

# How to Help

## *A Guide for Friends and Family*



*Helping someone who is in an abusive relationship can be frightening and challenging.*

*This guide will help will provide you with the knowledge, tools and resources to support your loved one.*

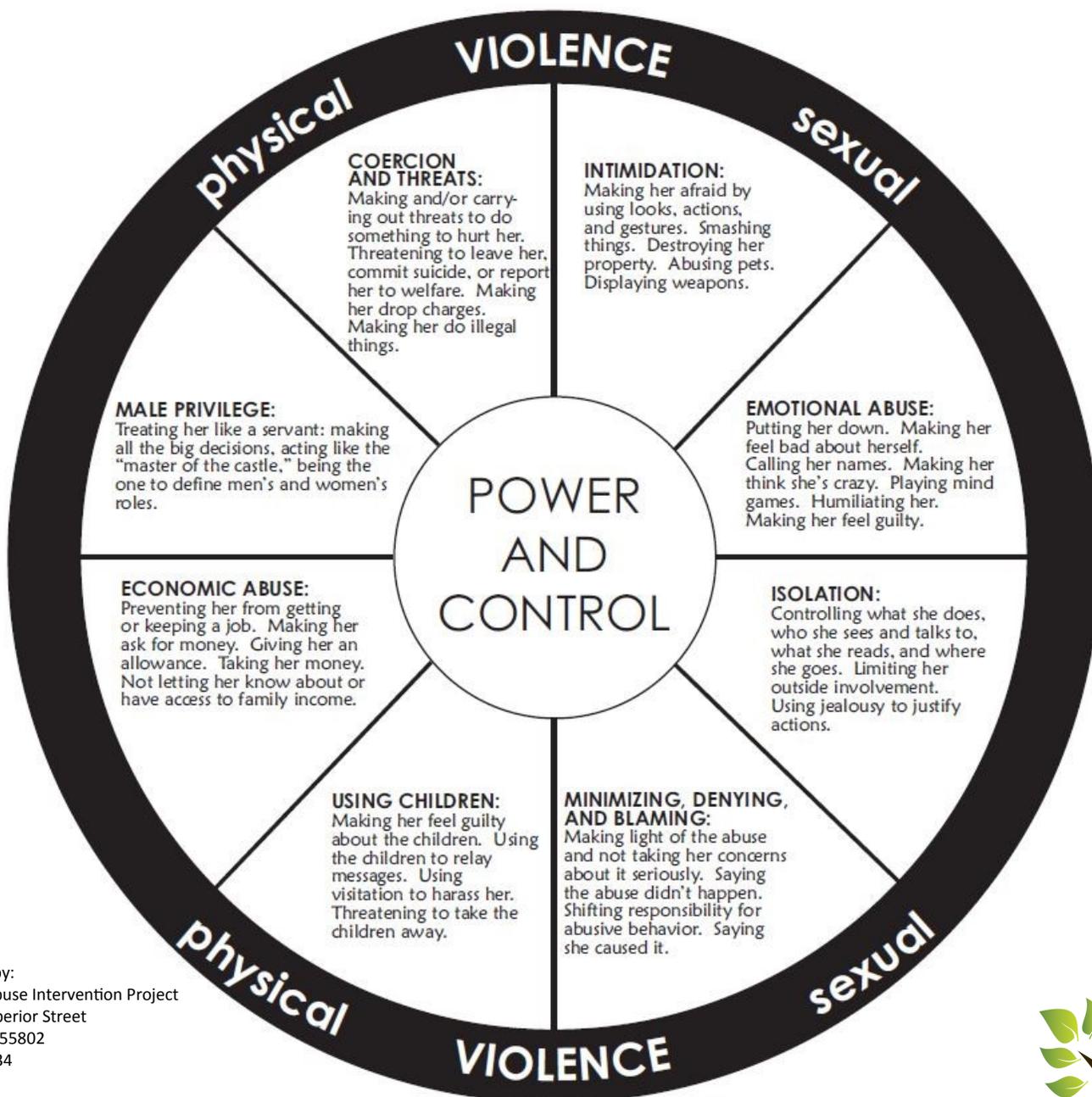


# How to Help: A guide for friends and family

## Power and Control

Physical and sexual assaults, or threats to commit them, are the most apparent forms of domestic violence. However, regular use of other abusive behaviors by the abusive partner, when reinforced by one or more acts of physical violence, make up a larger system of abuse. Although physical assaults may occur only once or occasionally, they instill the threat of future violent attacks and allow the abusive partner to take control of the victim/survivors' life and circumstances.

The Power and Control diagram is a particularly helpful tool in understanding the overall pattern of abusive and violent behaviors, which are used by an abusive partner to establish and maintain control over their partner. Very often, one or more violent incidents are accompanied by an array of these other types of abuse. They are less easily identified, yet firmly establish a pattern of intimidation and control in the relationship.

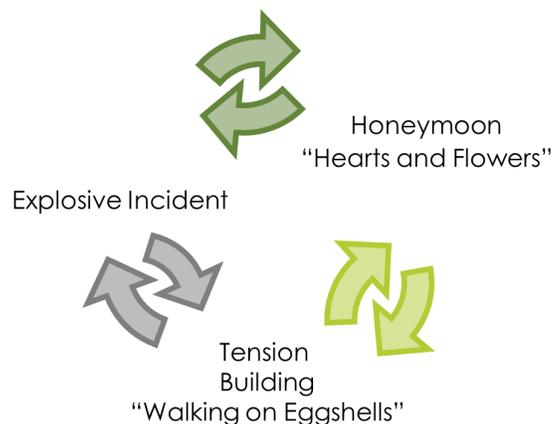


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## Cycle of Violence

Domestic violence is a pattern of abuse and control in an intimate relationship that escalates over time. The Cycle of Violence depicts this pattern, which consists of three phases.



**TENSION BUILDING.** This is a period that is marked by minor violent incidents, including pushing, shoving, verbal abuse, and arguments. The victim usually attempts to manage the abuser in a variety of ways. The victim may attempt to calm the abuser by becoming nurturing or compliant. They may attempt to anticipate every whim or to merely stay out of the abuser's way. The victim may acknowledge the abusive behavior, but believes that conciliatory behavior will prevent the anger and abuse from escalating.

**THE EXPLOSION.** The tension builds and sets the stage for the explosive incident. This is displayed through a release of tension through emotional and/or physical violence. During abusive incidents, the abusive partner often justifies their behavior by reciting many petty annoyances that occurred during phase one.

The actual attack is usually followed by shock, disbelief, and denial on the part of both the abuser and the victim. Both attempt to rationalize and often minimize the extreme seriousness of the incident.

**THE HONEYMOON.** Extremely loving, kind and remorseful behaviors characterize the honeymoon stage. The abusive partner behaves in a charming and loving manner and apologizes for the violence. They beg for forgiveness and promise that it will never happen again. Abusers typically reinforce apologies with gifts and/or vows to give up any and all behavior that contributes to the tension-building phase (drinking, affairs, working long hours or any other stressful factors that both would like to believe are the "cause" of the explosion).

The most disheartening part of the honeymoon phase is the false hope that it fosters. The victim/survivor gets a glimpse of what they thought, and still hopes, they had in a partner. The kind behavior of the abuser reinforces the hope that the situation can truly be better, if only the stresses were removed. During this phase, the victim often senses that the abusive partner is desperate, lonely and alienated and the victim feels responsible to be a bridge to their well-being.

During this phase, many victims who have sought professional help often abandon their support groups, counseling, drop charges, and/or discontinue with divorce or separation proceedings. They believe that the situation has resolved itself. Ultimately the tension builds again and the cycle is repeated.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE.** It is important to realize that there are some limitations to the cycle of violence. The cycle does not describe all violent relationships or all survivors' experiences of abuse.

- The cycle may better represent events early in the relationship and may not describe long-term abuse.
- The cycle focuses more on the experience of acute physical violence that may not occur regularly in abusive relationships while neglecting the other coercive, controlling aspects of abusive relationships.
- It presents violent episodes as isolated events rather than ongoing abuse, which is the reality for many victims.
- Some victims are offended by the use of the phrase "honeymoon stage" as this implies that the abuse has ended when there is no physical violence and that this time in the relationship is loving.
- Not all victims of abuse experience abuse in this way. Comparing a victim's experience of abuse to this cycle may not accurately reflect their experience.
- The cycle of violence theory does not take into account the other forms of abuse including sexual, emotional, financial, and mental.

Adapted from: [womensafe.org](http://womensafe.org)



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## Understanding why they stay or leave

People who have never been abused often wonder why a person wouldn't just leave an abusive relationship. They don't understand that leaving can be more complicated than it seems.

Leaving is often the most dangerous time for a victim of abuse, because abuse is about power and control. When a victim leaves, they are taking control and threatening the abusive partner's power, which could cause the abusive partner to retaliate in very destructive ways.

Aside from this danger, there are many reasons why people stay in abusive relationships. Here are some common ones:

**FEAR.** A person may be afraid of what will happen if they decide to leave the relationship. Their abusive partner may have threatened to harm the survivor, their children, their pets or even themselves if they leave.

**BELIEVING ABUSE IS NORMAL.** A person may not know what a healthy relationship looks like, perhaps from growing up in an environment where abuse was common, and they may not recognize that their relationship is unhealthy.

**FEAR OF BEING OUTED.** If someone is in an LGBTQ relationship and has not yet come out to everyone, their partner may threaten to reveal this secret.

**EMBARRASSMENT/SHAME.** It's often difficult for someone to admit that they've been abused. They may feel they've done something wrong by becoming involved with an abusive partner or worry that their friends and family will judge them.

**LOW SELF-ESTEEM.** When an abusive partner constantly puts someone down and blames them for the abuse, it can be easy for the victim to believe those statements and think that the abuse is their fault.

**LOVE.** So often, the victim feels love for their abusive partner. They may have children with them and want to maintain their family. Abusive people can often be charming, especially at the beginning of a relationship, and the victim may hope that their partner will go back to being that person. Their partner may be promising that they will change. The victim may only want the violence to stop, not for the relationship to end entirely.

**CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS REASONS.** Traditional gender roles supported by someone's culture or religion may influence them to stay rather than end the relationship for fear of bringing shame upon their family.

**LANGUAGE BARRIERS/IMMIGRATION STATUS.** If a person is undocumented, they may fear that reporting the abuse will affect their immigration status. Also, if their first language isn't English, it can be difficult to express their situation to others.

**LACK OF MONEY/RESOURCES/HOUSING.** Financial abuse is common, and a victim may be financially dependent on their abusive partner. Without money, access to resources or even a place to go, it can seem impossible for them to leave the relationship. This feeling of helplessness can be especially strong if the person lives with their abusive partner.

**DISABILITY.** When someone is physically dependent on their abusive partner, or relies on their partner's medical insurance, they can feel that their well-being is connected to the relationship.

**CHILDREN.** Sometimes, victims believe it is in the children's best interest to have both parents in the home, especially if the abuser doesn't physically abuse the children. Or, the children may put pressure (independently or by the abuser's influence) on the abused parent to stay with their partner. Often, abusive partners threaten to obtain custody.

**ISOLATION.** Victims who have been cut off from family and friends lack a support system or people to stay with.

*Adapted from the National Domestic Violence Hotline*

### Understanding abuser facade

Battering and abusive behavior is regulated by the batterer's estimation of probable consequences, never by "provocation."

Battering is chosen behavior. Therefore, other choices can be made.

Batterers do not lose control of their behavior because they are intoxicated. Battering is not a secondary "symptom" to alcoholism or addiction.

Battering is a pattern of coercive control and not a singular event.



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## Helpful Things to Do or Say

**OPEN A DIALOGUE.** “Are you ever afraid of \_\_\_\_\_’s temper?”

**SHOW CONCERN.** “I am afraid for your (and your children’s) safety.” Make honest but non-judgmental observations about changes you’ve noticed in them. “I’m worried about you. You don’t seem to laugh as much anymore.”

**BE NON-JUDGMENTAL.** Respect your friend or family member’s decisions. There are many reasons why victims stay in abusive relationships. They may leave and return to the relationship many times. Do not criticize their decisions or try to guilt them. They will need your support even more during those times.

**APPRECIATE THE DANGER THEY ARE IN.** “I am afraid that the abuse will only get worse.” Acknowledge that they are in a very difficult and scary situation. Reassure them that they are not alone and that there is help and support out there.

**LISTEN.** “If you ever need to talk, I promise to just listen and not give advice.” Then follow through and not give advice!

**VALUE THEM.** “This is not your fault and you do not deserve to be abused.”

**COMPLIMENT THEM.** Help counter the toll that the verbal abuse may be taking on their self-esteem.

**OFFER TO HELP** in ways that you are comfortable with and will not later become resentful about (i.e. financial help, baby-sitting, a place to stay, transportation, etc.) Set clear and fair boundaries. Don’t offer it if you can’t follow through.

**ASK QUESTIONS.** The questions should focus on their feelings and not press for decisions or use sarcasm. It’s helpful to say “That sounds scary. How did that make you feel?” rather than “So, what are you going to do about it?”

**HELP THEM DEVELOP A SAFETY PLAN.** The National Domestic Violence Hotline ([thehotline.org](http://thehotline.org)) has information on creating a safety plan, whether they’re choosing to stay, preparing to leave, or have already left.

**ENCOURAGE THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF THE RELATIONSHIP.** Support is critical and the more they feel supported by people who care for them, the easier it will be for them to take the steps to get and stay safe.

**ENCOURAGE THEM TO TALK TO PEOPLE WHO CAN PROVIDE HELP AND GUIDANCE.** Family Tree provides individual advocacy and support groups. If they have to go to the police, court or a lawyer, offer to go along for moral support.

**REMEMBER THAT YOU CANNOT “RESCUE” THEM.** Although it is difficult to see someone you care about get hurt, ultimately they are the one who has to make the decisions. It’s important to support them no matter what they decide.

**PROVIDE SUPPORT AFTER THE RELATIONSHIP.** Your friend or family member may feel sad and lonely once they’ve left their partner. They will need time to mourn the loss of the relationship and will especially need your support at that time.

**ENCOURAGE SELF CARE AND PRACTICE IT YOURSELF.** Self-care means taking care of yourself in any way that feels good to you and brings you comfort. People who experience abuse often don’t do self-care because they are made to feel like they don’t deserve love or care. It’s normal to lose sight of ourselves when we’re dealing with very stressful situations. You can remind them that self-care is important for everyone. **Why is taking care of yourself so important?** Because by doing what you can for your own well-being, you can enable yourself to continue being a source of support for your loved one.

## Things Never to Do or Say

**“JUST LEAVE.”** This trivializes their experience and will make you appear to not understand. Also, separation is the most dangerous and potentially deadly time for a victim. Leaving requires careful planning and is best done after consulting with a victim’s advocate and developing a safety plan.

**DISBELIEVE THEM OR DEMAND “PROOF.”** Their feelings should be the most important thing. If they feel unsafe, that is all that should matter to you. Victims are often terrified that they will not be believed and even an initial skeptical reaction may prevent them from seeking further help.

**GIVE AN ULTIMATUM.** Telling them that you will only talk to them if they leave their partner, or threatening to stop helping if they go back to the relationship, only assists the abusive partner in isolating the victim/survivor.

**BAD-MOUTH THE ABUSIVE PARTNER.** Even if their partner is the biggest jerk in the world, don’t say so! It will usually only cause the victim to be defensive of them and will now make it “unsafe” to confide in you.

**TELL HER WHAT SHE “HAS TO DO”.** Remember, domestic violence is about power and control – if a victim is going to heal, they must regain control of their situation. As hard as it may be, do not give advice or tell them what to do or what you would do if you were them. It is good to help them discover their options, but the decision must be theirs alone.



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## Resources:

The Family Tree, 303.422.2133, [thefamilytree.org](http://thefamilytree.org)

**Our Domestic Violence Services** support victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking; families who have experienced the break-up of their homes through divorce or separation; and children who have witnessed family violence and/or have experienced abuse in their homes. All services are available in Spanish. Programs include:

**Women In Crisis.** Keeping victims safe from domestic violence by providing a 24-hour crisis line, emergency shelter, safety planning, advocacy, community resources, health care and other supportive services.

**Parenting Time Program.** Providing a safe environment for children to spend time with their non-residential parent(s), and keeping the safety of the child and the victim parent as the highest priority through supervised visits, off-site visits, safe exchanges, and parenting after divorce classes.

**Domestic Violence Outreach Program.** Increasing the safety and healing and decreasing the isolation of victims of domestic violence through individual and group advocacy and supportive services in a safe, community setting.

**Legal Advocacy Program.** Increasing immediate and long-term safety for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking by providing civil and criminal legal advocacy, crisis intervention and information and referrals.

National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1.800.799.7233, [thehotline.org](http://thehotline.org)

Operating around the clock, seven days a week, confidential and free of cost, the National Domestic Violence Hotline provides lifesaving tools and immediate support to enable victims to find safety and live lives free of abuse. Callers to the Hotline can expect experienced advocates to offer compassionate support, crisis intervention information and referral services in over 170 languages. Visitors to this site can find information about domestic violence, safety planning, local resources and ways to support the organization.

loveisrespect, 1.866.331.9474, text "loveis" to 22522, [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org)

Highly-trained peer advocates offer support, information and advocacy to young people who have questions or concerns about their dating relationships. They also provide information and support to concerned friends and family members, teachers, counselors, service providers and members of law enforcement. Free and confidential phone, live chat and texting services are available. A project of the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Women's Law, [womenslaw.org](http://womenslaw.org)

A project of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, providing state-specific legal information and support to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Joyful Heart Foundation, [joyfulheartfoundation.org](http://joyfulheartfoundation.org)

A national organization dedicated to healing, educating and empowering survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse, and to shedding light into the darkness that surrounds these issues.

## Book List

***To Be An Anchor in the Storm: A Guide for Families and Friends of Abused Women***

– Susan Brewster

***Family and Friends' Guide to Domestic Violence: How to Listen, Talk and Take Action When Someone You Care About is Being Abused***

– Weiss, Elaine.

***Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men***

– Lundy Bancroft

***The Batterer As a Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics***

– Lundy Bancroft and Jay Silverman

