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How to help a friend who may be in an abusive relationship

If you think that a friend or someone you know is in an abusive or unhealthy relationship, it can be difficult to know what to do. You may want to help, but be scared to lose them as a friend or feel as though it is not your place to step in. All of these feelings are normal, but at One Love we believe the most important thing you can do as friend is start a conversation. Here are a few tips to help you talk to your friend.

1. Calmly start a conversation on a positive note.

Find time to talk to your friend one-on-one in a private setting. Start by giving your friend positive affirmations and complimentary statements like, "You're always so fun to be around. I've missed you!" Once your friend feels comfortable, you can begin calmly voicing your concern for your friend. It is likely that they feel as though things are already chaotic enough in their life, so to best help them, you will need to be a steady support with whom they can talk openly and peacefully. If you don't panic and do your best to make them feel safe, then it is pretty likely that they will continue to seek your advice. You don't want to scare your friend by worrying, starting an argument or blaming them.

2. Be supportive.

Listen to your friend and let them open up about the situation on their own terms. Don't be forceful with the conversation. It may be very hard for your friend to talk about their relationship, but remind them that they are not alone and that you want to help.

3. Focus on the unhealthy behaviors.

The focus of the conversation should be on the unhealthy behaviors in the relationship and to provide your friend with a safe space to talk about it. Sometimes, our instinct is to immediately label the relationship as "abusive" to drive home the severity of the situation. This instinct, however, can cause your friend to retreat and shut down. Instead, focus on the specific behaviors you're seeing and how that behavior makes them feel. For example, saying something like, "It seems like your partner wants to know where you are a lot and is always texting and calling – how does that make you feel?" pinpoints a specific behavior and gets your friend to think about how it makes them feel. You can also gently point out that certain behaviors seem unhealthy and be honest about how you would feel if someone did it to you. This is one of the first steps in getting your friend to understand what is and is not an appropriate behavior in a relationship. Help them realize for themselves that something is off about the relationship, and acknowledge that their feelings are legitimate.

4. Keep the conversation friendly, not preachy.

Very few people in abusive relationships recognize themselves as victims and it is likely that they do not want to be viewed that way. If you want to be helpful, make yourself emotionally accessible and available to your friend. One way to reassure your friend that you are not judging them is to normalize the situation. Talking openly about your own experiences with relationship troubles will help them feel as though they are not alone. Be careful not to derail the conversation and keep the focus on your friend's situation. Try to make it feel like an equal exchange between two friends — not like a therapist and a patient or a crisis counselor and a victim.

5. Don't place the blame on your friend.

Help your friend understand that the behaviors they are experiencing are not normal, and that it is NOT their fault their partner is acting this way. They may feel personally responsible for their partner's behavior or as though they brought on the abuse, but assure them that this is not the case. Everyone is responsible for their own behavior, and no matter what the reason, abuse is never okay.

6. Allow your friend to make their own decision.

If your friend is in an abusive relationship, the last thing you want to do is tell them to “just break up!” Relationship abuse is very complex, and your friend may really love their partner or be experiencing some form of trauma bonding—or loyalty to the person who is abusing them. Also, your friend is already dealing with a controlling and manipulative partner and the last thing that they need is for you to mimic those behaviors by forcefully telling them what to do.

7. Offer solutions to your friend.

The best way for you to help your friend is to offer them options. Don't push any one of them in particular, but instead let your friend know that you will support them no matter what they decide to do. Some of these options include visiting the campus violence prevention center or behavioral health center, talking to a R.A. or faculty member, or even calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Depending on how ready your friend is to open up, they may feel more comfortable vetting the situation with someone anonymously over the phone, or they may want to have the conversation in person with someone on campus who can help. If your friend is planning to end things with their partner, you should create a safety plan with them because the most dangerous time in an abusive relationship is post-break up. Maintain a calm approach when dealing with the situation and be open to what your friend is most comfortable with. At the suggestion of seeking help, it is possible that your friend may try to cover up or down play the abuse. Reassure your friend that they are the expert in their own life and make them feel as though they are in control of the situation.

The only exception here is if someone is in imminent danger – whether it is self-harm or harm inflicted by another person. If your friend is in immediate danger, you should alert authorities (i.e., campus safety or 911) right away. Even if you think your friend will feel betrayed or angry with you for going to the police, saving someone's life is the most important thing. Relationship abuse can be fatal and you should not hesitate to take serious action if you think that anyone is at risk for physical or sexual harm.

8. Expect more conversations in the future.

The first time you have this conversation with your friend, they may admit a few things that have happened and then suddenly pull away or take it back. You do not have to get your friend to change their mind completely about their partner and you don't need them to “admit” that they are being abused. The goal of the conversation is to let them know that you care and that you are available for them when they need to talk. It is not likely for the situation to be resolved neatly after one conversation, so you should expect to have more talks like this. Be patient through the process, and know that you are doing the right thing by talking to them about this difficult topic. Let your friend know that you support them and that you are there for them should they need you.



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Talk to your friend about it.

Always think of your own safety first, as it might be dangerous to confront someone who has been physically abusive. If you see, hear, or find out about a friend being emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive toward someone else, and you feel comfortable intervening, say something or do something. Start with gentle questions like, "How have things been going between you and [partner] lately?" The goal is to get your friend to admit that they are feeling stress and that they could use some help dealing with that "stress." An abusive person is extremely unlikely to respond positively to being told that they are an abuser. Going along with your friend and pretending it is stress might get that person to accept help faster than trying to get them to admit they are perpetrating relationship violence. An expert may be able to do so, but you risk endangering the victim if you press too hard on an abusive person to make them admit they are a perpetrator of relationship abuse. Talk to other friends about what you've seen and heard, and work together to come up with solutions.

Know where to refer your friend.

If your friend will admit to being "stressed," offer to go with them to a behavioral health or a mental health counselor. Normalize mental health treatment by telling your friend about a time you needed help, or someone else in your family needed mental health counseling. Plan in advance where you could go together for help. You can find out by asking the campus violence prevention office or the campus behavioral health center, or by calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline. The best thing you can do as a friend or loved one is to encourage them to get help from a professional.

Emphasize how important it is that your friend not use violence.

Tell your friend that no matter how bad things get, including if their partner has cheated on them, insulted them, or done other unfair things — there is never a reason to hit or hurt them. You can let your friend know that excessive drinking does not excuse use of violence and that having a difficult childhood is no reason to hurt someone else.

Many abusive people do not realize that they are being abusive.

An abuser may believe that they are being sweet, caring and loving when trying to "protect" their partner, or think that to "show how much someone means to you," you must act jealous. Alternatively, they could know that their behavior is inappropriate and/or criminal, and feel like they just can't control themselves or don't care about what happens. If you think a friend is being abusive in their relationship, it is vital that someone speaks with them about their behaviors. While it is important for you to try and approach them about this, they may not want to listen. If possible, have them receive counseling for their behaviors. If they are not being receptive, it can be helpful to speak with other people in their life that they admire (a coach, teacher, parent, etc.). Explain to those people what you are seeing, and ask them to speak with your friend about how they need to change their behaviors, and why they should change their behaviors. Some of the signs of an abusive personality include: not accepting responsibility for their actions, difficulty tolerating injury, if someone hurts them they think it's okay to hurt them back, and inability to communicate about emotions.

Abusive behavior can stem from a number of different risk factors.

Past trauma, codependency, a sense of abandonment, familial rejection or neglect, inability to communicate about emotions, lack of validation from outside parties, and objectification of women are all risk factors for abusive behavior.