

# Supporting Victims of Domestic Violence in Our Faith Communities

Help for Faith Leaders and Congregations



**Pieces of a Bigger Picture**

Faith Communities and Service Providers Working Together  
to Support Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence





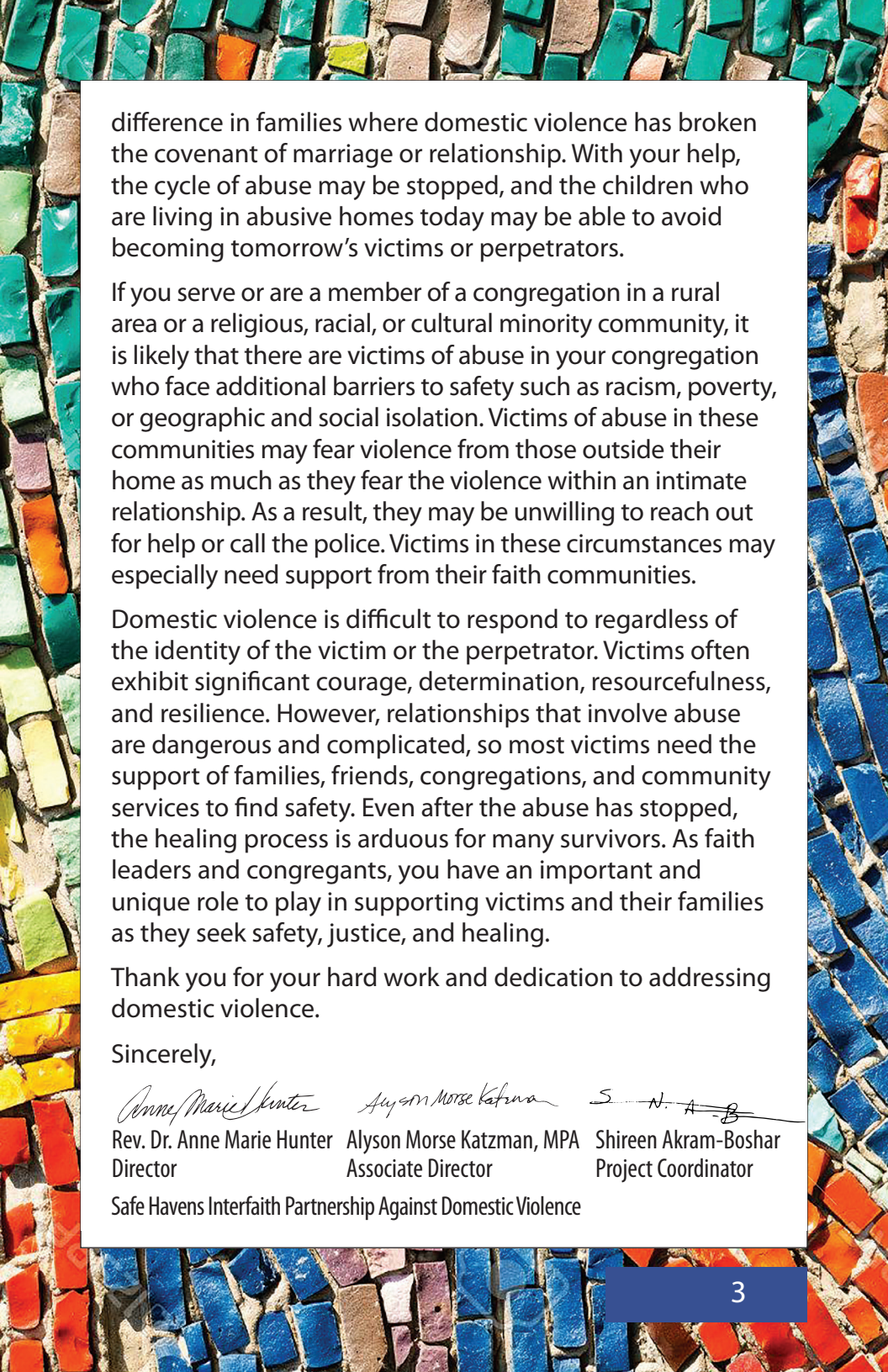
Dear Faith Community Leaders and Members,

In January and February 2017, Safe Havens conducted 26 focused conversations with domestic and sexual violence coalitions, member agencies, and clergy in 22 states across the country. We wanted to hear about the successes, needs, and challenges people are encountering as they build partnerships between domestic and sexual violence agencies and faith communities to support survivors of abuse. Many communities were just beginning to build partnerships, while others had been collaborating for years or even decades.

These partnerships are important because many survivors<sup>1</sup> of abuse look for support among their families, friends, or in their faith communities. The 2009 Georgia Fatality Review comments, “Victims, survivors, and surviving family members consistently turn to their faith communities for support and safety, whether they disclose the abuse or not.”<sup>2</sup> This study also found that, “in the cases we reviewed, victims of domestic violence are more likely to disclose the abuse to someone in their faith community than they are to seek help from the police.”<sup>3</sup>

For faith-affiliated victims of domestic violence, faith can be a critical resource, a pillar of identity and community, and an essential element in decision-making and healing. When misused, faith can also be a barrier to safety.

Because faith is so important to so many victims, you and other faith leaders and congregants can play a critical role in helping victims find safety. When you learn more about domestic violence and are alert for “red flags,” you can provide information, referrals, and resources to support victims and spread awareness in your congregation. Working with local domestic violence service providers, you can respond safely and effectively. You can make a



difference in families where domestic violence has broken the covenant of marriage or relationship. With your help, the cycle of abuse may be stopped, and the children who are living in abusive homes today may be able to avoid becoming tomorrow's victims or perpetrators.

If you serve or are a member of a congregation in a rural area or a religious, racial, or cultural minority community, it is likely that there are victims of abuse in your congregation who face additional barriers to safety such as racism, poverty, or geographic and social isolation. Victims of abuse in these communities may fear violence from those outside their home as much as they fear the violence within an intimate relationship. As a result, they may be unwilling to reach out for help or call the police. Victims in these circumstances may especially need support from their faith communities.

Domestic violence is difficult to respond to regardless of the identity of the victim or the perpetrator. Victims often exhibit significant courage, determination, resourcefulness, and resilience. However, relationships that involve abuse are dangerous and complicated, so most victims need the support of families, friends, congregations, and community services to find safety. Even after the abuse has stopped, the healing process is arduous for many survivors. As faith leaders and congregants, you have an important and unique role to play in supporting victims and their families as they seek safety, justice, and healing.

Thank you for your hard work and dedication to addressing domestic violence.

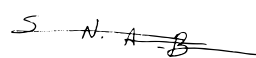
Sincerely,



Rev. Dr. Anne Marie Hunter  
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## Table of Contents

Domestic Violence 5



Surprising Facts about Domestic Violence 6



Who Are the Abusers? 8



Warning Signs and Red Flags for Bystanders 9



Warning Signs and Red Flags for People  
Experiencing Abuse 10



How Can I Help? 11



For Immediate Help and More Information 14

For additional copies of this resource, please contact:

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You can download this and other resources for free at  
[www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org).



## Domestic Violence ...

- ❖ is a pattern of behavior repeated over time and used to establish power and control over someone in a marriage or intimate relationship.
- ❖ affects people across the lifespan. Young people may experience teen dating violence, while older adults may experience abuse in later life.
- ❖ may be physical, verbal, emotional, spiritual, psychological, financial, and/or sexual. Often, multiple forms of abuse occur at the same time.
- ❖ affects more than 32 million Americans each year, causing more than 2 million injuries and approximately 1300 deaths.
- ❖ affects both men and women; most victims (approximately 85%) are women.
- ❖ affects people of any faith, class, race, country of origin, education, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, or ethnicity. Your neighbor, your child's teacher, your mother's best friend, or the person praying beside you could all be victims.
- ❖ disproportionately affects women of color.
- ❖ is a crime in the United States.

“*For many survivors coming out of a crisis situation, their faith was one of the pillars that helped them move on with their lives.*”

– Domestic Violence Advocate, Rhode Island, 2017

## Surprising Facts about Domestic Violence

### **Domestic violence happens in OUR congregation.**

Unfortunately, domestic violence can, and does, happen in every congregation. However, because victims often feel ashamed, confused, or too fearful to speak out, they may be silent. An Allstate Foundation study found that 3 out of 4 Americans know someone who is a domestic violence survivor or victim, and 30% of Americans said they knew a woman who had been abused physically by a husband or boyfriend in the last 12 months.<sup>4</sup>

Victims are often isolated and silenced. It is helpful to victims when someone breaks the silence. Speak up! Putting up posters, including victims in prayers, bringing in a speaker from a local domestic violence agency, or screening a video about domestic violence and faith are all great ways to let everyone in your congregation know that no one deserves to be abused.

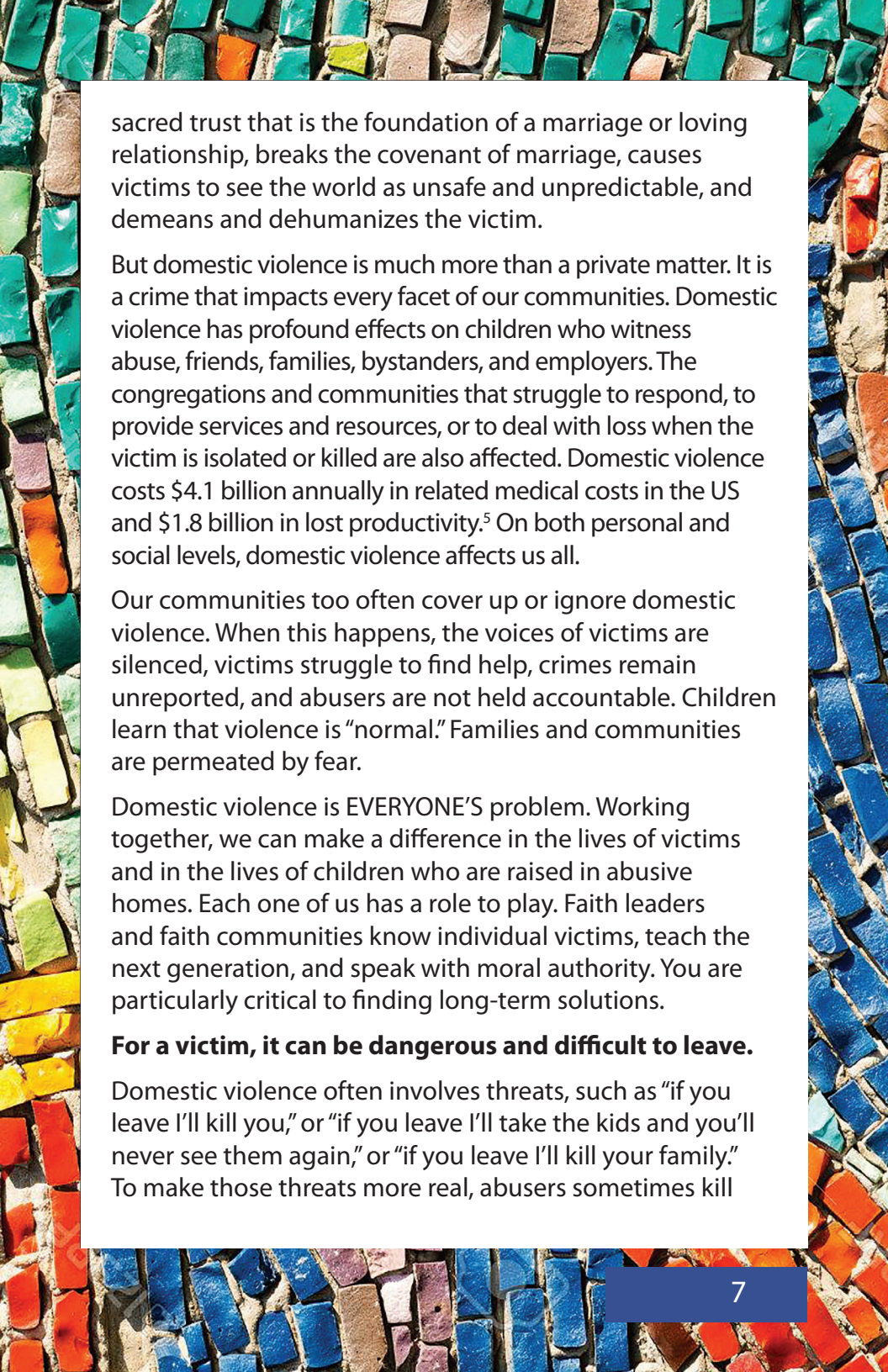
### **Abusers don't just "lose control."**

Abusers might say that they "just lose control." However, they usually don't lose their tempers with their boss, fly off the handle with their friends, or threaten people on the street. In addition, abusers often make sure that they don't bruise their partners in places where it will show. These examples illustrate that abusers are, in fact, in control of where and how they use violence. They are making a deliberate decision to use physical, emotional, verbal, spiritual, or other forms of abuse to control their spouse or partner.

### **Domestic violence is everyone's business.**

Because domestic violence happens within a marriage or intimate relationship, it is tempting to think that it is only a private matter. On a personal level, it violates the





sacred trust that is the foundation of a marriage or loving relationship, breaks the covenant of marriage, causes victims to see the world as unsafe and unpredictable, and demeans and dehumanizes the victim.

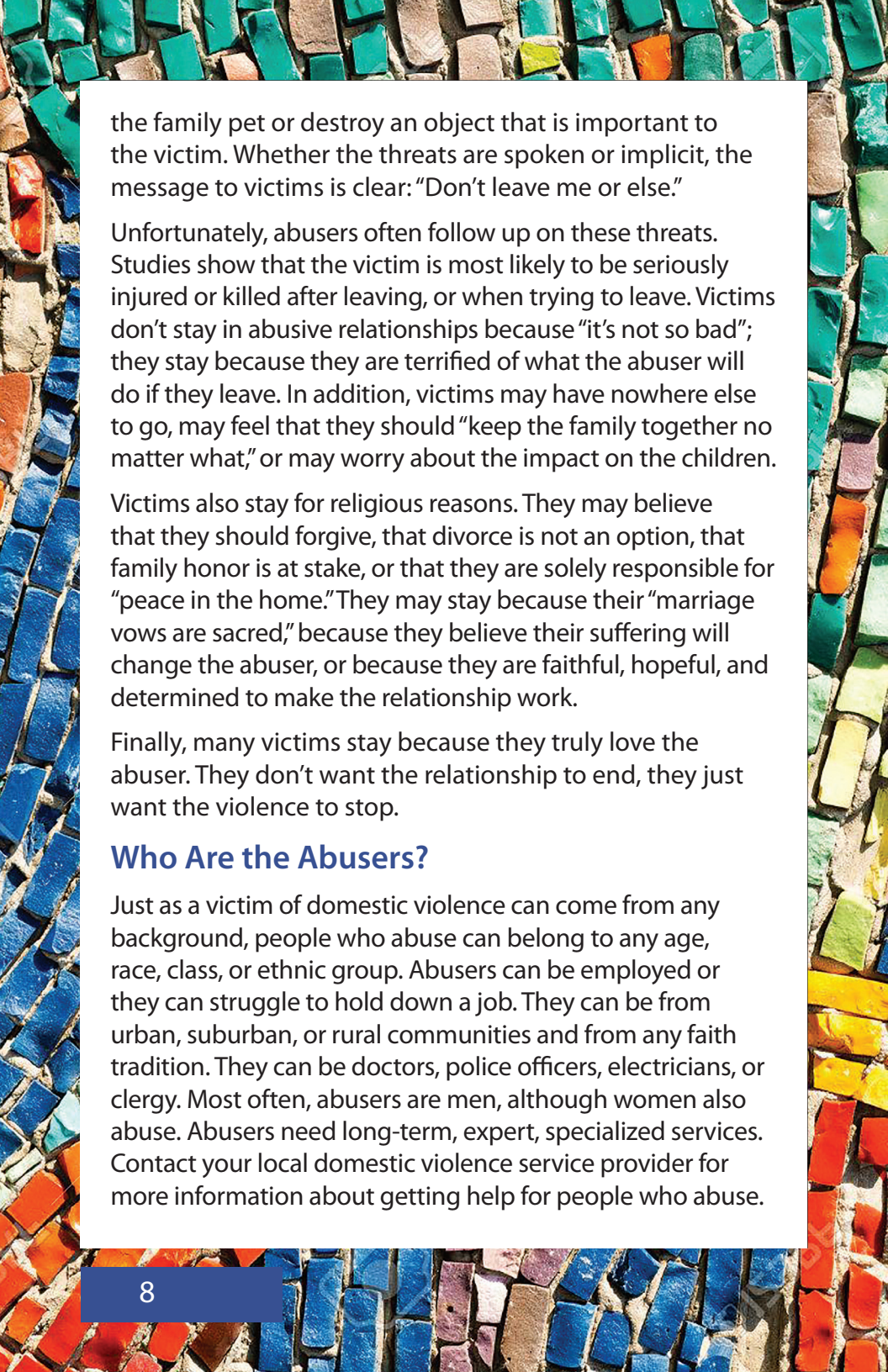
But domestic violence is much more than a private matter. It is a crime that impacts every facet of our communities. Domestic violence has profound effects on children who witness abuse, friends, families, bystanders, and employers. The congregations and communities that struggle to respond, to provide services and resources, or to deal with loss when the victim is isolated or killed are also affected. Domestic violence costs \$4.1 billion annually in related medical costs in the US and \$1.8 billion in lost productivity.<sup>5</sup> On both personal and social levels, domestic violence affects us all.

Our communities too often cover up or ignore domestic violence. When this happens, the voices of victims are silenced, victims struggle to find help, crimes remain unreported, and abusers are not held accountable. Children learn that violence is “normal.” Families and communities are permeated by fear.

Domestic violence is EVERYONE’S problem. Working together, we can make a difference in the lives of victims and in the lives of children who are raised in abusive homes. Each one of us has a role to play. Faith leaders and faith communities know individual victims, teach the next generation, and speak with moral authority. You are particularly critical to finding long-term solutions.

**For a victim, it can be dangerous and difficult to leave.**

Domestic violence often involves threats, such as “if you leave I’ll kill you,” or “if you leave I’ll take the kids and you’ll never see them again,” or “if you leave I’ll kill your family.” To make those threats more real, abusers sometimes kill



the family pet or destroy an object that is important to the victim. Whether the threats are spoken or implicit, the message to victims is clear: “Don’t leave me or else.”

Unfortunately, abusers often follow up on these threats. Studies show that the victim is most likely to be seriously injured or killed after leaving, or when trying to leave. Victims don’t stay in abusive relationships because “it’s not so bad”; they stay because they are terrified of what the abuser will do if they leave. In addition, victims may have nowhere else to go, may feel that they should “keep the family together no matter what,” or may worry about the impact on the children.

Victims also stay for religious reasons. They may believe that they should forgive, that divorce is not an option, that family honor is at stake, or that they are solely responsible for “peace in the home.” They may stay because their “marriage vows are sacred,” because they believe their suffering will change the abuser, or because they are faithful, hopeful, and determined to make the relationship work.

Finally, many victims stay because they truly love the abuser. They don’t want the relationship to end, they just want the violence to stop.

## **Who Are the Abusers?**

Just as a victim of domestic violence can come from any background, people who abuse can belong to any age, race, class, or ethnic group. Abusers can be employed or they can struggle to hold down a job. They can be from urban, suburban, or rural communities and from any faith tradition. They can be doctors, police officers, electricians, or clergy. Most often, abusers are men, although women also abuse. Abusers need long-term, expert, specialized services. Contact your local domestic violence service provider for more information about getting help for people who abuse.



“Religious leaders have a platform to influence their communities. This is a great, consistent platform to be able to promote healthy relationships and to expose those that are damaged.”

- Domestic Violence Advocate, Mississippi, 2017.

## Warning Signs and Red Flags for Bystanders and Community Members


Victims and survivors of domestic violence may not even realize they are in an abusive or controlling relationship. The abuse may have begun subtly and grown over time. Victims may be too overwhelmed to admit that there is a problem, or too fearful of the abuser to talk. However, you may notice some warning signs that could indicate a problem.

Victims...

- ❖ feel like they are “walking on eggshells.”
- ❖ often cancel plans or miss work, religious services, and other events.
- ❖ are afraid to do anything that might upset the abuser.
- ❖ describe frequent “accidents” to explain injuries.
- ❖ become overly submissive when with the abuser.

Abusers...

- ❖ are charming, well-liked, pillars of the community.
- ❖ are jealous and possessive.
- ❖ blame the victim for their problems or feelings.
- ❖ are disrespectful or cruel to the victim and/or others.
- ❖ call or text excessively to check on the victim.
- ❖ speak badly about past partners and/or spouses.



The presence of these behaviors does not necessarily mean that abuse is taking place, and the absence of these behaviors does not necessarily mean that everything is fine. If you notice some of these behaviors or are concerned and can talk to the victim privately, don't be afraid to gently ask questions, and offer help! You might be saving someone's life.

## Warning Signs and Red Flags for People Who May Be Experiencing Abuse


You may feel...

- ❖ afraid of what will happen when your partner comes home.
- ❖ disoriented, "crazy," and unsure of how to name your experiences and your memories.
- ❖ worried by the threats of violence your partner has made against you or your family.
- ❖ increasingly isolated from your friends, family, congregation, or community.
- ❖ barraged by constant accusations; your partner makes you feel guilty all the time.
- ❖ overwhelmed by your partner's demands and impossible expectations.
- ❖ "beat down" by your partner's verbal beratement: name-calling, insults, and put-downs.
- ❖ terrified by your partner's threats, physical violence, or other mistreatment.

If you think you may be abused...

- ❖ you are not alone!
- ❖ you do not deserve to be abused!





Without professional intervention, domestic violence typically escalates over time. Please seek help!

Focus on your safety and that of your children.  
You deserve to be safe in your home!


Contact your local domestic violence service agency (see p.14) or the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE/7233) for more information, safety planning, and support.

If you are unsure of what to say when calling, we suggest that you describe what you are experiencing, and just ask, “Does this sound like a situation that could be abusive?” All calls are confidential, and you can remain anonymous.

## **I Am Part of a Faith Community... How Can I Help?**

Because so many victims turn to faith community leaders and members for help, **YOU** can make a difference in the life of a domestic violence victim. Remember that every victim’s situation and experience is different, and victims may make very different decisions. Here are a few guidelines if someone turns to you for help:

- ❖ be calm, compassionate, and patient.
- ❖ listen, listen, listen.
- ❖ focus first on the victim’s safety. If the violence has just occurred, encourage the individual to seek safety and/or medical attention.
- ❖ maintain confidentiality. Don’t talk to anyone else about the situation without the victim’s permission.
- ❖ don’t judge.

- 
- ❖ don't tell the victim what to do. Instead, offer options and referrals and support the victim's decisions, even if they are not doing what you would do.
  - ❖ keep the conversation centered on the victim.
  - ❖ reassure victims that they are not to blame. No one deserves to experience domestic violence.
  - ❖ let victims know that they are not alone. Provide emotional, physical, and spiritual support.
  - ❖ respond to spiritual or faith-based questions. Provide information about how your tradition and scriptures can be a resource.
  - ❖ refer victims to a local or national domestic violence hotline (1-800-799-7233/SAFE) and to local services in your community (see p. 14) for expert help, safety planning, and support.
  - ❖ offer to accompany them to the hospital, police station, court, etc.
  - ❖ do not provide couple's or family counseling, which can be dangerous.
  - ❖ follow up with continuing support.

In addition to compassionate listening and referrals to community services, victims and survivors may need your ongoing spiritual guidance and support. They need to know that they can count on their faith community in this crisis. Think now about resources in your faith tradition that will help a victim of domestic violence find justice, peace, and healing.

“*In our state, we really see faith communities as a resource, and they really see us as a resource.*”

- Domestic Violence Advocate, Pennsylvania, 2017.



If you are unsure how to convey your concern to a victim, here are a few key things they may need to hear.<sup>6</sup>

- ❖ “I’m afraid for your safety.”
- ❖ “I’m afraid for the safety of your children.”
- ❖ “It will only get worse.”
- ❖ “I’m here for you.”
- ❖ “You don’t deserve to be abused.”
- ❖ “What can I do to help?”

“For people of faith, seeing something [that condemns abuse] in their faith community is validating. There is a strong possibility that someone might be more likely to call [for help] if the message is coming from their faith community.”

- Domestic Violence Advocate, Georgia, 2017.

“When domestic violence is denounced from the leadership and the pulpit, then the . . . members [of the congregation] feel comfortable opening up about it, because they feel that they’ll be supported.”

- Domestic Violence Advocate, Connecticut, 2017

Our heartfelt thanks to the service providers, clergy, and coalition staff members across the U.S. who shared their time, experiences, and wisdom so generously with us. We have learned so much from you all, and we are deeply grateful. It is an honor to share this journey with you. We are also grateful to the Office on Violence Against Women of the U.S. Department of Justice for their guidance and support.

## FOR IMMEDIATE HELP

Call your local police, sheriff, or Public Safety Officer, or dial 911 where available.

Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-800-799-7233/SAFE | Visit the National Domestic  
Violence Online Hotline at [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

*The National Domestic Violence Hotline is free, confidential, and available 24/7. Language translation is available. Anyone can call. You do not have to give your name or identifying information to receive help.*

*Add local service provider information.*

*If there is no local information here,  
call the National Domestic Violence Hotline  
(1-800-799-7233/SAFE)  
and ask for services in your area.*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Network to End Domestic Violence  
[www.nnedv.org](http://www.nnedv.org) | 1-202-543-5566

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
[www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org) | 1-303-839-1852

National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence  
[www.ncdsv.org](http://www.ncdsv.org) | 1-512-407-9020

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence  
[www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org) | 1-617-951-3980



## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Victim/Survivor: At the beginning of the domestic and sexual violence movements, those who had experienced domestic and sexual violence referred to themselves as “victims.” It was important to convey to the wider community that domestic and sexual violence is a crime with an identifiable perpetrator and victim. However, the consciousness of the wider culture has evolved. Some victims now prefer to be called “survivor” because they have not been overcome. Safe Havens uses “victim” and “survivor” interchangeably while recognizing that every victim/survivor is much more than their experience of domestic violence, and that most victims and survivors do not want to be defined solely by their experience of violence. We recognize victims and survivors as whole human beings, and we are deeply grateful for the insight and wisdom of victims and survivors that have been shared with us over the years.

<sup>2</sup> Georgia Commission on Family Violence and Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Georgia Commission on Family Violence and Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review, p. 5.


<sup>4</sup> Allstate Foundation National Poll on Domestic Violence, 2006. Lieberman Research Inc., Tracking Survey conducted for The Advertising Council and the Family Violence Prevention Fund, July – October 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/healthcare/a/femhealthcost.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, based on a study by Sarah M. Buel, JD, and the Quincy, MA Court.

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We chose to use mosaics in the design of “Pieces of a Bigger Picture” because they are common to many faith and artistic traditions throughout history. The mosaics you see in these resources are from Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and secular communities. They remind us of the diversity of people and faith communities that partner with Safe Havens and with local domestic and sexual violence agencies to end abuse.

Beautiful mosaics are made of broken pieces. For this reason, mosaics also speak to the experiences of survivors, who describe feeling “broken,” or “shattered,” and speak of “putting the pieces back together” as they courageously rebuild their lives after abuse. Survivors are the inspiration for these resources. One woman commented, “I am not damaged goods. I am a mosaic of everything that couldn’t beat me.”

We also chose mosaics because faith communities, sexual and domestic violence service providers, law enforcement, schools, hospitals, Adult Protective Services, and other allied professionals each represent an important piece of the bigger picture of safety, justice, and healing that survivors of sexual and domestic violence so richly need and deserve. Every one of us is critically important to the bigger picture. As David Crystal says, “To lose even one piece of this mosaic is a loss for all of us.”

We hope you and your congregation will put yourselves into the picture, learn more about sexual and domestic violence, and become a piece of community-wide efforts to build a mosaic of healthy and happy families, congregations, and communities where abuse is a thing of the past.