

## How to help a friend who has been experiencing domestic abuse

If you know or suspect that a friend or family member is experiencing domestic violence, it may be difficult to know what to do. It can be very upsetting that someone is hurting a person you care about. Your first instinct may be to want to protect your friend or family member but intervening can be dangerous for both you and them. Of course, this does not mean you should ignore it. There are things you can do to help make them safer. If you witness an assault, you can call the police on 999.

### It is helpful to remember that:

- Domestic violence is a crime – it is unacceptable
- Specialist Domestic Violence Courts now operate in 25 courts with a conviction rate of over 70% (CPS survey 2006)
- Domestic violence is very common. One woman in four experiences domestic violence at some point in her life and an abused woman may live with domestic violence for years before she tells anyone or seeks help
- Domestic violence is very dangerous
- Everyone has the right to live without fear of violence and abuse
- The abuser is solely responsible for the abusive behaviour. The victim is not to blame; violence is a choice the abuser makes

### What might an abused person be feeling and experiencing?

- An abused person is often overwhelmed by fear, which can govern their every move – a fear of: further violence, the unknown, personal safety and the safety of any children in the relationship – do not underestimate the effects of fear
- They often believe that they are at fault and that by changing their behaviour the abuse will stop. Research shows that this is not the case
- They may experience a conflict of emotions. They may love their partner, but hate the violence. They may live in hope that the partner's good side will reappear
- They may be dependent upon their partner, emotionally and or financially
- They may experience feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment
- They may feel resigned and hopeless and find it hard to make decisions about the future

### So what can you do to support them ?

- Start conversations and encourage them to open up. You may have to try several times before they will confide in you
- Try to be direct and start by saying something like, "I'm worried about you because ....." or "I'm concerned about your safety..."
- Do not judge them
- Listen and believe what they tell you – too often people do not believe
- Reassure them that the abuse is not their fault and that you are there for them
- Don't tell them to leave or criticise them for staying. Although you may want them to leave, they have to make that decision in their own time. It is important to remember that research shows an abused woman is at most risk at the point of separation and immediately after leaving an abusive partner

- Leaving takes a great deal of strength and courage. There can be huge obstacles such as nowhere to go, no money and no-one to turn to for support
- Focus on being supportive and helping to build self confidence
- Acknowledge their strengths and frequently remind them that they are coping well with a challenging and stressful situation
- People in abusive relationships are often very isolated and have no meaningful support – help them to develop or to keep up their outside contacts. This can help to boost self esteem.
- If they have not spoken to anyone else, encourage them to seek the help of a local domestic violence agency that understands, and offers specialist support and advice
- Be patient. It can take time for someone to recognise they are being abused and even longer to take be able to take safe and permanent decisions about what to do. Recognising the problem is an important first step

### **Helping a woman and her children to keep safe**

- A woman's safety and, if she has children, their safety, is paramount
- Talk to her about how she and her children can keep safe
- Help her to stay safe:
  - Agree a code word or action that is only known to you both so she can signal when she is in danger and cannot access help herself
  - Don't make plans for her yourself, but encourage her to think about her safety more closely and focus on her own needs rather than the abuser's
  - Find out information about local services for her; offer to keep spare sets of keys or important documents, such as passports, in a safe place for her so that she can access them quickly in an emergency
- Remember that it isn't children's responsibility to protect their mother. In an emergency they could call for help from the police, go to a neighbour, or a relative or someone they trust.

Adapted from National Domestic Violence Helpline -

<http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/support-a-friend-or-family-member-experiencing-domestic-violence.aspx>