

Is someone you know
being abused in a
relationship?

A guide for families,
friends & neighbours



*Your support can
make a difference*



This guide was jointly produced by the *Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre* (DVIRC), and the *Victorian Community Council Against Violence* (VCCAV), © 1999. Updated & reprinted 2001.

Illustrations by Terie Quealy.
Design & layout by DVIRC.

We would like to thank the members of the community and the services that contributed to the development of this guide. In particular, we would like to thank those who spoke to us about their personal experiences of abuse and who wanted to help to ensure that other victims of abuse are given the support they need.

Feedback on the content of this guide is welcome. Contact DVIRC on (03) 9486-9866 or email dvirc@vicnet.net.au.

The authors are happy for the information in this guide to be reproduced providing the source is acknowledged.

For additional copies of this guide, contact the *Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre*, (03) 9486-9866 or the *Victorian Community Council Against Violence*, (03) 9603-8280. Translations of this guide are also available in the following community languages; Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Russian, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog (Filipino), Turkish, and Vietnamese.

Is someone you know being
abused in a relationship?

Your support can make
a difference

Contents

- Introduction 1
- What is abuse? 2
- How can I recognise abuse? 3
- Why doesn't she just leave? 4
- Should I get involved? 7
- How should I approach her? 7
- What can I do to help her? 8
- What not to do 11
- Helping to increase her safety 12
- Looking after yourself 14
- Responding to her partner 15
- Services that can help 17

Introduction

It can be really worrying when someone you care about is being hurt or abused by their partner. This guide will provide you with practical information on how to help, and how to look after yourself.

Your help can make a great difference to someone who is abused.

Your response to her situation is really important. If she feels supported and encouraged, she may feel stronger and more able to make decisions. If she feels judged or criticised, she could be afraid to tell anyone else about the abuse again.

Abuse in relationships is quite common, and is mainly committed by men against women.

Much of this abuse is witnessed by children. Some women are abusive in relationships. Women in lesbian relationships, and men in gay relationships can also be abusive to their partners.

'My best friend really helped me. She never judged me or made me feel like it was my fault. She helped me think about what to do, looked after my kids to give me a break, and was there when I needed her. It can't have been easy on her. But her support made a big difference.'

- Ana

This guide will help in supporting female *and male* victims of abuse. Throughout the guide we refer to the victim as 'she' for simplicity and because the majority of victims are women, however we encourage supporters of men who are being abused to use this guide.

What is abuse?

Every couple has arguments or disagreements. In a respectful and equal relationship, both partners feel free to state their opinions, to make their own decisions, to be themselves, and to say no to sex. But this is not the case when someone is abusive. In an abusive relationship, one partner tries to dominate the other through physical harm, criticisms, demands, threats, or sexual pressure. For the victim and her children, this behaviour can be very dangerous, frightening, confusing and damaging.

'My family and friends didn't think it was "that bad" because he only physically hit me once. But the put-downs and manipulation were so much worse, the way he controlled my life. I really wish my family could have understood how horrible it was.'

- Kate

Psychological or emotional abuse can be just as harmful as physical abuse.

Abuse in a relationship is never acceptable, regardless of the circumstances, and is never the fault of the victim. Abuse is not caused by alcohol, or stress, or by the victim's behaviour. Abuse happens because the abuser wants to control and manipulate the other person. Physical and sexual assault, threats and stalking are crimes and can be reported to the police.





How can I recognise abuse?

You might be unsure if what your friend or relative is experiencing is 'abuse'. Maybe you just have some sense that something is 'wrong' in her relationship. Sometimes there may be signs that indicate that there is abuse. But often there will be nothing obvious.

These are some of the signs that someone is being abused.

- She seems afraid of her partner or is always very anxious to please him or her.
- She has stopped seeing her friends or family, or cuts phone conversations short when her partner is in the room.
- Her partner often criticises her or humiliates her in front of other people.
- She says her partner pressures or forces her to do sexual things.
- Her partner often orders her about or makes all the decisions (for example, her partner controls all the money, tells her who she can see and what she can do).
- She often talks about her partner's 'jealousy', 'bad temper' or 'possessiveness'.
- She has become anxious or depressed, has lost her confidence, or is unusually quiet.
- She has physical injuries (bruises, broken bones, sprains, cuts etc). She may give unlikely explanations for physical injuries.
- Her children seem afraid of her partner, have behaviour problems, or are very withdrawn or anxious. She is reluctant to leave her children with her partner.
- After she has left the relationship, her partner is constantly calling her, harassing her, following her, coming to her house or waiting outside.

Why doesn't she just leave?

It can be hard to understand why someone would stay in a relationship if she is being treated so badly. Leaving may appear to be a simple solution. You might think that the abuse is partly her fault because she puts up with it, or that she is weak or stupid if she stays.

It is hard to imagine what it is like to be abused when you are not in the situation yourself. From the outside, it may seem easier to leave than it actually is.

It can be very difficult to leave an abusive partner. This is an important thing for friends and family to understand.

There are many reasons why it may be so hard to leave.

- **She is afraid of what the abuser will do if she leaves.** The person who is abusive may have threatened to harm her, her relatives, or the children, pets or property. They may threaten to commit suicide if she talks about leaving. Many victims find that the abuse continues or gets worse after they leave.
- **She still loves her partner,** because he or she is not abusive all of the time.
- **She has a commitment to the relationship** or a belief that marriage is forever, for 'better or worse'.





- **She hopes her partner will change.** Sometimes the abusive person might promise to change. She might think that if the abuser stops drinking, the abuse will stop.

- **She thinks the abuse is her fault.**
- **She feels she should stay ‘for the sake of the children’,** and that it is best that children live with both parents. Her partner may have threatened to take or harm the children.
- **A lack of confidence.** The person who is abusive will have deliberately tried to break down their partner’s confidence, and make her feel like she is stupid, hopeless, and responsible for the abuse. She may feel powerless and unable to make decisions.
- **Isolation and loneliness.** The person who is abusive may have tried to cut her off from contact with family or friends. She might be afraid of coping on her own. If English is not her first language she might feel particularly isolated.
- **Pressure to stay from family, her community or church.** She might fear rejection from her community or family if she leaves.
- **She may feel that she can’t get away from her partner** because they live in a rural area, or because they have the same friends, or are part of the same ethnic, Aboriginal or religious community.
- **She doesn’t have the means to survive** if the relationship ends. She might not have anywhere to live, or access to money, or transport, particularly if she lives in an isolated area. She may be dependent upon

her partner's income. If she has a disability, she may depend upon the abuser for assistance.

It is very important that you do not make her feel that there is something wrong with her because she hasn't left. This will only reinforce her low confidence and feelings of guilt and self-blame.

Leaving an abusive partner may sometimes be quite dangerous. The abuse **may** continue or increase after she leaves. Help her to weigh up her feelings, to decide what she can do, and to consider her safety whether she decides to stay or to leave. She might want to contact one of the services listed in the back of this guide to talk about how to protect herself.

'When I told her how he abused me, my friend said "but you let him do it" like it was my fault. That made me feel worse. She didn't know how much pressure he put on me to go back, how he said he loved me and would kill himself rather than live without me and the children. He made me feel so guilty. I thought how important it was for the children to have a father. It was all a way of manipulating me to come back. My friend stopped talking to me after I went back to him, she said I was stupid. I was really upset because she was my only close friend in Australia and I really needed someone to talk to, and to help me to see that the way he treated me was wrong.'

- Nicola

Should I get involved?

Many people worry that they will be 'interfering' if they get involved, or that it is a 'private matter'. But it is equally worrying if someone is being abused and you say nothing. **Your support can make a difference.** You might risk some embarrassment if you approach her and she rejects your support or tells you your suspicions are wrong. But if you approach her sensitively, without being critical, most people will appreciate an expression of concern for their well-being, even if they are not ready to talk about their situation. It is unlikely you will make things 'worse' by expressing concern.

How should I approach her?

Approach your friend or relative in a sensitive way, letting her know your own concerns. Tell her you're worried about her, then explain why. For example *'I'm worried about you because I've noticed you seem really unhappy lately'*.

'My family knew I was being abused and that I felt trapped, but they didn't say anything about it until I finally left. It would have helped if they had said that his behaviour wasn't ok, because I thought it was normal. If they had said that I was a good person and that they were there if I needed them, it would have made getting out a lot easier.'

- Ellie

Don't be surprised if she seems defensive or rejects your support. She might be scared of worrying you if she tells you about the abuse. She may not be ready to admit to being abused, or may feel ashamed and afraid of talking about it. She might have difficulty trusting anyone after being abused. If the victim is a man, he may feel particularly embarrassed about speaking about the abuse as he may be seen as 'weak' or 'unmanly'.

Don't push the person into talking if they are uncomfortable, but let them know that you're there if they need to talk. Be patient, and keep an ear out for anything that indicates they are ready to talk about the abuse.

What can I do to help her?

The most important thing you can do is to listen without judging, respect her decisions, and help her to find ways to become stronger and safer.

- **Listen to what she has to say.**
- **Believe what she tells you.** It will have taken a lot for her to talk to you. People are much more likely to cover up or downplay the abuse, rather than to make it up or exaggerate. You might find it hard to imagine someone you know could behave abusively. But the person who is abusive will probably show you a very different side to the side the victim sees.

'You don't have to fully understand to be of assistance. All you have to do is give your time and love without being judgemental.'

- Jane

- **Take the abuse seriously.** Abuse can be damaging both physically and emotionally. Don't underestimate the danger she may be in.
- **Help her to recognise the abuse** and understand how it may be affecting her or her children.
- **Tell her you think she has been brave** in being able to talk about the abuse, and in being able to keep going despite the abuse.

'What would really have helped is to have a relative or friend to mind the kids for a while. I just needed the time to think and work out my feelings without the kids being around all the time.'

- Soraya

- **Help to build her confidence in herself.**
- **Help her to understand that the abuse is not her fault** and that no-one deserves to be abused, no matter what they do. Let her know you think that the way her partner is treating her is wrong. For example, *'No-one, not even your husband, has the right to mistreat you'*.
- **Help her to protect herself.** You could say *'I'm afraid of what he could do to you or the children'* or

'I'm worried that it will get worse'. Talk to her about how she thinks she could protect herself. See the section 'Helping to increase her safety' (page 12).

- **Help her to think about what she can do** and see how you can help her to achieve it.
- **Offer practical assistance** like minding the children for a while, cooking a meal for her, offering a safe place to stay, transport or to accompany her to court, etc.
- **Respect her right to make her own decisions**, even if you don't agree with them. Respect her cultural or religious values and beliefs.
- **Maintain some level of regular contact with her.** Having an opportunity to talk regularly to a supportive friend or relative can be very important.
- **Find out about Intervention Orders and other legal options available** and pass this information on to her if she wants it.

- **Tell her about the services available, listed at the back of this guide.** Remind her that if she calls a service, she can just get support and information, they won't pressure her to leave if she doesn't want to.
- **Keep supporting her after she has left the relationship.** The period of separation could be a dangerous time for her, as the abuse may increase. She may need practical support and encouragement to help her establish a new life and recover from the abuse. She could also seek counselling or join a support group.



Questions you could ask and things you could say:

These are just some ideas. It is important that you only say what you believe, and use your own words.

- *'The way he treats you is wrong'.*
- *'What can I do to help you?'*
- *'How do you think his behaviour has affected you?'*
- *'How do you think his behaviour is affecting your children?'*
- *'I'm worried about what he could do to you or the children.'*
- *'What do you think you should do?'*
- *'What are you afraid of if you leave?'*
- *'What are you afraid of if you stay?'*





What not to do ...

When talking to someone who is being abused, some things may not help, or may stop her from wanting to confide in you fully.

Here are some of the things victims of abuse say did **not** help:

- **Don't blame her for the abuse** or ask questions like *'what did you do for him to treat you like that?'* or *'why do you put up with it?'*, or *'how can you still be in love with him?'* These questions suggest that it is somehow her fault.
- **Don't keep trying to work out the 'reasons'** for the abuse. Concentrate on supporting the person who is being abused.
- **Don't be critical** if she says she still loves her partner, or if she leaves but then returns to the relationship. Leaving an abusive partner takes time, and your support is really important.
- **Don't criticise her partner.** Criticise the abusive *behaviour* and let her know that no-one has the right to abuse her (for example, say *'your partner shouldn't treat you like that'*). Criticism of her partner is only likely to make her want to defend him or her.
- **Don't give advice,** or tell her what you would do. This will only reduce her confidence to make her own decisions. Listen to her and give her information, not advice.
- **Don't pressure her to leave** or try to make decisions on her behalf. Focus on listening and supporting her to make her own decisions. She knows her own situation best.

Helping to increase her safety

Whether she is staying in the relationship or has separated, it is important to think about how she can be protected from further abuse. You could:

- Help her to plan where she and her children could go in an emergency, or if she decides to leave. If she needs to stay at a secret location, tell her about safe accommodation services (refuges). She can ring the *Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service* to find out about refuges in Victoria (see page 18).
- Agree on a code word or signal that she can use to let you know she needs help.
- Help her to prepare an excuse so she can leave quickly if she feels threatened.
- Find out about how the police can protect her. Talk to her about laws that can protect her, such as an Intervention Order. This is a court order that can protect her from further abuse or from the abuser coming near her. It is a criminal offence if the abuser disobeys the conditions of the Intervention Order.
- Help her to prepare an 'escape bag' of her belongings, and hide it in a safe place. If she leaves she will need money, keys, clothes, bank cards, driver's licence, social security documents, property deeds, medication, birth certificates, passport and any other important documents for herself and her children.
- If she decides to stay she may need other ways to protect herself and the children from further violence. She could ring one of the services listed at the back of this guide for safety ideas and legal information.

- You could offer to give evidence as a witness, if she wants to take out an Intervention Order or to take other legal action. If you feel able to offer this, take notes if you observe abuse, noting times, dates, and what you observed.
- For information booklets on *Safety for Women*, and *Laws for Violence in the Home*, ring the Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre, (03) 9486-9866.

What can I do if I witness or overhear physical violence or threats?

If you believe there is immediate physical danger and that she and her children are about to be harmed, call the police on 000 immediately.

'Our neighbour was stalked by her ex-boyfriend. He'd watch her from outside the house. We sometimes heard him yelling at her in the backyard. We weren't sure if calling the police would make things worse. We asked her about it. We agreed to ring her if we saw him watching her house, so she could get her brother to come over. If we thought we heard her ex in her house, we'd ring her and she'd use a certain word as a signal for us to call the police.'

- Mark

If you do have the opportunity to talk to her at another time, ask about whether or not she would like you to call the police. She may fear that calling the police may make things worse for her. Many people are afraid of involving the police, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds or indigenous communities who may have had bad past experiences. You could call a domestic violence service to find out about how you could help in this situation.

But remember, when you think there is immediate physical danger, call the police on 000.

Looking after yourself

Supporting a friend or relative who is being abused can be frustrating, frightening and stressful. You need to look after yourself and to get support too.

Feeling frustrated or angry that she hasn't left the relationship

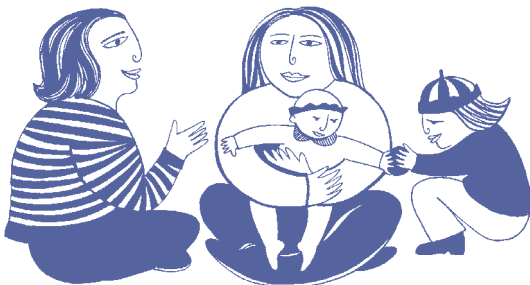
Remember that letting her know you're frustrated or disappointed will not help her, and may only make things worse. Don't give up on her, regardless of her decisions. Explain your fears, but let her know you will still support her. Remind yourself that your support is important, and will have a positive impact on her, even if she can't express this now. Don't underestimate the value of your support.

Feeling afraid or 'out of your depth'

Get some support for yourself. Talk to other friends or contact a service for information on what you can do.

Feeling pressured to help more than you are able

Be honest about the amount and type of support you can offer. Don't push yourself beyond your own limits – you can only fully support her if you look after yourself too. *Remember that you are not responsible for the abuse, and you cannot 'rescue her'.* She can also get support from the services listed at the back of this guide.



How can I respond to her abusive partner?

Be careful. Don't place yourself in a position where the person who is being abusive could harm or manipulate you. Don't try to intervene directly if you witness a person being assaulted - call the police instead.

If the person who is being abusive is your friend or relative, you may feel caught in the middle. It is important to understand that if you approach the person who is abusive, he or she may:

- tell you to 'mind your own business'
- deny the abuse, or say '*how can you think I could do something like that?*'
- make it seem like it's 'not that bad', or that it only happened once
- make it seem like it's the other person's fault, or that it's her behaviour that's the problem, not theirs
- say that they couldn't help themselves, they were drunk, just 'snapped', or 'lost control'.

None of these responses mean that he or she is not abusive. It is common for a person who is being abusive to deny or minimise the abuse. Probably the only way you will be able to 'verify' that a person is abusive is if their partner tells you that they are, or if you witness the abuse. Even someone who appears to be 'respectable' and 'normal' can be abusive in the privacy of their own home.

It is possible that the person who is abusive may admit the abuse was their fault, but say they don't know how to stop their behaviour. If the person who is abusive is male, he can be encouraged to call the *Men's Referral*

Service for anonymous and confidential advice on how he may go about ending his use of violence. See contact details at the end of this guide. If the abusive person is female, she can contact her local Community Health Service (see White Pages phone book).

If you do observe abuse, and you feel safe or able to, talk about the behaviour you have observed. For example *'You are both my friends, but I think the way you criticise and intimidate her is wrong'*. But if you only know about the abuse because the victim has talked to you about it, **check with her first** before saying anything to her partner. Her partner could become more abusive to her if he or she thinks she has told someone.

A man speaking to another man, or a woman speaking to another woman about their abusive behaviour can be a helpful way of approaching this issue. Don't focus on trying to understand why the person is abusive, or on trying to work out how to change him or her. Don't get involved in excusing the abuse. Focus on what the person who is abusive is going to do about it, and encourage them to call the *Men's Referral Service* (see page 19).



Services that can help

Domestic Violence Outreach Services

Outreach services are located throughout Victoria and can help provide information and practical support in finding safe accommodation, housing, or obtaining legal or financial assistance. Contact times are usually within business hours.

Metropolitan Domestic Violence Outreach Services:

Eastern Metropolitan

Ringwood (03) 9870-5939

Northern Metropolitan

Heidelberg (03) 9457-5087

Southern Metropolitan

Frankston (03) 9781-4658

Mordialloc (03) 8587-0200

Cranbourne (03) 5990-6789

Rosebud (03) 5982-2863

Springvale (03) 9791 6111

Inner South

St Kilda (03) 9534-6089

West Metropolitan

Footscray (03) 9689-9588

Rural Domestic Violence Outreach Services

Barwon South West

Geelong (03) 5224-2903

Warrnambool (03) 5561-1934

Hamilton (03) 5571-1778

Camperdown (03) 5593-1370 (Tues & Thurs)

Portland (03) 5521-7937

Casterton (03) 5581 2109

Gippsland

Bairnsdale (03) 5152-1863

Leongatha (03) 5662-4502,

- freecall 1800 221 200

Warragul (03) 5623-4168
Morwell (03) 5134-8555
- freecall 1800 243 455

Grampians

Horsham (03) 5382-6669
Ballarat (03) 5333-3666
Stawell (03) 5358-3700
Ararat (03) 5352-2555

Hume

Wodonga (02) 6056-1550
Shepparton (03) 5831-2012
Broadford (03) 5784-1306
Wangaratta (03) 5721-8277

Loddon Mallee

Mildura (03) 5021-2130
Bendigo (03) 5443-4945
Swan Hill (03) 5033-1899

Police

For urgent attendance ring 000.
For non-urgent police assistance contact your
local police or the Community Policing Squad.

Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service

Statewide 24 hour crisis support and safe
accommodation (refuges) for women and
their children.
(03) 9373-0123 or 1800-015-188

Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service

Support to immigrant women in their primary
language.
(03) 9898-3145.

Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre

For written information, pamphlets on legal and
safety options for domestic violence, books
for loan. Information about support groups
and services in Victoria.
(03) 9486-9866 TTY: (03) 9417-1255
email: dvirc@dvirc.org.au



Translating & Interpreting Service
 Interpreters in a range of languages.
 131-450 or country
 callers 1800-112-477 (24hr)

**Women's Information & Referral
 Exchange (WIRE)**
 Telephone counselling and information to
 women, referral to local counsellors and services.
 1300 134 130 toll free
 TTY: (03) 9654-5124. Mon-Fri 9am-7pm

Women's Legal Service
 Telephone legal advice and referral.
 (03) 9642-0343, freecall 1800-133-302

Federation of Community Legal Centres
 Will refer you to your local legal centre for free
 legal advice. (03) 9602-4949

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
 Legal assistance for Aboriginal people.
 (03) 9419-3888 (24 hrs),
 Country callers can reverse charges.

Victims Referral & Assistance Service
 Access to counselling and information about
 legal and financial assistance.
 (03) 9603-9797 or freecall 1800-819-817

Kids' Help Line
 24 hour telephone support for children and
 young people. freecall 1800-55-1800

Men's Referral Service
 Information and referral for men who want to
 change their abusive behaviour.
 (03) 9428-2899 or freecall 1800-065-973,
 12 noon-9pm Mon-Fri.

Court Network
 Information and support before, during and
 after court. (03) 9603-7433 (24 hrs),
 freecall 1800 681 614.

Books and other Resources

For more information on domestic violence, personal stories and advice see the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre website at: www.vicnet.net.au/~dvirc

Brewster, Susan. (1997) *To be an Anchor in the Storm: a guide for families and friends of abused women*. New York: Ballantine.

Douglas, Kay. (1996) *Invisible Wounds - a self-help guide for women in destructive relationships*. London: The Women's Press.

These and other useful books are available for loan from the *Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre* library, (03) 9486-9866.

For additional copies or translations of this guide, contact the *Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre*, (03) 9486-9866 or the *Victorian Community Council Against Violence*, (03) 9603-8280.





Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre



Victorian Community Council Against Violence

For additional copies of this guide, contact the *Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre*, (03) 9486-9866 or the *Victorian Community Council Against Violence*, (03) 9603-8280. Translations of this guide are also available in the following community languages; Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Russian, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog (Filipino), Turkish, and Vietnamese.