

How to help someone in your church who is experiencing abuse

If you suspect that someone in your church is a victim of domestic violence, reach out to them privately to understand the situation and offer help.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship. Abuse may include any combination of physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, spiritual and financial abuse and/or control. In some cases, the abuse never includes physical violence, but the effect on victims can be as severe.

Never ask this question

Well-meaning pastors often ask victims, **“Why don’t you just leave?”** Not only does that question place the blame on the victim, but it overlooks the fact that domestic violence is complex. Pressing charges, telling someone or seeking shelter may put a victim at significantly higher risk for increased violence, including murder. The victim may lack resources to leave safely, be worried about children or pets, be embarrassed or fear their abuser’s threats.

Ways to offer support

Before approaching the victim, consider calling Sheltering Wings for advice and assistance.

If you suspect someone is experiencing abuse, their safety and the safety of their children is the most important thing. Be discreet. Speak with the victim privately, away from their partner and children. Understand it may be difficult and frightening to talk about the abuse they are experiencing. Assure them the abuse is not their fault and no one deserves abuse. If a victim discloses abuse, you believe they are unsafe, but they are not ready to leave, help them create a safety plan for their protection in the event violence escalates.

If a victim is yet to disclose their abuse, begin a conversation by simply stating your concern and the reasons you are concerned.

If the victim needs resources or help, remain with them and place a call to the 24/7 helpline at Sheltering Wings. An advocate will answer their call.

Is the victim at risk?

Once trust has been established and abuse has been disclosed, you can ask the following questions. If a victim answers “yes” even once, he or she is at risk of experiencing escalating violence.



Is the abuser spying on or using intimidation when the victim is in public, with family, at church, traveling or at work?



Has the abuser threatened the victim or children with violence (e.g. punching, pushing, slapping, strangling, and etcetera)?



Has the abuser used or threatened to use a weapon against you? Does he or she own or have easy access to any weapons?

Encourage victims at high risk to contact us and help them create safety plans.

Create a safety plan

When victims are not able or ready to leave their abusers, it’s important to help them plan. A safety plan can decrease risk during and after a relationship has ended. It should include places to go if they leave their home and people who might help them. It must be their decision to leave and to let others know that they are in an abusive relationship or still at risk.

- Call Sheltering Wings at (317) 745-1496.
- Tell someone you trust about your situation.
- Create signals to alert a neighbor or child to call 911.
- Keep a cell phone with you at all times.
- Pack a bag with documents, extra keys, money and clothes for you and your children in case you must leave quickly. Keep it in a safe place or leave it with a trusted neighbor or friend.
- Plan to leave when your abuser isn’t at home.
- If violence escalates, avoid rooms with objects that can be used as weapons (e.g., kitchen, garage and bathroom). Move to a safer room with multiple exits.
- If you are injured, seek medical help, take pictures and document details.
- Advise school system and employer not to give out your personal information.
- Safeguard information on computers and cell phones. Change all passwords. Disable location services, that could help the abuser locate you.

To learn more about helping victims of domestic violence, or if someone needs help, we are here.

Call our 24/7 helpline at (317) 745-1496.