

# Why Doesn't She Just Leave?

The battered women's friends and family often cannot understand why she does not simply walk away and end the relationship. They do not understand why she does not ask for help, or act to change the situation. They may feel overwhelmed and frustrated, confused and angry, and wonder why they should try to help her when she doesn't seem to want the help.

Unless they have personally experienced an abusive relationship, those who care about her find it difficult to understand what she is experiencing. She may hear them say things like, "She must really love him to put up with the abuse," or "She's a big girl. She could change her life if she really wanted to," or "If she's not happy about it, why doesn't she just pack up and leave him?"

Leaving the abusive relationship is one of the most difficult things for her to do, no matter how bad the situation is. Often, her self-image has been virtually destroyed. She has been told so often that she is stupid, incompetent, and cannot make it on her own, that she may come to believe it.

And even if she can work up the courage to leave, there are many obstacles. She may be unemployed or underemployed; she may not know where to turn for help. She may have children to care for. Her friends and family may be unwilling or unable to offer her shelter. They may fear reprisals from the abuser, have strong convictions about "keeping the family together," or be unwilling to get involved in her private business. They may already have sheltered her, only to see her return to her abuser. Friends and family often don't realize how difficult it is for her to leave and how hopeless she truly feels.

So what **can** friends and family do to help the woman in an abusive relationship? First and foremost, be there for her. Leaving safely is not simple, and she should not be blamed for having a hard time making these decisions. If you can offer concrete help – shelter, child care, transportation – by all means, do so; but be aware that she may not yet be ready to accept the help. Be aware of resources in the community, and learn as much as you can about domestic violence and its dynamics.

But most importantly, try to understand that the battered woman will have to decide for herself what to do and when to do it. Your role as a friend or family member can be as a listener, helper and resource person, but it remains her decision and her choice to take action or not.

SAFE House 24-hour Crisis Line 734-995-5444

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Adapted from The Battered Women's Survival Guide by Jan Berliner Statman  
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