



How to Support a Woman in an Abusive Relationship

www.bcwomens.ca

The most important and helpful way to support women who have current or past abusive partners is through a non-judgmental, caring and supportive relationship. Women should always be believed when they report feeling unsafe or experiencing abuse. However, women should never feel pressured to disclose abuse. Women are the experts in their own lives and should be the ones that make ALL decisions that pertain to her (and her children's) lives, including their safety. This may include taking no action at all.

Here are some ways you can help:

- ▶ Find a safe time and place to ask a woman if you can discuss her concerns with her.
- ▶ Build trust by listening and supporting her in a non-judgmental manner. Validate her experiences, feelings and fears.
- ▶ Listen to her, believe her, and don't judge her. Let her know she is not alone.
- ▶ Give her time to make her own decisions. Don't tell her what to do, or that she should go back and try a little harder. Don't rescue her by trying to find quick solutions.
- ▶ Respect her autonomy. You are not responsible for the abuse or for her decision to stay or leave; or whether she decides to trust you or not.
- ▶ Acknowledge the potential danger of her situation. She needs to know you are aware of the complexity of her situation in order to trust you.
- ▶ If she does not speak English, use an independent interpreter (in person or over the phone). Ensure that she feels comfortable with this and who is interpreting, as some communities are very small and she may have concerns about confidentiality and safety.
- ▶ Respect her confidentiality - keep things private. Only share her experiences with others when she asks you to and/or gives you permission to. Ensure you get specifics about what particular aspects of her experiences you can share and with whom.
- ▶ Ask a woman in private how to support her safety. Discuss options, listed here:
- ▶ Talking with the Social Worker, counsellor or health care provider
- ▶ Connecting with an anti-violence organization such as BC Women's Woman Abuse Response Program (ext 3717 or 6490) or, if unavailable, a community organization (i.e. WAVAW or BWSS)
- ▶ Having a Threat Assessment completed by Protection Services Specialist (ext 6947)
- ▶ No additional safety planning other than maintaining privacy and safety
- ▶ If possible, provide resources for practical assistance: child care, transportation, financial assistance.
- ▶ Explore the use of community resources. Find out about services she can use and tell her about them. Depending on her needs, make sure they:
 - offer language or cultural interpretation
 - are accessible to people with disabilities
 - can care for her children if she needs it

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- are gay-positive if that's important to her
- ▶ If she is interested, share resources or referrals with her.
- ▶ No calls or referrals should be made without her explicit consent. This includes: counsellors, social work, police, protection services, Child Protection, etc. If she does not want to talk to anyone else or take any action at this time, respect this.
- ▶ Duty to report to the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) is not automatically required simply because children witness abuse of their mother (woman is the primary target).
 - While it is recognized that there are impacts from being exposed to or witnessing abuse, there is also the potential for significant negative impacts if children are removed from the protective, non-offending parent. Even though the evidence suggests that children do better when they separate from their father, for many families, this is not the reality. Even if a mother does separate, children continue to experience exposure to abuse through court-ordered visitations with the father. (Best Practice Approaches: Violence Against Women and Child Protection, Ministry of Child and Family Development, 2010)
 - If you believe the child(ren) are in immediate danger and need to report to MCFD, discuss this with the woman first. Supporting the woman without victim blaming is essential for good outcomes.
 - There is no legal duty to report abuse of a competent adult to police.
- ▶ Respect her process, timetable and decisions. This will begin to give her the sense of control and empowerment in moving forward and regaining what has been lost in the abusive situation.
- ▶ Support and admire the courage, strength, and wisdom it took for her to initiate action by asking for help or disclosing her experiences of abuse. Acknowledge small

successes along the way, one step at a time.

- ▶ Let her talk about the caring parts of the relationship. Don't put her down for staying with her partner. Instead, share information on how abuse often gets worse over time.
- ▶ Help her focus on the good things about herself and about her children. But don't tell her she should stay or leave for the sake of the children.
- ▶ Never recommend joint family or couple counselling if there is emotional or physical abuse. It is dangerous for a woman. If they want counselling, separate counselling can be helpful.
- ▶ Don't put yourself or her in danger by confronting the abuser.
- ▶ Safety is the first priority. If you believe she is in danger, tell her. Help her plan an emergency exit. Encourage her to get ready to leave home in a hurry. She can get together items she may need, such as:
 - birth certificates
 - credit cards/ cash
 - her children's favourite toys
 - clothing
 - bank books
 - passport
 - house keys
 - medications
 - citizenship papers

What can you say to her?

Give clear messages, including:

- ▶ Violence is never okay. There is never a good reason for it.
- ▶ Her safety and her children's safety are always most important.
- ▶ She does not cause the abuse. Her partner is responsible for the abuse.

- ▶ She cannot change her partner's behaviour.
- ▶ Apologies and promises will not end the violence.
- ▶ She is not alone. She is not crazy. It is not her fault.
- ▶ Abuse is not a loss of control. It is something people use to control others.
- ▶ It is a crime to assault a partner.

She may be too fearful or overwhelmed to take any step right away. Be encouraged that she is reaching out for help. Every time she does this, she is gaining the strength she will need when she is ready to make decisions and take actions to move forward.

Resources

Print Materials:

- ▶ **Are You Being Abused? Do you know how to protect yourself?** : http://www.bcwomens.ca/NR/rdonlyres/FC6648DE-1514-4B6E-8CE0-248F7A6E1FEE/38344/rfmw_b2.pdf
- ▶ **Is Someone You Know Being Abused? Do you know the warning signs?**: http://www.bcwomens.ca/NR/rdonlyres/FC6648DE-1514-4B6E-8CE0-248F7A6E1FEE/38346/rfmw_b4.pdf
- ▶ **Is Someone You Know Abusing His Partner? Here's How to Talk to Him About His Behaviour:** http://www.bcwomens.ca/NR/rdonlyres/FC6648DE-1514-4B6E-8CE0-248F7A6E1FEE/38347/rfmw_b5.pdf
- ▶ **Am I Safe? What are my options?** (Aboriginal Women): http://www.bcwomens.ca/NR/rdonlyres/FC6648DE-1514-4B6E-8CE0-248F7A6E1FEE/38343/rfmw_b1.pdf

- ▶ **Making Connections: A Resource for Women (Links between abuse, substance use and mental health):** <http://www.bcwomens.ca/Services/HealthServices/WomanAbuseResponse/Resources.htm>
- ▶ **When Love Hurts: A Woman's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships:** <http://whenlovehurts.ca/>

*Contact the Woman Abuse Response Program (ext 3717) for hard copies of these materials. Pamphlets available in several languages.

Community organizations:

- ▶ **VictimLINK** (24-hour Crisis & Referral Line)
1-800-563-808
or <http://www.victimlinkbc.ca/>
- ▶ **Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW)** (Support and Counselling)
1-877-392-7583 or <http://www.wavaw.ca/>
- ▶ **Battered Women's Support Services** (Support and Counselling)
604-687-1867 or <http://www.bwss.org/>
- ▶ **Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services** (Support and Counselling)
604-436-1025 or <http://www.vlmfss.ca/>
- ▶ **Atira Women's Resource Society** or (Support and Counselling)
604-331-1407 or <http://www.victimlinkbc.ca/>

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