

Creating a Safety Plan

Developed by:
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Many women have escaped and survived abusive situations. This information package was put together by women who have survived and offer their advice to you.

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Resources for Abused Women in York Region

INTRODUCTION

It is important to know that although you do not have control over your (ex) partner's violence, it is possible to increase your own, as well as your children's, safety when being subjected to this abuse. Creating a safety plan involves identifying action steps to increase your safety, and to prepare in advance for the possibility of further violence. This information package offers many suggestions and ideas that we hope you will find useful. However, don't try to do everything right away. Take it a step at a time, and start with the ideas that seem most doable for you.

In creating a safety plan it is important to remember that:

- Although you cannot control your (ex) partner's violence, it may be possible to increase your own and your children's safety.
- A safety plan is needed whenever the possibility of abuse is identified.
- This safety plan information is specifically designed for actions that you can take.
- This safety plan information also includes actions you can take to increase your children's safety.
- It is important to become familiar with and to review and/or revise your safety plan regularly. Abusive situations and risk factors can change quickly.

I. AN EMERGENCY ESCAPE PLAN

The Emergency Escape Plan focuses on the things you can do in advance to be better prepared in case you have to leave an abusive situation very quickly.

The following is a list of items you should try to set aside and hide in a safe place (e.g. at a friend's or family member's home, with your lawyer, in a safety deposit box):

a) Take a photocopy of the following items and store in a safe place, away from the originals. Hide the originals someplace else, if you can.

- passports, birth certificates, immigration papers, for all family members
- school and vaccination records
- driver's license and registration
- medications, prescriptions, medical records for all family members
- welfare identification
- work permits
- divorce papers, custody documentation, court orders, restraining orders, marriage certificate
- lease/rental agreement, house deed, mortgage payment book
- bank books
- insurance papers
- address/telephone book
- picture of spouse/partner
- health cards for yourself and family members
- all cards you normally use e.g. Visa, phone, Social Insurance, ATM

- b) Try to keep all the cards you normally use in your wallet:
- Social insurance cards
 - Charge cards
 - Phone card
 - Banking cards
 - Health cards
- c) Try to keep your wallet and purse handy, and containing the following:
- car/house/office keys
 - checkbook, bank books/statements
 - driver's license, registration, insurance
 - address/telephone book
 - picture of spouse/partner
 - emergency money (in cash) hidden away
- d) Keep the following items handy, so you can grab them quickly:
- emergency suitcase with immediate needs
 - special toys, comforts for children
 - jewelry
 - small saleable objects
 - items of special sentimental value
 - a list of other items you would like to take if you get a chance to come back to your home later

- Open a bank account in your own name and arrange that no bank statements or other calls be made to you. Or, arrange that mail be sent to a friend or family member.
- Save and set aside as much money as you can - out of groceries if necessary.
- Set aside, in a place you can get to quickly, \$10 to \$15 for cab fare, and quarters for the telephone.
- Plan your emergency exits.
- Plan and rehearse the steps you will take if you have to leave quickly, and learn them well.
- Hide extra clothing, house keys, car keys, money, etc. at a friend's house.
- Keep emergency suitcase packed or handy/ready to pack quickly.
- Consider getting a safety deposit box at a bank that your partner does not go to.

The Police will bring you back to the home later, to remove additional personal belongings, if it is arranged through the local division. Take the items listed above as well as anything else that is important to you or your children.

When you leave, take the children if you can. If you try to get them later, the police cannot help you remove them from their other parent unless you have a valid court order.

II. CREATING A SAFER ENVIRONMENT

There are many things a woman can do to increase her safety. It may not be possible to do everything at once, but safety measures can be added step by step. Here are a few suggestions:

1. AT HOME

If you are living with your abusive partner/spouse:

- Get your Emergency Escape Plan in order and review it often.
- Create a telephone list with numbers of local police, nearest shelter, assaulted women's help line, crisis help line, family members, counselors, children's friends.
- Make arrangements with friends or family so that you can stay with them if necessary.
- Try to predict the next likely violent episode and make plans for the children to be sent to friends, family etc. (Try to anticipate his "cycle," e.g. when there is a full moon.)
- Teach the children to let you know when someone is at the door, before answering the door.
- Teach your children how to use the telephone (and your cellular phone, if you have one) to contact the police and the fire department.
- Create a code word with your children and/or friends so they know to call for help.
- Teach your children how to make a collect call to you and to a special friend if your partner takes the children.
- Plan your emergency exits, teach your children and know them well.
- Teach your children their own Safety Plan.

If you are not living with your abusive partner/spouse:

- Change the locks on the doors and windows. Install a peephole in the door. Change the locks on your garage and mailbox.
- Teach your children to tell you if someone is at the door and to not answer the door themselves.
- Keep your restraining order near you at all times.
- Make sure that the school, day care, and police have a copy of all court orders, including restraining orders, custody and access orders, as well as a picture of the abusive partner.
- If possible, try to predict the next likely violent incident and be prepared.
- If you have call display on your phone, be careful about who can get access to the store numbers (example, last number dialed, etc.).
- Have your telephone number unpublished, as it is harder to track than when it is unlisted. Block your number when calling out.
- Consider getting a cellular phone and preprogram numbers of people to call.
- Consider moving your furniture around differently as this is something your partner may not anticipate, and cause him/her to bump into it and give you warning that he/she is in the house. Also put your kitchen utensils and knife block in the cupboards so they are not as accessible.
- If you live in an apartment, check the floor clearly when getting off the elevator. Look in mirrors and be aware of doorways in hallways. Speak to security, or make an anonymous call, requesting safety in your building.
- Purchase rope ladders to be used for escape from upper floors.
- If you have a balcony, consider putting wire around it.
- Replace wooden doors with steel/metal doors if possible.
- Install smoke detectors and fire extinguishers for each floor.
- Consider the advantages of getting a guard dog.
- Install an outside lighting system that lights up when a person is coming close to your house.
- Do whatever you can to install security systems, including additional locks, window bars, poles to wedge against doors, an electronic system, etc. – anything to provide added security.

2. IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

- Tell your neighbours that you would like them to call the police if they hear a fight or screaming in your home.
- Tell people who take care of your children which people have permission to pick up your children.
- Tell people in your neighbourhood that your partner no longer lives with you, and they should call the police if he/she is seen near your home. You may wish to give them a photo and description of him/her and of their car.
- Ask your neighbours to look after your children in an emergency.
- Hide clothing and your Emergency Escape Plan items at a neighbour's house.
- Use different grocery stores and shopping malls, and shop at hours that are different from when you were living with your abusive partner.
- Use a different bank or branch, and take care of your banking at hours different from those you used with your abusive partner.
- Change your doctor, dentist and other professional services you would normally use.
- Do not put your name in your apartment building directory.

3. AT WORK

Each woman must decide for herself if and/or when she will tell others that her partner is abusive and that she may be at risk. Friends, family and co-workers may be able to help protect women. However, each woman should consider carefully which people to ask for help. If you are comfortable, you may choose to do any or all of the following:

- Tell your boss, the security supervisor, and other key people or friends at work of your situation.
- Ask to have your calls screened at work. It would also help to have these calls documented.
- Discuss the possibility of having your employer call the police if you are in danger from your (ex) partner.

When arriving or leaving work:

- let someone know when you'll be home
- carry your keys in your hands
- get a remote or keyless entry car door opener
- walk with someone to your car
- scan the parking lot
- walk around your car, look under the hood and check if anything has been tampered with and check brakes. Remember to keep your car seats forward, so you know if someone is hiding in the car
- if your partner is following you, drive to a place where there are people to support you, e.g. a friend's house, police station
- if you have underground parking, consider parking across the street
- keep a sign in your car saying "call police"
- if you are walking, take a route that is populated
- change the patterns of when you arrive and leave work and the routes you take home
- if you see your partner on the street, try to get to a public place, e.g. a store
- if you see your partner on the street, call attention to yourself and request help

III. AN EMOTIONAL SAFETY PLAN

The experience of being abused and verbally degraded by partners is usually exhausting and emotionally draining. The process of surviving and building a new life requires much courage, and incredible energy. To conserve your emotional energy, and to support yourself in hard emotional times, there are a number of things you can do:

- Attend as many Crisis Counselling group sessions as you can.
- Become involved in community activities to reduce feeling isolated.
- Take a part-time job to reduce isolation and to improve your finances.
- Enroll in school to increase your skills.
- Join support groups of other women to gain support and strengthen your relationships with other people.
- Take time for yourself to read, meditate, play music, etc.
- Spend time with people who make you feel good and provide support.
- Take part in social activities, e.g. movie, dinner, exercise.
- Take care of your sleep and nutritional needs.
- Keep your Client Profile up to date to help you feel prepared for upcoming events.
- Keep a personal journal to write about your feelings, especially when you are feeling low or vulnerable. Keep it in a safe place or burn it.
- Take time to prepare yourself emotionally before entering stressful situations like talking with your partner, meeting with lawyers, or attending court.
- Try not to overbook yourself - limit yourself to one appointment per day to reduce stress.
- Be creative and do whatever makes you feel good.
- Write something positive about yourself everyday - your own personal affirmations.

- Do not find your comfort in excessive use of alcohol or food - it only serves to increase your depression.
- Avoid excessive shopping and impulse buying.
- Join a health club or start an exercise program. It will increase your energy level and increase your sense of well being.
- It's OK to feel angry, but find positive and constructive ways to express your anger.
- Remember that you are the most important person to take care of right now.

IV. A CHILD'S SAFETY PLAN

This plan was developed to help mothers teach their children some basic safety planning. It is based on the belief that the most important thing that children can do for their mothers and their families is to get away from the area of violence! They cannot stop the abuse, although they often try by distracting the abuser or directly interfering in the abusive episode. It is important to tell the child that the best and most important thing for them to do is keep themselves safe.

Children who experience woman abuse can be profoundly affected. It is very traumatic for them to be faced with violence directed at them or at someone they love. Personal safety and safety planning are extremely important and necessary for children whose families are experiencing violence. Children should learn ways to protect themselves. There are several ways to help you develop a safety plan with your children.

- Have your child pick a safe room/place in the house, preferably with a lock on the door and a phone. The first step of any plan is for the children to get out of the room where the abuse is occurring.
- Stress the importance of being safe, and that it is not the child's responsibility to make sure that his/her mother is safe.
- Teach your children how to call for help. It is important that children know they should not use a phone that is in view of the abuser. This puts them at risk. Talk to your children about using a neighbour's phone or a pay phone if they are unable to use a phone at home. If you have a cell phone, teach your children how to use it.
- Teach them how to contact police at the emergency number.
- Ensure that the children know their full name and address (rural children need to know their Concession and Lot #).

- Rehearse what your child/children will say when they call for help.

For example:

Dial 911.

An operator will answer:

“Police, Fire, Ambulance.”

Your child says:

Police.

Then your child says:

My name is _____.

I am ____ years old.

I need help. Send the police.

Someone is hurting my mom.

The address here is _____.

The phone number here is _____.

- It is important for children to leave the phone off the hook after they are done talking. The police may call the number back if they hang up, which could create a dangerous situation for yourself and your child/children.
- Teach your children about Neighbourhood Block Parents and how to use them.
- Pick a safe place to meet your children, out of the home, after the situation is safe for you and for them (so you can easily find each other).
- Teach your children the safest route to the planned place of safety for them.

V. DURING A VIOLENT INCIDENT

Women cannot always avoid violent incidents. However, in order to increase your safety, here are some things *you can do*:

- Remind yourself that you have an Emergency Escape Plan, and go over it in your mind.
- Start to position yourself to get out quickly or near a phone so you can call 911, if necessary.
- Try to move to a space where the risk is the lowest. (Try to avoid arguments in the bathroom, garage, kitchen, near weapons, or in rooms without access to an outside door.
- Use your code word with your children so they can call for help.
- Use your judgement and intuition - if the situation is very serious, you can agree with your partner or give him/her what he/she wants to calm him/her down. You have to protect yourself until you are out of danger.
- When, or after, you have been assaulted, call the police at 911 if you can. Tell them you have been assaulted by a man/woman, (don't say your husband/partner), and leave the phone off the hook after your call.
- Make as much noise as possible (set off the fire alarm, break things, turn up the stereo or TV) - so that neighbours may call the police for you.

Financial Assistance for the Booklet was provided by
The Ministry of Community & Social Services.
Translation provided by The Cultural Interpreter Services of Peel
and funded by the United Way of Peel.

