

Safety plan against domestic violence

Without effective intervention, domestic violence can escalate in severity and in some instances result in murder. Whether you are staying in, planning on leaving or have left an abusive relationship, you need to have a safety plan. Here are some suggestions.

Why we stay

Getting out isn't always simple. We maintain difficult friendships or those we have outgrown. We endure difficult managers or bosses who hurl abuse when they are in foul moods. Why would leaving an abusive intimate relationship be any easier? Here are some of the reasons we stay:

- Fear of the unknown, of being stalked or killed by the abuser, of the abuser committing suicide, of not being believed about the abuse, or of placing the children at risk when visiting the abuser unsupervised.
- Isolation by the abuser often leads to a lack of support systems for the victim. It is not uncommon for victims of abuse to have no family, friends, money, work, alternative childcare options and so on.
- Financial dependence. The victim may not be able to support herself and the children without the abuser's income or have no marketable skills.
- Childhood experiences may have taught the victim that abuse is a normal part of relationships and that it's okay to abuse the people you love when they have done something "wrong".
- Beliefs about the abuser. Victims usually have strong feelings of love or emotional connection. They may think that abusers act out of love or that they are all-powerful and will be able to find them anywhere. Often victims believe that they are the only ones who can help the abusers overcome certain problems.
- Beliefs about themselves. Victims of abuse tend to internalise the blame that abusers repeatedly place on them and usually have very low self-esteem. They may even think that abuse is all they deserve or that no-one else will love them.

These complex emotions and situations make it very difficult to just leave. Should you find yourself in this situation, it is important to ask for help. A counsellor, social worker, local anti-abuse association, crisis help line or domestic violence project will be able to help you. But if you are unable to leave immediately, planning to leave or fear for your safety even if you have left, it is very important that you prepare a safety plan.

Staying safe

Here are some safety tips to keep in mind:

Before a violent encounter

- Practice how to get out of your home safely. Identify which door, window, or staircase would be best.
- Have an extra set of keys and a packed bag ready and keep them in an undisclosed but accessible place in order to leave quickly.
- Identify a neighbour you can tell about the violence and ask that they call the police if they hear a disturbance coming from your home.
- Devise a code word to use with your children, family, friends and neighbours when you need the police. Teach your children how to dial the local emergency number.
- Decide and plan for where you will go if you have to leave home (even if you don't think you will need to).
- Teach your children how to get out or find safety.
- Always remember: You don't deserve to be hit, threatened or controlled.



Safety during an explosive incident

- Follow the steps for “Before a violent encounter”.
- If an argument seems unavoidable, try to have it in a room or area that has access to an exit and not in a bathroom, kitchen, or anywhere near weapons.
- Use your instincts and judgment. If the situation is very dangerous, consider giving the abuser what he wants to calm him down. You have the right to protect yourself until you are out of danger.

Safety when preparing to leave

- Open a cheque or savings account in your own name to begin to establish or increase your independence. Rent a post office box to receive mail that may not be safe to receive at home. Think of other ways in which you can increase your independence.
- Leave money, an extra set of keys, copies of important documents, and extra clothes with someone you trust so you can leave quickly.
- Determine who would let you stay with them or lend you money.
- Keep your local domestic violence project’s number nearby, and have change or a calling card with you at all times for emergency phone calls.
- Review your safety plan as often as possible. Remember: Leaving may be the most dangerous time.

Safety in your own home

- Change your door locks as soon as possible. Buy additional locks and safety devices to secure your windows.
- Discuss a safety plan with your children for when you are not with them.
- Inform your children’s school or day care about who has permission to pick up your children.
- Inform neighbours and landlord that your partner no longer lives with you and that they should call the police if they see him near your home.

Safety with a restraining order

- If you have one, keep your restraining order on you at all times.
- Call the police if your partner violates the order in any way.
- Think of alternative ways to keep safe if the police do not respond right away.
- Inform family, friends, neighbours, teachers, that you have a restraining order in effect, and give them relevant details (who has custody, when and where visitation takes place, and so on).

Safety in the workplace

- If you feel comfortable, tell your boss and co-workers. Your office may set up a safety policy.
- Give HR or security a copy of your restraining order and a recent picture of the perpetrator.
- Tell your colleagues and office security to call the police if they see your abuser at the workplace.
- Ask colleagues not to disclose where you are if your abuser comes to the office or calls.
- Ask someone to screen your calls.
- Move to an alternate worksite, avoid sitting with your back to doors, lobbies or street level windows and include barriers in your work space such as desks, bookcases, walls, or other furniture.
- Carry a phone, use escorts to vehicles, and park close to the building.
- Keep your office door locked if you can.
- Plan an escape route if your partner comes to work.
- Work when other people are there, never alone.
- Vary your route and the times you go to work.



Safety in the community

- Vary or change any routine your partner may be familiar with. Change grocery stores, banks, day care, and so on.
- Go out during the busiest times.
- Have people you trust walk you to and from your car.
- Take someone with you.
- Carry a whistle.
- Take a self-defence class.
- Programme the police, crisis line or friend on your phone. Keep it with you at all times.

What to take if you leave

- Identification book and passport
- Driver's licence and registration
- Your birth certificate
- Money
- Lease, rental agreement, deed
- Address book
- Bank cards, account numbers, and contact details
- Cheque books
- Children's toys
- Divorce papers
- Insurance papers
- Jewellery
- Keys - house, car, office
- Medication
- Medical records
- Personal treasures
- Photos
- Small saleable objects
- Work permits

Keep in mind that you can always call your local domestic violence project or crisis help line to receive help in any of these areas or with other issues related to domestic violence. Someone is there to help you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call anytime.

Always remember: You don't deserve to be hit, threatened or controlled!

Source: Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence

Please note: Although we recognise that men are also victims of abuse and that women may also be abusers, this article was written to commemorate the 16 Days of Activism on No Violence Against Women and Children event.

