

Helping Victims Break the Cycle of Abuse: Four Keys for Those Trying to Help

Watching someone you love be hurt in a relationship is very painful whether the abuse is emotional, physical, or sexual. When our best efforts to help only result in our loved one becoming angry, pulling away, or distrusting us, the pain increases.

My parents didn't understand why their quiet, helpful child turned into a withdrawn and angry teen. I didn't understand either. I became suicidal for years before marrying an abusive man I barely knew shortly after my nineteenth birthday.

The abusive relationship almost destroyed me, but I was able to escape after a year and a half and put my life back together. This time I married an amazing man and eventually uncovered dissociative amnesia covering ritualistic abuse, childhood sexual abuse, and dozens of rapes.

There are three paths a victim might take after being separated from their current abuser- returning to or getting into another abusive relationship, becoming an abuser, or breaking the cycle of abuse. I learned firsthand what helped me overcome and found that the same thing helped others as well. Now I am an Abuse Life Coach and help others who have been abused take charge of their lives. These are the things you can do to help someone you know who is being abused.

The three paths after abuse-

Victim: allowing continued abuse

Perpetrator: abusing others

Survivor: Breaking the cycle of abuse

Share Truth, Don't Control

The victim is being controlled by their abuser. When a well-meaning friend or family member uses control to try to help them, such as “I’ll tend your kids, but only if you leave the relationship,” it creates the same feelings within the victim as the abuser gives them. As a victim I had to choose the lesser of two evils, I did what my abusers wanted so they wouldn’t hurt me in far worse ways.

What helped me escape was counseling as a teen, the support of a good friend, and knowing I could move in with my parents at any time. My mother and my therapist tried to help, but I wasn’t ready. However, it laid the foundation for my ability to escape.

My abuser cut me off from my family, but I was able to maintain minimal contact with one person from my past who listened without

If they make a comment that is not normal, such as “I’m tired of him making me send selfies to prove I’m where I say I am.” Tell them that’s not normal, or that your partner has never asked you to do that. Then drop it and move on.

judgement and gave little bits of truth over the course of our conversations. He helped me understand that my relationship was not normal. He offered to pick me up immediately if I ever decided to leave. He helped me see that I had choices, rather than trying to control me by telling me what to do, even if it was in my best interest.

Even though I got upset at his gentle suggestion to leave, it remained in my head. I held onto it, and I began planning how to get out. It took me six months, but I did it. I was the only one that could get myself out of the situation, no one else. In deciding for myself that I didn’t want to be in an abusive relationship, I made sure not to escape one situation just to jump right back into another one.

Actively Listen

Active listening means you are listening, and not thinking about what you want to say or how you can make them do what you think is best. A victim needs to be heard, their voices have been silenced by their abusers. A victim might say outlandish things to get a reaction, to see if you are really listening to them and how you will respond.

The best thing you can do is to hear them. Hear anything they have to say. You don't need to fix their problems, only they can do that. Actively listening requires that you hear what they are saying, acknowledge them, and refrain from judgements. Any time the word should enters a conversation, you will know you are using guilt to pressure someone into the standards society has placed upon them or you.

Validate the victim's feelings, no matter what they are. Never tell them to forget about it and move on or that things couldn't be as bad as they say they are. If someone listened to me, I let myself talk a little more, always cautious. I tested them to see if they actually cared about me. Those who judged, refused to hear me, or told me how I should feel or act got the wall of China. Those who listened got a tiny portion of trust.

Active listening does not mean you stay silent, or let the victim verbally abuse you. Let them know you have heard. If the victim tries to attack you, calmly state that you are happy to hear them and support them, but you won't tolerate that type of talk. This is a powerful example of what a healthy relationship looks like. While you may feel like you are failing, know that you are not, you are feeding them truth.

Help the victim see truth and reality, rather than what the abuser has created as reality. When I stated that I had to do whatever my abuser wanted me to do, my friend calmly said, "No, you don't." While initially I felt like he didn't understand, I came to realize that he was right. In understanding my choice in the matter, I had the power to make different choices. Sometimes I let the victim talk through the possibilities and give them the truth of the consequences, but I always make it clear that it is their choice.

Be Supportive, Don't Save Them

Leaving an abuser is difficult and scary. I had no self-esteem, few skills, and no money of my own. My parents let me move back home with no judgement and no conditions, though I knew there were certain things they would not allow such as alcohol, drugs or men. They gave me space and quietly took care of me in any way I allowed them to. Many people don't have that type of safety net to allow them to deal with the pain of leaving while still having boundaries in place that will help them stay away from harmful coping mechanisms.

If someone in an abusive relationship wants to leave but doesn't see a way out, that is the time to let them know what resources there are to help them. Let them know you are there for support, and what community resources are available. Be clear what you can and can't do for them. They need an example of

someone who has good boundaries. They need to know that you will support them without telling them what to do, but not save them either. To be effective, this must come from a place of love, not judgement.

There will be sadness in ending a relationship, even one that was abusive. Just like anyone else, they need to grieve the loss. Give consistent encouragement. Emotional abuse is always present before other types of abuse surface and they will need help overcoming the negative self-image their abuser has reinforced within them. They might feel worthless, ugly, unloveable, incapable, ashamed, dumb, or any number of other things. Reassurance will get through over time. Make sure not to lavish things that aren't true about them or they will know they can't trust you.

Be clear what you can and can't do for them. Enabling means that you let them use you, creating a situation where both parties are helpless. Empower them and yourself.

Be Patient

It can be hard to go on with your own life while you know someone you love is being hurt. Change takes time, sometimes lots of time. Don't give up. Keep loving them within your own healthy boundaries. Keep sharing truth, being supportive, and listening. Know that the person being abused sometimes lashes out. Let them know you still love them, but don't allow them to turn into an abuser by offering up yourself as their punching bag. Be firm, be loving, and be patient.

There is hope and healing. Encourage your loved one to seek out the things that will help them overcome and become strong. It might be talk therapy, meditation, hypnotherapy, or spirituality. There is no right way, only the way that works for the individual.

No one saved me. I did that myself. But I couldn't have done it without help. I needed to lean on the strength and wisdom of others I felt safe with. In making choices myself I became strong, learned who I was, and what I wanted out of life. Now I tell people that I am no longer a victim, but more than a survivor. I am a thriver. It took years to get to this place in my life.

For me surviving was the first, steep climb. Eventually, I wanted more. I wanted to be happy, live life to the fullest, and heal every part of my body and soul. I kept pushing forward, doing what I needed to achieve the healing I knew I could find with enough time and hard work. Now I wake up every day grateful and excited to participate in my life and help others heal and learn to become thrivers themselves.

*Healing is possible. Feel free to email me at sandra@sandraritytting.com with questions, to find out more about my book, *Broken No More* which chronicles my own healing process, to schedule speaking engagements, or to become one of my clients. God Bless!*
