Dear Alice,

My best friend is in an abusive relationship! And he knows this! He married his wife about a year ago, when she was 19 and he was 21. And since then, she's verbally abused him, hit him, and even broke down their door once to get to him when he had locked himself in his room. But he refuses to do anything about it, since he "loves her so much." I hate seeing him like this. I'm worried about him. He's been physically hurt by her a lot. And while he can hold his own without getting seriously injured, it's painful to see. He calls me a lot, feeling upset about what she's done... I'm so worried about him.

He's told me he knows she's abusive, and that he wants to take her to marriage counseling... but I know that won't help. I don't want to sound biased, but she's very close minded and I know she won't listen to any counselor. But he "loves her so much" and "doesn't believe in divorce". What can I do to help him?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It may be hard to sit back and watch your friend go through this, but one of the most productive things you can do is to support him in getting help when he wants it. Though men are more commonly the perpetrators of relationship violence, when they are the victims, they tend to be more silent and less likely to seek help. Attributed to the fact that men are often raised with the mentality that men are supposed to be physically and emotionally strong and self-sufficient, admitting to or seeking help for domestic violence may be difficult or embarrassing for them. Adding to this, there are fewer male-focused resources available. This may convey an unintended message to male victims ? that their situation does not warrant concern. This is not true. Letting your friend know that asking for help actually makes him a stronger person may help him get beyond that fear or feeling of isolation.

It is unlikely that you will be able to singlehandedly fix his relationship issues, but instead you may want to help him recognize that this abusive dynamic is not normal. Don't force the issue, but when it comes up, try to remain non-judgmental since criticizing his partner or guilt tripping him into leaving her will probably only make him feel worse. Let him know that he is not alone and that help is available. The related Q&As discuss signs and forms of domestic violence and may be a helpful starting point for the two of you. However, don't forget that listening may be the greatest tool you have at your disposal. If your friend feels as though you've got his
back, he may be able to parlay this support into the first step to leaving this relationship. When he's ready, you may be able to help him put together a plan to do this.

One barrier that male victims of intimate partner violence face is that the physical signs of abuse are often overlooked or minimized by health care providers or are attributed to other causes. This means that your friend may be lacking support from other sources, so your role becomes even more valuable. You may want to start by compiling a list of local domestic abuse services in your area and letting him know about the 24-hour National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE). In terms of couples/marriage counseling, if the violence has escalated (like it seems in his situation) going to therapy together may not be the best option. However, the fact that he's interested in pursuing therapy is great. He may want to pursue this option on his own if his wife isn't interested or willing.

Both men and women in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships may become victims of domestic violence. In each instance, having supportive friends and family members who are available to offer guidance when they seek help are valuable assets. Preparing yourself to support your friend during this difficult time is the greatest action you can take to help him move forward and out of this abusive situation. You are being a great friend by asking this question and he is lucky to have someone that cares so much about him and his wellbeing.

Alice!

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