

## **How To Support Friends and Loved Ones Through an Abusive Relationship**

This is a question that comes up a lot. It's hugely frustrating, as well as difficult and painful to watch someone you care about struggle in the quicksand of an abusive relationship.

It's frustrating because we can see all the things that they can't. We'd love to help them – which probably means getting them to adopt the solution that we know is right. But they don't see it, and they're not going to do it.

It's difficult because you start to feel like you're caught up in Groundhog Day. They reach the point of leaving, they may well even leave... and then the whole thing goes around again, and again. Maybe the same partner, maybe a different one. But you hear the same story again and again.

In the end your emotional investment wears you out. You end up feeling resentful towards them for what they're putting you through.

It's painful because watching someone turn into a shadow of their former self is tragic. All the more so when there are children who are also suffering. Witnessing the pain of someone you care about and not being able to make it go away, really taxes us.

So how do we support them?

First we need to be clear about the distinction between helping and supporting them. We cannot help them, i.e. move them on even so much as a millimetre. What we can do is be there for them. That doesn't mean making ourselves available to listen 100% of the time.

What it does mean is simply acknowledging and respecting their right to make choices, or else stick with the situation. However disastrous it may appear from the outside, they are making the best choices they can at the time. They already feel pretty bad about themselves; your continued respect may make more of a difference than you could imagine.

Second, we mustn't give up on them. There is a very human temptation, at some point, to say "Whatever", and walk away. Abusers create a void around their victim that leaves the victim even more dependent. It's very easy to end up becoming irritated with the victim. When you do, you're actually colluding with the abuser.

If an abused loved one can't hold on to the thought of life beyond their relationship, then that is something important we can do for them. This simply means believing and trusting that they will come out the other side of this. Even if neither of you can predict the timescale.

Third, we can hold onto the knowledge of who they truly are. Over time, living with a self-appointed King of the Jungle reduces them to feeling little better than a cockroach. We can hold – and remind them of- their gifts, their qualities, their

uniqueness, their loveliness, until they are able to do it for themselves. Our vision may be the resource that starts them on their journey to recovery.

It doesn't even have to be a major holding operation on our part. Remember, abuse leaves its victims starving because it systematically closes down any channel of nourishment. Often, by opening up a channel we offer them more sustenance than we could possibly imagine.

To a friend of mine who has suffered hugely at the hands of a homicidally brutal partner and lost sight of herself, I sent a list of the blessings that she did not see. The list is incredibly empowering for her and she treasures it. It reads like this:

- 1) You are blessed with good and loving friends.
- 2) You inspire great love in those around you.
- 3) You have two wonderful children - maybe not easy, but definitely wonderful.
- 4) You have enormous strength.
- 5) You have a vast reservoir of talents.
- 6) You are an extraordinarily loving and supportive person.
- 7) You have a talent for creating beauty.
- 8) You have an extraordinarily attractive personality
- 9) You have formidable energy
- 10) All this and there is still, I'd guess, about another 85% of capacity that you are currently not able to access efficiently.

My friend is unique and gifted. So are all our friends and loved ones. Another person's list may be different, but it will be no less extraordinary. We are all uniquely gifted and wonderful. Yet we may need to have our eyes opened to this fact. Repeatedly.

We support others best when we offer them a valid, empowering vision of themselves. We support ourselves when we do the self-same thing for ourselves.

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