

# HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO IS LIVING WITH VIOLENCE



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Most people will turn to a relative, friend or co-worker before asking for help from formal supports. 74% of Albertans report knowing someone who has been or is being abused.

Do you know someone who is living with violence? Maybe they have talked to you about it and you aren't sure how you can help them? It can be very difficult to know how to support someone you care about when they are experiencing violence. This information booklet can help you recognize family violence and abuse in all its forms, show you ways to offer support to people who are experiencing violence, and explain barriers that can affect a person's decision to stay in or leave a violent relationship.

## **Recognize**

Family Violence and abuse in all its forms.

## **Respond**

Offer support to people who are experiencing violence.

## **Understand**

Barriers that can affect a person's decision to stay in or leave a violent relationship.

## HOW INVOLVED SHOULD I GET? HOW DO I HELP SOMEONE?

Do you know someone who is living with violence? Maybe they have talked to you about it and you aren't sure how you can help them? It can be very difficult to know how to support someone you care about when they are experiencing violence. There could be different reasons why you might be hesitant to get involved in someone's personal situation. You might feel like it is none of your business. You may not know what to say to your friend, family member, co-worker, etc. You may think it's not very serious or that the issue will resolve on its own. What if they aren't being abused and you offend them by offering help?

### Some things to consider about getting involved:

- Family violence and abuse is everyone's issue. It is happening in our community. If we want to end violence, our entire community has a role to play.
- Knowing what to say is not as important as being there as a support. Saying that you care and that you're concerned for them is a good start.
- It's important not to give advice about what your friend "should" do or what you think they "have" to do. It's important to be non-judgmental and supportive rather than advice-giving.
- There is a possibility that what your friend has told you about is just the tip of the iceberg. There could be more serious violence happening that you are not aware of.
- Abuse escalates over time and will not go away on its own.
- Being sensitive and asking a friend if they are being hurt rarely leads to offence. It shows your friend that you care and are there to help. If they are offended you can apologize and say you're here for them if they ever need you in the future.

Family violence is any violence that occurs in the family unit against another member of the family. It includes but is not limited to violence by one partner against another, by a parent against a child, by a child against a parent, between brothers and sisters, grandparents or other family members.

It is important to offer support in a compassionate, non-judgmental way. People who are experiencing abuse need to feel believed and supported by those around them. How you respond to their disclosure of abuse will either increase or decrease their likelihood of telling someone else.



# TYPES OF ABUSE

## **Emotional/Psychological Abuse:**

- Name calling, belittling, constant criticism
- Screaming, putting down family & friends, mocking, isolating from family & friends
- Saying she/he is a bad parent, controlling who she/he can see or talk to, threatening suicide, threatening to take the kids if she/he leaves
- Using jealousy to control her/his activities or movements
- Abusing/neglecting the kids and not letting her/him intervene to help the kids
- Making rules about who she/he can talk to, changing the rules without telling her/him
- Threatening to spread rumours about her/him if they don't do what the abuser asks
- Reminders of past abuse (ex. "remember what happened last time you didn't listen")

## **Physical Abuse:**

- Slapping, hitting, punching, kicking, biting, pushing, shoving, breaking bones, bruising, cuts, scratching, etc....
- Destroying furniture or personal items, hurting others she/he loves (children, pets, family, etc.)
- Driving recklessly
- Choking, strangling, cutting off air supply
- Restraining her/him from leaving
- Threatening with a weapon (gun, knife or other object)

It's important to remember that the types of abuse can overlap and people may be experiencing more than one type of abuse at a time.

## **Financial Abuse:**

- Stopping her/him from making money, not allowing her/him to spend money
- Forcing her/him to hand over money, spending money on drugs/alcohol or other items instead of rent, bills, food
- Making a person account for all money spent
- Racking up debt in her/his name
- Not allowing access to the bank account

## **Cultural/Spiritual Abuse:**

- Ridiculing a person's culture or beliefs or not allowing a person to practice their religion
- Using scripture or religion as a way to justify abuse or violence
- Forcing someone to engage in spiritual practices that are not their beliefs

## **Sexual Abuse:**

- Pressuring or harassing someone to have sex by using guilt, force or intimidation, forced sex
- Threatening to hurt someone if they don't want to have sex
- Threatening to "out" someone as gay or bisexual
- Forcing someone to have sex with other people, animals or objects
- Forcing someone to have sex for money or pornography, threatening to expose intimate details or photos
- Having sex with someone while they are asleep or unconscious

# BARRIERS TO LEAVING

There are many reasons why people may stay in or return to relationships in which they are experiencing abuse. As a society, we often focus on why someone stays rather than why a person is abusive. The barriers people face are very real and can depend on the relationship dynamics. Whether the victim is female, male or LGBTQ will also change what types of barriers the victim may face. We need to consider that the abusive person plays a role in creating barriers for the victim.

## The following are a few examples of why a person may not leave an abusive situation:

### Fear

- Fear of losing children to the abusive partner
- Fear that the abusive partner will harm them or their children if they leave
- Fear of being publicly “outed” if they are LGBTQ
- Fear that the courts will not handle child custody fairly

### Guilt

- Doesn’t want to be the one who “breaks up” the family
- Victims may feel a sense of obligation to partner
- May feel guilt, shame, embarrassment about the situation
- Consistently are told the abuse is their fault; believe they deserve it

### Social

- Societal beliefs that normalize violence
- Societal beliefs about what men should be, not allowed to be victims
- Social responses to victims are often negative and/or judgmental

### Lack of Support

- Victims may be afraid to tell anyone
- Victims are often isolated from friends/family, feel like they have no support
- Unaware of supports available
- LGBTQ people may not think there is help available for LGBTQ people

### Hope and Love

- People around the victim may not help or know how to help them
- They may still love the abusive person: the kids may still love the person
- Often they just want the abuse to stop; the relationship did not begin with abuse



*\*Adapted from Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter*



# THE PRINCIPLES OF SUPPORTING A VICTIM

1. **Acknowledge the violence.** When the person is talking about the violence, it is important to listen carefully and do your best to appreciate their experience and point of view. Most people find it helpful when others acknowledge the abuse and do not try to minimize or offer advice.
2. **Be clear that the person who committed the violence is responsible for their actions, not the victim.** At the same time, be careful about making negative comments about the person who used abusive behavior, especially if that person is a spouse. Uninvited criticism can suggest the victim is wrong or stupid for being with that spouse.
3. **Acknowledge the victim's resistance to the violence.** Victims always resist violence, although they often conceal their own resistance to avoid further violence from the person who chooses to use abusive behavior. Within each history of violence and abuse, there is a history of overt or covert resistance. Victims appreciate it when others notice what they did to stop or escape the violence, to protect their children or others, to stand up for their dignity.
4. **Challenge victim-blaming messages.** Many victims are blamed for the abuse; for example, told they are damaged or sick because they are with an abusive partner. They might be told that they are not strong enough or that they picked an abusive partner because they had an abusive childhood. But by listening carefully, it becomes clear that the victim has resisted the violence as best they could, even if they could not make it stop.
5. **Respect the person's choices.** Remember that you probably do not have all the facts. Although the person who committed the violence always has the choice to stop, the victim may be trapped and facing very challenging circumstances and will need support to follow their own best instincts. You can give the person the space to evaluate their circumstances and make their own decision.
6. **Tell it like it is.** Words are often used to hide facts, even by experts. Violence by one person against another is often called a "fight" or "argument" or "conflict", as though both people acted wrongly. But an assault or a beating is not a "domestic dispute". And a rape is not "sex". Try to use words accurately and sensitively, to acknowledge the facts and to show you are trying to understand the victim's point of view.

## RESPONDING TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE ABUSIVE BEHAVIOURS

You may not be sure if you should talk to the abusive person on behalf of the victim. Here are some guidelines to help you decide if talking to the abusive person is the best course of action.

- Remember that the person who is abusive is responsible for that behavior. They are the only ones who can change that behavior and help keep the victim safe.
- If you decide to talk to the abusive individual, do not mention that the victim has disclosed abuse to you. Only discuss incidents that you have witnessed personally and explain your concerns. Listen to your instincts. If you don't feel safe enough to talk to the person then do not do that. Talking to the abusive person when you don't feel it is safe could put you and the victim at risk.
- Always consider your safety when thinking about talking to an individual about abusive behavior.
- If you witness a physical assault, do not intervene. Call 911 and document what you witness.
- Witnessing violence can be upsetting. If you witness violence, you can call our 24 hour helpline at 403-529-1091 to talk to staff about the particular situation you have witnessed. Each situation is different and family violence is complex; it is important for you to access supports that you may need as well.



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# SAFETY PLANNING

Our staff is able to safety plan with all members of a family. The abusive person is the only person who can guarantee the safety of a partner/family by choosing not to use abusive or violent behavior. The victims of abuse know their partner best and have likely safety planned without realizing they are doing so. Our staff encourages victims to use their instincts when completing a safety plan. What works for one person may not work for another. Some people may need extensive physical safety planning and some may need emotional safety planning. Safety planning is not a one size fits all approach.

**To talk to staff about safety planning,  
please contact our 24 hour helpline at 403-529-1091.**

## **Some individuals have found the following helpful:**

- If you are in danger, call 911.
- If you need to be able to leave quickly consider keeping a “go bag” in a safe place. This bag should have some money, identification, health cards and copies of financial or other important documents. None of these are essential if you need to leave without them. Your safety is most important.
- If able, keep a charged cell phone on you at all times. Turn off your GPS locator on your phone if you suspect your abuser will be monitoring your whereabouts.
- It can be helpful if you let a neighbor, co-worker or relative know to call 911 if they feel something is suspicious. If they have your permission ahead of time, they won't wait until it's too late to call.
- It can be very dangerous to tell the abusive person that you are leaving. If you need help safety planning in order to leave please call our 24 hour helpline at 403-529-1091.



**Safety starts with awareness.  
Awareness starts with you.  
-Bernie Inman**



# HOW WE CAN HELP

## **24 Hour Help Line**

Crisis support, safety planning, and information is available to callers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

## **Phoenix Safe House**

### **Emergency Shelter**

The emergency shelter provides safe and secure shelter, basic necessities, referral services, safety planning, and supports to assist returning to community living.

## **Musasa House**

### **Second Stage Shelter**

Musasa provides long-term (up to one year), safe accommodation and accompanying support services for individuals and families who have experienced family violence. We provide a secure residence and programs that provide the ability for individuals and families to heal and gain stability.

## **Housing First**

In partnership with Medicine Hat Community Housing Society, we provide a Housing First program to homeless individuals and families. Our expertise in the field of family violence allows us to address the immediate concern for safety while providing case management that enables participants to move into and maintain safe and stable housing.

## **Outreach Programs**

Outreach workers provide services for individuals affected by family violence who need support and information. Individuals learn about family violence and are supported to access services in their community.

## **Safe Families Intervention Team (SFIT)**

SFIT is a partnership with Medicine Hat Police Services where Outreach Workers and Police Officers collaborate to provide a coordinated, effective and consistent response to families in need of intervention and community referrals.

## **Child Support Programs**

The Children's Program is available for children and youth who have experienced and/or witnessed family violence. Support and education are offered to children and their parents(s) through groups, one to one or family sessions and summer programs.

## **Support Groups**

Groups are available for men, women, children and youth who have been impacted by family violence.

## **Community Education and Awareness**

Outreach Workers provide information, education and workshops on family violence to community agencies, schools, businesses, service organizations, and the general public.



**Family Violence is an abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency. It always involves someone using their power over another person in a way that is hurtful. This abuse takes many forms including psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, financial, neglect, abandonment, injury to pets, destruction of property and homicide. Family violence is not dependent on income and educational levels; gender or sexuality; or religious, racial and cultural groups.**

As a community, we can change how we support victims of family violence. When we come together as a community and understand how family violence affects the individuals involved, we are better able to support those who need it. Whether they are family members, friends, co-workers or acquaintances; when we gain a better understanding of an issue we are more able to offer support. It is only with the compassion, understanding and commitment of our community that we can continue this drive of restoring dignity and respect to families impacted by violence.



**A kind gesture can reach a wound that only compassion can heal.**  
*-Steve Maraboli*

**Call our 24 hour help line 403-529-1091 or 1-800-661-7949**  
**Follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram for more information.**  
**[www.mhwss.ca](http://www.mhwss.ca)**

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