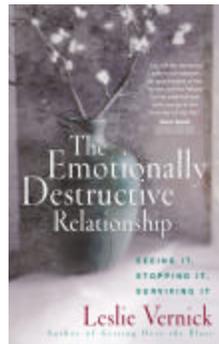


# A Special Word to People Helpers

By Leslie Vernick  
From *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*  
*Seeing It! Stopping It! Surviving It!*  
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Whether you are a friend, relative, clergy member, or professional counselor, you may find yourself unsure or unprepared when you hear the stories of people caught in destructive relationships. In this short appendix I cannot equip you with everything you need to know to help someone but, I want to give you some important information that will make you more effective and compassionate.

1. Be patient. What seems like a clear solution to us isn't so clear to the person stuck in a destructive relationship pattern. Sometimes you may be tempted to give up or pull away when your efforts to help someone seem ineffective. Please don't. It often takes a long time for someone to get ready to make a significant change in an important relationship, even if that relationship is quite painful.

Consider that God has put this person in your life right now for a reason. You have an opportunity to incarnate Christ and model a healthy relationship as you lovingly walk beside him or her during this difficult time. Here are some specific things to keep in mind during what might be a long process:

2. Listen carefully. God's Word tells us that answering someone before fully listening is foolish (Proverbs 18:13). One of the best gifts you can give someone who is hurting is your undivided attention and attentive ear. You may not know what to say, or you may think you know exactly to say. In either case, hold off. The best way to communicate that you have heard someone is to gently repeat or paraphrase back what you think you heard them say.

When people know you have heard them fully, they will be more ready to hear what you might have to say.

3. Don't dismiss the person's feelings or situation. What may feel tolerable to one person may feel unbearable to another. Don't minimize or trivialize others' pain because you can't understand why they feel as they do. When I was pregnant, I remember hearing women tell of their experiences with natural childbirth that made it seem not too bad. I felt like a total failure when, after ten hours of labor, I gave up and requested (more like demanded) drugs. People are unique, and each of us has different thresholds for emotional pain as well as tolerance for stress.

4. If the person discloses that a partner exhibits abusive and/or controlling attitudes or actions, be careful. Many professional counselors as well as pastors never receive any specialized training in recognizing abusive relationships nor know how to assess danger. That doesn't mean you can't care, listen, and help, but be wary of telling someone what he or she should or should not do, especially with respect to leaving an abusive partner or reconciling

with one if already separated. The consequences are too grave to the person and any children involved if you are wrong.

There are three common mistakes people make when working with a person caught in an abusive relationship. First, we may blame the victim. Abused people are not sinless, and so it's tempting to look for things they have done that provoked the abusive incidents. We might say to a woman, "If only you had been more submissive or less argumentative, then your husband wouldn't have treated you this way." And we might be right—this time.

There are always at least two sides to every story, but abusive behavior is always a sin and never an appropriate response, even if provoked. As people helpers it is imperative never to justify or excuse sinful behavior by blaming the victim. People provoke us all the time, but that never justifies or excuses our sinful response. Moses was held accountable for his temper outbursts even though the Israelites had provoked him greatly (Numbers 20:1–12).

The second error people helpers make when working with abusive/controlling marriage partners is to do marriage counseling. All research on domestic violence indicates that marital counseling is contraindicated. The victim will not be free to be honest and the abuser will continue to intimidate and control, even in the counseling. Without specialized training in abusive relationship patterns, it is unwise to tackle these issues in a counseling relationship.

The third error we make is that we try to become a benevolent rescuer. We give advice to the victims, tell them what to do, think for them, and make decisions for them all out of compassion and fear for their well-being. On the surface this looks like the right thing to do for people who feel helpless and overwhelmed, but in the long run you are not helping them to mature and think for themselves. You are just substituting one controlling relationship for another. Their dependence is what made them vulnerable to being controlled in the first

place. Taking over when they should be learning to think for themselves will not help them to grow.

5. Help the person carefully weigh his or her options and the potential consequences of these choices. One of the best things you can do is to become a sounding board that helps someone to think through pros and cons. Many times no alternative looks easy. Pain and confusion prevent many people from thinking clearly or being mindful of all their options. Advise in a calm, non-judgmental manner. Don't push the solutions you would choose on the person. You may be able to point out things that hinder good choices, and then help the person work through those obstacles in order to grow. You can also help him or her practice the speak-up dialogues and role play in preparation for wise and calm confrontations with a relationship partner.

6. Be honest about your limitations. Don't promise to do what you can't fulfill in the long run. Most of us are more than willing to answer distress calls in the middle of the night once in a while, but a regular pattern will grow tiresome sooner or later. No one can be all present, all knowing, and all loving at all times. It is important to recognize your limitations and continue to point the person to depend on God for strength and wisdom. We can be used by God, but we are not God.

7. Be prayerful. After all is said and done, you may feel rather impotent to help someone struggling in a destructive relationship. He or she may be unwilling to take action to evade danger or change the destructive patterns. Remember, you are *not* helpless. Prayer is a potent reminder that God is in charge and loves both individuals caught in their destructive dance. Take them before God daily, asking him to intervene in ways that you cannot imagine.

At the close of each of my counseling sessions, I usually ask my clients if I can pray for them. Prayer reminds us that there is a greater source of help than I can provide. Pray with

people every chance you get. I have rarely encountered someone who didn't deeply appreciate a personal prayer.

8. Be practical. Sometimes we forget that at times the most helpful thing we can do is to provide tangible help. The person may need medical attention, professional counseling, phone numbers for shelters, legal help, or information about community resources.

Become an expert on what's available in your locale, and provide a list of competent referral sources that the person can use to build a support system. You can't build or be the whole support system, but you can provide a start.

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