Supporting Survivors of Domestic Violence

How many of you have known or worked with a domestic violence survivor? The reality is we all have. It is the responsibility of all of us to hold perpetrators accountable and to work to create a climate that supports healthy relationships. Often we blame the victim because it’s an easy way out. Many of us have been in situations where we believed domestic violence has occurred, but didn’t act because we were not sure what to do.

Domestic violence is a learned behavior and the abuser chooses when and where to use the violence. This violence can be reinforced as acceptable if perpetrators are not held accountable by their community, not only by the criminal justice system but by their healthcare, education, business and faith based systems.

There are barriers to asking someone about domestic violence. Some of those being a lack of awareness of the prevalence, means of identification, or severity of the problem. Thinking it’s not our place to intervene and not knowing how to help stand in the way of asking.

So how can we support survivors? We can ask direct questions when it is safe to do so. Many survivors say that if someone had just asked they would have told them. Abusers are counting on all of us to not ask and to think it’s not our place to ask. They will tell the victim that no one cares and no one will notice. We can validate the survivor’s experience and feelings. We can take a stand against violence and articulate a clear set of beliefs that no one deserves to be abused and that the victim is not responsible for what is happening to them.

What can we say?

I believe you.

I am sorry this happened to you.

I am glad you told me.

I am concerned for your safety.

Help is available.

I can give you the number of the local domestic violence program.

We should acknowledge a survivor’s strengths and all the ways they have protected themselves and their children. Domestic violence is a complex issue and there is no “quick fix” or “cookie cutter” approach that can be used. What works for one person may be dangerous for another. The most important response is one that is supportive and nonjudgmental of the victim and holds the abuser accountable. Remember that the survivor must find solutions that they can live with and that in a crisis we all react and respond differently.