

# You can save a woman's life—just by asking her how she's doing

Tina Norris never told her friend Cynthia that her husband beat her, but there were too many warning signs for Cynthia to ignore. So she risked the embarrassment of being wrong and said something—and that tiny risk saved Tina's life. Cynthia is just one of the "bystanders" to domestic violence that REDBOOK celebrates because they didn't just stand by. Read their inspiring stories and learn how you, too, could save a woman's life, just by talking. **by Denise Dowling**

**"I wondered if it was my right to say anything, but I didn't want to see another bruise."**

—Cynthia Grant (right), 48, an education coordinator for a domestic violence agency, who suspected her friend Tina Norris, 41, a manager for the American Nurses Association, was being abused.

**CYNTHIA:** Tina and I became fast friends 16 years ago. We went out to lunch her first week at the packaging company where we worked, and after that we ate together often. Tina didn't talk much about her personal life. She'd talk about work or church, but rarely mentioned her husband.

**TINA:** Cynthia had this bumper sticker that read LIFE IS FRAGILE—HANDLE WITH PRAYER. My faith is very important to me, and when I saw that I thought, This is someone I could be friends with.

**CYNTHIA:** Sometimes I'd invite Tina out for happy hour, but she always had an excuse for why she couldn't go. One day she came in to work with a black eye. I joked, "Who socked you?" She said she hit her eye while opening a door. Another time I noticed a bruise on her hand; she had some excuse about that, too. She often wore long sleeves—even in the summer, and this was Florida!—but sometimes I'd glimpse a bruise on her arm. I thought, Either she is very accident-prone or something is going on at home. I wondered if it was my right to say anything, but on a day when she seemed especially sad, I felt it was time to ask. We'd been friends for a year by then, and I didn't want to see another bruise. ▶



**TINA:** We were in the ladies' room when Cynthia asked if anything was wrong at home. She said, "Promise me that if you need to talk, you'll come to me."

**CYNTHIA:** At first she denied anything was wrong, but then she sighed and the tears started coming. I gave her a hug.

**TINA:** I knew that Cynthia wouldn't judge me. As a victim, you already feel ashamed and humiliated—you don't want someone telling you that you're stupid for not leaving him. The abuse had been going on for more than a year, and I was paralyzed with fear. It was a relief to confide in Cynthia and hear that my husband had the problem, not me.

**CYNTHIA:** Tina needed support to get stronger. I never blamed her or said, "Why don't you just leave?"

**TINA:** One day my husband came to the office. He wanted my paycheck, but I told him he couldn't have all the money. That was unusual—I never challenged him. We went to cash my check anyway, and he took it all—but I knew there'd still be consequences for standing up to him.

**CYNTHIA:** There was a dark cloud over Tina when she returned from lunch. She wanted to work late, as if she were scared to go home. I told her to come home with me.

**TINA:** I was terrified to go home, but more terrified not to go. When I got

home, my husband started hitting and kicking me. I was four months pregnant, and I said, "God, if you get me out of this, I am never coming back!" We were on the second floor of our town house, and I thought desperately, If I jump over the loft to the first floor, maybe I can get away. So I jumped. I hurt my foot, but I lay on the floor pretending to cramp. I wanted him to think the baby was hurt and call an ambulance. He did. At the hospital, the doctors made him stay in the waiting room. The baby was okay, but I had fractured my foot. When the nurse asked me if I'd been abused, I denied it until she said, "I see the bruises; you can tell me. Is there anyone you want me to call?"

**CYNTHIA:** It was 2 a.m. when the nurse called. I drove to the hospital with my hair in rollers, mad at her husband and mad at Tina for not coming home with me. The nurse told me to park in the back so Tina's husband wouldn't spot me.

**TINA:** I left the hospital with Cynthia, on crutches with only one shoe and the clothes on my back. After the first night, she brought me to a friend's house because my husband knew where Cynthia lived. My dad came and took me back home to Maryland. I left everything behind.

Cynthia was my angel—her support was critical. I probably would have stayed with my husband if it weren't for her. But instead I moved back to my hometown and divorced my husband. I now have an online ministry and do outreach work to give other victims a voice.

**CYNTHIA:** Tina and I remained close friends even after she moved away. Ten years later, I was burned out on accounting, when an acquaintance who ran a domestic abuse shelter said she was looking for a victim's advocate. I took the job—and realized that I was an advocate even before I knew what the word meant.

**"As soon as I saw Lorel's husband punching her, I headed toward them. I didn't want to wait until Monday and find out I was going to a funeral."**

—Mike Nolan, 56, president of Accounting & Finance Personnel Inc., suspected that his employee, Lorel Stevens, 35, vice president and branch manager, was being abused.

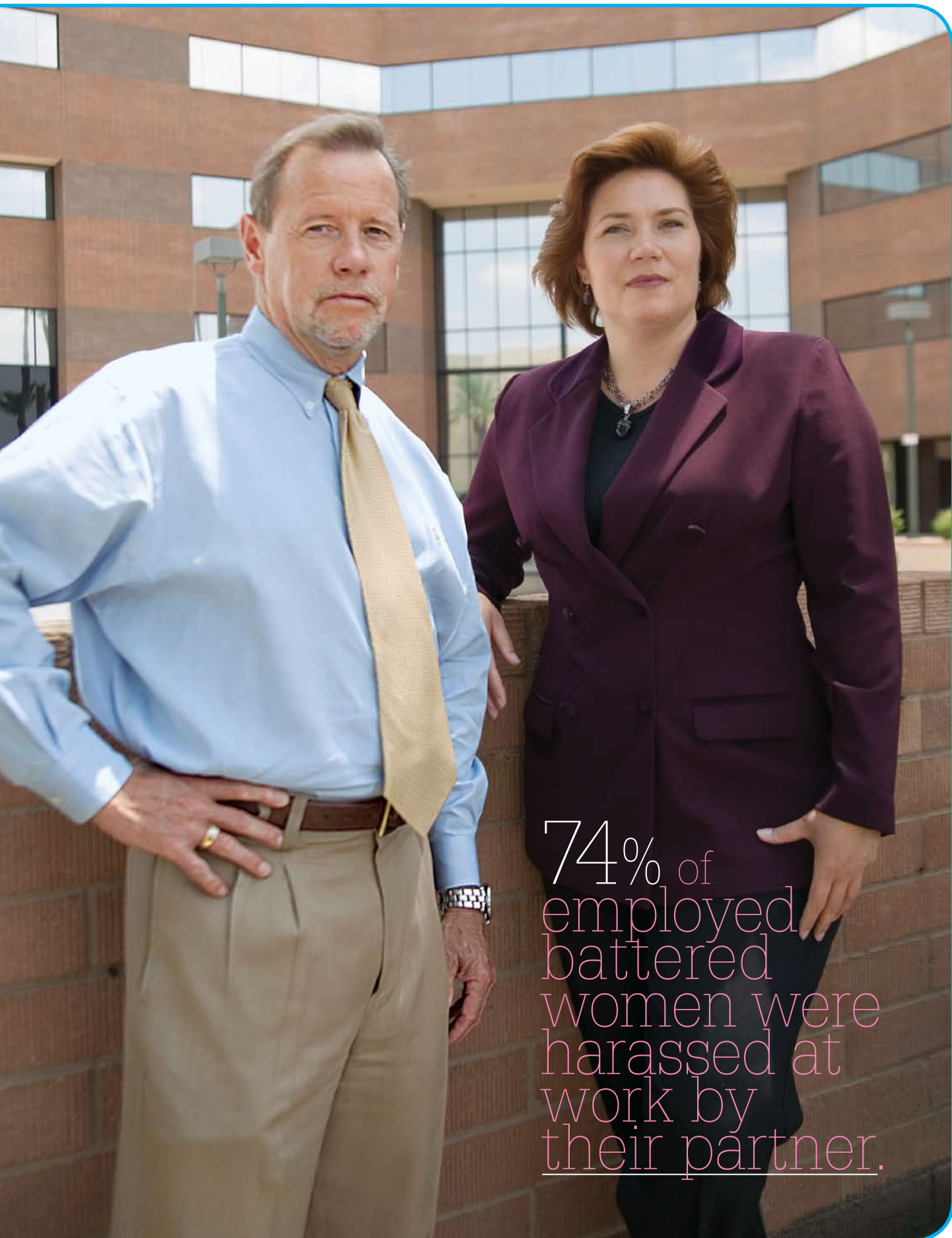
**MIKE:** Lorel was out sick more than other employees, but I didn't suspect anything was wrong until the day I witnessed the abuse.

**LOREL:** My husband was strategic—he'd hit my arms and legs, places that could be covered up. He'd often call work to check up on me. Some days I was glad that I could mask what was going on at home, but other days I wouldn't have minded if someone had said, "It looks like you've had a tough call—is everything okay?"

One Saturday my husband asked to see the pay stub from my bonus check; he wanted to make sure I had deposited all of it. The stub was in my office desk, so he drove me and our 5-year-old son to my office building. Once we were inside, he started yelling, "I can't believe you're so stupid that you forgot it here!" He came at me, pushing me into the furniture. I kept saying, "I'm sorry, let's just get out of here."

**MIKE:** I went in that day to catch up on some work. I could hear a heck of a commotion as I rode up in the elevator. When the doors opened, Lorel, her husband, and their son were standing there. She looked upset.

**LOREL:** I didn't recognize Mike;



74% of  
employed  
battered  
women were  
harassed at  
work by  
their partner.



he was wearing a baseball cap and glasses. Plus I kept my head down.

**MIKE:** A few minutes later I looked out of my office window and saw Lorel and her husband at their car. He grabbed her and started hitting her arms and legs. These were haymaker punches—wild, closed-fist punches, intended to knock an opponent out. I don't think I could have taken those punches. I

headed for the parking lot but couldn't catch up to their car in time.

**LOREL:** My husband kicked me and grabbed me by the arm and neck, tearing my shirt. He made me drive home, punching my arm and hitting my face the whole time. I kept hoping another driver would call the police. I could see my son's eyes in the rearview mirror; he was crying, "Stop, Daddy, stop!"

**MIKE:** I called our office manager to ask if she knew anything about Lorel's husband beating her. Marybeth said she'd had her suspicions. Next I called domestic abuse agencies, but got no answer. I didn't want to wait until Monday and learn I was going to a funeral.

**LOREL:** When we got home, there was a message from Mike asking me to call him at work. When I did, he said he'd seen everything. My heart sank. For 12 years, I'd worked continued on p. 164 ►

## How to know when something's not right

You've never seen her with a black eye or a broken bone, but you have this feeling that things are bad at home. Trust your instincts, says Sheryl Cates, executive director of the National Domestic Violence Hotline. "The signs of abuse can be subtle," Cates says. Here, five tip-offs Cates says you can't ignore.

■ **The tip-off:** She says, "No girls' night for me. He gets upset when I go out, and I don't want to start another argument."

■ **Why it's trouble:** "Jealousy is often the first sign of controlling behavior. He's sending the message that she belongs to him."

■ **The tip-off:** At their house for dinner, you say, "This is delicious." He tells her, "Yeah, it's the first good meal you've made in months."

■ **Why it's trouble:** "Verbal abuse is any kind of criticism with the intent to harm—from backhanded compliments to outright cruel comments followed by disclaimers like, 'Can't you take a joke?'"

■ **The tip-off:** He threatens her, "If you do that, I'll..."

■ **Why it's trouble:** "Threatening to harm her, their kids, pets—or himself—is another control tactic an

abuser uses to make a victim feel responsible for his behavior."

■ **The tip-off:** She's nervous around him, studying his face when they're at a party; if he gives her "the look," she rushes to his side.

■ **Why it's trouble:** "Little cues and directives are more examples of controlling behavior. Everything gets done *his* way: 'Go to the store at this time, pick up these items, be back in two hours, and bring me the receipt and change.'"

■ **The tip-off:** You rarely see her at social events like family gatherings and neighborhood get-togethers.

■ **Why it's trouble:** "He's isolating her from family and friends. She's not locked in the attic—she goes to work, buys groceries, takes the kids to school—but she isn't permitted to enjoy the company of her friends and family." —*Penny Wrenn*

## 5 reasons you tell yourself to butt out (and why they're lame excuses)

**1. "It's none of my business."**  
"Domestic violence is *everyone's* business," says Sheryl Cates, of the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Safety is safety—and if her house were on fire, you'd call 911, right? "We all need to get involved."

**2. "What if I'm wrong and she gets upset?"**

The better question is, What if you're not wrong? Cates once ran into a woman in the ladies' room of a bar. The woman had a black eye, and earlier that night Cates had seen her arguing with the man she was with. "I had a feeling something wasn't right, so I gave her my card," Cates says. "She told me I had it all wrong, then fed me an explanation about the black eye. But instead of ditching the card or throwing it in my face, she tucked it in her bra."

**3. "I don't know her that well. Surely someone else has said something by now."**

This "maybe someone else already spoke up" thinking doesn't work when you smell smoke in a movie theater, and it doesn't work when you think another woman (or a man, for that matter) is being beaten. If you notice it, you owe it to her to say something. "You could be her one lifeline," Cates says.

**4. "I said something to her before—and she told me to stay out of it."**

If she told you to keep off of her property, but then you saw her toddler playing alone near their backyard pool, would you heed her previous warning? "We don't need permission to get involved in someone's life and speak up," Cates says, "especially if what's going on in front of us could be a crime."

**5. "I don't know what to say."**

It's okay to be afraid, or nervous. But, Cates says, "as long as your intent is sincere, the words *will* come." (See "Here's How to Reach Out," page 164, for sample scripts you can practice before talking to a friend or loved one in crisis.) —*P.W.*

continued from p. 160 ► so hard to keep the abuse a secret. I felt humiliated, but I swore it had never happened before.

**MIKE:** I asked to speak with her husband. If he was unwilling to talk to me, I knew I would need to file a police report. But he got on the phone and was contrite; he also said it was the first and last time.

**LOREL:** Then Mike said to me, "I'm sorry to cross the line, but whatever decision you make, I'll be here for you." I felt supported and like it might be okay to show my face on Monday. I thought it was all over—until the doorbell rang.

**MIKE:** Her story wasn't adding up. I told Marybeth to meet me at Lorel's house: I wanted to separate Lorel and her husband so they couldn't tell us the same story. Plus, I wanted a witness if her husband came after me. But he was very mellow and receptive, and promised to get counseling.

**LOREL:** If Mike had made me leave with them, I probably wouldn't have returned to work. My life was already being controlled by my husband; if Mike had taken a controlling stance I would have retreated. On Monday, there was a brochure from an advocacy center on my desk. I must have picked it up 50 times before I called.

**MIKE:** A few days later, I heard rumors that Lorel's husband had boasted about outsmarting us. So I stopped by her desk to check in with her.

**LOREL:** I told Mike that I went to the advocacy center; I'd pressed charges and obtained an order of protection and divorce papers. Mike said I could have whatever time off I needed. Those were the most painful weeks of my life. I was afraid, and felt guilty about breaking up my family. Without the encouragement from my coworkers and the advocacy center, I might have backed out.

**MIKE:** I believe an employer has a responsibility to his employees. When it comes to domestic abuse, "intervention" is a term people should hear as often as "awareness" or "education."

**LOREL:** If Mike hadn't said anything, I might have left my husband someday...or maybe the only way I would have left was in a box. When you're a victim, you feel alone and invisible. Mike's support made me realize that my life and my son's life are worth fighting for. Today, I strive to inspire other victims by speaking out on domestic violence. I know how important that support can be. **R**

## Here's how to reach out

**Worried about a woman you know? Find time alone, just the two of you rather than a group of friends—so she doesn't feel ganged up on. Then, use this conversation guide from Elaine Weiss, author of *Family and Friends' Guide to Domestic Violence*, and tell her why you're concerned.**

**First say, "I'm worried about you."** Ask her how things are at home. If she tells you everything's fine, say, "Well, I'm glad, because..." and give examples about why you're worried ("Bob's 'joke' about your cooking made me cringe. I know you laugh those comments off, but they're insulting"). Victims of domestic abuse usually feel isolated from friends and family. Remind her that someone is there—you.

**BUT DON'T SAY, "Your husband/boyfriend can be a real jerk."** Go easy on the blame and name-calling—don't use words like "abuse" or "victim," which might scare her enough that she shuts down.

**If she does shut down, don't push.** Simply tell her you're there if she ever wants to talk.

**If she opens up about the abuse, say, "This isn't your fault. No matter what you did, you don't deserve this."**

**BUT DON'T SAY, "Why are you putting up with this?"** "Abuse is murky," says Weiss. "She's probably convinced that if only she knew how to make meatloaf, or were thinner, or bought the right toilet paper, then everything would go back to the way it used to be. Because *all* victims started a relationship with someone who treated them well."

**If she keeps talking, say, "I know you're dealing with complicated stuff, and you have hard choices to make."** Acknowledge her situation without trying to solve it for her. "She's not an idiot," Weiss says. "She *has* thought about her options." So keep it simple and say, "You're always welcome at my house. Anything I can do to help you, maybe take care of the kids—just let me know."

**BUT DON'T SAY, "If I were you..."** However differently you think you would handle things, you can't truly understand her financial issues, concern for kids or pets, and physical and emotional risk.

**Finish the conversation by saying, "It must be so hard for you to keep it together—you're a lot stronger than you think."**

Many people mistakenly think all abused women are weak or have low self-esteem—and she might even think this about herself. Remind her of just how strong she is to be living her life in the shadow of abuse.

**BUT DON'T SAY, "This is crazy" or "You're in denial,"** even if she's unwilling to change her situation. Give her time to think. As Weiss puts it, "Sometimes you can't see the picture when you're in the frame."

**Remember to follow up, especially if you think her situation is getting more serious.** "At this point, you're in it, so you should feel comfortable speaking up," says Weiss. Say, "I've been thinking about what you told me, and I'm beginning to feel like you might be in danger." Tell her you wouldn't feel like a good friend if you didn't share your concern with others who can help her. At this point, hand her a note with a phone number or website where she can get help. She'll use it when she's ready, and you should feel good knowing you helped. —P.W.

**On September 21, It's Time to Talk.** REDBOOK and Liz Claiborne Inc. have teamed up for the third annual It's Time to Talk Day to engage everyone in the conversation about domestic violence. Log on to [redbookmag.com/timetotalk](http://redbookmag.com/timetotalk) to find out which celebrities and radio stations across the country are taking part.

For more information about domestic abuse, or if you or someone you know is being abused, contact: the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800-799-SAFE, [ndvh.org](http://ndvh.org)); [loveisnotabuse.com](http://loveisnotabuse.com); and the Family Violence Prevention Fund ([endabuse.org](http://endabuse.org)).