

Guidelines for Safely Leaving an Abusive Relationship

Know your risk

It is really important that you understand the possible risks involved with a separation, and that you understand that there is always a risk for death even if you feel that your partner would never resort to murder. If you do not feel that you are at risk from your partner or if you know someone who doesn't recognize their own risk, contact a local shelter or the police for help with a threat assessment. This is a process that will help you to see how much danger you might be in.

Threat assessment tools help victims, social services, police, and other professionals figure out the level of risk for death when a woman is experiencing abuse. The Danger Assessment, created by Dr. Jacqueline Campbell, is a tool that is often used. The Danger Assessment addresses 15 factors that have been associated with victims of domestic violence and their risk for death. The Danger Assessment is used with a calendar to help abused women remember all of the violent events they have experienced. A research study on the Danger Assessment I found that a woman scoring an 8 or higher is at very serious risk of being killed and a score of 4 or higher shows a significant risk for being killed. You can find a copy of this assessment tool at <http://www.safvic.org/resources/documents/DangerAssessment.pdf>. It is best to have a professional conduct the assessment; but you can look at the risk factors and see how many you think you may have before you see a trained professional.

Don't let on about your plan or intentions to leave your abuser

Women are at higher risk for death when they separate from their abusive partner. But women are also at higher risk if the abuser suspects that she wants to separate or if she tells him that she intends to separate. The DVDRRC found that in 81% of the domestic homicide cases, there was an actual or pending separation between the couple. So it's really important that women do not tell the abuser about their plan to leave until after they have been able to separate safely. If the abuser has suspicions and continues to accuse her of planning to leave, an immediate safety plan needs to be put in place.

Build a support network

It is important that you do not make this huge decision on your own. You will need support from people you can trust. You will need to tell people about your plan and ask for help in keeping you and your children safe. Local shelters and counselling services are a good social support to talk about your situation and develop a plan for separating safely. If you do not have access to a shelter or counselling services, talk to your family doctor. If necessary, you can explain your situation to the police and ask them to be present when you move out.

During a separation, many women feel all kinds of emotions. It is important that you have a support network to help you understand and cope with these feelings.

Have a safety plan

It is really important to have a safety plan in place for times when your abusive partner gets violent and you need to escape from the situation. It is also important to have a safety plan for when you separate from your partner. This plan can help to make sure that you and your children are able to leave without the risk of more violence.

A safety plan for leaving an abusive relationship should include these factors:

- know the best time to leave – this should be when your partner will not be there;
- go to a place that is safe and secure (e.g., shelter, family);
- have all essential documents/medicines (passport, birth certificate) with you;
- tell others about your plan and make sure that they do not tell the abuser;
- talk to your children about the safety plan and make sure they do not tell the abuser;
- figure out an escape route from your new home in case the abuser finds you;
- tell your employer, co-workers, and human resources department about your situation so your workplace can put together their own safety plan;
- tell your children's school about the situation and give them a picture of the abuser;
- change your phone numbers, computer passwords, and any other identifying pieces of information that the abuser may know or learn;
- inform the police about your situation;
- care for yourself and let others to help you during this difficult time.

To learn more about creating a safety plan, please see www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca. Help is available in many languages. Call the Assaulted Women's Helpline at 1-866-863-0511/ TTY 1.866.863.7868 (toll free) or call your local women's shelter.

When you have immediate concerns about safety, call the police.

Create safety around the children

One of the main reasons for ongoing contact between separated or divorced couples is the children. Abusive men can attempt to regain power and control over their partner or ex-partner by using their children. They can pressure their children for information, use visitations as a way of seeing their partner or ex-partner, threaten or harm their children to get back at her and/or create custody challenges to cause further emotional and financial abuse.

If you have children when you separate from your partner, it is important that you obtain a lawyer that is knowledgeable about woman abuse and child custody and access. The lawyer should ask the Judge for a child custody/access agreement that makes sure visitations happen at a neutral meeting place with supervision provided by trained professionals at a certified visitation centre. If you can't afford a lawyer, you may be able to have one provided for you. Call 1-800-668-8258 (toll-free), or visit www.legalaid.on.ca to find an office near you.

Getting a protection order (restraining order or peace bond)

If you fear for your safety or the safety of your children, you can get a protection order against the abuser. A protection order outlines certain conditions that the abuser must follow to keep you and your children safe, such as stating that your partner or ex-partner has no direct or indirect contact with you and/or your children. Usually your partner or ex-partner will be told to stay away from the place where you live or work, which includes no phone calls, letters, or messages through relatives or friends. There are two main types of protection orders: a) Restraining Order and b) Peace Bond.

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