Responding to Domestic Violence:
Guidelines for ‘First Responders’

Where domestic abuse is an issues, victims will often approach their spiritual leaders for guidance. Responding to domestic violence in the ‘right’ way, ie one which is hashkafically and halachically sound and envalidating to the victim is of utmost importance.

The following guidelines are culled from several resources specifically to help religious leaders respond to domestic violence, the victim and the perpetrator in the most positive and helpful way:

Ultimately, it is more sustaining to empower loved ones than to rescue them.

Remember the Goals:

1. SAFETY for the woman and children
2. ACCOUNTABILITY for the abuser
3. RESTORATION of individuals and, 
4. If possible, RELATIONSHIPS or MOURNING the loss of the relationships

When should I choose not to personally intervene in a relationship with domestic violence?

In all of the situations listed below, you can call 911 and/or ask for help with intervening and supporting long-term change

- If a situation is unsafe for you, your safety needs to be a priority, and you should not intervene. For example, if there are weapons involved in an incident, or if you are threatened, you should not intervene.
- If the survivor tells you that an intervention will be unsafe for them, their children, and/or for you or others, listen, you should not intervene.
- If you have a concern for someone else’s safety based on your intervention, such as children who are present, you should not intervene.
- If your intervention would be overly traumatic for you, you should not intervene.
- If your intervention will violate ethical guidelines from your faith tradition, or applicable laws regarding clergy and confidentiality, you should not intervene. You can connect the survivor, children, and/or abuser with community resources for the assistance they need.

DOs and DON’Ts with the abused woman

DO talk to the survivor confidentially and in a safe setting, but not in isolation.

DON’T downplay the situation. Don’t pretend that the abuse isn’t happening or that it isn’t that bad; pretending it’s no big deal doesn’t make it go away.

DO believe her. Her description of the violence is only the tip of the iceberg.

DO reassure her that this is not her fault, she doesn’t deserve this treatment. She is not ‘being punished’ for transgressing any halacha.

DO affirm all of the feelings of the survivor about the abuse. Recognize that the survivor may be fearful and vulnerable. Let the survivor express all their fears and other feelings.

DO give her referral information.

DO empower her to regain control by making her own decisions.

DO ask her what she thinks will make her feel safer, and if she feels comfortable telling friends or family what is going on.
**DO** support and respect her choices. Even if she chooses initially to return to the abuser, it is her choice. She has the most information about how to survive.

**DO** encourage her to think about a safety plan: set aside some money; copies of important papers for her and children; a change of clothes hidden or in care of a friend if she decides to go to a shelter. Plan how to exit the house the next time the abuser is violent. Plan what to do about the children if they are at school; if they are asleep, etc. (This is both practical and helps her stay in touch with the reality of the abuser’s violence. Safety planning is a process that is ongoing.)

**DO** protect her confidentiality.

**DO** encourage her to participate in activities outside of the relationship with friends and family (as suitable for that particular case). Support engagement in outside interests to reconnect with sense of self.

**DO NOT** give information about her or her whereabouts to the abuser or to others who might pass information on to the abuser. Do not discuss with others in your shul who might inadvertently pass information on to the abuser.

**DO** help her with any halacha/ hashkafa concerns.

**DO** emphasize that the marriage covenant is broken by the violence from her partner.

**DO** assure her of Hashem’s love and of your commitment to walk with her through this ordeal.

**DO** help her see that her partner’s violence has broken the marriage covenant and that Hashem does not want her to remain in a situation where her life and the lives of her children are in danger. If she decides to separate and divorce,

**DON’T** attack the abuser. Bad-mouthing the abuser may make her feel responsible to defend him.

**DO** support her and help her to mourn the loss to herself and her children.

**DO** pray with and for her. Ask Hashem to give her the strength and courage she needs.

**DON’T** minimize the danger to her. You can be a reality check. “From what you have told me, I am very much concerned for your safety . . .”

**DON’T** tell her what to do. Give information and support.

**DON’T** react with disbelief, disgust, or anger at what she tells you. But don’t react passively either. Let her know that you are concerned and that what the abuser has done to her is wrong and not deserved by her.

**DON’T** blame her for his violence. **DON’T** lecture her about the abuse, or for what you consider poor choices, judgment, or decisions. If she is blaming herself, try to reframe: “I don’t care if you did have supper late or forget to water the lawn, that is no reason for him to be violent with you. This is his problem.”

**DON’T** recommend couples counseling or approach her husband and ask for “his side of the story.” These actions will endanger her.

**DON’T** recommend “marriage enrichment,” “mediation,” or a “communications workshop.” None of these will address the goals listed above.

**DON’T** send her home with a prayer and directive to submit to her husband, bring him to shul, or be a better wife.

**DO** offer an open door to talk again in the future. Help the survivor break out of the isolation the abuser has put them in. Keep in contact with them.

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**Statements of Support and Validation for Survivors of Domestic Violence**

- “This sounds like a difficult experience.”
- “I’m really sorry to hear this has happened to you.”
- “This was not your fault.”
- “Are there things we can do to help you feel safe?”
- “Are you okay? Do you need medical attention?”
- “I know this must be uncomfortable.”
- “If you want to talk about this again, you can talk to me.”
When Someone Approaches you about Domestic Abuse

presented by: CHJCC, Adai Ad, Shalom Taskforce

DO provide crisis services that you offer to those in need in your congregation, such as financial support, housing assistance, meals, childcare, and others. Offer these and other options, and ask them what they need and want. Check in about this more than once.

DON’T encourage her to forgive him and take him back.

DO NOT encourage her dependence on you.

DON’T do nothing.

DO consult with colleagues in the wider community who may have expertise and be able to assist you in your response.

DO be patient. Self-empowerment may take longer than you want. Go at the survivor’s pace, not yours. Remember that it takes an average of seven attempts for a survivor to leave a domestic violence relationship.

DON’T give up hope. Because of the complex dynamics and traumatic effects of domestic violence, supporting a survivor to achieve safety and healing can be a long-term effort.

DOs and DON’Ts with an abusive partner

!! Before you approach a person who is abusive to offer to support them in achieving long-term change, you first must make sure that you have the survivor’s permission to talk to the abuser.

Always call 911 if you are concerned about someone’s immediate safety.

• Ensure you are in a safe setting any time you talk to the abuser. Set up a safety plan for yourself whenever you talk to the abuser; for example, make sure someone else is nearby and knows the situation, and meet in a room with a window.
• You will be most effective in supporting long-term change if you already have an ongoing relationship with the abuser.
• Make referrals to experts, and hold the abuser accountable to those referrals.
• Keep paying attention for opportunities to intervene and offer support, and continue to follow up over time.
• If you also have a relationship with the survivor, ask the survivor about which interventions would be most helpful with changing the abuser’s behavior.
• When you intervene, consider the impact that the consequences for the abuser may have on the survivor.
• Know your own strengths and limits, and intervene and offer support based on those.
• Provide financial assistance for the abuser to attend a state-certified perpetrator treatment program.

Make referrals to and ask for help from experts Sometimes it may not be safe for you to intervene, or it may be more effective if you ask for help. You can:

• Call 911, especially if someone is in danger or if the situation is unsafe for the survivor, children, yourself, or anyone else.
• Ask another person who has a relationship with the abuser to help you.
• Refer the abuser to state-certified Domestic Violence Perpetrator Treatment.

If he has been arrested, DO approach him and express your concern and support for him to be accountable and to deal with his violence.

DON’T meet with him alone and in private. Meet in a public place with several other people around.

DON’T approach him or let him know that you know about his violence unless a) you have the victim’s permission, b) she is aware that you plan to talk to him and c) you are certain that his partner is safely separated from him.

DO address any religious rationalizations he may offer or questions he may have.

DON’T allow him to use religious excuses for his behavior.

DO name the violence as his problem, not hers. Tell him that only he can stop it; and you are willing to help.
DO refer to a program which specifically addresses abusers.

DO assess him for suicide or threats of homicide. DO warn the victim if he makes specific threats towards her.

DON’T pursue couples’ counseling with him and his partner if you are aware that there is violence in the relationship.

DON’T go to him to confirm the victim’s story.

DON’T give him any information about his partner or her whereabouts.

DON’T be taken in by his minimization, denial or lying about his violence.

DON’T accept his blaming her or other rationalizations for his behavior.

DON’T be taken in by his “teshuva” experience. If it is genuine, it will be a tremendous resource as he proceeds with accountability. If it is phony, it is only another way to manipulate you and the system and maintain control of the process to avoid accountability.

DON’T advocate for the abuser to avoid the legal consequences of his violence.

DON’T provide a character witness for this purpose in any legal proceedings.

DON’T forgive an abuser quickly and easily.

DON’T confuse his remorse with true repentance.

DO work with others in the community to hold him accountable.

DO daven for Hashem to help him stop his violence, repent and find a new way.

DO assure him of your support in this endeavor.

DO find ways to collaborate with community agencies and law enforcement to hold him accountable.

Be honest and direct

You can say things like:

• “What you are doing is not okay.”
• “I don’t agree with your words or actions.”
• “Your behavior is not acceptable in our congregation and faith tradition.”

Focus on observations you have made, and use I statements

You can say things like:

• “I noticed that you control all of her money, movements, and social life.”
• “I noticed that you grabbed her arm very roughly when you were arguing.”
• “I heard you threaten to hurt her.”
• “I’ve seen that you expect her to respond to all of your texts and phone calls immediately.”
• “I know that you were arrested for assaulting her.”

Talk to the abuser about the impact the abuse has on children, if applicable

You can say things like:

• “Domestic violence can have devastating effects on your family, including your children.”
• “For many children, exposure to domestic violence is just as traumatic as being abused themselves.”
• “The abuse you are using can impact your child even before they are born.”
• “The abuse you are using can harm your child. They might see you be physically abusive, or they might observe your use of control, or be impacted by the stress and trauma you are causing their other parent.”
• “You might not intend to hurt your children, but they might accidentally get caught in the middle of an incident.”
• “You cannot be a positive and healthy parent for your children if you are using abuse against your partner.”

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Support healing for the abuser

Approach everyone with compassion: be non-confrontational, and non-shaming, so that the abuser doesn’t feel defensive. Recognize the abuser as a complete human being, who uses abusive tactics. Remember that saying that someone has a problem with abusive behavior doesn’t mean that the person is a completely bad person.

The ideal outcome for everyone, including the abuser, survivor, children, and community, is for them to completely stop using abusive tactics.

You can say things like:

• “This situation is really complex, and you need expert help to resolve it.”
• “You may not realize the impact of your behaviors.”
• “Reaching out for help is the right thing to do for you and your family.”
• “You are not a bad person. You can learn and change. Abuse is a learned and chosen behavior, so it can be un-learned and un-chosen.”
• “If you have violent tendencies, you have deep issues that you need to get to the bottom of, to resolve, and to heal.”
• “You will never be free until you get help for yourself.”
• “Getting help will be a long process. There is no quick fix. We are in it for the long haul, and will support you to get help and change.”
• “It’s up to you to change. This is your work.”
• “You may not even know what you are capable of. I don’t want you to do something that you will regret.”

Address the future of the relationship

Once there is domestic violence in a relationship, the trust and covenant of the relationship is broken. Even if the abuser agrees to change, the relationship may not be able to be restored, because of the trauma, pain, and broken trust that the abuser has caused the survivor and children.

Let the abuser know that:

• “Forgiveness from the survivor may not be possible.”
• “If the survivor does forgive you, it will be on their timetable, not yours.”
• “Regardless of forgiveness, you should have no expectation of any degree of future relationship with the person you’ve harmed.”
• “If you accept accountability, repent, and change, you may be able to restore your relationship with the survivor. If your relationship with the survivor cannot be restored, I can support you in mourning the loss of that relationship, and then you may be able to enter into another relationship as a healthy partner.”