



how  
to help  
someone in  
an abusive  
relationship



# Friends & Family Guide



# Everyone deserves a healthy relationship.

Do you know someone who is being hurt? Or someone who is causing harm? Are you worried about what might be happening in a loved one's relationship? You are not alone—we are here to help!

This guide will help you support someone who is struggling in their relationship—and to take care of yourself while you're doing it. People are more likely to turn to their community (friends, family, you) than they are to professionals.

Survivors tell us that what matters most is having someone in their life who is there for them, without judgment, to bounce ideas off, get support, and lean on when things are tough. You can be that person. These tips and tools will help you get started.



# What are we talking about when we talk about abuse?

Abuse is a pattern of behavior that one person uses to gain power and control over the other.

These behaviors can include:

- isolation
- emotional abuse
- controlling the finances
- physical and sexual assault

The fundamental harm of abuse is a loss of autonomy. Autonomy means independence and freedom from external control. Everyone should be free to make their own choices in relationships. As friends and family who want to help, we can work to return those choices that have been restricted or taken away by abuse.



# How do I know if it is abuse or just a bad relationship?

In some ways, it doesn't matter if it's abuse or not—if someone is being hurt or controlled, they deserve better. We want everyone to be in a healthy relationship, and people may need support to get there. The strategies in this guide can help in either case.

But it is helpful to know if it is abusive for a couple of reasons:

1. You might need some help to support the person from a local domestic violence or sexual assault program.
2. You will need different strategies to address safety concerns.

People who are abusive to their partners believe that:

- they have a right to control their partner,
- their bad behavior is justified, and
- their partner is to blame for all the problems in the relationship.

You can talk with an advocate anytime (you don't have to be in crisis) to sort out how to help someone who is in an abusive relationship. You can call, chat, or text the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or reach out to your local domestic violence or sexual assault program to get support.



# What can I do to support someone experiencing abuse?

These three strategies show your willingness to show up and support someone.

You don't need to be an expert or have all the answers. Just being there and available is what people have told us helps most.



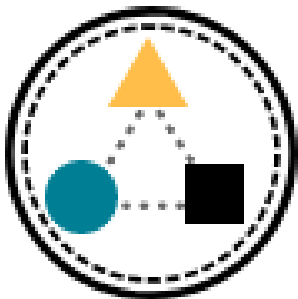
ask a question

*"How's it going?" is powerful*



listen up

*Being heard helps*



stay connected

*What makes something better is connection*



Asking: "How's it going?"—and really caring about the answer—is powerful.

Some other possible questions to ask:

- What is your biggest concern?
- What are you most worried about?
- What do you need or want?
- What do you need from your community?
- How can I help?
- What is life like with [partner's name]?
- Is this relationship energizing or draining for you?
- Do you get to do the things you like to do?
- What happens if you disagree?
- What does arguing look like in your relationship?
- How do you both apologize to each other?

**friends can**  

---

**organize,  
discern,  
distill,**  

---

**thoughts,  
ideas, and  
priorities**



Really listen.

Listen without having your own agenda.

Being heard helps. Acknowledgment makes all the difference.

When you're listening deeply to someone, you are not trying to get to your point of view, you are trying to hear their perspective.

You're also listening for what the person thinks about risks, priorities, and concerns.

Bottom line: you are listening to hear what the person is experiencing, what they want, and how you can help.

**Things to say to people who have experienced harm:**

<b>I believe you.</b>	<b>I am so sorry this is happening to you.</b>	<b>Thank you for sharing this.</b>
<b>I don't even know what to say right now, but I am so glad you told me.</b>	<b>I am just so sorry you've experienced all of this.</b>	<b>Thank you for telling me.</b>
<b>It's not your fault.</b>	<b>You are not alone.</b>	<b>You get to choose what you do next.</b>



# Starting to feel worried?

If you're hearing something (they're isolated, being monitored or stalked, the person has a weapon) that makes you concerned they are in immediate danger, you (or both of you together) can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline to come up with a plan to stay as safe as possible.

Some particularly risky stuff to listen for:



access to firearms



suicide threats



prior strangulation

The National Domestic Violence  
**HOTLINE**  
1.800.799.SAFE (7233) • 1.800.787.3224 (TTY)

If any of these are present, be sure to reach out to a domestic violence advocate for help and support.





It can take a long time for things to get better, and it can be difficult to hang in there through it all. But staying connected is one of the most helpful things you can do. When someone is isolated, the abuser has far more power and control over their lives. You do not need to know all the answers or agree with every decision to be helpful. Instead, consistently show up, take on what you can, and ask for help with things that are difficult for you.

Connection also means no ultimatums. We've learned that tough love is not what folks need. You might be the only person they are reaching out to. If you give them an ultimatum that they can't live up to, they won't have anyone left. Instead, try to leave the door open to make it easy to keep coming back to you.

Even if the person you're concerned about doesn't reach out, you can be the one to reach out. This takes some of the power away from the abuser and can be a lifeline for your loved one. It might be that they aren't calling or reaching out because they can't, not because they don't want to or don't need support.

That said, we know that it's really hard to stay connected when you're worried and scared and nothing seems to be changing. It is not helpful to sacrifice your own well-being in the hopes of helping someone else.

If you need help, talk to your trusted people and reach out to experts. If you need to take a break, take it.



# Feeling nervous about what might come up?

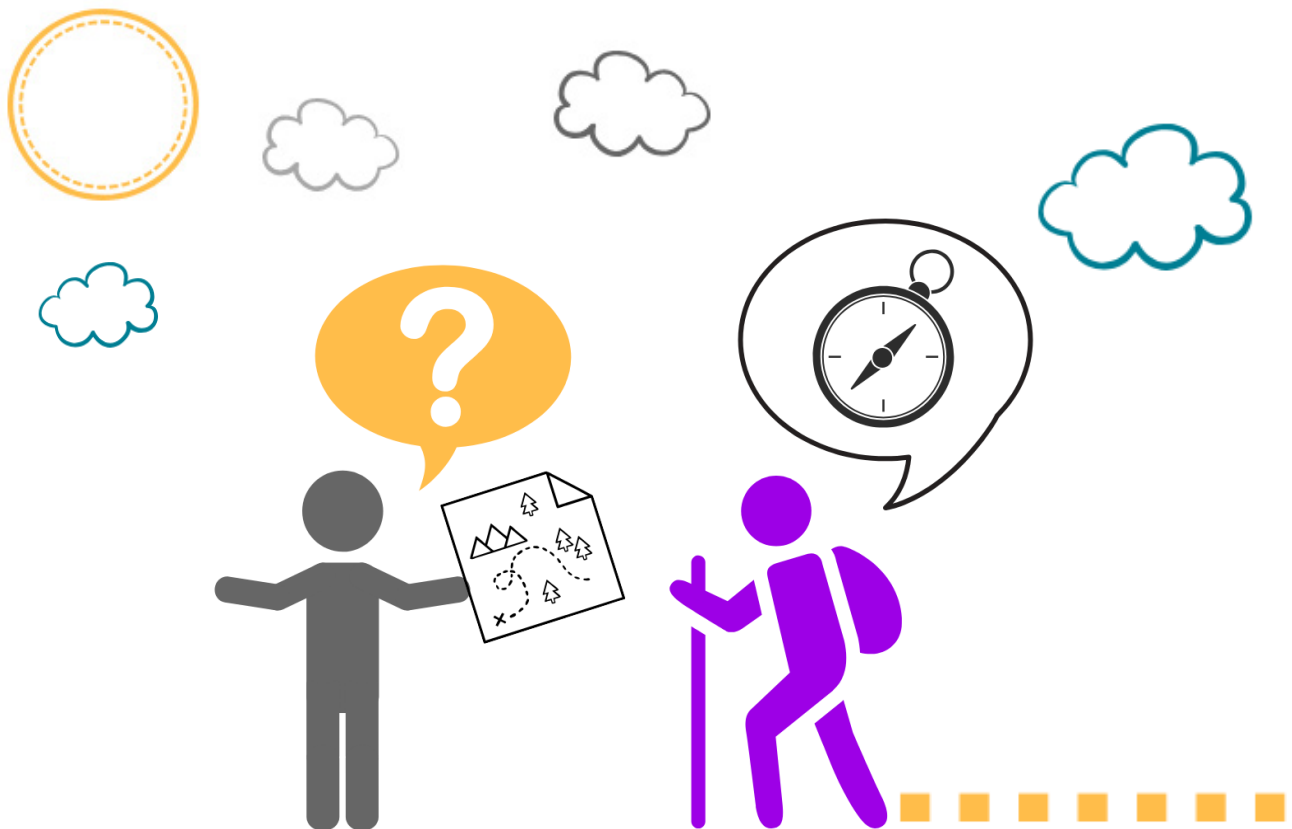
Get through those awkward moments with these tips.

**Conversation going nowhere?** When you're getting silence or one-word answers, it's best to back off and try again a different day. Just asking questions lets people know you are someone they can turn to when they are ready.

**Don't know the answer?** Try saying: "Honestly, I don't know. Let me do some research and then we can talk more tomorrow."

**Totally freaked out by what you just heard?** Let them know you need a little time: "I'm really glad you're talking to me. I want to keep talking, but it would help me to have some time to think about all this. Can we check in again another time?"

**Not feeling great about your own relationship?** You don't need to have it all figured out to support someone else. Remember, you can always reach out to domestic violence advocates and think about who might be open to listening to you, even if they've never asked you about your relationship.



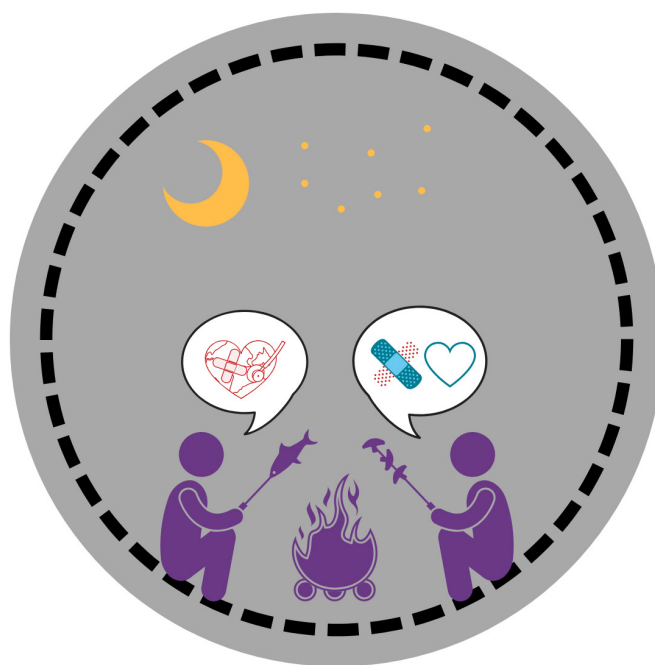
# How do I talk to someone about their abusive behavior?

No one wants to imagine that someone they care about is hurting another person. If there is one thing that we've learned from the #MeToo movement and from our work with survivors, it's that abuse, coercion, and control are incredibly common and that people who cause harm can be the same people we love and care about. This can be hard to reconcile, but what we've learned is that people are not just one thing.

People who are abusive are not only made up of their bad deeds, just as non-abusive people are not only comprised of the good stuff. Acknowledging this is not easy, but it can help you understand how someone you care about can do harmful things and still be worthy of love and support, and believe that they can change and help repair the damage. And the reality is, if we are going to end domestic and sexual violence, we must figure out how to talk to people who cause harm, too.

Looking for tangible things to say to someone who is harming their partner? We created conversation cards to help you talk with a person in your life who is struggling in their relationship, who isn't their best self, and who has the will to change. You can find this tool at [wscadv.org/resources/how-your-relationship-conversation-cards/](http://wscadv.org/resources/how-your-relationship-conversation-cards/).

Feeling uneasy about reaching out to someone who has hurt someone else? Ask yourself: How would you want to be treated if you caused harm? You can use the same advice we gave earlier on supporting someone in an abusive relationship: ask a question, listen up, and stay connected. Many of these strategies are also helpful for conversations with someone who has caused harm.



# Supporting teens to have healthy relationships

Chatting about love with people you love is always a good idea. We have some helpful resources to help you get that conversation started. You can use our *How's Your Relationship?* conversation cards and our *Love Like This* materials to unwind and talk. You can find these tools at [wscadv.org/resources/how-s-your-relationship-conversation-cards/](http://wscadv.org/resources/how-s-your-relationship-conversation-cards/) and [wscadv.org/resources/love-like-this/](http://wscadv.org/resources/love-like-this/). And teens are human too, so asking questions, listening up, and staying connected holds true for teens too.

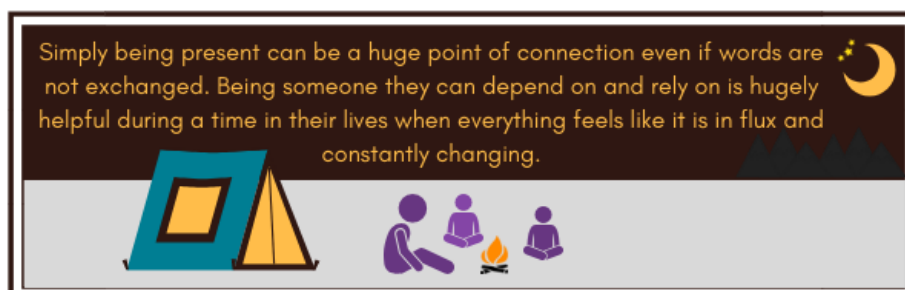
When you fall in love for the first time, or second, or gazillionth, everything feels possible. Your opportunities expand, your world broadens. You get to try new foods because you're dating someone from a different culture. You get to celebrate in different ways because every family does things a bit differently. You meet new people because your circle of friends gets bigger. In a word, everything feels roomy.

When you're in an unhealthy relationship, things don't feel quite as possible. Your world tends to narrow, your opportunities to hang out with people or do things you used to enjoy decrease. The person you're dating doesn't like your friends, so you stop hanging out with them. You stop spending time on your hobbies because the person you're dating wants to spend all their time with you. You start wondering what you should wear because the person you're dating always comments on your outfits. Things feel squished.

Talking to your teenager about how their relationship makes them feel can be a window into seeing if things are healthy or unhealthy. We want young people to feel like the world is wide open to them. Their relationship should help that, not hinder it. You can use our *Love Like This* images to help guide your conversations.

Staying connected at a time when it is literally your teen's job to separate from you can feel difficult and overwhelming. And yet, it really is the most critical thing you can do. Simply being present can be a huge point of connection even if words are not exchanged. Being someone they can depend on and rely on is hugely helpful during a time in their lives when everything feels like it is in flux and constantly changing.

There is a special hotline devoted to supporting teens called Love is Respect. You or your teen can reach out by calling 1-866-331-9474, texting LOVEIS to 22522, or chatting online at [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org).



# Taking care of yourself

Helping other people with their relationships shouldn't take over your life. You need people to support your well-being too. You can call your local domestic violence program—they can answer any questions you might have and be a sounding board if you're feeling challenged.

You also don't need to be a victim to get support from the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And remember: just letting someone know that you'll be there if and when they want to talk is a huge thing.

If you're feeling overwhelmed or anxious, try this 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise: Find five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can smell, two things you can hear, and one thing you can taste. Connecting to your senses can help settle your mind.



# Thank you!

You can do it!

While everyone has a role to play in ending domestic and sexual violence, the good news is that you don't have to be an expert to help. It doesn't take much to make an impact. Your continued presence, connection, and support are what people need to get safer and thrive.

Know that you are appreciated and that there is help available for you if and when you need it.

You've got what you need: ask a question, listen up, and stay connected.



# Resources

## Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence

[wscadv.org/get-help-now/](http://wscadv.org/get-help-now/)

## Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs

[wcsap.org/help/csap-by-city/](http://wcsap.org/help/csap-by-city/)

## Love is Respect

[loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org)

## The National Domestic Violence Hotline

[thehotline.org](http://thehotline.org)

Many people have supported our thinking and vision for this work. We'd like to particularly acknowledge and appreciate the advocates across Washington State for their tireless work to help survivors towards safety and freedom, parenting expert Lisa Damour of *The New York Times*, the NW Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse's *It Takes a Village People*, and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective whose work has inspired and influenced our thinking.

Thank you to the Horizons Foundation for their support of the creation of this guide.

This document was supported by funding from the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration. The points of view presented in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.

