

Tools to Build African & CaLD Men as Leaders in the Prevention of Domestic Violence Project

How to spot an abusive relationship — and help a friend who's in one

[ABC Life](#)

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If a friend's relationship has you worried, there are several things you can do to work out whether her partner's behaviour is abusive.

- Your friend's husband tells her to cover up because she looks "slutty".

Your daughter's partner insists she come straight home after work every day and forbids her from making new friends in the office.

Your housemate's boyfriend is always jealously monitoring her text messages.

Any of these women in your life could be in an abusive relationship — but many of us don't know how to spot abuse when we see it, or what to do when someone we know is experiencing it.

In Australia, on average one woman a week is killed by a current or former partner. In October 2018, [nine women were killed](#).

Not all domestic violence ends in death, but one in four women has experienced non-physical abuse from a live-in partner, and one in six has experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of a current or former partner.

If a friend's relationship has you worried, there are several things you can do to work out whether her partner's behaviour is abusive. There are also steps you can take to help.

Know the signs of an abusive relationship

It can be difficult to spot the signs of domestic violence, particularly because perpetrators often operate under a cover of secrecy — using a mixture of manipulation, blame-shifting and threats to conceal their abusive behaviour, says Liana Papoutsis, a member of Victoria's Victims Survivor Advisory Council.

"A perpetrator's behaviour is markedly different in the public sphere as opposed to the private sphere, which makes the family violence that more unbelievable, and that can lead to rampant victim-blaming in society," she says.

"Perpetrators are very good at keeping a shroud of secrecy around family violence," Liana Papoutsis tells ABC Life.

If you're trying to establish whether your friend's partner's behaviour is abusive, [look for an ongoing pattern of behaviour](#) aimed at controlling her through fear.

Don't limit yourself to looking for bruises or other signs of physical abuse.

Non-physical forms of abuse, such as controlling the family finances or monitoring text messages without their knowledge, [can be just as harmful as physical abuse](#).

Control is a cornerstone of many abusive relationships, so keep an eye out for signs that your friend is "being controlled around what she can and can't do, and what she can and can't say and think," says Inez Carey, a program specialist at 1800RESPECT, a confidential information and counselling service for people impacted by sexual assault, family violence and abuse.

Patty Kinnersly, CEO of Our Watch — the national organisation established to drive change relating to violence against women and their children — says to watch for things like changes in your friend's style that seem unusual.

"Perhaps your sister starts wearing her hair that way because her boyfriend likes it, even though she doesn't like it," she says.

"Or your colleague is getting 15 calls from their partner a day."

Domestic violence involves an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling her through fear.

Look out for changes in your friend's wellbeing, too. If she seems less confident and jumpier than she used to be, that could be a red flag, Ms Kinnersly says.

"One of the typical things that we hear from women is that they actually lost faith in their own ability to make good decisions," she says.

"They no longer felt capable of making decisions. You hear that in someone's language — they start talking about themselves as being stupid, saying things like, 'That's my fault, I'm silly, I spent too much money accidentally'."

What does an abusive relationship look like?

Domestic violence can take many forms, [Our Watch explains](#). Abuse can be:

- **Physical:** Includes punching, slapping or shaking, destroying property, throwing things, locking a woman in or out of the house, physical restraint, trying to strangle or choke, or driving dangerously.
- **Financial:** Controlling how a partner spends their money. This may include forbidding her from working, or limiting the amount of petrol in the car — which, particularly in remote or rural locations, also has the effect of isolating the victim.
- **Emotional and/or psychological:** Can include putdowns, disrespectful language, jokes at the partner's expense or making her feel guilty, withholding affection, manipulation, undermining her choices, shifting the blame for abuse, and 'gaslighting' (manipulating her to make her doubt her own sanity or perception). For women on temporary or spousal visas, psychological abuse may include threats to cancel her visa or have her deported, says Ms Carey.
- **Sexual:** Might involve physical abuse such as rape or forced sexual acts, but can also include non-physical abuse such as saying they're only good for sex.
- **Social:** Dictating who the partner can and can't spend time with, which may involve using jealousy to justify the perpetrator's actions.
- **Spiritual:** Disrespecting a partner's religion or not letting them practise their religion.
- **Technological:** Using a phone or other technology to control, embarrass or demean a partner. This includes monitoring the person's communication without their knowledge.

Don't ignore the situation

Doing nothing won't make the situation go away.

"I understand it can feel awkward to intervene into these private relationships, particularly if you're seeing both partners in a social setting, like at the school gate," says Sydney-based Rebecca, a survivor and writer.

"But the worst thing to do is just ignore it."

Family and domestic violence support services:

- [1800 Respect national helpline](#): 1800 737 732
- [Women's Crisis Line](#): 1800 811 811
- [Men's Referral Service](#): 1300 766 491
- [Lifeline](#) (24-hour crisis line): 131 114
- [Relationships Australia](#): 1300 364 277

Rebecca knows from personal experience how domestic violence can escalate, with tragic consequences.

She experienced non-physical forms of violence in a previous relationship, and also watched her sister suffer at the hands of her brother-in-law, who eventually killed her father and niece and nephew in 2003.

"While you're in a relationship with that person, it will never get better," Rebecca says. "They will never, ever improve — and actually things may steadily bit by bit degrade."

What if your friend's abusive relationship seems to settle down for a while?

Unfortunately, that doesn't necessarily mean the abuse is gone for good. [Abusers often follow a cyclical pattern](#) that can include periods of doting or remorseful behaviour, says Ms Carey.

"Someone that's abusive typically won't be abusive for every second of every day," she says.

"Often, the person using violence will come back to them to apologise and attempt to repair the relationship — say, 'I was drinking and I hadn't slept'."

Then, she says, the target will often accept him back and believe he'll change — but inevitably, the cycle will repeat itself.

Plan what you're going to say

Finding the right words to help your loved one can seem daunting.

A helpful starting place is to come at the conversation from a position of care, being sure not to take an accusatory position, says Ms Carey.

"Really do let the person know that you're worried," she says.

"Talk about some of the things you've noticed. Say, 'You're much quieter these days, I haven't heard you laughing as much, I've noticed that every time your partner's around you seem quieter and quite jumpy'."

"And just say, 'Is everything OK in your relationship? Because I've seen and heard him treat you really disrespectfully, and I'm really worried'."

It can be helpful and even necessary to name the abuse.

"If it's violent and dangerous behaviour, actually name it as that," Ms Carey says.

Advocate Tracey Morris says the best thing you can do as a friend is "always keep your door open".

However, it won't always work to "go in all gung-ho" in the first instance, Rebecca says. She advises to start early conversations with your friend "just getting the seed in there that maybe it is abusive and maybe the signs are there".

Ms Kinnersly says to remember that people don't like to think they're in a bad relationship, particularly in the early stages.

"It can be incremental. Everyone likes to feel that their relationship is a good one, so being challenged might feel confronting," Ms Kinnersly says.

"You making a decision about arriving at their house and packing them up and moving them isn't going to be useful if that's not what they want to do."

It's a good idea to focus on building up and empowering your loved one, suggests Tracey Morris, a Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre advocate.

"In any communications with your loved one, counteract the emotional, psychological and verbal abuses by identifying your loved one's strengths, their worth, their goals, and desires," she says.

Safely direct them to resources

If your friend is ready to leave her abusive relationship, "it's important that the woman has a plan in place and that they are supported with that", Ms Carey says.

That's because in abusive relationships, the most extreme violence often occurs when a woman tries to leave a relationship and in the 12 months afterwards.

"One of the things that can be really helpful is to jump online together and say, 'There are services out there, let's look at them together'," Ms Carey says.

"You're giving them information to let them know they're not alone."

More resources that can help:

- The Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria offers a ['warning signs of abuse' quiz](#).
- [Women's legal services](#), [community legal centres](#) or [Legal Aid](#) can offer legal assistance.
- The website for [DV Work Aware lists services](#) for women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities for different states and territories.

- The [National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services](#) provides culturally sensitive help to Aboriginal people who are survivors of family violence; Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women can also call the Aboriginal Contact Line 1800 019 123 for assistance.

Be mindful of how you do this: if the perpetrator is monitoring their online behaviour, sending web links could pose a risk.

It's a good idea for your friend to make a safety plan that includes putting away some money and ensuring she has access to a mobile phone with the contacts of emergency services.

"You might also address things with her like a code that they can text you if they're in danger, and a safe place to go to" if the perpetrator becomes violent when he learns of her plans to leave, Ms Carey adds.

There's a [safety planning checklist you can use](#) on the 1800RESPECT website.

Your friend may also consider getting legal support; for example, to obtain a protection order.

While such an order won't guarantee the violence will stop, it's "about holding the perpetrator accountable", says Rebecca Helberg, senior lawyer at Women's Legal Service Victoria.

"It's a shield for her. If there's an intervention order in place and he breaches it, she can report it to police. They can then charge him and there are criminal sanctions for that," Ms Helberg says.

Women's legal services or community legal centres can also offer advice on family law issues in relation to property or parenting, she says.

Some can also connect you with financial counsellors who can help you financially prepare for leaving an abuser.

It's a good idea for your friend to make a safety plan that includes putting away some money and ensuring she has access to a mobile phone with the contacts of emergency services.

Just be there for them

Your friend may not be ready to accept that the relationship is abusive, or to leave the perpetrator.

You may have to be patient and persistent in offering your friend support. It usually takes on average seven or more attempts for a woman to permanently leave her abuser.

"There will likely be a myriad or mountain of barriers from fears, anxiety, loss of confidence, manipulation by perpetrator and their family, minimal access to finances, minimal public or emergency housing, just to name a few," Ms Morris says.

Threats to the woman's safety — or that of her children or pets — can also keep a woman in an abusive situation.

The best thing you can do as a friend is "always keep your door open".

"Abusers rely on the family or friends of the victim to abandon the victim," Ms Morris says.

"Such abandonment is then used by the perpetrator to further isolate and destroy their victim's self-esteem and mental health."

Survivor Rebecca says she's still grateful to her best friend for remaining persistent and gently pointing out the abusive nature of the relationship.

"She would say to me, 'Bec, that's abuse. What he's doing is abusive'. She did it softly, softly, and she kept it up for probably a good 18 months.

"When I look back, I just look at her really fondly that she was brave enough to say it."

While domestic violence can happen to anyone, this article refers to perpetrators using male pronouns and survivors using female pronouns because statistically, men are the majority of perpetrators and women and children are the majority of survivors.

You might also want to read:

- [How to stay energised and practice self-care in the #MeToo era](#)
- [Family violence deaths dominate headlines as Victorian coroner calls for changes](#)
- [Dispatches from Australia's domestic violence crisis](#)
- ['Their cross to bear': The Catholic women told to forgive domestic violence](#)

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