



Becoming an anchor in the storm

One of the reasons a battered woman is finally able to leave an abusive relationship is because she has someone who acts as her anchor in the storm.

“For a battered woman, having an anchor can mean the difference between helplessness and empowerment to work toward a solution,” says Susan Brewster, author of *“To be an Anchor in the Storm.”* She compares the role of friends and relatives of battered women to the anchor of a ship. The anchor:

- is made of the strongest steel which is able to withstand corrosive elements around it
- is grounded and unwavering against the strain of the tide
- stabilizes the ship, but does not control it
- does not rescue the ship or cut the line

It is not easy to be an anchor for someone who seeks your help one minute and then withdraws from you completely the next. However frustrating the situation becomes, the “anchor” needs to remain stable and available. It is tough to be the victim of abuse, and the more you can learn about the dynamics of domestic violence, the greater help you will be to her.

It may be maddening to offer to help get the victim out of the situation, only to have her become angry at you and strongly defend the abuser. You may feel she deserves what she gets if she goes back to the abuser.

If you have never been involved in domestic violence situations, you may think the victim is over-reacting. However, her life may depend on you understanding that she is probably allowing you to see only the tip of the iceberg. If she is in a physically abusive relationship, her life could be in danger!

If you feel confused and overwhelmed at what action to take, think about what the

victim feels as she looks at options which may turn her whole world upside down.

An “anchor” must overcome some of the obstacles and myths that block the way to helping a victim. Sometimes family members really don’t want to know the truth because they won’t know what to do with it. They might have to face certain realities and problems which are uncomfortable and shameful. Parents may feel at fault for their daughter’s choice of a mate.

Anger at the victim’s decision to stay with or return to her abuser is another obstacle to being an anchor. A victim may also be extremely needy and clingy, and it is frustrating to hear her story over and over again while she refuses to heed your advice and get help.

An anchor may also be repulsed by the victim and her unwillingness to stand up to her abuser. Before one can become an effective anchor, these negative feelings must be overcome.

Things an anchor should do:

- u Listen and ask questions.* You should assume that she is revealing only the tip of the iceberg, and the situation is usually much worse than she describes. Be prepared to hear her say the same things over and over, and let her know that you believe her. Ask probing questions that invite her to share more with you, but do not immediately use words like “abuse” or label her spouse as an “abuser.” She may not be ready to admit that she is the victim of domestic violence.
- u Educate yourself with the facts about domestic violence so you won’t alienate the victim or give her harmful advice.* Get in touch with experts in domestic violence issues, or read books on the subject to help you understand what she is experiencing and feeling, how the cycle of abuse works, and how to determine whether she is in

imminent danger and needs immediate intervention.

- u Learn the signs of abuse* (imbalance of power and control) so you will be aware of her situation even before she tells you what is really going on. Batterers often give themselves away by intimidating or verbally controlling their partners. A victim may also be isolated from friends and family. She may check with him often when she is away from him, and will not make even minor decisions without consulting him. She may put herself down and seem sad or depressed most of the time. If you see obvious signs of physical abuse, be aware that this is probably not the first time. Be aware of less obvious signs of physical abuse such as holes in walls, torn clothing, broken furniture, and financial control.

Things an anchor should *not* do:

- u Control the victim.* Offering to help the victim only if she leaves the abuser is another form of control. You may have good intentions, but your control will create distance and mistrust. The victim can be guided and advised about her options, but trying to force or control her further demoralizes her. Respect her right to make her own decisions.
- u Rescue the victim.* Unless she has asked you to intervene, rescuing a victim can result in making her feel criticized and treated like a child. A battered woman returns more often to her abuser when she has been rescued (without her total approval) by well-meaning friends and family members. A rescuer’s focus is on changing the victim. An anchor’s focus is on getting *themselves* into a position to help the victim when she is ready.

An anchor is one who hears, stays alert for non-verbal cues, and pro-actively educates herself to understand the dynamics of domestic violence. She helps the victim sort out the truth, look for realistic options, and encourages her in wise decision making.

Next issue: 12 Principles for being an anchor