organizations and originated with "Helping The Battered Woman, A Guide For Family And Friends," a 1989 publication of the National Woman Abuse Prevention Project.*