

WHAT WE CAN DO AS INDIVIDUALS TO ADDRESS DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY ISSUES

The issues of domestic abuse and chemical dependency often trigger feelings of confusion, anger, powerlessness, hopelessness, and depression in the families where they are occurring and in us as a society. An important next step is to start to identify what we can do about it with women who are being abused and with their partners who are abusing them and in the community-at-large. This article will focus on some specific ideas and recommend some concrete things that you can do to actually make a difference in peoples' lives and in the culture-at-large. It is not meant as an exhaustive list of ideas. Rather, use this section as a way to generate discussion and more ideas for yourself and those around you.

Whether we are professionals working in the mental health field or a friend, family member, co-worker, supervisor, or neighbor to a woman who is being abused, begin to recognize and believe that you do, in fact, know and interact with women who are in this frightening situation. Domestic abuse occurs everywhere, in all the best companies, in all the best neighborhoods, in all the best places of worship, and in all the best country clubs. Start to believe that this issue really does touch your life and that you may, in fact, actually know people who struggle with these issues. If we as a community and a society don't take more responsibility to intervene in domestic abuse and chemical dependency, they will continue unabated. Given that reality, what are some things you can actually do?

1) Learn more about the issues of domestic abuse and chemical dependency and how they are similar and how they are different.

You have begun that process by coming to this website and thinking about and, hopefully, discussing some of the issues raised in this website. Part of this website includes books and other references to learn even more. Take the opportunity to become and stay informed. Don't let your way of thinking about this issue be determined by the many myths (see some examples of these myths in another part of this website) that exist and shape our beliefs about abuse, violence and chemical dependency in the home. Part of this involves more effective interfacing between domestic abuse and chemical dependency professionals. For too long, these two fields have been "at odds" and unwilling to seriously dialogue about how they can work together for the benefit of families involved with both issues.

2) Learn more about local community resources that address domestic abuse and chemical dependency.

Get to know resources in your community that might be helpful to a woman who is being abused by her partner. These could include battered women's shelters and other programs that can offer women and children safety; emotional, financial, and housing support; legal and other kinds of advocacy; and mental health, chemical dependency, and medical services.

3) Set up educational programs in your community organizations.

Bring in speakers to your neighborhood block club, your worksite, your place of worship, your service club, your children's school, and other organizations where you are involved to encourage awareness of domestic abuse and chemical dependency. Begin a dialogue about these issues and start to think about ways you and your organization can be a part of the solution.

4) Find ways to support community resources that combat domestic violence and chemical dependency.

Volunteer to provide services for a local battered women's shelter, to visit men in jail who have been arrested for domestic abuse, or to work for a crisis phone line that addresses the issues of domestic abuse and chemical dependency. Or donate money and/or goods that are helpful to these domestic abuse and chemical dependency organizations and the services they provide.

5) Support community, state, and national initiatives that seek to intervene in domestic abuse and chemical dependency.

Support legislation against domestic violence and support political figures who have the courage and conscience to take a clear stand against domestic abuse. Do the same thing for laws that address unhealthy and dangerous behavior related to chemical use and abuse.

6) Boycott products and entertainers that promote and glorify domestic violence and chemical abuse and the attitudes behind them.

Messages demeaning and objectifying women and violent content in the movies, on television, in music lyrics, in video games, in advertising, on the internet, and elsewhere are part of the cultural permission that contributes to domestic abuse occurring. In the same way, messages glorifying excesses regarding alcohol use and the use of drugs promote poor choices around the use of chemicals. Make the decision not to provide financial support to those who wish to communicate these distorted values to our society.

7) Talk to your own and other children about domestic abuse and chemical dependency.

Help children understand more about domestic violence and chemical dependency and how harmful they are to everyone involved. Break the link between masculinity and the need to dominate and control others. Help boys (and girls) learn non-abusive and respectful ways to express their anger and their other emotions. And finally, it is of critical importance to model a respectful and non-abusive style of relating to other people within your family, neighborhood, and community and to also model responsible use of chemicals or abstinence (if this is appropriate). Your children are constantly watching and learning from how you behave, not just from what you say.

8) “Take a stand” if you are around people who minimize or “make light of” issues related to domestic abuse and chemical dependency.

Don’t participate in jokes about domestic abuse and demeaning and objectifying comments and humor about girls and women. At the same time, be unwilling to participate in “drunk jokes” or other statements that give the message that chemical abuse is acceptable and “just part of the way things are.” At a minimum, ignore what the person is saying and walk away. Better yet, speak up and say something in an assertive and respectful way about how you don’t appreciate that way of looking at domestic abuse, women, and alcohol and drug use.

9) If domestic violence is occurring in your apartment building or neighborhood, call the legal authorities.

If you hear loud arguments, yelling, cursing and swearing, threats, property destruction, or even physically assaultive behavior, don’t just go inside, close the windows, or “try to ignore it, put it out of your mind, and get to sleep.” You don’t need to put yourself at risk personally in order to start the process of intervention. Call the police and tell them that you are concerned about “something going on” in your building, with your neighbors, or on the street that sounds like a “domestic altercation.”

HOW TO TALK WITH WOMEN WHO ARE BEING ABUSED AND MEN WHO ARE CONTROLLING AND ABUSIVE

If you think you know a woman who is being abused:

- Ask her what is happening in her life and in her relationship with her partner. Be interested and prepare yourself to hear things that may be difficult to hear and may even be shocking for you. Be honest about your concerns and suspicions and ask questions that are specific: “*Does your partner ever put you down, call you demeaning names, or curse and swear at you?*,” “*How did you get the bruise on your cheek?*” “*Has your partner ever been ‘physical’ with you?*” or “*Are you afraid of or intimidated by your husband (boyfriend)?*” If a woman denies that abuse is occurring, don’t “push” for more information, but do let her know that you’re always willing to talk with her if she ever wants or needs to do this.
- If she is willing to talk honestly about what is happening, listen to her in a nonjudgmental and supportive way and be clear that you believe her. Women in abusive relationships expect to be judged, shamed, and blamed and often feel that they are responsible for the abuse and violence directed at them by their partners. In fact, their partners have often been very clear with them that they (the women) are the reason the abuse and violence is occurring in their relationship because of what she says and how she acts. Let her know you respect her courage in being willing to “break the secret.” How you respond to her initially will determine whether she continues to talk with you (or others) in the future. Validate her feelings, even if it’s beyond the realm of your own personal experience. Help her see her strengths, skills, and competencies and assist her in building on these as she plans for her future.

- Challenge the abusive and violent behavior directly. Abuse and violence are not “relationship issues” and do not come about as a result of a “communication problem” and, in all probability, will not stop on its own (rather, abuse tends to get worse over time without any kind of intervention). Domestic violence is assault and it is a crime. Women, children, and men have a right to feel safe and secure in their homes. Be clear with her that it is not okay for her partner to use abuse and violence in a relationship and that it is not she who is to blame but rather her partner, who is 100% responsible for his own abusive and violent actions. You may care very much both for her and her partner, but that doesn’t mean you can’t make it clear that the abuse and violence is wrong and that no one deserves to be abused.
- Provide a “reality test” for her. She may minimize and deny both the extent of the abuse and her feelings about it. She may say things like *“It’s really not that big a deal,”* *“He only pushed me once,”* and *“It doesn’t happen all that often.”* She may deny being afraid of him and tell you that he has promised her that *“it will never happen again.”* Express your concerns that “it is a big deal” and that it is very likely that it will happen again if he doesn’t get some help to directly address the issue. Let her know that you are concerned about her and afraid for her and her children (if she has children) even if she doesn’t say that she is afraid for herself. Let her know that abusive behavior negatively affects her and her children’s emotional stability and emotional well-being in a multitude of ways. Avoid condemning or judging her partner, however. At this point, she may still love him and these kinds of judgments will only alienate her from you and are not helpful in keeping the channels of communication open between the two of you. At least initially, many women want to see the abuse and violence end, not the relationship with their partner.
- Help her understand the difference between chemical dependency and abusive behavior if both issues are present in her partner. Let her know that alcohol and drug use do not cause abuse (although they may be a part of his abusive behavior and contribute to it) and that these are two separate and freestanding issues. When both are present, each needs to be directly addressed if the controlling and abusive attitudes and behavior is to stop and the relationship is to become a more healthy one.
- Assure her that treatment is available for both her **AND** her partner, if they are willing to seek it out. Many women want help for their partners as well as themselves. There is no “magic” to changing his controlling and abusive attitudes and behaviors. It’s hard work and her partner must be willing to challenge his old ways of thinking and acting and put into place some very different ways of responding to his partner, himself, and the world around him. But it can be done! Some men are willing to change and, in fact, do what is necessary to make these changes actually happen. In the same way, if alcohol and drug use are a part of the abusive behavior, effective treatment is also available to address this aspect of the picture. In reality, if chemical issues exist and are not addressed, it is unlikely that the control and abuse will stop.
- Guide her to community resources including support groups and temporary safety at shelters for women who are in abusive relationships. Advocates who can help her understand her legal, financial, and housing options and helping professionals who understand the dynamics of

domestic abuse and can assist her in deciding what she wants to do with her relationship and her life.

- Help her come up with a **safety plan** for herself and her children. Let her know that thinking ahead to protect herself when her partner is escalating to controlling and abusive behavior again is important for her. Assist her in determining how she can be safe and what steps she will take if the abuse continues in her relationship. Remind her that dialing 911 and contacting the police is always an option. Help her identify some friends, neighbors, and relatives that she can contact in an emergency and some places she can go to feel safe. Suggest that she keep an extra set of car and house keys and some cash readily available. Discuss the idea of packing and hiding an overnight bag of clothing, personal items, social security cards, bank books, and other important documents and belongings.
- Be patient with her in her process. Don't tell her what to do and expect that she will do exactly what you say. She has been in the grip of someone who has wanted to control her and tell her what to do and who to be for as long as she's been in the relationship with her abusive partner. Don't be just another controlling person in her life. Remember that she is in the midst of making a critical life-changing decision. This process has started with her beginning to talk about the abuse that is being directed at her. Your task is to help her connect with the tools that can assist her in making her own decisions about how she wants to proceed. Try to understand that this is truly her own process and work hard to fight the impulse to become frustrated, "throw up your hands," and decide that "she'll never 'get it' and do the right thing."
- Finally, take care of yourself in the process of being there for a woman who is in an abusive relationship. When someone you know or care about is in the midst of a crisis, as being in a abusive relationship certainly is, it can become a crisis in your life as well, triggering your own feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, anger, hopelessness, and powerlessness. Let go of the idea that you are completely responsible and that you have to "fix" the situation and can make a change happen, in her or in the relationship. Your presence and your caring is part of what may help her do what she needs to do in this situation, which may take months or even years. You can't do it alone and you can't do it for her. There will be many other people that she needs to connect with and count on in addition to you if she is to figure out what she needs to do. And, ultimately, it is she who must make the final decisions about what will happen. If her situation becomes too overwhelming for you, talk to a friend or seek out professional help and support for yourself. As a helping person to a woman who is being abused, you are there to help plant the seeds that may, at some point, take root and grow. Survivors of abusive relationships, in looking back, often highlight the importance of just having someone there who believed them and was really there for them. Try to really be that person for a woman who is being abused if you can.

If you think you might know a man who may be controlling and abusive:

- Take the risk to ask more about "fights" and "arguments" if this seems to be an ongoing issue in a friend's relationship with his partner. Be clear with him that you don't believe that control, abuse, or violence are ever okay in intimate relationships under any circumstances.

- Let him know that you believe that he is responsible for his violence and his other abusive actions with his partner and that his abusive behavior isn't about his or her alcohol use, unemployment, her spending too much, or her "nagging him all the time." At the same time, let him know that, if he is using alcohol or drugs in any unhealthy way, this also needs to be directly addressed if he is to change his abusive and violent behavior.
- Reinforce the idea that he makes the choice to use abusive behavior and to abuse chemicals and that he is not "out of control" with his emotions or his chemical use (although he may "feel" this way at times).
- Make sure he knows that domestic violence is illegal and can lead to significant legal and other consequences for him.
- Further appeal to his self-interest by letting him know about the impact of abuse and violence on women and children and about the potential for him to lose his partner and family and for decreased time with his children (if he has children) if his controlling and abusive attitudes and behaviors continue.
- Let him know that he can, in fact, get help if domestic abuse and/or chemical abuse or dependency are issues for him and that he can, in fact, change these parts of who he has been up to the present. Finally, if he is willing, direct him to places he can go to actually get this kind of help.

The issue of domestic abuse all too often feels depressing and just plain hopeless. It is an issue that cries out for dialogue and constructive solutions. We seem to be at a critical point in our history. We desperately need to stem the tide of domestic abuse that threatens to overwhelm us. We can't afford to continue in the direction that we appear to be heading. Our children and our children's children deserve a better and a brighter future. This will only happen if we tackle this challenge with all the resolve that we can muster. The abuse and violence have to end and you can be a person who helps make that happen!