

SOMEONE I KNOW IS IN A RELATIONSHIP IMPACTED BY ABUSE, **WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

THE VICTIM

Pain comes from witnessing someone we care about being abused. Pain also comes from witnessing someone we care about being the abuser. And pain comes from not knowing how to help either the victim or the abuser. This pain constitutes Vicarious Trauma, a form of trauma that comes from being a helpless witness to other's trauma and not knowing how to intervene or, if knowing, not being able to.

Children who see one parent abuse another or one of their siblings are in this life-altering position of being vicariously traumatized, even if they themselves are never directly harmed. In fact, studies show children who witness abuse are negatively effected into their adults years by what they witness. The survivor guilt that accompanies Vicarious Trauma can last a lifetime. These pages are intended to give some basic steps so that you can move from helpless to helpful, from being traumatized yourself via someone else's trauma to finding a path of healing.

If you initiate your own private intervention with a friend or family member who is being abused, you may not receive the welcome you expect. In fact, you may be warned away with a variety of responses:

- Nothing is wrong • I can handle it myself • You're going to make this worse • There's no way out •

It's easy to become discouraged by this, especially if you fear that your help might actually not be considered helpful. Leading abuse expert Lundy Bancroft (2002) says, "Empowerment and recovery for an abused woman can be a long process; the urge to find fault in her interferes with your ability to help her and ultimately colludes with the Alleged Perpetrator or with secondary abuse."

We suggest using our healing model as your guide.

HEALING MODEL OF COMPASSION



Listening means that instead of retreating, tell your loved one that you are there to listen only. Then, listen, listen, listen. No judgments, no suggestions, no interpretations. Often when a victim/survivor is listened to, they may begin to hear (for themselves) and become more open to a later offer of intervention. Remember that the victim's position did not occur overnight: they may feel it's become the norm, or be so terrified that any thought of action is overwhelming. They are vulnerable and must be approached with empathy and compassion, not pity. Listen with big ears and a closed mouth. Do not even blame the abuser or try to hold them accountable to the victim. They may rise to their abuser's defense.

Once that first step of listening opens even a slit in the door, you can move to the other five steps:

Accepting means to believe that what the victim/survivor says is true of their experience. This does not mean approval or blind acceptance of what they may or may not have done. It means that you accept that they are in a highly compromised position without knowing what to do, and they need you to accept their veracity, pain, fear, indecision, confusion for what it is: the story of their suffering.

Empathizing is the act of being able to put yourself in the other's shoes, enough that you can feel what they are experiencing. Being able to feel empathy in current time with the victim/survivor's situation will guide you in communicating your deep understanding, without negative judgment, evaluating, or telling them what to do. Empathizing will also guide you in offering them compassion and patience as they process and make their own decision. Lastly, empathy offers an emotional companionship along their journey to health and wellbeing.

Validating consists of mirroring back to your loved ones what you are understanding about what they are saying, not in a parroting way, but so that they can hear that you truly do comprehend not only the content of what they are saying but the meaning their experience has for them. Identifying is the act of assisting the abused to name their experience: this interaction helps them find their voice and their words to narrate what has been confusing. Identifying the abuse supports them in speaking their truth to those who can intervene and help them heal. Sometimes, it can be illuminating for you to name your own parallel experiences as examples, as long as when you use these examples the primary focus remains on developing their narrative instead of shifting to yours.

Encouraging is not a set of directives but your communication that you believe in them, that you will walk beside them, and know that with the right support they will have the courage to work their way out of the morass.

THE ABUSER

You are the front line. You have a better chance of turning around an abuser's attitude than anyone else: their partner, a therapist, abuser program, the courts, individually or all put together. You are the hardest ones to resist or discredit. They may easily dismiss the others on the list with a wave of their hand, or the charm of their smile, but when a loved one, other than the abused, steps in and confronts them, they are likely to experience some uncertainty for the first time (see Bancroft, 2002, p. 376). The abuser might then be willing to listen.

But you are on shaky ground. The abuser is still in Image Management Mode, so they will need to keep their world intact, including maintaining your view of them. To do this:

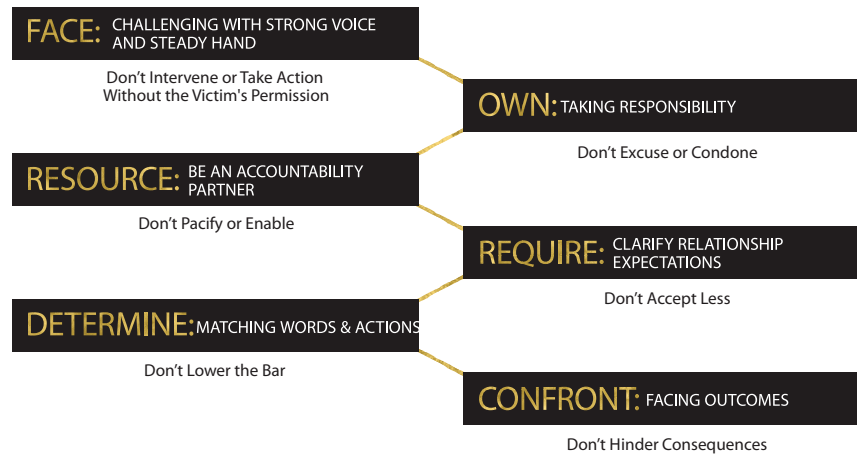
- They may admit partial confessions to deflect attention away from the severity of their actions; they may give a litany of harsh criticisms about the victim and their treatment of the abuser. These may have snippets of truth but are riddled with deception and distortion, none of which actually justify any form or level of abuse.
- They may state and even believe they are the one who is being abused, because as the victim gains the ability to become more of an individual and finds their voice, the abuser may feel traumatized because the victim is threatening their worldview and the role they have played in the victim's life.
- They may begin to fold you into the problem, even verbally abusing you via criticism, ridicule, denial, or placating. Keep affirming your willingness to listen, but be willing to confront as well.

Remember: abuse is always a choice, never a mistake, and it is never the victim's fault. Between 2 and 10 percent of victims lie about abuse, whereas the majority of abusers lie about their actions. The pillars that abuse stands on are image management, a faulty belief system, and entitlement.

Our gift and responsibility when we are aware that abuse is occurring is to use our voices and our words to confront the abuse of the abuser, even if a loved one or friend, instead of using our voices and words to confront and accuse the victim. Abuse is its own category in various protocols because a professional or layperson's fundamental charge is to Do No Harm. In holding with this idea, you must always be willing to hear what the victim can speak, while holding their confidentiality. But in contrast, you must be able to share in transparent ways perpetrations of the abuser from the victim to support their reality testing and forward actions.

For our guidelines on how to approach and help an abuser, follow our Accountability Model on the next page.

ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL OF COURAGE



Facing is a profound act of courageous encouragement that takes place between you who are on the front line and your friend or family member. Facing begins as a calm, thoughtful, and even-handed conversation about what abusers need to recognize: the abusive behaviors they are expressing. This amounts to challenging them, but with a steady hand and a strong voice. You are not taking any overt action, as in an intervention. You are helping abusers become aware, to think, and to face the reality that what they are doing is harmful.

Owning involves the abusers taking responsibility for their distorted belief systems, harmful actions, and for their necessary alteration and repair. Such ownership is not for the faint of heart, for either the person helping the abusers to face what they are doing or for the victimizers to admit what they are doing. Owning and its act of repentance requires the abusers to stop the harmful behaviors they have been doing, or it is a false owning.

Accountability may be a difficult consequence for the abusers to accept, but ultimately it is the only one that will lead to necessary change and healing. Genuine remorse and repentance are humbling and significant signals that the abusers truly understand what they have done and are willing to make reparation. These reparations require doing what the victim/survivors needs in order for them to feel safe, protected, and satisfied with the repairs. If property has been damaged, fix it. If the victim's reputation was damaged it might take double or triple effort to salvage it, and ensure that it is never tainted again. Hiding or taking a course of action that stalls or avoids public humility for the abusers because they are in a position of employment, community or church leadership, or volunteerism is unacceptable, and does not offer any excuse to continue the abuse in any form or to avoid its consequences.

Resourcing means that once you have helped an abuser face and own their abusive behaviors, there is help available to them. Programs that work with victimizers, individual therapy, the support of an enlightened church community, family and friends, are all rich resources that can both support the abuser in getting help and serve to uphold the work they need to do to change. An accountability partner can be an invaluable resource, someone with knowledge of the nature and activity of abuse, how this particular abuser has enacted that activity, and holding them accountable to him or herself for the changes that need to occur.

Requirements are at the heart of what makes a relationship, and **requiring** these amendments in a relationship is inseparable from repair and success. As the abuser takes responsibility for the deep and serious psychological, emotional, and cognitive reworking they must do if they want their relationship to thrive, they will also need to come to grips with the requirements of what a relationship needs. While hundreds of books have been written on the subject, here are just a few of the essentials requirements that a victimizer needs to accept and then learn how to provide.

Necessary repairs	Discovery	Affection	Pleasure
Building	Mutuality	Caring attention	Variety
Equality	Reciprocity	Support	Accountable freedom
Difference	Respect for individuality	Honesty	Protective boundaries

Determining is setting a new bar, which is revisited for constant updating and improvement. This includes determining the **goals** for new standards of behavior, productive ways of communicating, sharing knowledge of and responsibilities for child rearing, financial considerations, running a household and supporting work efforts. The goals are bi-directional, including both partners in collaborative design and implementation.

Confronting is the brave act of facing, once again, but this time in terms of recognizing, analyzing, and either celebrating and building upon successful **outcomes** or owning the immediate failure to achieve determined goals while becoming willing to embrace the challenge of trying again. Here, a structured program, individual therapy, an accountability partner, and/or a support group becomes an invaluable **resource** of support and care in encouraging or confronting the abuser to make yet another attempt at change and repair.

Helping confront an abuser does not place priority on the abuser. That would mean joining in the abuse and causing secondary abuse to the victim. You are **NOT** a rescuer, an enabler, a distraction, or a force. You are the **VOICE** of sanity, of honesty, of care, and respect, speaking to the trauma that is occurring by means of abuse and the necessary realities that must be faced, owned, resourced, required, determined, and confronted in order to change and build to a new way of relating. We hope these pages have helped you speak your voice in the service of healing.
