



## **Sue Ann Says: There's Help for Domestic Abuse Victims**

Women wear many hats. They are mothers, daughters, wives, best friends, co-workers—and, too often, victims of domestic abuse.

My friend Susan Ramsbacher told me a great deal about domestic abuse I'd never known before. As Prevention Project coordinator at the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Susan really knows her stuff.

The greatest misconception about domestic abuse, Susan told me, is that it always involves physical violence. Not true. Domestic abuse is all about controlling another person. That frequently includes physical violence, of course. But domestic abuse includes any form of mental, psychological and even economic control. And domestic abuse can occur in many types of intimate and familial relationships. This might be a long-married husband and wife, teenagers who have been dating for just a few months, partners in a same-gender relationship, or an adult child or caregiver and a vulnerable elderly person. Women are the victims in the vast majority of domestic abuse cases.

“The abuser uses the unique emotional connection with the other person by manipulating that person's thoughts, feelings and actions,” Susan told me. The abuser often masks the abuse as love or caring: A boyfriend who checks his girlfriend's cell phone and email messages because he is jealous. A husband who isolates his wife from socializing with her family and friends because he doesn't want to be away from her.

The victim often is unable to see this behavior as the abuse it is. She may have grown up in an abusive home and doesn't view this behavior as inappropriate and dangerous, but simply normal. She is persuaded by her abuser's assertions that he acts this way because he cares so deeply, or that he is punishing her because she has done something wrong and she deserves it. Because domestic abuse is so poorly understood by our communities, victims often do not seek help, even if they are physically injured. This misunderstanding and the social stigma that can come with being a victim of domestic abuse prompts many women to hide or deny the abuse.

“Most couples have arguments, but the difference is that an abusive relationship involves domination, control and manipulation,” Susan explained. “The victim should ask herself questions and listen to her gut. Does the relationship feel more bad than good? How often does she feel that she is not valued? Does her partner belittle her and call her names? Or

is she treated with caring, concern and respect, even when she and her partner have a disagreement?”

Susan advises women who wonder if they are involved in an abusive relationship to tell someone they respect and can talk openly with- someone they know won't tell their abuser. When the abuser's behaviors are discussed and picked apart, it's easier to see patterns and assess the relationship. “It's important to tell someone you trust, just to start talking,” Susan told me. “Often victims feel so isolated from the abuse that they need someone else's viewpoint before they can start to see objectively. They need to be believed and supported.”

She also urges women to call a domestic violence hotline. Many women are afraid to take this step for fear that it will start a ball rolling they cannot stop. Susan emphasized that calling a hotline does not mean you have to leave the relationship; it is simply a step toward getting information and help. There are also numerous free resources that can offer advice on domestic abuse situations, whether you are a wife being abused by a husband, or an adult child concerned for your parent in a long-term care facility or hospital.

If you think you know someone in an abusive relationship, give her the opportunity to talk. “Just start by saying, ‘I am concerned about you,’” Susan suggests. “It's crucial to validate her feelings and experience. Offer to help her get help, go to a support group with her and work with her on making a plan for her safety. Listening and support are the main things you can give her so she can know that you are there when she needs you.”

As Prevention Program coordinator, Susan focuses on the root causes of domestic abuse: An abuser who feels a sense of entitlement, a personal belief that it's his or her right to treat people this way. And a society that says it's okay to use violence to gain power over others.

“Abuse isn't about anger management issues or poor communication skills,” Susan told me emphatically. “It's about the abuser's set of values, combined with the fact that society sanctions violence all the time. We as a society have to speak up and say ‘Enough! There's another way.’”

If you are involved in an abusive relationship, or know someone who might be, start by calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline toll-free at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) to be connected with services in your area. You can also check the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation web site at [www.wwhf.org](http://www.wwhf.org) for more information and a list of additional resources in Wisconsin.

We urge you to join all of us at the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation in speaking out against domestic abuse. Together, ours can be a powerful voice for change ... creating a safer and more peaceful world for ourselves, our children and our communities.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson  
*Founder & President*  
*Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation*

*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit [www.wwhf.org](http://www.wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

**If you or someone you know feels they may be in an abusive relationship, take a step toward**

**help and knowledge by calling these resources:**

National Domestic Violence Hotline (toll-free): 1-800-799- SAFE (7233)

Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence: (608) 255-0539

Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault: (608)257-1516

Refugee Family Strengthening Bilingual Hotline: 1-888-345-5898

Unidos Againsts Domestic Violence 1-800-510-9195