

How to Support a Friend Who is in a Coercive or Controlling Relationship

When someone you care about tells you that they are being disrespected or that their choices are being taken away by a partner, family member, or caregiver, it can feel unsettling, confusing, frustrating, or scary. It is not uncommon to feel unsure of what to say or do when someone confides in you or when you recognize behavior that is abusive or controlling.

Below you will find some suggestions to consider if you are supporting someone who is being mistreated or if you want to raise the issue with a friend. Please note that this is a guide, not a script. Do what is natural for you, in your own words.

Use positive, validating language

- I believe/support you.
- I'm glad you told me.
- What your partner/caregiver is saying or doing to you isn't your fault.
- What your partner/caregiver is saying or doing to you is much more common than people think. You are not alone.
- There are resources available – people you can talk to or confidential hotlines you can call for support.

As you listen and support your friend

- Believe them.
- Listen non-judgmentally and without blaming or shaming them, even if you are confused about or disagree with some of their choices.
- Avoid trying to figure out how they might change their behavior to keep the person who is mistreating them happy. Abuse is never the fault of the person experiencing it.
- Offer support, but don't try to rescue your friend or tell them what they should do. If they are being told what to do by someone else (the person who is mistreating them), this can feel like more of the same rather than support, even if it's well-intended.
- Remind your friend that their partner, family member or caregiver is choosing to act this way – it is in no way your friend's fault.

- Encourage them to think about their options without pushing them toward a particular decision. Abusive behavior is rooted in power and control. It is important to empower your friend to be able to make their own decisions.

Raising the issue with a friend when you are concerned

- Ask gently about how the relationship is going.
- If you notice your friend's partner, family member, or caregiver teasing them in a mean way or otherwise embarrassing them, you can tell your friend that you didn't think it was funny or okay.
- If your friend tells you about things that don't sound okay to you, you can gently but clearly tell them that they deserve to be treated with respect.
- Focus on the behavior that you didn't think was okay rather than putting down your friend's partner, family member or caregiver.
- If your friend doesn't want to discuss it, let them know you're open to talking another time.

Some things to say or do if you are supporting a friend

- Be clear that you are there for them.
- Tell them that you understand that their situation is very difficult.

- Let them know that they don't deserve to be treated badly. No one "asks for it."
- Remind your friend of what you like about them and why you think they are pretty amazing.
- Continue to invite them to spend time with you or do things together even if they keep declining your offers or cancelling plans. Controlling people often isolate their partner and make it difficult for their partner or family member to maintain friendships and relationships.
- Encourage your friend to tell you more about the situation but avoid questions that start with "why." "Why" can imply fault and make people feel defensive, judged, or blamed.
- Let them know that you are concerned about their safety if that is the case.
- Remember that sometimes people who use abusive behaviors will monitor and/or respond to their partner's emails, texts, and social media.
- Help them identify people or organizations that could help. See the "**Programs that Can Help**" section for more information. Let them know they can call anonymously if they want.

Take care of yourself

- Supporting a friend who is in a difficult situation can be very stressful. It is okay to turn to other friends for support. Using a hypothetical situation may protect your friend's identity.
- If you feel like you and your friend are going in circles and you are starting to feel overwhelmed or frustrated, it's okay to take a step back. Let them know that if they want help with something specific or are in danger, they can still talk to you about it and that you still care a lot about them.
- Your safety is as important as your ability to support your friend. If you do not feel safe around the abusive individual, it is okay to only see your friend alone, without their partner, even if that makes it hard to see them. If that is the case, be clear that you will always be there to support your friend, even if you don't see them as often in person.
- **Remember that the help listed below is available to you, too. Feel free to reach out anonymously to one of the helplines/hotlines to talk about what's going on and figure out what you want to say and do.**

Programs That Can Help

**Jewish Family & Children's Service
Journey to Safety Program**
781-647-5327

The Second Step
617-965-3999

Newton-Wellesley Hospital
617-243-6521

REACH Beyond Domestic Violence
800-899-4000 available 24-7
Online Chat:
<https://reachma.org/online-chat/>

Boston Area Rape Crisis Center
800-841-8371 available 24-7