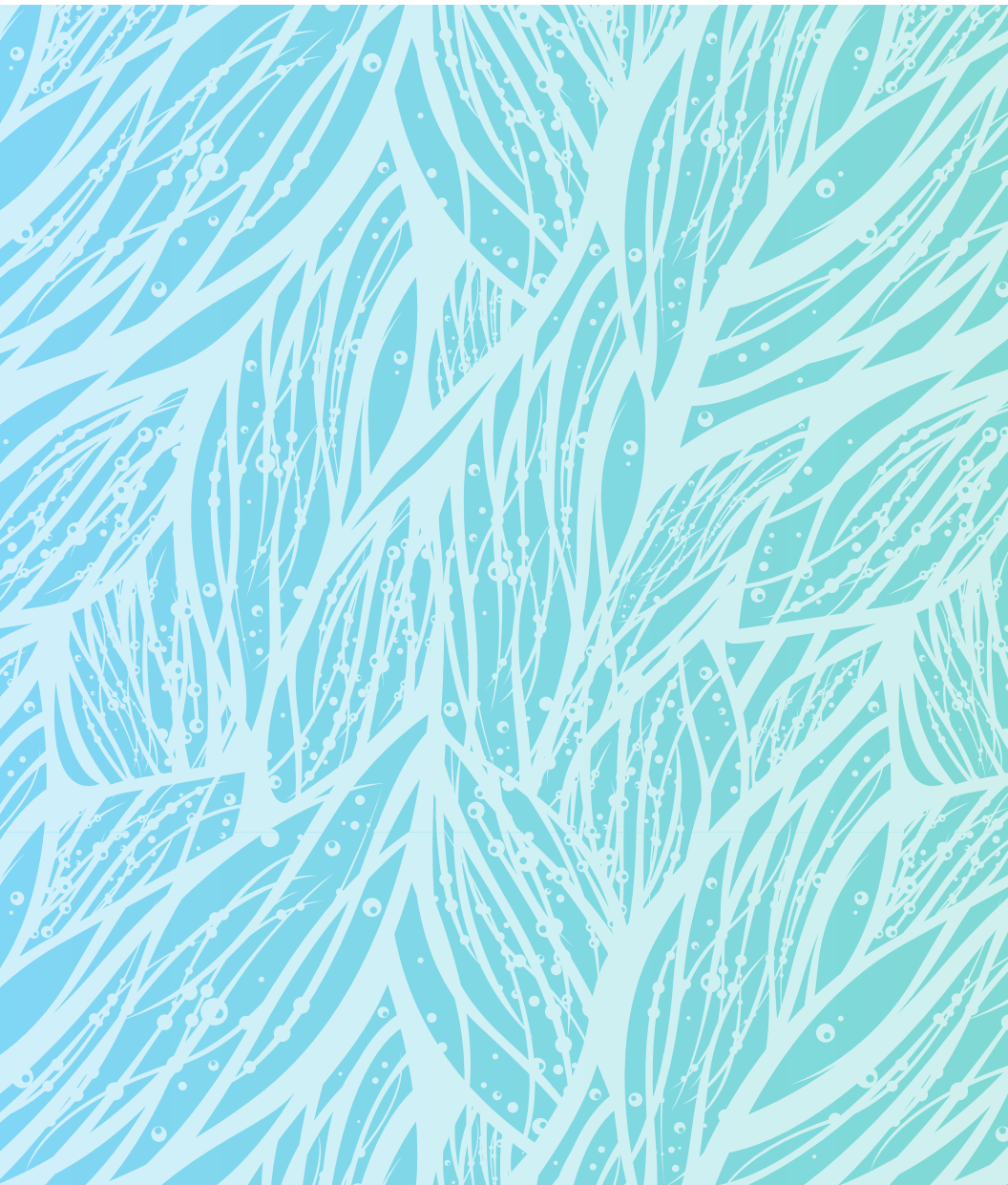
How Neighbours, Friends, Families, and Co-workers Can Help



There are steps you can take if you suspect someone you know is abusing their partner, or if someone you know is being abused. This section provides information and suggestions for neighbours, friends, families, and co-workers of people who are experiencing abuse. While this book talks about women who experience abuse, most of the information is true about anyone who experiences abuse.

See “Understanding Abuse,” starting on page 1, to learn about different forms of abuse.

Remember: it is against the law for children to be exposed to abuse. If you know of a child who may be experiencing or seeing abuse, you must report this to Child and Family Wellbeing.

Dealing with your thoughts and fears

If you think that someone is abusing their partner or that someone is being abused, you might want to help, but not know how. The first thing you can do is reflect on your own thoughts and fears about abuse.

Sometimes the abusive person feels ashamed about their behaviour. If you want to talk to them, you should assume that they would prefer to have a relationship without abuse.

Sometimes both partners are ashamed about the abuse. The shame might cause them to say the abuse is less serious than it really is, or even deny that it is happening.

Sometimes the abusive person is confused about who is responsible for their abusive behaviour. Sometimes they want to stop abusing their partner, but think that it is the abused partner's responsibility to stop it. Sometimes they say things like "If she disrespects me, then I will disrespect her," "She made me do it," or "She drove me to it." Remember, only the abusive partner is responsible for the abuse.

Sometimes women who have experienced abuse are also confused about who is responsible. They may blame themselves for their partner's behaviour. It is not the abused partner's fault. There is no excuse for abuse.

Often people who abuse are not abusive all the time. They can also be respectful and caring to their partners, family, and friends. People often think a person who is abusive could never act this way. It can be confusing to friends and family to learn that a person they know as loving and caring has been abusive toward their partner.

Friends and family may think the abuse can't be serious if someone stays with their partner. Read pages 61–63 to understand why women may stay with a person who abuses, and how difficult it can be for women to make changes. Many women love their partners and just want the abuse to stop. It may be helpful to read pages 121–126 about how to be a good support person.

Steps you can take

Learn about violence against women and others and the supports available. Reading this book is a good place to start. It is important to be supportive, but it is also important to get professional help if it is needed. It can be helpful to talk to a counsellor who works with these issues, especially for long-term support. You can contact a transition house in your area to talk to someone about how you can help. You can also text or call 211 to ask about resources in your area or visit ns.211.ca. You do not have to tell them your name. Call 211 to learn about these services.

RESOURCES

Neighbours, Friends, and Families is a public education and awareness program with a toll-free information line to help people learn about the signs of abuse and what can be done to prevent further abuse.

Call 1-855-225-0220, or visit women.novascotia.ca/womens-safety/offering-support/neighbours-friends-and-families for information about this program.

Let her know you are there for her

Asking someone if they are being abused can be very uncomfortable, but you only need to ask "Do you need to talk?" or say "I've been worried about you."

Never tell your friend or family member what to do. She has to make choices for herself. Telling her to leave will not help. You can make suggestions and ask her what she thinks. If you are unsure what she wants from you, ask.

Know that you are not responsible for her choices. What she does is her choice. Don't take the credit or the blame for her decisions.

Be a good listener

Being a good listener can be emotionally demanding. Details about abuse are often painful. You have to be balanced and stable yourself, and able to handle your friend or relative's stories and emotional stress. Your job is to be there for her, to just listen. By listening, you can help her work through what is happening and the impact it is having on her and her children. You can affirm that the abuse is not her fault.

Patience is essential when supporting someone who is being abused. Making changes is a process, not a single act: often it takes months, or even years. Your friend or relative may talk for a very long time before she acts to change or leave her relationship.

Help her make a safety plan if she wants one

Your friend or family member may need to plan an escape route, where she could go to in an emergency, and how she would get there.

See pages 46–48 for information on safety planning.

Encourage her to call police if she is being threatened or hurt. Officers are trained to handle abuse cases and have procedures they must follow. Some departments have Victim Services.

If she is not comfortable speaking to police, it might be helpful to talk with her about who she can call for help in an emergency.

See pages 34–35 of this book to find out what will happen if she or a neighbour calls the police.

Let her know help is available

Let your friend or family member know that she can get help and support from a counsellor, and that there are programs that can help her partner stop their abusive behaviour. The back of this book has lists of support agencies and programs. Call 211 to find services near you.

Go with her to appointments

Your support will mean a great deal, even if it is simply accompanying your friend or relative to appointments.

Talking to doctors, police, and lawyers can be a scary experience. So can attending court. Offer to go with her as a support person. Looking after her children or helping with transportation so she can go to appointments can also be a big help.

If she wants to leave, help her find a safe place to go.

Think carefully before you offer your home. Having a woman and her children live with you can be extremely stressful. Having good boundaries will help you help them in the best way you can.

Help your friend or relative connect with counsellors at a local shelter to discuss her options before you make any decisions. It may be useful to help her brainstorm places to stay, look for an apartment, or reach out to community groups that provide support.

Be aware of her needs

Your friend or relative may have specific needs. She may have experienced racism or homophobia or transphobia. She may have felt excluded and isolated in the past when thinking about getting help. This may make her reluctant to turn to particular organizations or people for support.

Read pages 16–27 to see if any of the information applies to your friend or family member. You may be able to help her find support from someone who understands her needs.

Dos and don'ts when offering support

You can help your friend or family member and her partner learn about what supports are available to them. You can listen and support both of them. You can give them information about abuse and organizations that can help.

At the same time, you cannot make decisions for them. You cannot assume you know what is best for them. You may think you know what is best for your friend or family member, her partner, and her children. However, it is up to your friend or family member to decide for herself what they want to do.

Don't blame your friend or family member for her partner's choice to abuse. Even if she has done things you don't agree with, she is not responsible for her partner's choices.

You can encourage your friend or family member to take responsibility for her own choices, but not her partner's choices. Many women say their friends or relatives offered practical support that helped them, but being blamed for their partner's choices made them feel worse.

Don't say "I told you so." Resist the urge to say "I knew this would happen." No one wants to hear that, and it isn't helpful.

Don't make judgmental statements. Many women say that they didn't tell someone about the abuse because they heard statements such as "I think some women like being controlled by a strong man," or "No one would ever get away with abusing me!"

Do take care of yourself. Be aware that your friend or relative's abuse may trigger memories of your own. If this happens, think about helping her find someone else to support her.

Do find a support person for yourself. Find someone you can talk to about your own feelings, but be careful not to share your friend's personal or private information.

Sometimes the abusive person will feel threatened by your conversations with the person experiencing the abuse. In these situations, it can be helpful to reach out to the abusive partner to find out how they might be supported as well. Many women want the abusive partner to have support even if they are no longer together in a relationship.

Call the police or make a safety plan if you are being threatened in any way.

Cut or tear along this line. Fold up and keep in a safe place.

Safety Alert

If you have experienced domestic abuse, know that you are not alone, and that there are a variety of supports available to you.

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

If you are seeking help or are looking for information about abuse, you can call the **Transition House Association of Nova Scotia 24-hour toll-free line**: 1-855-225-0220

Women's, Men's, and All Genders Helplines: 211

Help Lines

Crime Stoppers 1-800-222-8477

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

Mental Health Crisis Line
Serves all of Nova Scotia (24/7)1-888-429-8167

Avalon Sexual Assault Centre
Crisis Line 902-422-4240

Your local number:

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Quick connect

Community and social services 211
ns.211.ca

HealthLink 811
Hearing impaired 711
811.novascotia.ca

Women's, Men's, and All Genders Helplines:211

Mi'kmaw Family Healing Centres

Millbrook 902-756-3440
Toll-free: 1-800-565-4741

We'koqma'q 902-756-3440
Toll-free: 1-800-565-3440

Transition Houses and Shelters Crisis Lines

Amherst, Autumn House 902-667-1200

Antigonish, Naomi Society. 902-863-3807

Bridgewater, Harbour House 902-543-3999

Digby, Juniper House 902-742-8689
Toll-free: 1-800-266-4087

Halifax, Bryony House 902-422-7650

Kentville, Chrysalis House 902-679-1922
Toll-free: 1-800-264-8682

New Glasgow, Tearmann House . 902-752-0132
Toll-free: 1-800-831-0330

Port Hawkesbury, Leeside Transition House
. 902-625-2444
Toll-free: 1-800-565-3390

Shelburne, Juniper House 902-742-8689
Toll-free: 1-800-266-4087

Sydney, Cape Breton Transition House
. 902-539-2945
Toll-free: 1-800-563-2945

Truro, Third Place 902-893-3232
Toll-free: 1-800-565-4878

Yarmouth, Juniper House 902-742-8689
Toll-free: 1-800-266-4087

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