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There's No Excuse for Abuse (Part 1 of a four part series)

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(Note: The majority of those who are abused are women and most abusers are male; therefore, respective pronouns will be used in this series. However, men also can be abused.)

October is recognized as National Domestic Violence Awareness Month and many community organizations hold programs and distribute materials to alert employees, employers and community leaders to the prevalence and severity of domestic violence. However, because partner abuse is so prevalent, the issue needs attention year round. In 1996, Carla Stovall, former Kansas attorney general, speaking at the National Rural Families Conference, said there's nothing domesticated about this type of violence; she called it "undomesticated violence." She lost a friend who was murdered by the friend's ex-husband.

In this series of four articles, information will be provided from the Family Violence Prevention Fund, the Nebraska and Kansas Coalitions Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, K-State Research and Extension, Nebraska Cooperative Extension, and many other research-based sources. You will learn more about how you can help a woman who is being abused, how you can offer support to children in abusive situations, how you may approach potential abusers, how to access resources, steps that can be taken in the workplace to help end domestic violence, what to teach children about partner abuse, how to raise community awareness, and how you can be an advocate for family well-being and for the prevention of domestic violence. In 90-95% of domestic violence cases, the abused person is female; therefore, the abused person will be referred to as a female in this series. Some resources, such as outreach services, are available to men who are abused but they often are limited. Any abused person, regardless of gender or individual circumstance, must be persistent in asking for help. In these articles, the terms domestic violence and partner abuse are used interchangeably.

Whether you know it or not, there are some people in your life who are facing abuse or violence at home, maybe a friend, co-worker, neighbor, or even a family member. For many reasons, it's often hard for a woman to admit she is being abused by the partner who is supposed to love her, nurture her and be her lifetime partner. She needs someone to validate that she is being abused, that the violent behavior directed towards her is unacceptable, wrong, not to be tolerated, and is a crime. She needs to know that she's not overreacting, there's nothing wrong with her, and that she didn't cause the abuse to happen. Domestic violence is a dominance and control issue (See the Dominance and Control Wheel). There are many forms of abuse besides the catastrophic physical and sexual abuse, such as emotional abuse, economic abuse, spiritual abuse, manipulation using children, and making threats. There are no easy answers and no easy solutions but by becoming more knowledgeable about domestic violence you can

help to improve the quality of life for many women, men, and families. One person can make a significant difference. You can make a difference.

There are many ways you can sense abuse of an acquaintance. A woman may have unexplained injuries and bruises, or explanations that don't make sense. Perhaps her children are frequently upset or withdrawn and won't say why. She may cancel plans without an excuse or take extra precautions not to upset her partner. You may hear her being ridiculed or put down. She may tell you about some of the inappropriate behavior that is directed towards her. If you know a person who is likely being abused by her partner, she and her children need your help. However, one of the most dangerous times for a woman with an abusive partner is when she tries to leave or has left the abuser. But women will not be successful in their attempts to end abuse without supportive help from family, friends, and the formal network.

The following are suggestions of how you might help a women living with an abusive partner:

- If you don't want to get personally involved for any reason, encourage her to contact local shelter services or any of the contacts listed at the end of this article. In an emergency, contact 911.
- Ask direct questions about her situation.
- Give her time to talk; ask the same questions a few days later. Research indicates that women want their support network to be persistent in asking questions about the abuse.
- Listen without judging.
- Let her know you care about her and that she's not responsible for the abuse.
- Explain that physical violence in a relationship is never acceptable.
- Make sure she knows she's not alone. Many women are abused and find it difficult to leave their abuser. She may be fearful for her life, may be economically dependent, may feel safer knowing his whereabouts, may have emotional ties to her abuser, or may not feel she has any other option. Instead of judging her for staying, ask the question "why does he abuse her?"
- Let her know partner abuse usually gets worse instead of decreasing.
- Explain that domestic violence is a crime.
- Give her written information about how to protect herself. Small cards or booklets work well so she can keep them hidden.
- Keep in mind that the abuser may screen her telephone calls and visits, as well as information.
- Provide information about local resources.
- Contact local services yourself for advice and guidance (e.g. law enforcement, shelter services, mental health, trained religious leaders, Cooperative Extension, legal aid)
- She may need help finding a place to live or to store belongings. She may need assistance to escape. Encourage her to store some money in a secret place. Use your good judgment and common sense when helping her find a safe place. It is best to refer her to shelter or outreach services as they are trained to help women living with an abusive partner and to be safe.
- Continue to be her friend even if she stays in the abusive relationship.
- Express your concern for her safety.
- Express your concern for her children's safety.
- Encourage her to tell a doctor or nurse about the abuse.
- Encourage her to document all verbal threats and physical evidence.
- If she's being stalked, help her find ways to keep safe.
- If she is being stalked on the job, notify the supervisor of the situation. Ask about harassment policies or security measures to keep the workplace and employees safe.
- If she has a Domestic Violence Protection Order or Harassment Protection Order, let her know that the abuser is breaking the law if he has any contact with her at all. Encourage her to call the police.
- Encourage her to keep any letters or taped telephone messages from the abuser.

- Encourage her to keep important papers in one safe place, such as driver's license, birth certificates, checkbook, Social Security cards, and other important papers for herself and her children.
- If you see or hear an assault in progress, call the police.
- Always use common sense before getting involved and when assisting a person in an abusive partner relationship. Safety must be a priority. Shelter and outreach service advocates are trained to deal with domestic violence and are a helpful resource.

Help a child living in an abusive home:

You may know a family in which the father is abusive to the mother. There are some things you know for sure—the children in the family are witnessing domestic violence, are hurting, and may be in physical danger. The experience of living with abuse is terrifying, traumatic and psychologically harmful for many children. Children may feel guilty, embarrassed, ashamed or frightened and often try to keep the abuse a secret. Although the children may be old enough to realize the family needs some help, they often don't have the skills to access resources. Since the abuser often isolates his partner from family, friends and other social contacts, it may be difficult for the woman and her children to seek outside intervention. In many cases where women have reached out for support, they have been negated, discounted and blamed. Therefore, if you have the opportunity to be involved, try to intervene and offer supportive help to the woman and her children.

The following are suggestions for helping children who witness domestic violence:

- If you don't want to get personally involved for any reason, encourage the mother to contact local shelter services or any of the contacts listed below. If you suspect child abuse or neglect contact Health and Human Services immediately. In an emergency, contact 911 or the local police department.
- Show children that you care about them by making time to spend with them and letting them know you are a "safe" person to talk to.
- Ask the children questions directly and ask them if they or their mother have been hurt.
- You can try talking in general terms explaining that the child is not responsible and that abuse is wrong. The child needs to know that you know about the abuse.
- Offer to spend time away from home with the child. You may want to invite them to join you for a family outing or picnic, or to go out for a soda pop.
- If the child opens up to you, make sure to ask if the child is being physically hurt. If so, contact Health and Human Services or the local police department to make a report.
- Consider approaching the child's mother to offer help.
- Talk about some ways children can protect themselves during an attack. For example, they can get out of the way by going to their bedroom or the house of a friend or neighbor. They can call 911 for help.
- Don't abandon the children once you've made the report. They need continued friendship with an adult they trust.
- Let the child know how you can be reached at any time of the day, for any reason.

For help in domestic abuse or violence call any of the following:

In the event of an attack or immediate threat, call 911 or your local police.

Violence Wheel

Outside Nebraska or Kansas, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-SAFE (7233) (voice) or 1-800-787-3224 (TDD).

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