

The Aurora Center for Advocacy & Education

Concerned Persons/ Secondary Victims Relationship Violence

What is Relationship Violence?

Relationship violence is a pattern of behaviors that includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, economic, and/or psychological abuse used by adults or adolescents against (current or former) intimate partners, and sometimes against other family members and friends¹. Violence in relationships often occurs in private and not always easy for friends, family, and co-workers to detect. In some cases, the only evidence a concerned person will have is the survivor telling you they are being abused. It is important for you to believe the survivor and listen to what they have to say. This packet is intended to help you offer support and understand the dynamics of relationship violence.

What You Can Do to Help a Survivor of Relationship Violence

• **Be Supportive**

There are many ways to be supportive of an individual who discloses to you that they are in a violent relationship. The first step in supporting the survivor is to BELIEVE them and support their decision. An advocate from The Aurora Center can talk with you or the survivor about some options they have including restraining orders and seeking safe housing. Remember that the abuser took away the survivor's power and control. It is important that the survivor is allowed to be in control and make their own decisions (even if you do not like the decision they make). Supporting the wishes of the survivor will help them to begin healing.

• **Communicate**

Communicating the following messages with the survivor can increase their openness in disclosing to others in the future: "I believe you," "It's not your fault," "Help is available," "No one deserves to be treated in that way."

• **Listen**

As a friend or family member, it is important that you LISTEN to what the survivor tells you. Be non-judgmental and non-blaming. The abuser will often play the role of a "perfect partner" in public, therefore the abuse can be difficult for others to detect. The survivor is the only one who knows what the relationship is like. It is more important to listen than to talk or give advice.

• **Be Patient**

Be aware that the recovery from abuse can be slow and that there is not a set period of time for healing. Let the survivor proceed at their own pace and continue to be available for support throughout the process. Also, it may take a significant amount of time before the survivor feels empowered enough to leave the abusive relationship. Ending the relationship prematurely can result in going back to the relationship or starting a relationship with another abusive person. Be patient and let them know that you are there to offer support.

• **Know the Options**

Assist the survivor in getting the help they want and need. This may mean providing phone numbers, transportation, information, etc. Informing the survivor of their options can be important in their recovery. An advocate from The Aurora Center can offer options such as restraining orders, safety planning, and safe housing in detail and help answer any questions during the decision-making process.

• **Be Non-judgmental**

The manner in which you respond can increase or decrease the likelihood that the survivor will continue to seek assistance. Being judgmental often decreases one's desire to reach out to others and may hamper the survivor's healing. Your job as a concerned person is not to judge, or say what you would have done differently, but to be supportive and appropriately attentive to the survivor and to validate their feelings.

• **Help in Gaining Safety**

Asking the survivor questions like "What would help you feel safer?" can help reveal options for increasing safety. The survivor may need accompaniment when walking outside, someone to talk to in order to feel

emotionally safe, or to leave clothes, toiletries, and important documents at your residence in case of emergency. Advocates at The Aurora Center can also help you create a more specific safety plan for you and the survivor.

- **Self-Care**

Seek support for yourself. Become aware of your feelings about the trauma and the stress of supporting your loved one. It is best to avoid communicating your biases and negative emotions with the survivor. However, it may become important for you to speak with someone about how you are feeling. Staff and advocates at The Aurora Center are available to talk with you about your experiences in the role of a support person as well as your experiences of being a survivor.

What is NOT Helpful to a Survivor of Relationship Violence

- **Don't Blame**

Do not place blame on the survivor. The abuser is the only one to blame for the abuse. The survivor did not provoke the abuser nor are they to blame for refusing to leave the abuser. It is common for people in abusive relationships to have difficulty ending the relationship due to fear of repercussion, concern for the abuser, and fear of isolation.

- **Don't Make Assumptions**

This is a good general rule. Allow the survivor to tell you what happened, what they want, how they are feeling, or what they need. Do not assume that you can imagine the survivor's experience. Even if you have survived similar trauma, it is likely that your experience is less similar than you may assume. Also, don't assume that what was helpful for you will be helpful for them. Ask the survivor.

- **Don't Tell Them What to Do**

Instead, review options with the survivor and support their decisions. Allow them to take control over their own life.

- **Don't Put Yourself in Danger**

When the abuser finds out that the survivor is reaching out to friends for help, they may at times turn their anger towards these friends. Although it is very important for the survivor to be supported by family and friends, do not put your physical and emotional safety in jeopardy. If the abuser harms or threatens to harm you, you have the right to call 911. It may also be possible for you to obtain a restraining order against the abuser if you begin to feel threatened. Please contact The Aurora Center for more information about this option.

- **Don't Question or Criticize**

Don't criticize or question the survivor for not telling you sooner about the abuse. The very reason for not telling you was most likely fear of your rejection. Honor the survivor's timing, and thank them for disclosing this information to you. This is not the time to inquire about why they hadn't told you about this before. It does not mean that the survivor does not trust you or does not care about you.

- **Don't Gossip**

Do not break the survivor's trust by telling others about the abuse without permission. The survivor should have the control over who knows about their situation as well as when and with whom they disclose such information.

- **Don't Lose Patience**

Comments such as "Why haven't you left them yet?" or "Why are you putting up with this?" are not helpful. Remember that the empowerment process can be slow and lengthy and will vary with each individual. Such messages will only force the survivor to stuff their feelings and cause them to distance from others.



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