



Getting Out of An Abusive Relationship

Protecting Yourself Before and After You Leave



Getting out of an abusive or violent relationship isn't easy. Maybe you're still hoping that things will change or you're afraid of what your partner will do if he discovers you're trying to leave. Whatever your reasons, you probably feel trapped and helpless. But help is available. There are many resources available for abused and battered women, including crisis hotlines, shelters—even job training, legal services, and childcare. You deserve to live free of fear. Start by reaching out.

If you need immediate assistance, call 911 or your local emergency service.

For domestic violence helplines and shelters, click [here](#).

If you're a man in an abusive relationship, read [Help for Abused Men](/articles/abuse/help-for-men-who-are-being-abused.htm). (/articles/abuse/help-for-men-who-are-being-abused.htm)

How can you get out of an abusive relationship?

Why doesn't she just leave? It's the question many people ask when they learn that a woman is being battered and abused. But if you are in an abusive relationship, you know that it's not that simple. Ending an important relationship is never easy. It's even harder when you've been isolated from your family and friends, psychologically beaten down, financially controlled, and physically threatened.

If you're trying to decide whether to stay or leave, you may be feeling confused, uncertain, frightened, and torn. One moment, you may desperately want to get away, and the next, you may want to hang on to the relationship. Maybe you even blame yourself for the abuse or feel weak and embarrassed because you've stuck around in spite of it. Don't be trapped by confusion, guilt, or self-blame. The only thing that matters is your safety.

If you are being abused, remember:

- ▶ You are not to blame for being battered or mistreated.
- ▶ You are not the cause of your partner's abusive behavior.
- ▶ You deserve to be treated with respect.
- ▶ You deserve a safe and happy life.
- ▶ Your children deserve a safe and happy life.
- ▶ You are not alone. There are people waiting to help.

Making the decision to leave

As you face the decision to either end the abusive relationship or try to save it, keep the following things in mind:

If you're hoping your abusive partner will change... The abuse will probably happen again. Abusers have deep emotional and psychological problems. While change is not impossible, it isn't quick or easy. And change can only happen once your abuser takes full responsibility for his behavior, seeks professional treatment, and stops blaming you, his unhappy childhood, stress, work, his drinking, or his temper.

If you believe you can help your abuser... It's only natural that you want to help your partner. You may think you're the only one who understands him or that it's your responsibility to fix his problems. But the truth is that by staying and accepting repeated abuse, you're reinforcing and enabling the abusive behavior. Instead of helping your abuser, you're perpetuating the problem.

If your partner has promised to stop the abuse... When facing consequences, abusers often plead for another chance, beg for forgiveness, and promise to change. They may even mean what they say in the moment, but their true goal is to stay in control and keep you from leaving. But most of the time, they quickly return to their abusive behavior once they've been forgiven and they're no longer worried that you'll leave.

If your partner is in counseling or a program for batterers... Even if your partner is in counseling, there is no guarantee that he'll change. Many abusers who go through counseling continue to be violent, abusive, and controlling. If your partner has stopped minimizing the problem or making excuses, that's a good sign. But you still need to make your decision based on who he is now, not the man you hope he will become.

If you're worried about what will happen if you leave... You may be afraid of what your abusive partner will do, where you'll go, or how you'll support yourself or your children. But don't let fear of the unknown keep you in a dangerous, unhealthy situation.

Signs that your abuser is NOT changing:

- He minimizes the abuse or denies how serious it really was.
- He continues to blame others for his behavior.
- He claims that you're the one who is abusive.
- He pressures you to go to couple's counseling.
- He tells you that you owe him another chance.
- You have to push him to stay in treatment.
- He says that he can't change unless you stay with him and support him.
- He tries to get sympathy from you, your children, or your family and friends.
- He expects something from you in exchange for getting help.
- He pressures you to make decisions about the relationship.

Safety planning

Whether or not you're ready to leave your abuser, there are things you can do to protect yourself. These safety tips can make the difference between being severely injured or killed and escaping with your life.

Prepare for emergencies

Know your abuser's red flags. Be on alert for signs and clues that your abuser is getting upset and may explode in anger or violence. Come up with several believable reasons you can use to leave the house (both during the day and at night) if you sense trouble brewing.

Identify safe areas of the house. Know where to go if your abuser attacks or an argument starts. Avoid small, enclosed spaces without exits (such as closets or bathrooms) or rooms with weapons (such as the kitchen). If possible, head for a room with a phone and an outside door or window.

Come up with a code word. Establish a word, phrase, or signal you can use to let your children, friends, neighbors, or co-workers know that you're in danger and the police should be called.

Make an escape plan

Be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Keep the car fueled up and facing the driveway exit, with the driver's door unlocked. Hide a spare car key where you can get it quickly. Have emergency cash, clothing, and important phone numbers and documents stashed in a safe place (at a friend's house, for example).

Practice escaping quickly and safely. Rehearse your escape plan so you know exactly what to do if under attack from your abuser. If you have children, have them practice the escape plan also.

Make and memorize a list of emergency contacts. Ask several trusted individuals if you can contact them if you need a ride, a place to stay, or help contacting the police. Memorize the numbers of your emergency contacts, local shelter, and domestic violence hotline.

If you stay

If you decide at this time to stay with your abusive partner, there are some things you can try to make your situation better and to protect yourself and your children.

- **Contact the domestic violence/sexual assault program in your area.** They can provide emotional support, peer counseling, safe emergency housing, information, and other services while you are in the relationship, as well as if you decide to leave.
- **Build as strong a support system as your partner will allow.** Whenever possible, get involved with people and activities outside your home and encourage your children to do so.
- **Be kind to yourself!** Develop a positive way of looking at yourself and talking to yourself. Use affirmations to counter the negative comments you get from the abuser. Allow yourself time for doing things you enjoy.

Source: *Breaking the Silence Handbook*

Protecting your privacy

You may be afraid to leave or ask for help out of fear that your partner will retaliate if he finds out. This is a legitimate concern. However, there are precautions you can take to stay safe and keep your abuser from finding out what you're doing. When seeking help for domestic violence and abuse, it's important to cover your tracks, especially when you're using the phone or the computer.

Phone safety for abused and battered women

When seeking help for domestic violence, call from a public pay phone or another phone outside the house if possible. In the U.S., you can call 911 for free on most public phones, so know where the closest one is in case of emergency.

Avoid cordless telephones. If you're calling from your home, use a corded phone if you have one, rather than a cordless phone or cell phone. A corded phone is more private, and less easy to tap.

Call collect or use a prepaid phone card. Remember that if you use your own home phone or telephone charge card, the phone numbers that you call will be listed on the monthly bill that is sent to your home. Even if you've already left by the time the bill arrives, your abuser may be able to track you down by the phone numbers you've called for help.

Check your cell phone settings. There are cell phone technologies your abuser can use to listen in on your calls or track your location. Your abuser can use your cell phone as a tracking device if it has GPS, is in "silent mode," or is set to "auto answer." So consider turning it off when not in use or leaving it behind when fleeing your abuser.

Get your own cell phone. Consider purchasing a prepaid cell phone or another cell phone that your abuser doesn't know about. Some domestic violence shelters offer free cell phones to battered women. Call your local hotline to find out more.

Computer and Internet safety for abused and battered women

Abusers often monitor their partner's activities, including their computer use. While there are ways to delete your Internet history, this can be a red flag to your partner that you're trying to hide something, so be very careful. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to clear a computer of all evidence of the websites that you have visited, unless you know a lot about computers.

Use a safe computer. If you seek help online, you are safest if you use a computer outside of your home. You can use a computer at work, a friend's house, the library, your local community center, or a domestic violence shelter or agency.

Be cautious with email and instant messaging. Email and instant messaging are not the safest way to get help for domestic violence. Be especially careful when sending email, as your abuser may know how to access your account. You may want to consider creating a new email account that your abuser doesn't know about.

Change your user names and passwords. Create new usernames and passwords for your email, online banking, and other sensitive accounts. Even if you don't think your abuser has your passwords, he may have guessed or used a spyware or keylogging program to get them. Choose passwords that your abuser can't guess (avoid birthdays, nicknames, and other personal information).

Protecting yourself from GPS surveillance and recording devices

Your abuser doesn't need to be tech savvy in order to use surveillance technology to monitor your movements and listen in on your conversations. Be aware that your abuser may be using hidden cameras, such as a "Nanny Cam," or even a baby monitor to check in on you. Global Positioning System (GPS) devices are also cheap and easy to use. GPS devices can be hidden in your car, your purse, or other objects you carry with you. Your abuser can also use your car's GPS system to see where you've been.

If you discover any tracking or recording devices, leave them be until you're ready to leave. While it may be tempting to remove them or shut them off, this will alert your abuser that you're on to him.

Domestic violence shelters

A domestic violence shelter or *women's shelter* is a building or set of apartments where abused and battered women can go to seek refuge from their abusers. The location of the shelter is kept confidential in order to keep your abuser from finding you.

Domestic violence shelters generally have room for both mothers and their children. The shelter will provide for all your basic living needs, including food and childcare. The length of time you can stay at the shelter is limited, but most shelters will also help you find a permanent home, job, and other things you need to start a new life. The shelter should also be able to refer you to other services for abused and battered women in your community, including:

- ▶ Legal help
- ▶ Counseling

- ▶ Support groups
- ▶ Services for your children
- ▶ Employment programs
- ▶ Health-related services
- ▶ Educational opportunities
- ▶ Financial assistance

Protecting your privacy at a domestic violence shelter

If you go to a domestic violence shelter or women's refuge, you do not have to give identifying information about yourself, even if asked. While shelters take many measures to protect the women they house, giving a false name may help keep your abuser from finding you, particularly if you live in a small town.

Protecting yourself after you've left

Keeping yourself safe from your abuser is just as important after you've left as before. To protect yourself, you may need to relocate so your former partner can't find you. If you have children, they may need to switch schools.

To keep your new location a secret:

- Get an unlisted phone number
- Use a post office box rather than your home address
- Apply to your state's address confidentiality program, a service that confidentially forwards your mail to your home
- Cancel your old bank accounts and credit cards, especially if you shared them with your abuser. When you open new accounts, be sure to use a different bank

If you're remaining in the same area, change up your routine. Take a new route to work, avoid places where your abuser might think to locate you, change any appointments he knows about, and find new places to shop and run errands. You should also keep a cell phone on you at all times and be ready to call 911 if you spot your former abuser.

Restraining orders

You may want to consider getting a restraining order or protective order against your abusive partner. However, remember that the police can enforce a restraining order only if someone violates it, and then only if someone reports the violation. This means that you must be endangered in some way for the police to step in.

If you are the victim of stalking or abuse, you need to carefully research how restraining orders are enforced in your neighborhood. Find out if the abuser will just be given a citation or if he will actually be taken to jail. If the police simply talk to the violator or give a citation, your abuser may reason that the police will do nothing and feel empowered to pursue you further. Or your abuser may become angry and retaliate.

Do not feel falsely secure with a restraining order!

You are not necessarily safe if you have a restraining order or protection order. The stalker or abuser may ignore it, and the police may do nothing to enforce it. To learn about restraining orders in your area of the U.S., call 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE) or contact your state's [Domestic Violence Coalition](http://www.ncadv.org/) (<http://www.ncadv.org/>).

Taking steps to heal and move on

The scars of domestic violence and abuse run deep. The trauma of what you've been through can stay with you long after you've escaped the abusive situation. Counseling, therapy, and support groups for domestic abuse survivors can help you process what you've been through and learn how to build new and healthy relationships.

After the trauma you've been through, you may be struggling with upsetting emotions, frightening memories, or a sense of constant danger that you just can't kick. Or you may feel numb, disconnected, and unable to trust other people. When bad things happen, it can take a while to get over the pain and feel safe again. But treatment and support from family and friends can speed your recovery from [emotional and psychological trauma](#) (</articles/ptsd-trauma/coping-with-emotional-and-psychological-trauma.htm>). Whether the traumatic event happened years ago or yesterday, you *can* heal and move on.

Building healthy new relationships

After getting out of an abusive situation, you may be eager to jump into a new relationship and finally get the intimacy and support you've been missing. But it's wise to go slow. Take the time to get to know yourself and to understand how you got into your previous abusive relationship. Without taking the time to heal and learn from the experience, you're at risk of falling back into abuse.

Where to turn for help for domestic violence or abuse

In an emergency:

Call 911 or your country's emergency service number if you need immediate assistance or have already been hurt.

Helplines for advice and support:

In the US: call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](http://www.thehotline.org/) (<http://www.thehotline.org/>) at 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE).

UK: call [Women's Aid](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/) (<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/>) at 0808 2000 247.

Australia: call [1800RESPECT](http://www.1800respect.org.au/) (<http://www.1800respect.org.au/>) at 1800 737 732.

Worldwide: visit [International Directory of Domestic Violence Agencies](http://www.hotpeachpages.net/) (<http://www.hotpeachpages.net/>) for a global list of helplines, shelters, and crisis centers.

For a safe place to stay:

In the US: visit [Womenslaw.org](http://www.womenslaw.org/) (http://www.womenslaw.org/gethelp_type.php?type_name=State%20and%20Local%20Programs) for a state-by-state directory of domestic violence shelters in the U.S.

More help for abuse

[Recovering from Rape and Sexual Trauma](/articles/ptsd-trauma/recovering-from-rape-and-sexual-trauma.htm): (/articles/ptsd-trauma/recovering-from-rape-and-sexual-trauma.htm) Tips for Regaining Your Sense of Safety and Trust

[Domestic Violence and Abuse: \(/articles/abuse/domestic-violence-and-abuse.htm\)](/articles/abuse/domestic-violence-and-abuse.htm) Are You or Someone You Care About in an Abusive Relationship?

[Finding a Therapist Who Can Help You Heal: \(/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm\)](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) Getting the Most out of Therapy and Counseling

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