

Is a woman you know being abused in a relationship?

A GUIDE FOR FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS
AND NEIGHBOURS



WOMEN'S LINE

In writing this guide for people close to abused women, we have made use of a corresponding guide produced in Australia, for which we have obtained permission. This guide has been produced by the Women's Line in Finland. We thank everybody who has commented on it or otherwise contributed to this guide.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this guide grew out the experiences the Women's Line has gained through its guidance and support telephone line, when helping abused women and girls. Women's Line is a nationwide easy-access service, free of charge for the caller. Through it, professionally trained volunteering women offer peer-support and information about abuse and they also direct the callers to appropriate services. Women's Line is coordinated by the Women's Line in Finland, and it is funded by the Slot Machine Association.

Some 10 percent of those who contact the Women's Line are persons close to women experiencing abuse in a relationship. They need information about abuse and their own possibilities to help and support the abused woman. In this guide we offer answers to questions that they have raised in their contacts with the Women's Line.

By abuse in a relationship we here mean violence that occurs in an intimate relationship, committed by the woman's partner, ex-partner, dating partner or ex-dating partner. Although we here concentrate on supporting women who have experienced abuse, we hope that also persons close to abused men might find the information useful.

When a woman talks about experiencing abuse, it is important to take it seriously. **To talk about abuse, to**

be heard and understood are the first steps for tackling the situation. If

the listener questions the woman's story or blames her, she might become afraid of talking about the abuse with anybody else.

“ My best friend really helped me. She never judged me or made me feel like it was my fault. She helped me and looked after my kids to give me a break, and was there when I needed her. It can't have been easy on her. But her support made a big difference. – ANNA

WHAT IS ABUSE?

Violence in a relationship is fairly common in Finland, and it is mostly men that abuse women. For this reason we here refer to the abusive person as the man. In 2005, every fifth married or cohabiting woman told that she at least once had experienced physical or sexual abuse or the threat of it from her partner at the time.¹ The children are always exposed to the violence when one parent abuses the other. Also women may abuse their partners. There is also abuse in gay- and lesbian relationships.

There are disagreements and quarrels in every relationship. **There is, however, a difference between arguments and violence.** In an equal and respectful relationship both partners have the right to express their opinions freely, to make their own decisions, to be themselves and to say no to sex. But this is not the case if someone is abusive.

When the man abuses the woman in a relationship it is often an exercise of power, through which he wants to dominate and control her. Abuse in a relationship can take many different forms. It may, for example, be:

- > Psychological abuse, such as naming, mocking, dominating, threatening, isolating her from other relations, as well as control,
- > Economic domination, such as controlling her spending and stopping her from going to work,
- > Physical assault, such as hindering her activities, punching, hitting, kicking her, banging her head, as well as armed violence, and also
- > Sexual assault, such as, forcing her to have sex, rape, sexual humiliation and also treating the woman as a sex object.

1) Minna Piispa, Markku Heiskanen, Juha Kääriäinen ja Reino Sirén. 2006. Naisiin kohdistunut väkivalta 2005. (Violence against women in Finland 2005). National Research Institute of Legal Policy, Publication no. 225. Helsinki.

Abuse in a relationship seldom happens only once; instead the woman is constantly faced with a variety of actions. Some women, who have freed themselves from the abuse, told that they felt like being caught up in a web of violence, and that it was so hard to free oneself from it.

The effects of abuse are most severe when the violent behaviour has continued for a long time, involving also control and domination of the other person. This kind of abuse may gradually escalate and cause serious physical injuries.

Abuse in a relationship is never acceptable and it is never the victim's fault. **The perpetrator is always responsible for his actions.** Physical and sexual abuse is an offence in Finland.

HOW CAN I RECOGNISE ABUSE?

You might be concerned about the wellbeing of a woman you know, and you suspect that she is being abused at home. You might have a feeling that everything is not as it should be in her relationship.

The following are signs that the woman might be abused:

- > She seems to be afraid of her partner or she is always very eager to please him.
- > She has stopped seeing her friends and relatives, or she avoids talking on the phone when her partner is present.
- > Her partner criticises and humiliates her in front of other people.
- > She tells that her partner pressures or forces her to have sex.
- > The man commands her and controls what she is doing, such as, whom she can see, how long she may

be away from home, and on what she may spend her money.

- > She talks about the man's jealousy, his temper or possessive nature.
- > She feels low and depressed. Her self-esteem is weakened, or she is unusually silent.
- > She has physical injuries (such as bruises, wounds, sprains, fractures). Her explanations of how she got them do not seem to fit their nature, or accidents appear to happen surprisingly often.
- > The children are afraid of their father or stepfather, or they are very closed or frightened. The woman does not want to leave the children in his care.
- > After their separation the man constantly harasses the woman: he phones her, follows her and intrudes in her home.

WHY DOES SHE NOT JUST LEAVE?

It might be difficult for an outsider to understand why a woman stays on in a violent relationship. Leaving may appear to be an easy way out. If a woman does not leave an abusive man, one might get the idea that she is responsible for the situation, because she puts up with it. One should not think along such lines. Somebody who has not experienced violence in an intimate relationship may have difficulties in understanding the consequences of abuse.

THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY IT MAY BE HARD TO LEAVE AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP.

- > **The woman is afraid of what the man might do after she has left.** The man may have threatened to hurt the woman, relatives, the children, pets or property. The man may also have threatened to kill himself if the woman decides to leave or talks about leaving.
- > **The woman is ashamed** of having been abused, of the man's violent behaviour, of broken human relations, and she is equally ashamed of staying on in the relationship.
- > **The woman still loves her partner,** because he is not violent all the time.
- > **The woman hopes that the man will change.** The man may also promise to change and stop abusing her. Both may consider that there are some external reasons behind the violence, such as alcohol or pressures at work. They might both believe that once these reasons are gone the abuse will stop.
- > **The woman is committed to the relationship** or to the idea of an everlasting marriage – “for better or for worse”.
- > **The woman thinks that it is in the best interest of the children that she stays on in the relationship.** However, the children are always also exposed to the violence.
- > **The woman thinks that the violence is her fault.** To blame the victim is one of the most common ways in which abusive men try to avoid responsibility for their actions. They try to justify their abuse: “If you hadn't said/done/gone, this wouldn't have happened.”

- > **Lack of self-confidence.** The man uses (psychical) violence to break down her self-confidence and her ability to think. He accuses and scorns the woman. He blames her for the violence. The woman may feel powerless and unable to make decisions.
- > **Isolation and loneliness.** The man may have restricted the woman's circle of friends and relatives, thus isolating her from other human relations. This is a particularly difficult situation for a woman whose first language is not Finnish or Swedish. For immigrant women, the situation may also be particularly difficult if they are not aware of Finnish support systems and their own rights.
- > **Pressure from the family,** relatives or the religious community to stay on in the relationship. The woman may fear to be rejected by the family or the community.
- > **The woman may think that she cannot get away from her partner anyway,** because they live in a small community, they have joint friends, or because they belong to the same ethnic or religious community.
- > **Uncertainty about the future.** The woman might not have any other place to go. She might be worried about being on her own and uncertain whether she will cope on her own. The woman might also be dependent on her husband's income. In rural areas it can be difficult to move without an own car. If the woman has physical disabilities, she might also be dependent on her abusive partners help.

Sometimes it may be dangerous to leave an abusive partner. One should therefore always take threats of violence seriously. If a woman decides to leave her abusive partner, tell her about the support services mentioned at the end of this guide.

“ When I told her how he abused me, my friend said “but you let him do it”, like it was my fault. This made me feel worse. She didn’t know how much pressure he put on me to go back, how he said he loved me and that he would kill himself rather than live without me and the kids. He made me feel so guilty. I thought of how important it was for the children to have a father. It was all a way of manipulating me to come back. My friend stopped talking to me after I went back to him, she said I was stupid. I was really upset because she was my only close friend and I really needed someone to talk to.” – NOORA

SHOULD I GET INVOLVED?

Many people are worried that if they get involved they will interfere in other people’s business. Many may still consider that what happens in the family is a private matter, of no concern to others. **Do not close your eyes to violence, talk about it.** Your support can make a difference. Most people are grateful if somebody is concerned about their well-being, even though they might not at that moment want to talk about their situation, or even if your worries would be unfounded. It is unlikely that things would change to the worse simply because you express your concern for the well-being of somebody close to you. However, you should be aware that there are situations in which authorities should be involved and intervene. (see p. 19)

HOW SHOULD I APPROACH HER?

Raise the question of abuse with the woman when the two of you are on your own. You could start by saying: "I'm concerned about you because you have looked so unhappy lately." Tell her the reasons for your concern. **Ask directly about the abuse, but do so with empathy.** In this way you show her that it is okay to talk about abuse.

The woman might deny the abuse or she might start defending her husband. She might not yet be ready to admit that she lives in an abusive relationship or she might be ashamed of her situation. It is also possible that she is afraid of talking because she fears the consequences it might have. Equally, she might not want to worry you. If the victim is a man it might be even harder to talk about the abuse, because he might worry about the impression he gives – that he is "weak" or "unmanly".

Remember that it is not easy to talk about being abused. Do not pressure the woman to talk if she does not want to. Tell her that she can always talk to you when she feels like it.

HOW CAN I HELP?

The most important thing to do is to listen to the abused woman and respect her decisions.

> **Listen.**

> **Believe what the woman tells you** and show her that you understand. Abuse is normally covered up and belittled rather than exaggerated. If you happen to know the abuser, you might have difficulties in believing that he abuses his partner. Bear in mind that an abusive person may act quite differently in the

company of others than when he is alone with the woman.

> **Praise her for her courage to tell you about the abuse.** It takes a lot of courage to tell about being abused.

> **You should be aware that abuse might cause many kinds of reactions.** It may be different and rapidly changing moods – shame, guilt, hate, helplessness and fear. These are all normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Abuse can also result in reactions such as a feeling of isolation and otherness, concentration problems, sleeplessness, nightmares, increased use of alcohol and difficulties in communicating with others.

> **Take abuse seriously and take a clear stand: abuse is a crime.** Do not underestimate the danger the woman faces. Abuse is a danger to one's physical as well as mental health.

“ My family knew I was being abused and that I felt trapped, but they didn't say anything about it until I finally left. There was never any talk about it. I felt ashamed of my situation and I was worried about causing mother harm. I also feared that mother would say: "You have chosen your lot". But it wasn't like that. When I told about the divorce, mother said she was relieved. She said she had known about the abuse all along, but she didn't dare to talk to me about it. Also my sisters had known about the abuse. I so wish that they had told me what they had seen and that they thought it was wrong, and not my fault.” – ELLI

- > **Tell her that the abuse is not her fault and that nothing justifies abuse.** You could for instance say: "I think the way your partner treats you is wrong." or "Abusive behaviour is never justified, and that also includes a partner".
- > **Help her to boost her self-esteem.** Give her positive feedback for having coped and for having the energy to deal with many everyday matters, despite the abuse.
- > **Respect her right to make her own decisions,** even if you might be of a different opinion. Respect also her cultural or religious values. But tell her that neither culture nor religion justifies violence.
- > **Offer her practical help such as looking after the children or cooking.** It is important to keep up everyday routines. Tell her that if she wants to, you can go with her to see a doctor or to the police station (see p. 17)
- > **Tell her about Restraining Orders** (see p. 17)
- > **Tell her about the services** that are mentioned at the end of this guide and encourage her to contact authorities, if you think that this should be done in order to solve the situation. There are also services for abusive men, but to ask for help is the responsibility of the abuser.
- > **Tell her that she might be able to get the help of an interpreter.**
- > **Keep in touch with her and stay as her friend.** It may be very important for her to be able to discuss regularly with a close friend.
- > **Continue supporting her also if her partner seeks help for his violent behaviour.** This situation often

raises hopes that the abuse will stop, but the situation may change in many different ways. That the man is seeking help is no guarantee that his violent behaviour will stop.

> **Continue supporting her also if she has left her abusive partner.** Your friend may need support of different kinds and encouragement when building up her new life, and also when she recovers from the abuse. She can also seek professional help and join a support group.

THINGS THAT YOU CAN SAY:

- > The way he treats you is wrong.
- > How can I help you?
- > How has your partner's behaviour affected you?
- > How do your kids react to your partner's behaviour?
- > I'm worried about what he might do to you and your kids.
- > What do you think could solve the situation?
- > What worries you if you leave?
- > What worries you if you stay?

“ You don't have to fully understand to be of help. All you have to do is give your time and love without being judgemental.” – JAANA

WHAT NOT TO DO?

When you talk with an abused woman, it is important to be aware that some things may not be helpful or they might even make her lose confidence in you.

- > **Do not blame the woman or hold her responsible for being abused** or ask questions such as: “What did you do to make him treat you this way?”, “Why do you put up with him treating you so badly?” or “How can you still love him?” Questions like these give the impression that she in some way is responsible for the abuse.
- > **Do not try to find out the “reasons” for the violence**, concentrate instead on supporting the abused woman.
- > **Do not judge the woman**, even though she might say that she still loves her husband, or if she goes back to the abusive man. Leaving an abusive partner is often a difficult process.
- > **Do not criticise her husband**. Criticise violent behaviour and tell her that nobody has the right to abuse her.
- > **Do not give explicit advice (do like this)**, or tell her what you would do in her situation. Instead you should listen to her, give information and think about different alternatives together with her.
- > **Do not pressure her to leave the relationship**, or try to make decisions on her behalf. Concentrate on listening and supporting the woman in her own decisions. She is the best expert on her own situation.

HELP THE WOMAN TO INCREASE HER SAFETY

The most important thing to do is to consider how the woman can be protected from further abuse. It is also important to think about safety aspects when the woman has left the abusive man.

- > **The emergency number is 112**, through which also the police can be alerted.
- > Encourage the woman to contact support services.
- > If the woman has been physically or sexually abused, **advise her to see a doctor as soon as possible after the incident**. In addition to treating the injuries, it is also important that the incident and the injuries are documented in view of an eventual court case, even though the woman would not at that point consider reporting the offence. A medical certificate can also be used as a ground when applying for a Restraining Order.
- > **To report an offence** is the only legal way to make the abusive man face his responsibility. It is a signal to him that violence is not acceptable and that it has to stop. To report an offence can also be used as a ground when applying for a Restraining Order. Tell the woman that if she wants, you can go with her to report the offence, but do not pressure her if she is not ready to turn to the police.
- > **Tell her about a Restraining Order**. A man who has got a Restraining Order may not meet, try to contact or follow the woman protected by the order. Nowadays it is also possible to obtain a Restraining

Order within the family, which means that the violent man is also ordered to leave their home, in addition to the above-mentioned restrictions. It is a crime to violate the Restraining Order. The police, among others, can give more information about a Restraining Order.

> If the woman wants to apply for a Restraining Order or to report the violence she has faced, you could, if you want to, offer to act as a witness. In that case you should take notes about your observations about the abuse (such as time and dates).

> Help the woman to figure out **how she could quickly escape from home**, if needed. She could develop some routine, so that she regularly leaves the home (such as bringing out the garbage, going out with the dog).

> Help the woman to plan where she and her children could go in an emergency situation, or if she decides to leave the abusive man. Tell her about **shelters**. She can also call the Women's Line at the number 0800 02400, where she will get addresses and telephone numbers for shelters.

> Help the woman to prepare **an escape bag** that she can keep in a handy and safe place. It is good to have money in the bag for a taxi, for example, spare keys to the home and the car, spare cloth for herself (and the children), toilet accessories, medicine and also important documents and identity papers (or copies of them).

> You can also agree on some **keyword or sign** through which the woman can signal that she needs your help.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I WITNESS VIOLENCE OR OVERHEAR VIOLENCE OR THREATS?

Make an emergency call to number 112. Skilled Emergency Response Centre operators will assess the situation, give instructions and alert the police, if needed.

If you have an opportunity to discuss with the woman when there is no immediate danger, ask her if she wants you to call the police. The woman might be afraid that calling the police will only make things worse for her. If the woman has had bad experiences of authorities, calling the police might be distressing. This can be the case for immigrant women if their rights are not respected in their country of origin.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF!

It can be stressful to care for an abused person, who is close to you. You might get the same kinds of reactions that the abused woman experiences. Fear, frustration, powerlessness and hate are common and normal reactions. Also you need time to process your own thoughts and feelings. It is important that you take care of yourself and your own needs. See to it, that also you get the support you need.

Feeling frustrated that she has not left the relationship

Feelings of frustration and disappointment are natural. Nonetheless, you should stand by the woman's side even if you do not understand her choices. To get rid of violence is normally a long process and a great change in one's life that does not come about over night. You can say that you fear for her, but anyway you are there to support her. Remind yourself

that your support is important and that it has positive effects, even though the abused woman might not be able to express it there and then.

Feeling afraid

Get yourself support! Talk with a reliable person or contact support services (see p. 22)

“I should still have to cope”, but I don’t know how

Be realistic about how much help you can give and of what kind. Be aware of your own limits. You can help the person close to you only if you also take care of yourself. **Remember that you are not responsible for the violence or for putting an end to it!** The woman can also seek support from the services mentioned at the end of this guide.

HOW SHOULD I APPROACH THE ABUSER?

Be careful. Avoid situations in which the abuser could hurt or try to manipulate you. If you witness violence, do not intervene but phone immediately the emergency number 112.

If the abuser is your friend or a relative, you might feel badly trapped. If you learned about the abuse only from the woman, check first with her if she wants you to raise the question of abuse with the man. Sometimes the abuses might increase if they are revealed to the outside world.

The abuser may react to the violence being revealed in the following ways:

- > He might tell you to just mind your own business.
- > He might deny the abuse or say: "How can you suspect me of something like that?"
- > He might try to trivialise the whole thing by saying that "things aren't that bad" or "it only happened once".
- > He might try blame the woman saying that she provoked it through her own behaviour.
- > He might also say things like "I couldn't help it", "I was drunk", "it just happened", "I lost my temper", "it just snapped in my head".

None of these answers means that he has not been abusive. It is common that an abusive man denies or belittles his actions. However, the abuser is always the responsible one. Violence is normally revealed only when the abused tells about it or if there are witnesses to the abuse. Also "respectable" men in high positions can be violent at home.

It is also possible that the abusive man admits what he has done, but says that he does not know how to put an end to it. There are also services for abusive persons, where they can get help to free themselves from their violent behaviour. When you discuss with a man, do not try to understand the reasons for his violence but concentrate rather on **what the abusive man intends to do to put an end to his violent behaviour**. Encourage the man to seek help for his problem. It is often a long process to free oneself from violent behaviour and it requires professional help from agencies that have experience in helping abusive persons.

SERVICES THAT CAN HELP

Women's Line | www.naistenlinja.com

An information and support service for abused women and girls and persons close to them. The service is free of charge.

Women's Line also informs about other helping instances

Phone 0800 02400

In Finnish Mon–Fri at 16–20

In Swedish Wed at 16–20

In English Fri at 16–20

Rape Crisis Centre Tukinainen | www.tukinainen.fi

Crisis phone line for victims of sexual abuse, free of charge, phone 0800 97 899

Legal counsel jour, free of charge, phone 0800 97895

For persons having experienced sexual abuse Mon–Thu

For persons having experienced violence in a relationship Fri

Shelters | www.turvakoti.net

In different parts of Finland there are shelters maintained by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes, the municipalities and other actors. Contact information for different localities are found at the website.

Multicultural Women's Resource Centre Monika | www.monikanaiset.fi

Support for immigrant women experiencing violence.

Services are available in many different languages

Telephone help-line (09) 6922 304

Police | www.poliisi.fi

Emergency number 112

More information on

reporting an offence: www.poliisi.fi > crimes > reporting an offence

restraining order: www.poliisi.fi > crimes > restraining order

Legal aid offices | www.oikeus.fi/8852.htm

Victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence may obtain legal aid free of charge, at the expense of the state. An appointment as a public defender will be given to a Public Legal Aid Attorney, an Advocate (www.asianajaliitto.fi) or another lawyer. Legal aid can also be obtained in cases involving divorce, child custody and the right to see the child. Contact information for different localities can be found at the website.

Victim Support | www.rikosuhripaivystys.fi

Telephone help-line, phone 0203 16116

Legal counsel by phone, 0203 16117

Support for witnesses, phone 0203 16118

Alternative to violence in Espoo | www.lyomatonlinja.fi

Work with men to stop and prevent violent behaviour, phone (09) 276 6280

Work with immigrant men, the Men's line, phone (09) 276 62899

Jussi-työ | www.ensijaturvakotienliitto.fi/in_english

Work done in member organisations of the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters to help men to stop violence. Contact information for different localities at the website.

Miesten keskus | www.ensijaturvakotienliitto.fi/miestenkeskus

A centre for men offering short-term counselling and support, phone (09) 612 93750

Demeter-project | www.maria-akatemia.fi

Help-line for women, who are violent or fear to become abusive, phone (09) 7562 2260

Apua.info | www.apua.info

A portal for early intervention and crisis support

The social and health services of the own municipality



Women's Line
P.O.Box 136
00121 Helsinki
Phone (09) 436 1008
Fax (09) 494 617
www.naistenlinja.com