

# What Does a Friend Do?

## PART III OF A GUIDE FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

BY LAURA MILLER

It's 3am. The phone rings. It's your friend Patrick. "You have to help me," he says, "We had a bad fight. He left, but he's coming back. I think he's really going to hurt me this time." What do you do?

Domestic violence causes great suffering to its victims, but another group of people who also experience grief, frustration, anger, and fear are the victims' (and abusers') friends. Often, a friend of the victim is also a friend of the batterer, and the first time the victim confides in the friend about the abuse, the news can provoke both shock and disbelief. Once the friend comes to believe in the abuse, it can be maddening to watch the victim repeatedly leave and go back as he deals with his conflicting emotions and his fear of reprisal.

In addition, watching or knowing of GLBT domestic violence can be especially trying for us as a community. We like to think of ourselves as more enlightened or more educated than the general population. We like to see same-sex couples who are able to stay together; we don't like them to break up. We like to make a good impression on the homophobic society around us, to prove once and for all that same-sex relationships are just as loving and supportive as everyone else's. Knowing that same-sex couples can be abusive can be both disillusioning and embarrassing to us.

But we know that it does hap-

pen. We also know that, because Vermont is a rural, spread-out community, and that 95 percent of all domestic violence victims are heterosexual women, our chances of having convenient resources specifically tailored for same-sex couples are probably rather slim. We know that lesbians sometimes feel out of place at women's shelters, and that male victims are not permitted to stay in the shelters at all.

So what can we do as a community, for our friends who are suffering at the hands of their partners? Here are a few guidelines, drawn primarily from the Women Helping Battered Women Web site and the book *Men who Beat the Men who Love Them*.

### Believe the Victim

Don't accuse him of exaggerating, and don't ask him what he might have done to provoke the violence. No one provokes violence; almost all couples argue, but there is no justification for violence. Don't tell him to get back in there and "take it like a man." It doesn't matter who is bigger or stronger; anyone can be a victim, and no one of any size or strength should tolerate domestic abuse.

In addition, don't write this off as some sort of S&M game, even if you know the couple is into S&M. Domestic violence has nothing to do with S&M. S&M is a consensual activity; once it is no longer consensual, it is not S&M anymore. You need to tell your friend that this is not his fault, and something he should not have to tolerate.

### Help Your Friend Recognize the Abuse

Learn a few facts about domestic violence, and share those facts with your friend. Tell

her that batterers usually do not change their ways, and that abuse generally gets worse and worse over time. Explain that the longer she stays in the relationship, the harder it will be to get out.

### Express Your Concerns

Tell your friend you are glad he confided in you. You can never say the following phrases too much: I'm worried about you; it's not your fault; I'm glad you told me; you deserve better; I'm here for you. Just keep saying these things, even if you feel he is not listening to you.

### Be Accepting

Don't be upset or judgmental if your friend is not ready to leave the relationship, or if she leaves and goes back several times. For many victims, leaving the relationship is easy; staying out is the hard part. Keep in mind that the abuser is probably threatening to do something to your friend if she ever leaves. Many abusers "stalk" their victims for years after the relationship ends, which forces the victims to live in a constant state of fear that they might think is actually worse than just staying in the relationship.

Also, keep in mind that your friend probably loves her abuser, and may not be ready to accept the fact that this is a relationship that is never going to work out. Just continue to be supportive, and don't get angry with your friend, no matter how many times she goes back. Remember, none of this is her fault.

### Help the Victim Find a Safe Place

This can be tricky, because you don't want to place yourself in danger. Your friend needs a place he can go to get away from the abuse, and when he finally leaves the abuser for good, he is going to need a "safe house."

The best safe houses and safe places are places the batterer won't know to look, so your friend probably needs some friends whom the batterer doesn't know. The problem is, your friend may not have many friends like that, since batterers have a tendency to keep their victims as isolated as possible. If that is the case, get help from a friend of a friend. You can also call the Vermont Network's Domestic Violence hotline at (800) 228-7395 and ask them for suggestions.

### Help the Victim Devise an Escape Plan

Look at some of the guidelines listed in the resources described in last month's article. Encourage your friend to take some of those measures, such as getting her own post office box or leaving credit cards at your place.

### Assist the Victim After the Escape

In *Men who Beat the Men Who Love Them*, Island and Letellier give several tips on how to help the victim gradually get over the relationship. First, try to do things *with* the victim without doing things *for* him. Accompany him on his errands, especially if those errands might be emotionally trying for him (as will be the case when he has to go to court or to the police), but make sure you encourage him to regain his independence.

Don't give him money. You can lend him money, but make sure you stick to a repayment plan. Your friend has just come out of an extremely taxing relationship. He has to redevelop his sense of independence, and getting into a sticky dependent relationship with you will not help him.

### AIDS: An Epidemic of Silence for the Black Community

In the May 9 *Miami Herald*, AIDS in the African-American community is addressed in a forthright and poignant fashion by a pair of reporters, Andrea Robinson and Stephen Smith, and in a complementary op-ed piece by Leonard Pitts, Jr.

The former piece is an exhaustive report that pulls out all stops in search of an answer to the question, "How can the black community talk about AIDS?" In the service of this piece, Robinson and Smith interview 100 hundred people, from PWAs to pastors, politicians to prisoners to family survivors. It is a bleak portrait, but a tale that must be told. The article quotes spokespersons from the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, the

### Don't Maintain a Friendship With Both the Victim and the Abuser

This part is hard for a lot of people, but the truth is that if you try to sympathize with both the abuser and the victim, you're not going to be much help to either. The victim needs to stay away from the abuser completely; every contact that she has with the abuser is going to slow down or disrupt the recovery process. She needs to be able to talk to someone who believes her, who will not pressure her to "see it from the other person's point of view," and who under no circumstances will try to encourage her to get back together with the abuser.

If you're not that person, keep a safe distance from both parties. It is always tempting to try to "get to the truth of the matter" by talking to both parties, but placing yourself in the position of investigator or mediator is not going to help anything, and it will probably only turn you into an emotional wreck in the end.

### Get Help for Yourself As Well As the Victim

All of the resources and hotlines listed in last month's article are there for you, too. You can call on behalf of your friend, or on your own behalf, if the situation becomes stressful or dangerous for you. Helping a victim recover from abuse is a frustrating, difficult, and emotionally taxing process that can last a year or more. You are only human and won't always be able to be a good listener, counselor, or "pillar of strength." Help your friend as much as you can, but don't neglect yourself. ▼

Congressional Black Caucus, and references a recent speech by Jesse Jackson, who has pledged "rhetorical and political might to the battle with the virus."

The power of this article is its range. It is anecdotal, but it also spotlights research studies (one analyzes how the loss of a close relative affects a woman's ability to fight HIV), the power of stigma, and steps taken to acknowledge an epidemic that continues to disproportionately affect the African-American community.

Leonard Pitts' op-ed piece references this article, and is a plea that quotes Marvin Gaye: "Talk to me. So you can see. What's Going On."

Although blacks account from one-seventh the population of Florida, they account for 63% of AIDS deaths.

## GLAADAlert

In our continuing effort to provide GLBT Vermonters and their allies information about the world outside our state, *Out in the Mountains* is pleased to offer excerpts from *GLAADAlert*, the activation tool of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. Readers should note that these alerts are not necessarily a reflection of the opinions of OITM or Mountain Pride Media. Rather, they are written by the staff of GLAAD in their mission to "promote fair, accurate and inclusive representation in the media as a means of challenging homophobia and all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation or identity."

### Ignorance is Dangerous

Richard Lessner's editorial "High-School Hijinks: Homosexual Group at West; Lawsuit in Concord" in the May 18 edition of the *Union Leader* (Manchester, NH) was an exercise in journalistic ignorance. Students at Manchester's West High requested a support group

for gay and lesbian teens and were turned down by their principal. Their request is now before the school board.

Lessner tosses off this request as a bit of nonsense, since "the last thing they need in such circumstances is a 'support group' to add to their confusion by endorsing their supposed sexual

orientation." Further, as the author of this piece is a journalist, we would have thought that he could get the facts straight. Among his gaffes, he maintains that "[n]o evidence suggests that homosexuality is genetic," and argues that "it is a myth that homosexuality is untreatable."

It is shocking that a staff member of a newspaper in the very same state where Gov. Jean Shaheen has just repealed a ban against gay adoption treats part of his readership with utter contempt and compromises the safety of its youth in a most cavalier fashion.

Please let the *Union Leader* know that this column was offensive, defamatory and dismissive.

Contact: Jim Linehan, Managing Editor, *Union Leader*, P.O. Box 9555, Manchester, NH 03108-9555, fax: 603.668.0382