

## Counseling Considerations

It is important to talk to a victim of domestic violence alone. Many experts in the domestic violence field concur that counseling a couple together is not effective once domestic violence has been established. **Joint counseling often threatens the victim's safety, and the abuser's presence will hinder the victim's ability to openly discuss the abuse.**

“In my experience as a faith leader, I know all too well the dangers of couples or marriage counseling in situations of domestic violence. Earlier in my career, without the extensive education and training I later received on domestic violence awareness, I'd often talk to the victim/survivor with her alleged perpetrator present. The risks that I placed on abused women by my well-intentioned, but inappropriate, efforts were great. I now know that the women were not free to express the devastation under which they lived.”

*The Rev. Al Miles,  
Author and national trainer on  
domestic violence awareness for faith leaders*

Many victims and survivors of domestic violence are relieved when asked to tell their stories to an understanding and knowledgeable person. Encourage victims who come to you to openly discuss their situations. A domestic violence victim may express feelings of isolation, shame, confusion, guilt, fear and powerlessness.

Because violence is pervasive in our society, many victims may minimize their situation to make it bearable.

The trauma a victim experiences may make it difficult to make decisions. You can help by asking the victim to assess personal strength, resources and support systems without making decisions on the victim's behalf. By presenting information and options and allowing victims to make their own decisions, you will strengthen the victim's self-esteem. Let victims know that you support the decisions they make, whether it means leaving the abusive relationship or even returning to the abuser. Everyone's safety must be secured before work to preserve the family can begin. Victims may feel their safest option is to stay in the relationship. In this scenario, faith leaders can provide options, support and safety planning by believing that the victims are the experts in their own situations.

Safety should be the priority for victims of domestic violence and their children. Victims should develop a safety plan by identifying a safe place to go in the event of an emergency. (The National Domestic Violence Hotline or your local domestic violence shelter can help). Talk to the victim about setting aside money, keys, medication, important papers, clothes and whatever else is needed in an emergency. Provide the victim with resources if the abuse occurs again. Planning a victim's safety and the safety of their children may help ease feelings of guilt and betrayal of family loyalty.

