

Safety Planning: Protecting Yourself and Your Children while Planning to Leave an Abuser

If you are reading this, you are most likely searching for advice on how to protect yourself as you leave an abusive relationship. Reaching out for support is the first step to a life free from abuse, and you are very brave to have taken that step.

Now that you've taken the brave first step of reaching out for help, it's time to create a **safety plan**. A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan that includes ways to remain safe while in a relationship, planning to leave, or after you leave. A good safety plan will have all of the information you need, be specific to your situation, and will help walk you through different scenarios that you might come across while living with an abuser. *Some of the things that you put in your safety plan might seem obvious, and that's okay*- in moments of crisis your brain doesn't function the same way as when you are calm. In a crisis, it can be hard to think clearly or make logical decisions about your safety. Having a safety plan ahead of time can help you to protect yourself- and your children-in those stressful moments.

Physical Safety Planning

It's important to remember that *violence can escalate when you are planning to leave, or are actively leaving, an abusive relationship*. Here are some things to think about as you prepare to leave. The goal here is to plan and prepare enough beforehand so that you can leave *as quickly and quietly as possible*.

- Document the abuse.
 - Take pictures of physical injuries, and save any medical paperwork you might have from them.
 - Keep a journal of all violent incidents, noting dates, events and threats made, if possible. Keep your journal in a safe place.
- Research and list out helpful resources: legal advice lines, shelter numbers, etc. (visit our Online Resource Hub for some ideas!)
- Put together a "go-bag" with:
 - Legal and medical documentation for you and your children/pets: licenses, social security cards/birth certificates, vet records
 - Medications
 - List of important phone numbers
 - A burner phone, if possible
 - Documentation of the abuse
 - Extra money, if possible
- Think about your support system. Who in your life could help you if they knew what was happening?
 - Make a list of these people, then determine which ones you could trust the most to help you and keep you safe. Make a plan to tell them about the abuse. You don't have to tell them everything if you don't want to. Come up with a signal to show/tell them that you need help, and make a plan with them for what to do when that signal is used.



- If your abuser has kept you away from family and friends and you're anxious about reaching out, **connect with them anyway!** More than likely, they'll be happy to help you.
- Decide on a trusted friend or family member to tell.
 - Make a plan to tell them about the abuse. Come up with a signal to show/tell them that you need help, and make a plan with them for what to do when that signal is used.
 - If possible, keep a "go-bag" at this person's house.
 - Try to memorize their phone numbers.
- Plan your exit: which door/window you'll use, at what time of day, how you'll leave the area (drive? Getting picked up? On foot?), and where you'll stay the night.
 - Plan for what you will do if your partner finds out about your plan. Make a Plan B.

Safety Planning with Children

Domestic violence impacts children, too. It's important to make sure your children are physically and emotionally safe when you are planning to leave an abusive relationship. If you are planning to leave an abuser and have children in the home, your safety plan should include ways that your children can stay safe.

- Teach your children when and how to get help:
 - When and how to call 911
 - Help them list people they trust and can talk to
 - Come up with a code word for when things get bad, and plan where they'll go/who they'll call when that word is used.
- Help the children create their own safe space at home, such as a chair with a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. Teach them that they can go to this place when they need to feel safe and/or think about things.
- Come up with a code word that you can say when they need to leave the home in case of an emergency, and *make sure that they know not to tell others what the secret word means.*
- Be prepared in case the children accidentally reveal your plans to leave. Make a Plan B.
- If the children are enrolled in school, make sure someone on staff knows what is going on at home. Make arrangements and changes to prevent the abuser from picking the children up from school, make sure the school is only contacting you (or a safe relative who is not the abuser) with information about your child.
- Enroll them in a counseling program or support group for children.
- Tell your children that violence is never right, even when someone they love is being violent. Tell them that the violence is *not their fault or yours*, and that when anyone is being violent, it is important to stay safe.
- Let them be kids: Domestic violence often forces children to grow up too fast. Give your children chances to be and act like children- let them run wild at a playground, make a messy art project, or sing a silly song.

- **How to have these conversations:** Let them know how much you love them and that you support them no matter what. Tell them that you want to keep them safe, so you have to come up with a plan to use *in case of emergencies*. It's important to remember that when safety planning with a child, they might tell this information to the abusive partner, which could make the situation more dangerous. When talking about these plans with your child, use phrases such as "We're practicing what to do *in an emergency*," instead of "We're planning what you can do when (abuser) becomes violent."

Emotional Safety Planning

When you're putting together a safety plan, you might be focusing most of your energy on your physical safety. That's great, but did you know that you can include your emotional health in your safety plan? Emotional safety can look different for different people (everyone has unique needs!), but the goal of emotional safety planning is the same- developing strategies and coping mechanisms to help you accept yourself, your feelings, and your choices while dealing with abuse.

When you're developing your safety plan, consider including emotional safety planning. Here are a few ways to start:

- **Build your support system:** Reach out to trusted friends or family- even if you haven't spoken in a while because of the abuse, they'll be glad to hear from you. Supportive people can give you the space to process tough situations and think through your options.
- **Think small, achievable goals:** Be gentle and patient with yourself, and work at a pace that feels doable. Your goal for the day might be calling one local hotline or finding out about a new support group. You don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with, but when you're ready, your small goals will have laid the groundwork for you.
- **Create your own Happy Place:** When you're living with abuse, it can be helpful to carve out a physical space for yourself to relax, recharge, and feel safe. Whether it's a room or closet full of comfortable blankets, a favorite tree in a nearby park, or a chair by a window, you deserve a safe place to just be.
- **Tell yourself "I am valuable!":** You are important and special. Remind yourself of that! When living with abuse, simply remembering your worth can work wonders for your emotional health. It is not your fault when someone chooses to abuse you, and being abused does not mean you're a bad person. Tell yourself you matter. Believe it.

More Safety Planning Tools

Safety Planning Apps

MyPlan (also has a website!): <https://www.myplanapp.org/home>

RUSafe: <https://www.wcspittsburgh.org/rusafe-app/>

*Remember: if your phone is monitored, downloading an app like one of these might not be a safe option.



Online Chat with an Advocate at:
www.wadvocates.org
24/7 Crisis Line, Call 651-227-8284
Email resources@wadvocates.org

Women's Advocates Live Chat anytime at www.wadvocates.org

[Online Resource Hub](#)

[Day One shelter network](#)

[Greater Minneapolis Crisis Nursery](#)

[Agape Oasis Childcare Center](#)

[Washburn Center for Children](#)