

Safety Planning

Whether you are committed to staying in the relationship, are unsure of what to do, are trying to leave to escape the abuse, or have left and returned to the relationship, help exists for you to create more emotional and physical safety for you and your children.

It may be complicated and difficult it is to make decisions or take action because your partner may continue to try to present risks to you regardless of what steps you decide to take in any given situation. One of the primary ways advocates at the domestic violence resource centers of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence can help you through this is by working with you to develop a safety plan.

Safety planning is a process in which you look at your most pressing concerns, including immediate or possible dangers and risks from your partner, and come up with actions that will increase your safety in those situations and help you move forward. Advocates are skilled at brainstorming and assessing different options with you, even if you are feeling out of options. The resource centers also provide many additional direct services that can be a part of your safety plan, and these are described in the “Getting Help” section of this document.

Safety planning is an individualized process that takes into account the realities of your situation. Perhaps you are financially dependent on your partner. Perhaps your partner threatened you with harassment or harm if you were to take any steps to protect yourself, to hold him accountable, or to leave the relationship. Perhaps your love for your partner is strong, you and your partner have had good times, and you remain hopeful about the relationship. It may also feel better to work with what is known, rather than face the unknown. Safety planning takes into account that as you assert your need for emotional and physical safety, your partner may react by trying to increase control over you.

Because people experience abuse in culturally specific ways, advocates at the domestic violence resource centers take into account the cultural background and unique issues and barriers you may be facing, in order to create a safety plan to meet the circumstances. When collaborating with people experiencing abuse, advocates at the domestic violence resource centers consider culturally specific responses and resources. Domestic violence affects people regardless of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and gender identity, religious affiliation, age, immigration status, and ability. Because people experience abuse in these culturally specific ways, advocates individualize their services accordingly.

Safety planning in your relationship can include many different kinds of actions, and may be something you have already undertaken, just not with that name attached. Perhaps you have talked with a friend or family member after a difficult or dangerous situation with your partner. Perhaps you have involved law enforcement, spoken with a doctor, or been engaged with another service provider in your community. In confidential conversations with advocates at the domestic violence resource centers you can create or expand your safety plan to meet your current and most important needs, and to plan long-term for the future. Safety planning options might include making a list of important phone numbers such as friends, law enforcement, and the local domestic violence resource center. Or, it might include preparing an overnight bag should you need to leave your home quickly, and identifying safe places you can stay on short notice. It might include gathering in one place important documents such as birth certificates, identification, insurances, medical records, financial information and social security numbers. It might

mean starting a calendar to record the dangerous situations that happen with your partner. If you have children, safety planning might include options that children can put into action, such as calling 911 or identifying a safe retreat location should danger arise. Whatever your situation, creating a safety plan can assist you in reclaiming some control over your life and prioritizing your safety and the safety of your children.

If you have made the decision to leave your relationship, make safety your highest priority. Even if your partner has never physically harmed you, and even if you do not believe your partner is a person who could or would ever physically harm you, this is a time to act as if physical harm to you and/or your children is possible. Because abuse is caused by your partner's desire to exert coercive control over you, if you step away from the relationship your partner may escalate the abusive behaviors in an attempt to regain control, to scare you into coming back in the relationship, or to harm you so that even if you do not return to the relationship you may not get free either.

You may have time and space to plan how to safely leave the relationship, taking time to pack your belongings and work out housing and finances. If you are attempting to negotiate all this with your partner, still keep in mind the possibility of physical harm, and make specific safety plans that take this into account. Be cautious about invitations by your partner to meet alone for conversation, sorting out belongings, or good-byes. You do not have to feel afraid of your partner for there to be a real risk of physical danger to you and your children.

If you do not have time and space to plan, and just need to get away from your partner, you may be able to return later to retrieve your belongings with the assistance of law enforcement officers. Or, through legal action you may be able to gain sole possession of your residence. It can be difficult legally to retrieve your children later if you initially leave them with your partner, so if possible, bring them with you.

More helpful reading

- ✓ Should I Stay or Should I Go?: A Guide to Knowing if Your Relationship Can – and Should – Be Saved by Lundy Bancroft (Berkley Trade, 2011)
- ✓ The Emotionally Abused Woman: Overcoming Destructive Patterns and Reclaiming Yourself by Beverly Engel (Fawcett Columbine, 1992)
- ✓ Domestic Violence Safety Plan: A Comprehensive Plan That Will Help Keep You Safer Whether You Stay or Leave by Kellie Jo Holly (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013)
- ✓ In Love and In Danger: A Teen's Guide to Breaking Free of Abusive Relationships by Barrie Levy (Seal Press, 3rd Edition 2006)
- ✓ Getting Free: You Can End Abuse and Take Back Your Life by Ginny NiCarthy (Seal Press, 4th Edition 2004)
- ✓ You Can Be Free: An Easy-to-Read Handbook for Abused Women by Ginny NiCarthy and Sue Davidson (Seal Press, 3rd Edition 2006)