

PLAY IT SAFE DEALING WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

There's no denying it – domestic violence is a serious problem. It can have a devastating impact on a marriage, leaving a couple's relationship in complete shambles. To make matters worse, it's alarmingly common: research indicates that as many as 33% of women and 25% of men have been victims of violence in their intimate relationships.

Some of these individuals feel highly conflicted about their experience. On the one hand, they're sick of being victimized; on the other hand, they don't want to abandon the relationship. Others are anxious to get out of harm's way, but hesitate to leave because they're afraid of how their partner may respond. It's not easy to confront the violence, and it's even harder to put the marriage back together once you've made up your mind to do something about it. Abuse is usually rooted in deeply entrenched patterns of thought and behavior, and you can't expect to reverse those patterns overnight.

If you're a victim of domestic abuse, you need to take decisive action right away. Your attitude toward physical violence must be one of zero tolerance. "Safety first" is the basic rule of thumb. This becomes all the more important when there are children in the household. Here are four things you can do to counteract violence while keeping yourself (and your kids) as S.A.F.E. as possible:



1) SIGNALS

The first step is to increase your awareness of behaviors that have the potential to ignite uncontrollable anger. Anger often feels like it comes on suddenly, but explosions are usually the result of a slow building process. Both you and your spouse need to identify your personal signals of escalating emotional and behavioral intensity. What kinds of thoughts, emotions, and situations typically cause you to get angry? What physical sensations do you notice in your body when this begins to happen? If your mate is the one who tends to snap, can you recognize the signs that a meltdown is coming? Pin down the answers to these questions ahead of time, and you'll be in a better position to avert trouble and choose a safer response.

3) FEELINGS

As noted above, feelings can signal the approach of violent outbursts. Anger is the immediate culprit, of course, but it's important to realize that anger is a secondary emotion. In other words, it's usually the product of a mixture of other emotions: fear, for example, or humiliation, shame, abandonment, or sadness. You and your spouse can prevent anger from gaining the upper hand by keeping a finger on the pulse of these primary emotions. If you can identify the source of the problem, you'll be able to care for yourself in a safer and more efficient way. Remember, your feelings matter even if your partner is the one who tends to become angry and violent!

2) ACCOUNTABILITY

Victims of violence are never responsible for their partner's behavior. Never. It's vital to keep this basic truth in mind, because many abusive spouses are adept at brainwashing their mates into accepting the blame for episodes of domestic violence. There's only one way to stop the destructive cycle: each partner has to become accountable for his or her own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Shifting blame will only increase the amount of fear and danger in the relationship.

4) ESCALATION-PLAN

It's not good enough to say, "This will never happen again." If you really want to avoid violence and ensure safety, you need to have an established escalation-plan in place. If you're in imminent danger, don't hesitate: call 911 without delay. If several days have passed since the last violent episode and there's been a "cooling off" period, you may still be only a few ill-received words away from another eruption. If you think this is a possibility, find a safe, perhaps undisclosed location where you can go before contacting your spouse and confronting him or her with the need for change. Check with an attorney about the implications of leaving your home for an extended time, since in some states you could run into difficulties if the reasons for your action are left undocumented. Once you and your children are safe, create a crisis by giving your partner an ultimatum. Say something like, "Either we get counseling, or I'm moving out until you're ready to help me resolve this problem." Separation may be what it takes to open an abusive spouse's eyes to the severity of the situation.

Focus on the Family's Counseling staff can provide you with referrals to qualified marriage and family therapists practicing in your area. They would also consider it a privilege to discuss your concerns with you over the phone if you think this might be helpful.



FOR A FREE CONSULTATION

CONTACT OUR COUNSELING DEPARTMENT

Monday - Friday between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time at 855-771-HELP (4357)

The Family Help Center staff member who answers the phone will arrange for a licensed counselor to call you back. One of them will be in touch just as soon as they're able.