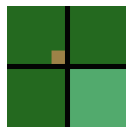


Talking to a Battered Woman: A Guide for the Short-Term Helper

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Dedicated to all the women whose stories I've shared

And to my husband--a constant source of love and support



Author's Note & Disclaimer



This book is intended for use as a general guideline for helping. It is not a substitute for formal training, experience, or education. Working with battered women is a complex and challenging task and should not be undertaken lightly or without seeking appropriate training and resources. This guide assumes that short-term helpers already have a firm understanding of the nature and dynamics of domestic violence, beyond their own experience or beliefs.

Helpers are urged to seek complete information about the nature and dynamics of domestic violence before engaging in a helping relationship with a battered woman, understanding that they may cause greater harm to the woman if they lack this knowledge. The author has made every attempt to ensure the accuracy and appropriate nature of the material contained herein. The author and the publisher assume no responsibility for how the material is interpreted or applied by the reader.



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Using the Guide



This guide is intended to serve as an aid for people working with battered women on a short-term basis (volunteers in crisis hotline or residential settings, crisis workers, hospital personnel, and informal helpers such as friends). This guide will be useful to helpers interacting with women on a one-time, crisis oriented, relatively informal encounter (such as over the phone) and to those with an ongoing, though still short-term, episodic helping relationship (such as in a shelter). Individuals who will have a long term or counseling relationship with the battered woman will still find these tips helpful, but should seek complete and in-depth strategies for helping over the long term.

This guide is intended for use in training sessions and for ongoing use a quick reference. It can be viewed as a small primer or crash course in interaction skills. Suggestions for further resources are offered at the close of the booklet.

This guide assumes that short-term helpers already have a firm understanding of the nature and dynamics of domestic violence, beyond their own experience or beliefs. Helpers are urged to seek complete information about the nature and dynamics of domestic violence before engaging in a helping relationship with a battered woman, understanding that they may cause greater harm to the woman if they lack this knowledge.

A Note Regarding Battered Men:

Though this booklet refers to women throughout its entirety, it is important to remember that men can also be battered by their significant others. This booklet focuses on women because national crime statistics indicate that the substantial portion of people experiencing domestic violence are female, with a husband or boyfriend as the abuser. However, research suggests that men are also frequent victims, yet are often reluctant to report the abuse they experience. Same-sex couples may also experience violence in the relationship. Please refer to the **Resources** section at the close of this booklet for more information regarding abused men and also same-sex couples, as some other special issues

apply in those circumstances. The techniques in this booklet are applicable to battered people of either sex.

Brief definition of some key concepts:

- ❖ Short term helping relationship—occurs over a period of hours, days or weeks. May often be a one-time crisis oriented encounter. Frequently on an informal, as-needed, crisis basis (with no appointment). Volunteers, crisis workers, hospital workers, and friends often fall into this category.
- ❖ Long term helping relationship—occurs over a period of months, frequently on a formal or weekly appointment basis. Counselors, therapists and close family members or friends fall into this category.
- ❖ Empowering—reminding people that they are in control of their own lives and helping them develop skills and resources for making decisions for themselves and the direction of their life paths (helping people help themselves).
- ❖ Enabling—taking control of someone else’s life and making decisions for them (helping *too* much).

Of Paramount Importance:

Before employing any of the techniques described in this guide, it is of utmost importance to make sure the woman you are speaking with is in a safe place (if on the phone, ask her; if in person, make sure you are both in a safe location).

It will also be helpful and valuable to work on a safety plan with the woman. A sample safety plan can be found in **Appendix A**.



Developing Rapport



Begin by offering caring eye contact and a calm presence. Then, add listening with your heart. Rapport refers to the pattern of communication that develops after demonstrating feelings of interest, understanding, and genuine concern for another. Conveying respect, caring, and being non-judgmental are necessary ingredients for building rapport.



Active Listening Skills & Empathy



Active listening skills involve integrating your genuine caring concern with your ability to listen to the story being shared, both verbally and non-verbally (through body language).

Empathy involves compassion for others—listening to and understanding people and their concerns and being able to communicate that understanding to them.

Empathy involves understanding that people feel, noticing what those feelings are, expressing which feelings you perceive, and communicating that these feelings are okay and are caringly understood by you. (This is **not** the same as “knowing exactly” how someone is feeling and telling them so).

The following techniques can be employed while speaking with battered women, in order to communicate your interest and concern about their experiences:

- ❖ Allow silence—simply “being with” the woman in her difficult time can be extremely helpful.
- ❖ Attend non-verbally—making eye contact, nodding your head, expressing caring facial expressions, and saying “uh huh” appropriately.
- ❖ Paraphrase what you’ve been hearing—this communicates understanding, interest and empathy and lets the woman know that she’s been heard. Suggestions include saying: “So, you are saying that…” or “What I’ve heard you say is…”
- ❖ Reflect feelings back to the woman by paying attention to her tone of voice and non-verbal gestures that communicate her feelings—respond by saying something like “you sound scared, sad, mad, etc” or “sounds like that was a really sad experience for you.” Always ask about her feelings instead of assuming that you know how she feels.
- ❖ Allow and be comfortable with expression of strong emotions. Create a safe space for the woman where it is okay to cry or be mad. Let her know that it is okay to *feel*.



Boundaries



Though it is important to connect on an empathetic (compassionate) level with people you are trying to help, it is also important to maintain your boundaries.

Boundaries can be thought of the lines that separate you from the battered woman. Remember that her problems are not your problems and do not take them on as your own—instead try to help her find her own solutions or resolution. When faced with a battered woman’s intense emotions and experiences, it can be tempting to rush in and “save her” by helping in every possible way. This is not in the best interest of the woman or you. It is best to provide an empathetic listening ear and to empower the woman to take care of her own situation—this will help her feel more capable, competent, and better able to tackle the challenge. Remember to pay attention to the difference between helping someone and *doing for* them.

It is also important to pay attention to your personal competence boundary. This is the boundary between your level of experience, confidence, skills, and general comfort level and the situation you are encountering. If you feel that a woman’s needs are beyond your level, then refer her to someone who is better suited to meeting her needs.



Some Interaction Tips



The following are some suggestions for interacting with battered women:

Do

- ❖ Provide an atmosphere of physical and emotional safety in which the woman can share her story.
- ❖ Listen openly, actively, and responsively.
- ❖ Use open-ended questions. (Questions using “what” or “how”—i.e. “tell me about what has been happening in your relationship”).
- ❖ Listen without judging.
- ❖ Provide validation of the woman’s story, strengths, and right to control her own life and to live a violence free life.
- ❖ Be optimistic.
- ❖ Occasionally use appropriate humor.
- ❖ Draw on and respect the woman’s own knowledge and strengths.
- ❖ Be a source of emotional support for when she just needs to talk.
- ❖ Provide information, resources, and assist her in learning about alternatives.
- ❖ Provide suggestions for action while supporting the woman’s right to make her own choices.
- ❖ Use gentle challenges to further explore comments or feelings—challenges involve drawing attention to significant discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal cues (i.e. the woman says “I’m fine, I’m fine,” but is crying) or between a statement and circumstance (i.e. the man has been arrested for assaulting the woman on multiple occasions and she says “he won’t do it again”).
- ❖ Verbalize implied beliefs or feelings in order to clarify whether your interpretation is correct.
- ❖ Identify the injustice (it isn’t fair and it isn’t her fault).
- ❖ Be calm and accepting.
- ❖ Explain all information thoroughly.
- ❖ Minimize social and economic differences.
- ❖ Convey warmth, respect, and concern.

- ❖ Be content to just be there for the woman.
- ❖ Follow the woman's cues—use a lead-in question or comment and then proceed based on the person's response (talkative vs. not). Pay special attention to non-verbal communications.
- ❖ Remember you don't have to make small talk.
- ❖ Be comfortable with silence—you are not there to make conversation, you are there to provide what the woman needs and that may just be a soda, or a listening ear, a counseling referral, or a shoulder to cry on.
- ❖ Always offer a resource if you cannot provide what the woman needs or answer their questions.
- ❖ Remember your personal competence level and refer the woman elsewhere if you feel in over your head.
- ❖ Do say:
 - It isn't your fault.
 - Your reactions are normal.
 - Your reactions/feelings are okay.
 - It is understandable that you feel this way.
 - It is okay to talk to me about it—I'm here for that purpose.
 - You are not going crazy.

Of special importance for formal helpers (people who are not friends or family members):

- ❖ Remember boundaries! Operate within the parameter of the agency with which you are involved.
- ❖ Mobilize the resources of the community, family, and friends whenever possible.

Don't

- ❖ *Blame the victim* (this is one of the most important things you can remember to avoid and to convey to the woman—it is **not** her fault).
- ❖ Tell the woman how or what she “should” be feeling, believing, doing, or thinking.
- ❖ Take control from the woman by trying to make decisions for her.
- ❖ Deny or cut short expressions of grief or feelings.
- ❖ Dominate the woman's time—be responsive to cues that she may not want to talk to you.
- ❖ Intellectualize about the situation to the point that you forget to acknowledge and explore feelings.
- ❖ Ask questions using “why.”
- ❖ Be insensitive, cold, artificial, or stilted.

- ❖ Allow silences to become too long or awkward.
- ❖ Change the subject or ignore embarrassing comments or circumstances.
- ❖ Laugh or make inappropriate jokes.
- ❖ Become negative, pessimistic, or depressed.
- ❖ Promote your own beliefs, values, attitudes, or feelings.
- ❖ Make small talk to fill silence.
- ❖ Take on a larger or more involved role than you feel comfortable with.
- ❖ Focus on your own past history with abuse.
- ❖ Convey disappointment if the woman returns to an abusive relationship.
- ❖ Don't say:
 - It could be worse.
 - It is best if you just keep busy.
 - I know just how you feel; or, I understand how you feel (saying “your feelings are understandable” is okay).
 - You need to get on with your life.
 - You'll get over it.

Finally, remember to not only speak from a book, but to speak from your heart—from a non-judgmental place of acceptance and empathy.

Of special importance for formal helpers (people who are not friends or family members):

- ❖ Avoid over-engaging and enabling (i.e. offering to let her live with you while she gets on her feet).

A Note About Empathy and the “Don’t” List:

As noted previously, forming empathetic connections with people involves communicating understanding of their feelings. This may seem in conflict with the advice not to tell someone that you “know just how you feel.” The explanation for this is that, while you can understand *how* people might feel, you can never fully understand *feeling* the feelings in their totality or likewise fully understand the person’s experience. Each person’s experience of abuse is different. Telling someone you “understand” frequently causes a shut-off in communication as the person you are talking to has a unique experience and does not feel like you have “been there.” Using empathy involves the capacity to understand how someone is feeling and how it might be possible to feel that way, not saying that you feel or have felt the same way.



Steps in the Complete Helping Process



Developing rapport and using your active listening skills as a woman shares her story are very valuable components of the helping process and there are further elements to the complete helping process as well. It is possible to complete all of these steps during one phone call or conversation, but more interaction may be necessary. If your interactions with a battered woman allow sufficient time to do so, you may use all of the following steps to guide your work with her.

- ❖ Make contact—develop rapport, use empathy, and active listening (remembering to first find out whether she is in immediate danger).

- ❖ Explore the situation—find out about what has happened in the past, what is happening now, and what are her immediate needs for the future.
- ❖ Look at possible solutions that address the immediate needs—figure out alternatives, pros and cons, and set priorities.
- ❖ Take action—take one step at a time to move toward the solutions discussed.
- ❖ Follow-up with the woman on her progress and situation (remember that you may have a one-time encounter only and will not get to know the outcome of your interaction).



Sharing Pain



As you listen to the stories of battered women it is important to develop the capacity to *absorb some of their pain*. This is accomplished through using your active listening skills and your capacity for empathy. Remaining open to the emotional pain of others and really *listening* to what they are saying allows people the often unique experience of being able to heap their hurt upon you and having it be received without judgment, or without your expecting anything in return. This is a rare experience for many people and it can be a powerful tool to help them cope with their experience, even if only for a moment. Most people shy away from pain and by opening yourself to the painful experiences of another you form an immensely meaningful connection (even if for a short time).

In listening to people's stories and absorbing part of their pain, it is important to remember to be receptive to their pain, to take it in, to connect with the

person, and then to breathe it out and *let it go*. You do not make their pain your pain; you just alleviate their burden for a time.

Trying to avoid taking in the full emotional impact of painful stories quickly leads to a lack of empathy, connection, and understanding. The secret is developing the ability to let the pain of others in and then let it go again.

A Note for Professionally Trained Helpers

Social workers and counselors are warned repeatedly during their education not to “take their clients home” with them. Despite this, it is both possible and valuable to carry people's stories with you without carrying a corresponding wound on your own psyche. This is accomplished by accepting the pain of others, then releasing the pain without forgetting the accompanying stories.



The Advocate Face



One of the most important things to cultivate in a shelter setting is what is often termed your “advocate face.” The advocate face is a collection of reactions, attitudes, and mannerisms that short-term helpers project when working with women in crisis.

The advocate face shows only acceptance and compassion. The advocate face does not show disbelief, fear, disgust, or pass judgment. The advocate face is constant and it inspires trust. The advocate face allows you to create a bond with an abused woman and it helps you cope with being faced with vicarious trauma. The advocate face maintains a calm, welcoming, and accepting presence. It encourages the development of trust. The non-judging advocate face helps women process and overcome their painful and overwhelming experiences, because it says: “You can tell me absolutely anything and I will not run away from you. I will absorb

part of your pain and I will help you help yourself out of it.” It is in this way that trust and respect are born and grow. It is how women make it through.



Self-Care



Helping women who are dealing with an intensely stressful situation can be a very emotionally challenging task. Take time out for yourself if you need it. Make sure to ask for help from your own friends, family members, colleagues, or a professional if you feel stressed out or overwhelmed. It may be helpful to remember the following things (these can also be suggested to the woman in crisis):

- ❖ Eat, drink, & sleep as normally as you can.
- ❖ Do not turn to using alcohol or substances for self-soothing.
- ❖ Breathe deeply.
- ❖ Try to relax your body through yoga or gentle stretching.
- ❖ Use journaling to explore your feelings.



Resources



If you need more help: Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

Books:

Crisis Intervention, by Donna Aguilera, 1998 Mosby-Year Book

Into the Light: A Guide for Battered Women, Leslie Cantrell, 1994 Kidsrights

Field Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Workers in Major Disasters, by Deborah DeWolfe. Available without charge from the Center for Mental Health Services, P.O. Box 42490, Washington, D.C. 20015 or: www.mentalhealth.org

The Skilled Helper, by Gerald Egan, 1998 Brooks & Cole Publishing Company

Getting Free: You Can End Abuse and Take Back Your Life, Ginny NiCarthy, 1986 Seal Press

Websites:

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence:

<http://www.ncadv.org/>

National Domestic Violence Hotline:

<http://www.ndvh.org/>

Battered Men:

<http://www.batteredmen.com/>

Battering in Same-Sex Relationships:

<http://www.nwnetwork.org/>



Appendix A Safety Plan



Special thanks to the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic Violence for granting permission to reprint this Safety Plan.

Preparing for a Crisis:

- ❖ I can leave
 - If I decide to leave, I will _____
_____ (practice how to get out of the house safely. Which doors, windows, etc, will I use?).
 - I can keep my purse and car keys ready and put them _____, so I can leave quickly.
 - I will leave money and an extra set of keys at _____
 - I will keep copies of important documents or keys at _____
- ❖ I can get help
 - I can tell _____ about the violence and request that they call the police if they hear noises coming from my home.

- I can teach my children how to use the telephone to contact the police, fire department, and ambulance. I will make sure they know our address.
 - I will use _____ as my code word on the phone or in person with my children or my friends so they will call for help if needed.
 - If I have to leave my home, I will go to _____.
 - If I cannot go to the above location, I can go to _____.
 - The domestic violence shelter's hotline is _____. I can call it if I need shelter or to talk to someone.
 - If it is not safe to talk openly, I will use _____ as the code word or signal to my children that we are going to go, or to my family or friends that we are coming.
- ❖ I can use my judgment
- When I expect my partner and I are going to argue, I will try to move to a space that is lowest risk, such as _____. (Try to avoid arguments in the bathroom, garage, kitchen, near weapons, or in a room without an outside exit).
 - I will use my judgment and intuition. If the situation is serious, I can try to give my partner what he wants to calm him down. I have to protect myself until the children and I are out of danger.
 - I can also teach age-appropriate strategies to my children.

Planning to Leave:

- I will call a domestic violence program and get help making my plans. The hotline number for the nearest program is _____.
- I will leave money and an extra set of keys with _____, so I can leave quickly.
- I will keep copies of important documents or keys at _____.
- I will leave extra clothes with _____.
- I will keep important numbers and change for phone calls with me at all times. I know that my partner can learn who I've been talking to by looking at phone bills, so I can see if friends will let me use their phones and/or phone cards.
- I will ask _____ and _____ to see who would be able to let me stay with them or lend me some money.
- I can increase my independence by opening a bank account and getting a credit card in my own name; by taking classes or getting job skills; by getting copies of all of the important documents or papers I might need and keeping them with _____.
- I can rehearse my escape plan and, if appropriate, practice it with my children.

After I Leave:

- I can have the locks on my doors and windows changed.
- I can replace wooden doors with metal ones.

- I can install security systems, including additional locks, window bars, poles to wedge against doors, etc.
- I can buy rope ladders to be used for escape from second-floor windows.
- I can install smoke detectors and put fire extinguishers on each floor of my home.
- I will teach my children to make a collect call or a 911 call if they are concerned about their safety.
- I can tell people who can take care of my children, who has permission to pick them up, and make sure they know how to recognize those people.
- I will give the people who usually take care of my children copies of custody and protection orders, as well as emergency numbers.

At Work and in Public

- I can inform my boss, any security personnel, and the employee assistance program, if available, about my situation. The EAP number is_____.
- I can ask_____ to screen my calls at work.
- When leaving work, I can_____.
- If there is trouble when traveling to and from work, I can_____.
- I can change my patterns—avoid stores, banks, doctor’s appointments, self-service laundries and _____, places where my partner might find me.

- I can tell_____ and_____ that I am no longer with my partner and ask them to call the police if they believe my children or I are in danger.

With an Order of Protection

- I will keep my protection order _____.
(Always keep it on or near your person).
- I will give copies of my protection order to the local police or sheriff and to departments in towns where I visit friends or family.
- I will give copies to my employer, my religious advisor, my closest friend, my children’s school and day-care center, and _____.
- If my partner destroys my order or I lose it, I can get another copy from the court that issued it.
- If my partner violates the order, I can call the police and report a violation, contact my attorney, call my domestic violence program advocate, and/or advise the court of the violation.
- I can call a domestic violence program if I have questions about how to enforce an order or if I have problems getting it enforced.

My Emotional Health:

- If I am feeling lonely, down, confused, or in need of support, I can call_____ or the domestic violence hotline_____.

- If I have left my partner and am considering returning, I will call _____ or spend time with _____ before I make a decision.
- I can attend support groups, workshops, or classes at the local domestic violence program or _____ so I can build a support system, learn skills or get information.
- I will remind myself daily of my best qualities. They are _____, _____, _____, and _____.
- I will look at how or when I drink alcohol or use other drugs. If I am going to drink or use other drugs, I will do it in a place where people are committed to my safety.

Items to Take When Leaving:

- Identification for myself
- Children’s birth certificates
- My birth certificate
- Social Security cards
- School, vaccination records
- Money, checkbook, bankbooks, ATM cards
- Credit cards
- Medication
- Keys—car, house, work
- Driver’s license, car registration
- Insurance papers
- Public assistance ID/Medicaid cards
- Passports, green cards, work permits
- Divorce or separation papers
- Lease, rental agreement, or house deed
- Car/mortgage payment book

- Children’s toys, security blankets, stuffed animals
- Sentimental items, photos
- Personalized safety plan

Keep Your Plan in a Safe Place:

If you are unable to find a safe place to keep a written safety plan where your partner won’t find it, maybe you can ask a friend or family member to keep a copy for you. If not, you can ask your local domestic violence shelter to keep your plan for you. Whether it is safe to write down your plan or not, it is still important to make one.

This safety plan (with only minor variation) was used with permission from the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Author Biography

Molly Remer graduated with a master's degree in social work from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2000. She also earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Missouri-Rolla. The bulk of her professional experience has been in short-term crisis oriented settings. Presently, she works as a professional volunteer in an agency serving families of critically ill children. In the past, she was a full-time unpaid coordinator of volunteers at a shelter for battered women and has been a crisis-line volunteer in a shelter for battered women as well. She is also an author and artisan and lives with her husband and son in central Missouri.

The above bio and booklet were published in 2003. Molly now has four children and works, writes, and creates via <http://brigidsgrove.com>