

Helping Someone with Shalom Bayis:

Guidelines for anyone who is trying to help

How you respond when someone comes to you about shalom bayis issues can make all the difference in their marriage, and possibly in your relationship.

The guidelines shared in this section are mostly for friends and family trying to help out in the more 'regular' soft problems.



- Hard problems are defined as the 3 As - Abuse, Addiction, Affairs and Mental Health issues.
- Soft problems include the more regular marital problems such as: not feeling appreciated, or wanting more help with the kids, or there was a huge fight about how to spend their summer. Communication issues, difference in tastes or perspectives, personal irritating habits, jobs, in laws, other family members – just about anything.

The following guidelines are culled from several resources to help in the most positive and helpful way:

Quick Reference Guide

- You are not a professional (unless you are). Know the limits of how you can help. Do not try to be their counselor. Offer to help them find a competent counselor who has experience in that particular area.
- Choose your words and suggestions carefully. Very carefully.
- Realize that your words have even greater impact when someone is in a vulnerable state.
- Keep all information confidential.
- Many times, your role is not so much to give advice, but rather to help them work through their own thoughts, and become empowered and more resourceful to deal in their lives.
- Such conversations cannot be productive over text or email or Facebook messaging. At the very least you need to talk as a conversation, so you can hear the energy in the conversation. No, voicenotes are not good enough. The pace of the conversation should be as a normal conversation – talking to each other.
- Try to empathize with them while maintaining your objectivity. There is a delicate balance between your being emotionally available and maintaining enough objectivity so as not to be overwhelmed with distraught feelings. Do what you must in order to remain calm when you hear the stories.
- Ask for more details; not because they are interesting, but rather because inadequate detail may lead to an inflated or insufficient response. "Tell me more about this." Listen carefully and ask questions that call for specific behavior examples so you can better determine how you might be helpful.

Most of this guidebook is not directed to assisting in Domestic Abuse cases. For that specific area, you can listen in to the recording by Lisa Twerski about Helping a Loved One in an Abusive Marriage (www.adaiad.org/past-events)
We have compiled an extensive resource guide for those in roles of spiritual leadership, as related to Domestic Abuse.
Please email info@adaiad.org for access to those resources.

Create an environment of emotional safety and trust

- Don't judge or blame.
- **Be patient.**
- **Be encouraging**, but do not push them into talking about things that are uncomfortable. "I'm sensing some hesitation here. Do you want to share more or stop here?"
- **Leave lots of room for their dignity.** Word your observations and thoughts so there is room for them to clarify or not feel compelled to take in your perspective or advice. "It seems to me ..." , "It sounds like ..." , "The way I understand it is ... did I get that right?" "What I am *hearing* is ..." vs. "So what you are saying is ..."
- Comments such as "That must have been frightening" or "You certainly have been through a difficult time" can be useful in assisting the person in telling the story and **validating the experience**.

Listen to Understand

- **Listen, listen, listen. Listen much more than you talk.**
- Listen with all your senses and your intuition. Listen to the non verbal messages – the energy, the pace of the talking, the breathing, emotions, choice of words, what words are omitted. Is the spouse referred to by a pronoun and the name is never mentioned?
- You can't really be listening if you are planning what you will say.
- **Listen between the lines**, to the hints and clues. Listen to the "white spaces on the page" – what is not being said.
- **Ask clarifying questions** to better understand. Clarifying brings the details into sharp focus and holds it up for inspection. "What do you mean when you say that you are feeling down?" "I heard you use the words 'feeling down'; how so?" "I'm sensing some fear here; do I get that right?" "Can I tell you what it sounds like over on this side of the phone?"
- **Help them get in touch with their feelings.** "I wonder how that behavior makes you feel." **Honor their feelings** – as neither right nor wrong, just as their feelings. Help them pay attention to what their feelings are telling them.
- **Listen for feelings** (mad, sad, scared, hurt, frustrated, worried, confused) and don't get caught up in the details of the story (who said what to who and when).
- **Listen for the "soft feelings"** (sadness, fear, hurt, insecurity) **underneath the "hard feelings"** (anger, aggravation, frustration, blame). People often start with the hard, protective feelings that cover the softer, more vulnerable feelings. It is those softer feelings that are often a pathway towards understanding and healing.



Open Ears, Shut Mouth

- You can't be listening if you're talking.
- **Think before you talk.** Give yourself time to think carefully about what you will say. **Silence is OK.** It's much much much better than saying the wrong thing.
- It is during silences that much thinking and connection can really happen.

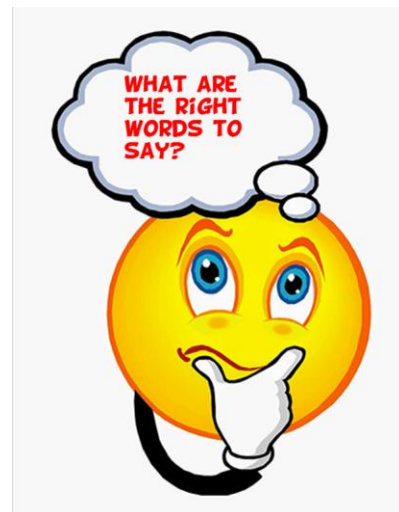
Believe them

- Believe their story, feelings and perceptions. Victims of real abuse rarely lie or exaggerate, most will minimize the abuse. Take it seriously.
- **Accept and validate their perceptions of reality.** Precise facts and details are not necessary; they may have blocked out some details as a way of dealing with it all.
- Do not ask "What did you do to bring this on?"
- If you suspect the stories are not true, seek help in how to help. **"This is a lot. I need to think about how I can best help you."** And then turn to someone more experienced.

Your Words Matter

Empathize

- **Let the person know you care.** "I'm sorry you're going through a hard time right now."
- **Reflect back the person's feelings** - "That must have really hurt." "What a confusing situation you're in right now."
- Empathize with the person's feelings and pain, not necessarily with the story. **"What an awfully painful moment for you"** as opposed to "I can see how hurt you were when your wife put you down in front of her whole family."
- **Nonverbals are key.** Sometimes it's just a look or touch, or a sound "Ooh...".
- Avoid statements that appear empathetic but are really put downs of the partner. - "How insensitive!" OR "I can't believe she won't support you better."
- If the person is going on and on with a critique of the partner or details of what happened, gently steer back to the person in front of you by offering empathy. (You can't empathize with a harangue, only with a person.) **"What a mess. I'm so sorry."**
- Good empathy should help the person feel calmer rather than adding fuel to the fire.



Affirm

- **Affirm the strengths and capacity of the person** - "I know you are a caring person."
- **Affirm the strengths and capacity of the partner and the relationship** (only when you really have knowledge of those relationship strengths) - **"She really seems to care about you."** OR **"You two have weathered storms before."**
- Avoid being so positive that the person doesn't feel heard ("I know you can work it out.")

Be a Mirror

- **Restate what they said - in your own words.** “So you’re feeling foolish for letting her get to you like this.” “You’re worried what the kids might be learning from all this chaos.”
- Tone matters a lot.
- **Help them see inside themselves**, to their feelings and instincts. Reflect back the *feelings* of their statements. Do not re-emphasize their negative judgments of the other. Instead of “So your spouse is uncaring”, rather say “**You feel uncared for.**”
- Be careful not to use ‘mirroring’ to subtly manipulate what they mean to say what you would like them to be saying.

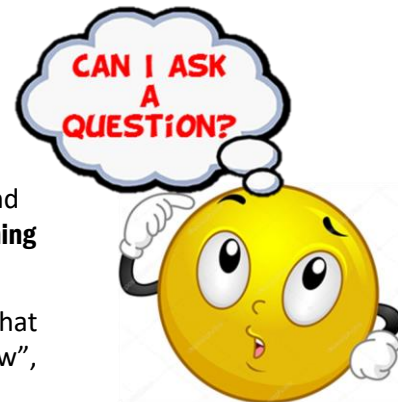
Speak only for yourself

- **Speak from your own perspective, not for them.** Do not tell them how to think or feel, give advice or judge.
- Speak about what you feel, believe, observe. “**I feel afraid for you when you describe that behavior.**” “**I noticed that recently you turn your eyes down when you see your spouse coming.**”
- **Use ‘I statements’ rather than using the word ‘you’.**
- It’s tricky to express your beliefs without sounding judging, controlling or giving advice. Choose your words carefully. Sometimes, it is better not to share your beliefs at all. “**I believe that everyone has the right to feel safe in their own home.**” Not “I believe that if a spouse hits the other even once, it’s time to go.” – that sounds more like advice and judging if they choose not to follow your advice.

How you can help

Ask powerful questions

- Your objective is to help them hear their own voice telling the story, and for you to capture their *feelings* about the situation, not the details of the story.
- Find out as much as they share willingly. Prod them along with questions and statements such as “**Is there more?**” “**Anything else you want to add?**” “**Is there anything I didn’t ask about?**”
- **Ask open ended questions to open up conversation.** (Of course, there are times that a Yes/ No question is most appropriate.) Questions that begin with “What”, “How”, “Why” lend themselves to conversation more than “When”, “Where”, “Did you”.
- Note some questions beginning with the word “why” invoke analyses and explanations, and might conjure feelings of defensiveness because they feel they need to explain or justify their decisions or point of view. “Why do you keep going back?” can be better asked “**What compels you to go back?**” “**What about that bothers you?**” vs “Why does that bother you?”
- **Avoid questions and statements that might feel like blame, criticism or judgment.** “You aren’t the type of person to let that just go on, are you?” “What did you do?”
- **Before asking sensitive questions, ask for permission to cross into that space.** “I’m worried about you. Lately I’m noticing that you are very jumpy [share some anecdotes] . Do



you want to talk about that?” “In order to better understand a fuller picture, I might ask you some questions that might be sensitive, is that OK?”

- A powerful question can sometimes stop people in their tracks and there might be a sudden hush as they give it some thoughtful consideration. **“What do you really want?” “Look ahead six months; what decisions do you want to make now that will impact that vision?”**

Offer Perspective

- Only offer perspective once you know the person feels heard and you have empathized with them.
- **Normalize the problem**; help the person understand that common problems are universal - **“From what I understand, a lot of couples feel less energy for their relationship after a baby comes and takes so much of their time and attention.”**
- Offer a perspective on what the spouse might be feeling, if you know the person - **“I’d bet that Sarah is feeling badly about that big argument too.”**
- **Back up if the person rejects your perspective as not true** or relevant to their situation. They may use words like “Yes, but ...”. They may need time to think about it.
- Sometimes it can be useful to share your own experience. Keep it brief and to the point.
- You might share something you read or learned about the issue.



Challenge

- Sometimes, it might be important to **challenge them, with hard questions to make them think about the situation in a different light.**
- **Help them see the perspective of the other spouse.** **“Every problem has two sides. I wonder what he would be saying if he was here now.”**
- **Help them see the effects of their unrealistic expectations.** **“With little kids and your busy schedule, it’s no wonder that something falls to the wayside.”**
- **Help them see their part in the issue.** **“Have you thought about what you might be contributing to the problem?”**
- **Maintain hope to keep working on a marriage** **“The stakes are really high. I hope you’re going to keep trying and not give up too soon.”**
- Some sentence starters: **“Have you thought about ...” “I am curious about ...” “I’m wondering about how ...”**
- **As applicable, ask permission to challenge them** **“Can I say something challenging right now?”**
- **Use I-statements** **“One of the things I’ve learned is that I can’t expect him to read my mind, I have to ask straight out.”**

Don't give advice

- **Neither of you are better off if you give advice.** You don't want that responsibility. In order to fully go through with an action step, they need to own it – by being part of the process of working through it.
- **Giving advice tends to take away their power.** It can make them feel that you don't trust them to make good decisions.
- **They know their own situation much better** and know what they must do to navigate through it.
- Even when directly asked “What should I do?”, be careful about giving specific advice such as “Here's what you should say to him when you home tonight.” When asked what you would do, you can always say “**I don't know**” and let the other person keep talking.
- **Your role is to help them explore possibilities and options.** Ask “**What do you think you should do? You are the one who knows your situation best.**”
- Remind them of their ability to make good decisions; remind them of a specific decision they have made that turned out well.



Explore possibilities together

- It is best to explore possible next step actions and solutions together, rather than you giving advice. They have to own the decision, and not do it because someone told them to.
- **Ask for permission before telling someone your ideas or solutions.** “**Can I share some thoughts?**” “**We can look at some options together. Would that be useful?**” “**I can tell you something that worked for me. I can share it and you can tell me if and how it resonates with you. Is that OK?**” “**I can share something that some people have said worked for them in similar situation, and we can explore together if that can work for you and how we might tweak it up for your unique situation.**” “**You can say no and I'll let it go, I'm truly asking on your behalf**” rather than ‘If I were you, I would ...’, “Some people in your situation have done ... you should try it.” “So this is what you are going to do ...” .

Some Important Dos & Don'ts

Do

- **Build up their self esteem.** Focus on what it is that they do well, not their failures or chaos around them. Caveat: Only say what you really believe.
- **Respect their decisions. Don't judge.** It may be hard to support them if you don't agree with their decisions. Do it anyway. Say nothing. Or simply say “**I don't agree with the plan, but I'll support you regardless.**”
- **Listen to let them know you care.** Your questions, statements and non-verbal cues should be so that they know you are not assuming you know anything more than they do about the situation. It is their story, you ask the questions. Not “I know what you are going through.” Every story is different and every person takes it in differently. “**That sounds rough.**”

- **Be willing to be vulnerable,** as is appropriate to your relationship. Rarely do people spill their guts to those who seem to have no problems. Share some obstacles that you overcame. Caveat: Do not take over the conversation with your stories.
- **Remain neutral.** It is not necessary to take sides in order to show support or be helpful. Taking sides, even if it is their side, will only place them in a position in which they have to choose you or their partner. In an abusive situation, they usually defend their spouse – and shut you out, or minimize the abuse. Even if they have separated, do not fall into the trap of taking sides.
- **Allow them their pain; it is part of the process.** They have to go through the emotional pain to get past it and move on; they must not try to get around it. Be supportive through that process. Even if you have heard the story hundreds of times. Be patient.
- It is important to take the time to let them tell the story without being interrupted or rushed.

Don't

- **Do not agree with them when they speak badly of the spouse.** You might agree about the behavior, but not the person.
- **Avoid stigmatizing terms like 'abused', 'violence'.** Even if that is indeed what is happening. Many people who are really abused resent those terms. And if it isn't real abuse, then definitely don't use those words.
- **Do not add comments that belittle the experience** such as "I can't believe he did that" or "Are you sure he meant to hurt you?" These comments tend to make them feel further isolated and distrusting of you.
- **Do not react with disbelief, disgust, or anger at what they tell you.** But don't react passively either. Let them know that you are concerned about what is happening.

Boundaries

- The other person is making themselves vulnerable to you. **DO NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THAT. Respect their privacy throughout the conversation, and from thereon.**
- **Know your triggers from your own experiences** (ie: this story hits too close to home, you or someone very close to you has experienced something too similar). As appropriate, recuse yourself or work hard to keep yourself in check.
- Do not ask for details that are not important to your being able to help.
- **Resist getting drawn into a triangle** when you have a relationship with the other spouse.
- **Keep a check on your impatience,** and don't make a recommendation that someone live with the problem or break up the relationship because you are tired of listening to their complaints.
- **Remind yourself of the limits of your ability to help** when the other person is not ready to face the problems or has determined a course of action you think is unwise.

