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How Do You Begin a Conversation?

If you suspect someone you know is being abused, share your concerns with her, rather than tentatively whispering them to a mutual friend. One conversation might not solve her problem, but it will remind her that she has an ally. We consulted Kim Wells with the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence and Allegra Perhaes at Safe Horizon for some easy opening lines

IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT A friend or relative, the key is to avoid passing judgment or using accusatory words, like "violence" and "abuse." And always have a hotline number on hand, like Safe Horizon's: (800) 799-SAFE.

START BY SAYING: "Andrea, I'm worried about you. You don't look happy; you rarely smile anymore. I feel like Alex has been demanding a lot of your attention. You've called him three times in the past half-hour. You always have to ask him for money, even to go see a movie. Is there anything you want to talk about?"

IF SHE BRUSHES YOU OFF, SAY: "OK, I'm glad to hear nothing's up. But I'm always here to talk, if anything changes. I really care about you."

A FEW WEEKS LATER, FOLLOW UP WITH: "You know Andrea, you still seem pretty tense. I'm really concerned about you. I don't mean to be a nag, but I'm here if you ever want to talk."

IF SHE ADMITS THERE IS A PROBLEM, LISTEN FIRST, WITHOUT INTERRUPTING. THEN SAY: "I'm so glad you confided in me. I care about you, and I understand how hard it must be to figure things out alone. I'm here any time you want to talk. But you also might want to speak with an expert: Here's a hotline number, and also the address of a help center where we can go—together, if you want—to get more information. This is a serious situation that likely won't get better without help."

A FEW WEEKS LATER, FOLLOW UP WITH: "How are things going with Alex? Any progress? I've been thinking about you guys a lot."

IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT A neighbor or acquaintance, try opening the conversation during a natural one-on-one moment. Keep it low-key and calm, so she doesn't feel like she's being ambushed. Your purpose isn't to pry, it's to let her know she has a friend.

START BY SAYING: "Hi, I'm Cynthia, and I live upstairs. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I heard a lot of yelling and banging coming from downstairs last night. If you feel like talking about anything, I'm available. And if you ever need help, my door is always open—really."

IF THAT'S WHERE THE CONVERSATION ENDS, DON'T FEEL BAD: YOU'VE DONE THE RIGHT THING BY SAYING SOMETHING. BUT IF YOUR NEIGHBOR OPENS UP, LISTEN FIRST—THEN SAY: "The last thing I want to do is get you into trouble; he doesn't have to know we talked. You're welcome to use my phone to call this hotline number—that way you can have privacy and get some advice. Also, I'm going to keep an eye on you. Please knock whenever you want to, day or night."

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For more conversation tips, information about It's Time To Talk Day, or to request Liz Claiborne's handbook on relationship abuse, visit www.marieclaire.com. ♦



When I was little, our neighbor used to run to us for protection whenever her husband beat her. We'd take her in until he calmed down—then she would go back home. I don't remember our family ever discussing it with her or each other; it was 'none of our business.' Back then, it wouldn't have occurred to any of us to talk to her about options or feelings. I bet she must have been terrified all the time."

— JOY BEHAR, COHOST, ABC'S THE VIEW