

## **Promote safety**

Domestic violence can be dangerous – even lethal. A victim’s safety is critically important. Never reveal information that a victim has told you unless you have the victim’s permission. Don’t ask the victim to speak publically or in front of the abuser about the abuse. Don’t attempt couples counseling, which may expose the victim to retaliation from the abuser. Remember that danger escalates for victims who are preparing to or leaving their relationships, so encourage victims to talk to a domestic violence advocate who can help them develop a safety plan. You can find a local advocate through the national domestic violence hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

## **Don’t tell the victim what to do**

Abusers often tell victims what to do, and sometimes control every detail of their lives. As a result, many victims have had little or no control over even the most basic decisions in their own lives. This leaves victims feeling disempowered and helpless. Instead of telling victims what to do, encourage them to make their own decisions. After all, victims are often the best judge of safety, and they know the situation better than anyone. They are experts in their own lives, and have developed coping mechanisms that have kept them safe so far. Also, remember that if there were a “quick fix,” the victim would have thought of it by now.

## **Don’t blame the victim**

Abusers often blame victims for everything, including the abuse. Victims sometimes blame themselves for the abuse as well. However, it is always the abuser who is responsible for the violence. Whatever the choices or behaviors of the victim, there is no excuse for abuse, and no one but the abuser should be blamed. Reassure the victim that he/she is not at fault.

## **Be victim centered**

Victims tell us that the first step toward healing often begins with being able to talk about what has happened and to truly feel heard by another person. Victims long for a place where they can tell what has happened, in their own words, and without interruption or someone jumping in with a judgment or a “quick fix.” When a victim is ready to talk, do all you can to clear some time and practice active listening. Don’t share your own past trauma or rush the victim because you are uncomfortable with the conversation. Don’t try to patch it up, make it all better, or rush the victim to forgiveness or resolution. As much as possible, keep the conversation centered on the victim and his or her needs.

## **Welcome everyone/don’t judge**

There are no perfect human beings. As a result, there are no perfect victims. Victims need compassion and support, not judgment or condemnation. It takes a long time to heal from trauma and abuse, and victims will make decisions along the way that may differ from what you would do. For those who want to leave the relationship, they may return several times before they are able to leave for good. Continue to provide resources, options, and support, and to reassure victims that they do not deserve to be abused. Encourage victims to make their own decisions and to prioritize their own safety.