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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.