15 THINGS THAT A BATTERED WOMAN NEEDS.

by Susan G. S. McGee

- **VALIDATION** – support, *belief*, belief that what she’s suffered is abuse and is wrong, belief in the details of her story, belief that she is not crazy, belief in the sometimes unbelievable malice and planned terrorism of the batterer.

- **SUPPORT, COMFORT, RESPITE** – to be told that she is a worthwhile, valuable, wonderful human being, that she is lovable, that she matters – to be *told over and over and over*. She needs some plain old down home kindness and caring. She needs some time to herself.

- **TO BE ASKED “What do you want? What do you need?”** And she needs her answers taken seriously.

- **NOT TO BE EVALUATED, NOT TO BE BLAMED, NOT TO BE PATRONIZED** – not to have her whole life, character, plans, intentions, and actions scrutinized, evaluated and *judged*, just because she’s had the misfortune of falling in love with/being entrapped by a domestic terrorist.¹ To be asked – and then to be *reminded* – what she did right, how she protected herself, how she protected her children, how she survived, how she prevailed, how she *sustained her energy* throughout brutal attacks. To be told that it’s not her fault.

- **TO BE GIVEN HOPE.** To be offered connection with other battered women who have survived and escaped. To know that many, many battered women *get away, stay away and flourish*.

- **A SEA IN WHICH SHE CAN SWIM SAFELY**² – temporary safety in shelter, safety in her own home, or in new affordable housing.

- **TO BE SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE WHO “get it”** – loving family and friends, co-workers, neighbors, colleagues, bosses, health care professionals, law enforcement folk, school and day care personnel – people who understand that:

  “just leaving” is difficult under the *best* of circumstances, but almost *impossible* when batterers stalk, harass, gain access to their victim through custody and visitation of their children; that the batterers’ “problem” is not poor impulse control, or a tortured childhood, but “his sense of *entitlement* to the life, services, affection, undivided attention and loyalty of his victim”.;³ and that battering is not

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¹ Please note – the battered women’s movement was talking about terrorism far before 9/11, just the way the women’s liberation movement had tried to tell the world about the Taliban for years prior to 9/11.

² Susan Schechter said in a workshop in 1983 that survivors needed to be safe within their own community, to be fish in the sea, I assume she was paraphrasing from Mao.

³ Paraphrased from Barbara J. Hart, survivor, advocate, attorney, from the article “Rulemaking and Enforcement/Rule Compliance and Resistance.” 1996.
impulsive, but instrumental – that he doesn’t have poor impulse control, a temper problem, a short fuse, an explosive personality, but that he has carefully planned the abuse to get what he wants or to punish her for breaking his rules.

“I would have put emotional support at the top of the list because without it all other support is ineffective. If I didn’t believe I could leave, cope, stay away, survive, then I wouldn’t have even tried. In those crucial first days, weeks, months, years, it is vital that others believe in us because we don’t believe in ourselves.

That doesn’t mean I wasn’t conscious of other needs. I was and that’s what terrified me. What if my kids went hungry? What if we didn’t have a roof over our heads? What if he was right that I was a complete f*ck and the source of everyone’s problems? What if the court gave them to him because I messed everything up? What if he killed me and they were left behind to be raised by him?

What I needed more than anything was a safe place, a cocoon, to live in, to nestle in until my soul wasn’t so tired, until the numbness wore off and I could think again.

A place without time limits because if I knew those time limits were in place, I couldn’t have rested, would have worried the whole time. I know that isn’t likely to happen for anyone but that’s what I needed.”

Loretta Kemsley, a writer who uses her skills to give voice to all those not yet able to speak out.

- HER CHILDREN. She needs to be able to keep her children and keep them safe – not to be threatened by: the batterers’ kidnapping; kidnap attempts; abduction through the courts (getting custody); threats of violence and kidnapping through visitation; deliberate alienation of the children from her through horrible and untrue tales; batterer raping and beating the children; having the children removed by child welfare because the batterer is beating, raping and neglecting them and the police and child welfare can’t stop him, etc. She also needs help and protection for pets and farm animals.4

- TO BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN HER COMMUNITY – community of faith, culture, education, family, workplace, without interference and harassment from the batterer5, including the batterer6, spreading careful lies and half truths about her character, fidelity, mental health, use of alcohol and other drugs, violence and parenting. This is particularly important for survivors from small closed communities – minority faiths, military bases, reservations, immigrant communities, lesbian or gay male community, deaf community – communities that provide substantial economic, emotional and survival support to its members.7

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4 The Humane Society now has a program about animal abuse and its connection to other forms of violence. Prior to that, however, many of us knew how batterers killed, tortured, and threatened pets and farm animals in order to inculcate hopelessness and despair and to prove that he was capable of any atrocity.

5 Conversation with Barbara J. Hart

6 And the batterers’ allies, hostile family members, and other people he persuades to do his dirty work for him.

7 Particularly communities that are under pressure or are experiencing discrimination and injustice. Obviously there are many more than are referenced here.
➢ **TO BE GIVEN ACCURATE, UPDATED, ENERGETIC, CONCRETE INFORMATION** about the dynamics of domestic violence, the opportunities for help in her community, the actual practices that occur among police, courts, etc. without thought of the political ramification. To be told the truth -- that the system doesn't always work, that in some places it rarely works, and it's not her fault.

➢ **TO BE OFFERED INFORMATION** about sexism, about how women are routinely degraded and bought and sold, about how her experience is part of a world wide system to keep women under control, that the tactics of the batterer are commonly used by assailants throughout the world, and by those who abuse power over others.

➢ **ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY, AFFORDABLE LEGAL REPRESENTATION** – for custody, visitation, divorce, and advice and assistance in criminal matters.

➢ **ACCESS TO ADVOCACY** – high quality, ferocious, respectful, culturally sensitive advocacy – the kind that makes you feel that you always have someone on your side. Someone to stand up for her, fight for her and believe in her.

➢ **TO BE ABLE TO CALL FOR HELP AND GET IT.** When she calls the police, goes to court, tells her doctor, contacts child welfare, in other words, interacts with systems set up to enhance her safety she needs a helpful response. She needs not to be punished for seeking help.

➢ **A CHANCE FOR (ECONOMIC) SURVIVAL** – help with credit repair, money, housing, education and employment opportunities, child care, transportation, quality medical care, dental and eye coverage – as well as access to mental health and substance abuse services when needed.

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