

## Unhealthy Relationships: How to Recognize and Support our Friends

It is always easier to recognize unhealthy or abusive relationships from the outside, compared to in our own relationships. Think about watching a dramatic movie: our brains are telling the victims to ‘get out, run away’, yet they stay because it is much more complex when feelings are involved.

### What are the signs? 🏠

- Witnessing verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; if your friend or family member tells you they are feeling unsafe, fearful, or are unable to leave the relationship
- If they are isolated, or slowly becoming cut off from their friends, family, hobbies (ex. they no longer hangout, respond to texts, post on social media, or are never alone when they do go out)
- They immediately defend any and everything that their partner says or does; they may minimize or deny the abuse saying things like ‘they don’t mean it’, or ‘they just had a bad day’

### What should I do? 🙋

- Keep the door open - check in with them, invite them out even if they don’t often show up, keep in touch about the day-to-day
- Focus on your concern for them and their safety/ well-being
- Give specific examples of what you have seen or heard (‘I saw how hard they grabbed your arm’); even use your own experiences and how you felt during a similar fight or unhealthy relationship
- Ask them questions, allow them to do most of the talking, and support them without judgement

### How to have the conversation: 🗣️

- Begin the conversation when your friend or family member is calm - maybe over lunch rather than immediately after a big fight with their partner
- In person may be more effective, but if you choose to chat electronically, be intentional about punctuation, emojis, and the tone that your words communicate
- Use I-statements: ‘I feel really worried about you when I see them grab you like that’
- Ask questions to get them thinking rather than telling them what to think: ‘How does that make you feel?’ ‘Are you ever afraid that they will really hurt you?’ ‘Have you talked to anyone about this?’
- Believe them, remind them that they do not deserve to be hurt and none of it is their fault

### What NOT to do: 🚫

- Cut them out of your life if they decide to stay - this may increase their sense of isolation and helplessness
- Approach their partner - this can become unsafe for you as well as for your friend or family member as the partner may take this out on them and assume they are trying to leave
- Gossip with others - this is not your information to share without permission and can look like you are ‘ganging up’ on them or their partner, making the situation worse
- Tell them to leave - it’s not that simple and may lead them deeper into defending the relationship

### What if I am concerned for their safety? ✖️

- You may need to decide to get adults or professionals involved
- This should not be done with the intention to create an ‘intervention’ but to take steps towards their safety
- You may not want to get anyone in trouble, but we all know that sometimes getting help is necessary when we are worried about someone we care about
- Create a safety plan with them: where they could go if/when they choose to leave, code words for kids or neighbors when it is an emergency, plans to keep pets safe, gathering important documents, money, medications, and clothing for several days, etc.
- Offer to go with your friend or family member to reach out to a parent, counselor, or law enforcement

### Where can I go for help? 🆘

- Do you have a trusted adult that you could go to with ‘anything’? Even if you are an adult, who would you first think of in a tough situation?
- Help the kids and young adults in your life to find that safe person, even if it is not you
- **Lake County Crisis Services Hotline**: 440-953-TALK (8255)
- **The Hotline** (domestic violence); 1-800-SAFE (7233) or text ‘START’ to 88788
- **RAINN** (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network): 800-656-HOPE (4673)

Leaving an unhealthy relationship takes a lot of courage. If you are in need of support and are looking for counseling options in Northeast Ohio, check out [www.SignatureHealthInc.org](http://www.SignatureHealthInc.org)

Signature Health’s Family Planning division also offers **free training and education on healthy relationships and violence prevention** for schools, workplaces, and community forums. To learn more, email [Lisa.Huendorf@SHINC.org](mailto:Lisa.Huendorf@SHINC.org) and check out @RelationshipsIF on Facebook and Twitter or @RelationshipsInFocus on Instagram!

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