

Concerned Family and Friends – What Can I do?

Abusive relationships are not just exclusive to partners, 'Domestic abuse' is a term used to describe abuse from one partner towards another, even if they have separated but also from one adult family member towards another, such as grown-up child towards a carer giver. Yet, as the person outside of the relationship; it can be hard to know exactly how to identify abusive behaviours and knowing whether you should be concerned. Sadly, those who experience abuse often try their best to conceal what is happening due to fear of the repercussions, fear of not being believed, to protect loved ones or the fact they do not realise they are experiencing domestic abuse.

Abusive, controlling or coercive acts towards a partner or family member is against the law.

We all have a right to live free from abuse and violence but sometimes people just need help to realise that the way they are being treated is not okay and that they have the right to live without feeling scared, intimidated or having their freedom restricted by a partner or a family member. There are positive ways in which those around the person, whom is experiencing abuse, can make a difference to their situation. Even though you may not know the full extent of what is happening, you may have concerns about the relationship and it is important not to ignore these worries.

Trust your instincts and if something does not feel right, it properly is not!

All abusive relationships are different and it is not possible to describe all situations and signs. It is important to remember that abusers can sometimes act differently around others, to not raise suspicion and to further isolate, delude and dominate their victim. Domestic abuse is not a one of incident; it is a repeated occurrence of acts of control and abuse over another. Some common signs are:

- behavioural change (becoming distant, introverted or in a state of alertness)
- emotional change (decrease in confidence, making excuses for partner/relative or change in vocabulary – being negative towards self)
- physical change (change in weight, looking unkempt or bruising/marks on body).

It can be hard, as someone close to the person experiencing abuse, not to try to 'rescue' them, to defend them or to even confront the abuser. This is a natural response, as you care about the person, it hurts to see them being mistreated and you may feel insecure about what are the 'right' steps to take. As hard as it, this maybe to disgust, ultimately, the person who is experiencing abuse must decide for themselves whether or not they wish to remain in the relationship. If they do decide to leave, only they can decide the safest way to do so.

They may not be in a good headspace to recognise or acknowledge that they are in an abusive relationship. So, patience is a must, as supporting someone whom is in an abusive relationship, is a gradual process. Those who experience abuse, may find it hard to talk about it or they may not even be aware that what they are experiencing is abuse. You do not need to have all the answers, be open-minded, actively listen and no matter how hard it maybe, withhold offering your opinions about the relationship or the abuser, as this may put unhelpful barriers in place and abruptly bring the conversation to an end.

It is easier for the person who has experienced abuse if you approach them in a way that shows your humanity and worry. Try at first to avoid the labels of domestic abuse or violence, as a lot of people

struggle to identify with this, rather ask the person how things are in their relationship, or reference things you have perceived in the behaviour of the person or the actions of the abuser.

"I've worried about you...you seem different, a bit down, is everything okay?"

I am here to listen'

Supporting someone who is or has experienced an abusive relationship can affect how you feel, how you preserve others, your sense of safety and how you see the world, so it is completely normal to feel a whole range of emotions about the situation. Domestic abuse can make a person feel isolated, alone and confused. Make sure to take care of yourself as well, as you too will be impacted. Let them know that you are there for them, this above anything else, will be priceless for that person, maybe not at that time but certainly in the future. Ensure that you are safe in whatever steps you decide to take with them and that the person too is in a safe place to talk (if you text or call the victim, the abuser may have access to their phone, so please mindful of this). Many confidential specialist services out there can provide professional guidance and support; don't be afraid to reach out!