

The First Response

What to do when someone in your church discloses domestic abuse.

A short, practical guide for pastors, staff, and lay leaders, so the first person to hear “I’m not safe at home” knows exactly what to do next.

LOVE DOES NO HARM · 28 YEARS OF EQUIPPING THE CHURCH TO RESPOND TO ABUSE

IF SOMEONE IS IN DANGER, REACH REAL HELP NOW

In immediate danger: call **911**.

24/7, free, confidential: National Domestic Violence Hotline: call **1-800-799-7233**, text **START** to **88788**, or chat at thehotline.org.

In crisis: call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline).

A word from Judi

Friend,

In twenty-eight years, I have learned that the moment someone finds the courage to say “something is wrong at home” is holy ground, and fragile. What happens in the next few minutes can begin their healing, or it can become a second wound.

You do not need to be a counselor or an expert. You need to be **ready**. Ready to believe, to keep them safe, and to walk with them toward people who are trained to help. That readiness is the whole of this toolkit. You are already in the room. Let’s make sure you know what to do while you’re there.

With hope,

Judi

Start here: believe them

When survivors reach out to their faith community and are not believed, they suffer what we call the **Secondary Trauma of Disbelief**, the wound that opens when the people who should have been a refuge become one more locked door. On average, survivors in faith communities take **3.5 years longer** to reach safety than their peers (Wright, 2024). Being believed is where that changes.

THE FIRST WORDS THAT MATTER

“I believe you. This is not your fault. I’m glad you told me.”

The First Response: six steps

You can remember the whole of it in six words. Move through them in order; the first two come before anything else.

- **1 • Believe.** Take them at their word. Do not investigate, ask for proof, or defend the person they named.
- **2 • Ask about safety.** “Are you safe right now?” If there is immediate danger, call 911. Otherwise, connect them to the Hotline to make a safety plan. Don’t improvise one.
- **3 • Listen, don’t fix.** Let them lead. Your calm presence is more powerful than any solution you could offer today.
- **4 • Do no harm.** Avoid the responses that raise danger (see the next page). When unsure, choose safety over speed.
- **5 • Connect to trained help.** You are the bridge, not the whole bridge. Warmly refer them to the National DV Hotline and local advocates who are trained to help.
- **6 • Stay.** Healing is measured in years, not days. Keep believing, keep checking in, keep the door open.

The first conversation: say this, not that

The words are simple. Under pressure they are easy to forget, so keep this table close.

SAY THIS	NOT THIS
"I believe you."	"Are you sure? That doesn't sound like him."
"This is not your fault."	"What did you do that set him off?"
"Are you safe right now?"	"Go home, submit, and pray harder."
"You don't have to decide anything today."	"You need to leave him immediately."
"I'll help you find people who know how to help."	"Let's get you both into counseling."
"What would be most helpful right now?"	"Here's what you need to do."

Why "not that" matters: pushing a survivor to stay, or to leave, can both increase danger, because the moment of leaving is often the most dangerous. Couples counseling and mediation are unsafe where there is abuse. The survivor knows their own risk best; your job is to believe them and connect them to trained help who can plan with them.

What not to do

THESE RESPONSES CAN RAISE THE DANGER

- **Don't play detective.** You don't need proof to offer belief and support.
- **Don't offer couples counseling, mediation, or a "both sides" meeting.** These are unsafe when abuse is present.
- **Don't contact or confront the person who was named,** and don't share the disclosure without the survivor's consent.
- **Don't pressure a decision in either direction.** Connect them to an advocate to plan for safety.
- **Don't promise secrecy you can't keep.** Know your state's mandatory-reporting duties, especially where children may be at risk (this toolkit is not legal advice, verify locally).
- **Don't make them feel like a problem.** They were brave to tell you.

Recognizing the signs

Abuse is a **pattern of power and control**, and it is not only physical. Long before a bruise, coercive control shows up in patterns like these:

- **Isolation:** cut off from friends, family, money, or church community.

- Monitoring: tracking their phone, location, spending, or messages.
- Fear: they seem anxious, “walk on eggshells,” or fear a partner’s reaction.
- Control: one person makes all the decisions; the other must ask permission.
- Blame and threats: including threats about the children, immigration status, or using faith and Scripture as a weapon.

You don’t have to be certain to care. If something feels wrong, gently open a door: “How are things at home, really? I’m here, and I’ll believe you.”

A note on safety & privacy

PROTECT THE SURVIVOR’S PRIVACY

- Assume a survivor’s phone, email, and accounts may be monitored. Follow their lead on how and when to communicate.
- Offer a safe way to talk, in person, or a trusted number and time they choose.
- Don’t leave voicemails, texts, or notes that could be seen by someone else.
- Keep what they share confidential within your safeguarding policy. Never gossip, never “prayer-chain” their story.

If this is your story

If you are reading this because it is **your** story, we believe you. What is happening is not your fault, and you are not alone. You deserve to be safe. You do not have to have it all figured out to reach out.

Talk to someone who can help, any time: call **1-800-799-7233**, text **START** to **88788**, or chat at thehotline.org. In immediate danger, call **911**. There is help, and there is hope.

Where Eagle’s Wings comes in

This toolkit is a beginning, not the whole of it. When your church is ready to go further, we walk with you:

- **Love Does No Harm** : our curriculum equips your whole team to recognize and respond well, together.
- **The Founders Program** : for leaders building a response that lasts, so readiness outlives any one person.
- **Team coaching & speaking** : bring Judi and our team to train your staff or speak to your congregation.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Just reply to the email that sent you this toolkit and we'll send a short, no-pressure introduction to the Founders program, and Judi's book, *[Founders book title, to confirm]*, which goes deeper into everything here.

Prefer to talk? Book a conversation with our team at *[booking link, to confirm]*.

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