



interfaith partnership against domestic violence

because no one should have to choose between faith and safety

Suggestions for Clergy Responding to Victims and Survivors of Intimate Partner Abuse

Safety Is the First Priority

- Safety is the first concern. Make sure the survivor is safe from further abuse. Do not disclose information to anyone without the survivor's permission. Never reveal a victim's location.
- Make sure the survivor receives appropriate medical attention for his/her injuries.
- Refer the survivor to services in your community, including shelters, domestic violence service providers, police, legal advocacy, hotlines, and support groups.
- Support the victim's right to safety.
- Respond to faith questions about divorce, forgiveness, suffering, etc.
- Remind the victim that batterers do not end the violence on their own, and the violence will escalate over time.
- Do not use couples' counseling if you know or suspect that abuse is present.
- Discuss the impact of the abuse on the children. Remind the victim that the children usually see and know more than their parents think. Even if they are not experiencing physical violence, living in a violent household is a form of abuse with severe effects on children.

Be Victim Centered

- Take the survivor's story seriously. Allow the victim time to tell the story in his/her own words.
- Bear witness to the abuse and its consequences. Acknowledge that what happened is abusive.
- Stay focused on the survivor. Let him or her set the agenda. Practice active and empathetic listening. Celebrate every small step toward safety and wholeness.

Do Not Blame the Victim

- NO ONE DESERVES TO BE HIT. Victims often feel that they have failed as spouse or partner, that their behavior somehow provokes the violence. Emphasize that the abuse is the fault of the abuser, not the victim. There is no justification for abuse. Conflict is normal, abuse is not.
- Living with abuse damages the victim's self-esteem. Victims may not believe that they can care for their children, that they are worthy of a better life. Help victims identify their skills and strengths. Celebrate the courage that it took to ask for help. Lift the burden of shame and guilt from the victim.
- Do not let victims assume the blame, and do not make excuses for the abuser's behavior such as stress, unemployment, alcoholism, etc. There is no excuse for abuse.
- Recognize that the stigma of domestic abuse falls on the victim, not the abuser.

Do Not Tell the Victim What to Do

- Respect every decision victims and survivors make, and do not make decisions for them. Give them honest feedback, and let them know that your support is available no matter how they decide to handle the situation. It is normal, for them to feel confused and to change their minds.
- Recognize that victims may feel ambivalent about the abuser. Victims often still love their abusers, who can be good parents and providers. Never speak negatively of the abuser.

101 Arch Street, 11th Floor, Boston, MA 02110

Phone: 617.654.1820 Fax: 617.654.1799 Email: info@interfaithpartners.org