

Family and Friends' Guide to Domestic Violence: How to Listen, Talk and Take Action When Someone You Care About is Being Abused

by Elaine Weiss, EdD

Review by Brigid McCaw, MD, MPH, MS

The year was 1980, 27 years ago. I was in medical school, working hard to learn how to save lives. Though I didn't know it, my sister was working much harder—to save her own life and keep from being killed by her fiancé.

At that time, I couldn't make sense of the changes I saw in her. She left her university studies; she limited her time with friends and family; she became tenuous about her opinions and future goals. These didn't fit with the smart, self-assured, talented person I grew up with. Although her fiancé seemed charming and confident, something made me uncomfortable. Why wouldn't she be honest about what was going on, or better yet, simply assert herself and leave this guy?

As she remained in what seemed like a downward spiral, I felt discouraged, frustrated, annoyed, and then perplexed when she suddenly moved to a city hundreds of miles away. Just she and her fiancé—no job, no friends, no family—and she refused to get an answering machine so we could contact her.

I just didn't get it. This is true for many of the people who know someone dealing with an abusive relationship. It's difficult to recognize the tactic of isolation that is frequently used to break down an individual's ability to access resources that could be helpful. It's almost impossible to understand what it is like to live in an atmosphere of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. And, though friends and family may sincerely want to say and do the right thing, they may unwittingly hurt more than they help.

Family and Friends' Guide to Domestic Violence fills a much-needed gap in the literature about domestic violence. This insightful, highly readable book teaches family members and friends, and those in the helping professions, that domestic abuse is complicated and that escaping from abuse is never a simple act. Elaine Weiss, EdD, an established writer and educator whose other book¹ is focused on the stories of women who successfully survived, now gently leads

readers through the dark, often distressing realities of domestic violence. She addresses the issues that often stymie friends and relative of victims: Why do abusers abuse? Why do victims put up with it? She helps differentiate a "bad relationship" from the pattern of purposeful power and control tactics that characterize an abusive relationship. She does an excellent job of elucidating the complexities of psychological abuse and tackling special problems such as dating violence. Most importantly, she tells readers what they can do to help. Simply put, they can listen, talk, and take action. Ms Weiss offers concrete suggestions for each of these.

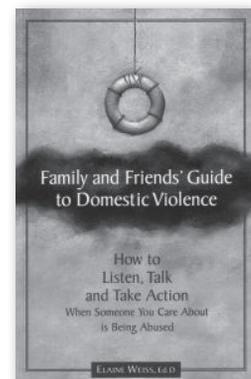
What makes *Family and Friends' Guide* remarkable is the author's ability to strike a balance between compassion—for victims, for their children, for their relatives and friends—and pragmatism. This is not an "everyone can succeed if they just

try hard enough" self-help book. The author is clear: escaping from an abusive relationship is complex and potentially dangerous. It takes time. If you are a friend or relative of a victim, providing support will not be easy. But the more friends and family know about domestic abuse, the better able they are to offer useful support.

My sister, like the majority of women dealing with domestic violence, found her way to safety, made a healthy home for her daughter, and developed a fulfilling career and caring community. She did it on her own, with tremendous courage, faith, and endurance that continues to inspire me. Now a quarter century later, Elaine Weiss has provided a valuable resource for family, friends, and health care providers. It should be included in health education libraries; it is an important resource to help physicians become more comfortable approaching this personally difficult clinical problem. ❖

Reference

1. Weiss E. *Surviving domestic violence: voices of women who broke free*. Volcano, CA: Volcano Press; 2004.



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... a valuable resource for family, friends, and health care providers.

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