

How to help an abused wife

When an abused woman reveals her life with you, you are just seeing the tip of the iceberg.

Although you might not be able to offer financial support, you can provide hope just by saying *"I believe you. I care about you. I will be here for you."*

In her book, "Broken and Battered," author Muriel Canfield instructs readers how to help someone who is experiencing domestic violence. Here's how you can help:

- **Listen to her story, at times asking questions that will help her define her situation.** Listen carefully for signs that she is in imminent danger or that she is feeling suicidal. Even if she has shared the same details with you before listen patiently each time she needs to talk.
- **Keep what you hear confidential.** You may be the only person she has ever trusted enough to tell. If you tell others, even with the best of intentions, word may get back to her husband and her safety could be compromised. If she can trust you with small details, she will eventually open up and tell you the rest of the story.
- **Validate her.** She needs someone to believe her and accept her word as credible. If you are a friend of both husband and wife, you can validate her without disparaging him by saying, "I believe what you have suffered is wrong." It is important to help her realize that the abuse (physical or emotional) is not a normal way of relating in a marriage.
- **Be supportive, but not directive.** Ask questions that get her to think, but don't tell her what to think. If she already lives with a controller, she will withdraw if you try to control her with your opinion of what she should do .
- **Don't blame her for not leaving her husband.** You don't know all

the ways she has already tried to stop the violence, nor the reasons she feels she needs to stay. There is no way for you to understand what she is going through, and a decision to leave an abusive relationship needs to be made without pressure from anyone else when the timing is right. You will put her at greater risk if you pressure her to leave before she has a safety plan in place. Encourage her to call you whenever she needs to talk, or to contact you in an emergency situation when she needs a place of refuge. Don't give up on her if she decides to stay.

- **Express concern for her safety if she is battered.** Many women protect their abusers, even when they are gravely injured. Let her know you are concerned and offer to help her work out a safety plan.
- **Inform her that physical abuse is a criminal act.** Offer to photograph her injuries and go with her to the police station to press charges. Help her understand that the best way to stop the cycle of abuse is to hold her husband accountable of his crime. If she refuses to go to the police, respect her decision but encourage her to talk to a domestic violence counselor at a local shelter or support group.
- **Assure her that God loves her and discuss her spiritual concerns.** She may have misguided ideas that it is her role to suffer or that she somehow deserves the abuse. She may experience guilt, and fear she is trapped because she doesn't believe in divorce. On the other hand, she may be filled with rage and thoughts of revenge. In either case, give her freedom to vent, and then share scriptures which deal with the issues that concern her.
- **Offer to discuss her situation with her whenever she wishes.** Put her in touch with people and

resources who can help. Offer to go with her to the doctor, police, pastor, attorney, or court when she needs support.

The role of a pastor

The response of a pastor to an abused woman can either give her hope or crush her spirits even further. He may identify her as the guilty party by suggesting how *she* can improve the marriage, or validate her by helping her discuss options and seek help.

He may offer a place of safety and refuge or put her in greater danger by sending her back home and advising her husband of their meeting.

He may offer compassion and support, or he may ask her to step down from her position in the church.

He may confront the abuser, encourage him to get counseling and hold him accountable, or he may align himself with the abuser and demand unbiblical submission from the already wounded woman.

A wise pastor won't suggest joint counseling in abusive relationships because he is aware it would put the woman in greater peril. He realizes the problem is not in the marriage relationship, but in an obsessive need for power and control.

Pastors need all the help and resources of the community and other ministries in dealing with domestic violence. Many pastors are not trained in counseling, and others simply do not have the time to deal with every case.

What pastors *can* do is define wife abuse in sermons and provide a scriptural basis to denounce verbal and physical abuse from the pulpit. They can set the record straight about the "servant leadership" role of a godly husband and the "submissive" response of a wife who is treasured and honored.

The devastation of family violence is too great to pretend it doesn't exist. The price of ignorance about domestic violence is too high to remain uninvolved!