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JUNE 2011



The Exact Words That Could HELP A FRIEND

More than half of all young women we surveyed have experienced abusive behavior in a relationship. That means someone you know is probably a victim—and “simply saying, ‘I just want to be there for you; how can I help?’ can get the conversation started,” suggests Esta Soler, president of Futures Without Violence. If you’re still unsure, try these scripts:

▶▶▶ **If you suspect she’s being abused, and you’re approaching her for the first time:** Don’t focus on what a loser he is; in our survey, the top reason women stayed with an abusive partner was that they still loved him, so dismissing that love won’t help. Instead, start with how awesome *she* is. “The victim feels anger from her partner already,” says Miriam Ehrensaft, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. “If she feels it from you, too, she’s less likely to hear what you have to say.” (Not sure if it’s abuse? Go to glamour.com/go/tell-somebody for danger signs.)

WHAT NOT TO SAY: “He’s such a jerk! How can you stay with him?”

INSTEAD, TRY: “No relationship is perfect, and I know you love him. But I’ve noticed he doesn’t always treat you well, and I’m concerned about you.”

▶▶▶ **If she says her boyfriend isn’t abusive, or if she defends him:** Hard as it is, try to listen. “It’s much more powerful to ask questions than to lecture,” says Casey Gwinn, president of the National Family Justice Center Alliance and coauthor of *Dream Big*. For example, does she feel differently now than before the relationship?

WHAT NOT TO SAY: “Don’t you see how he’s brainwashed you?”

INSTEAD, TRY: “I don’t want to talk about him. I want to talk about you.”

▶▶▶ **If she leaves but then goes back to him:** Be patient. Trying to force her to break up with him for good means you’re taking control—and that’s what her boyfriend is doing. And know that it can take seven to nine tries before a woman leaves an abusive partner for good, says Diane Lass, Ph.D., who treats domestic violence victims.

WHAT NOT TO SAY: “If you go back to him one more time, I’m done!”

INSTEAD, TRY: “I’ll always be here for you when you need me.”

▶▶▶ **If you feel she’s in immediate danger:** If he’s physically hurt her or threatened to kill her, experts urge you to call the police—yes, even if she objects. “You may think, I’ll risk losing her as a friend, but it’s better to do that and keep her alive,” says Jill Murray, a psychotherapist who has testified before Congress on dating violence issues. “You can tell her, ‘What he’s doing is illegal. This is not my rule; this is the law.’”

▶▶▶ **If she’s ready to get out:** Call a hotline (like 800-799-SAFE) and tell a trained advocate that you have a friend who’s being abused. Or, if there’s one in your area, take her to a Family Justice Center for counseling, legal and other help. Also, write down any abusive episodes you witness or hear about, and tell your friend to keep any texts or emails her abuser has sent as evidence, advises the Safety Net Project’s Cindy Southworth. Amilia Duchon-Voyles, executive director of SWAN, an advocacy program in Glendale, Arizona, agrees: “Most women don’t document abuse, so when they go to get an order of protection, there’s no history to refer to.” And if your friend has injuries at any point along the way, encourage her to see a doctor. Medical documentation is the best proof of abuse.

WHAT NOT TO SAY: “Good for you,” and nothing else.

INSTEAD, TRY: “Do you need a prepaid cell phone? Do you need me to drive you anywhere?” Offer to keep things she’ll need when she leaves: money, keys, phone numbers, clothes. And if she waffles and doesn’t dump him, don’t give up. It’s natural to crave a movie-finale scene in which she declares, “I’m outta here!”—but real life can be far more complicated. Says Rita Smith, executive director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: “Try not to have any expectation other than helping her achieve more safety.” —Liz Welch