

Leaving An Abusive Relationship

Caring for You and Your Children

Leaving an abusive relationship is a positive choice for you and your children. The process however, can still be difficult. It can also be difficult to make the transition alone. It is helpful to have the support of people who are experienced with helping women in abusive relationships. Your personal safety and your legal rights become more difficult to ensure when an abusive partner is involved.

Violence against women agencies, shelters, 24 hour Abused Women's Helpline, Police, or Police Family Consultants can help to meet the needs of you and your children. ([Community Resources](#))

Separation - How Will It Feel?

Separation is not easy. It may take some time to work through the steps and become re-established.

It is common to identify yourself with your relationship. Your role as a wife/partner and/or mother may be the way you see yourself. When you leave the relationship you may experience a real sense of loss of your identity. The process of moving from your role of wife/partner to a single person is painful and not always as fast as you might want it to be.

The transition involves getting to know yourself in a new way. Now you can become your own person. Being on your own is a wonderful feeling as well as a scary one. It may be the first time you have had the freedom to experience this responsibility. It sometimes takes many trials to discover who you are and what you want in life. This is normal. It is OK to learn from your mistakes and learn from what you do well. You will probably feel all your emotions more strongly than ever. You may feel betrayal, grief, anger, joy and freedom, weakness and strength, often at the same time. You may feel that you are going crazy because of all the emotions you have, which are sometimes overwhelming, contradictory, and unexpected. You are not crazy. Remember that your emotions are just a part of you, a changing part. This is a normal process.

It is helpful to let yourself feel your emotions fully and not judge yourself for having them. You will pass through each one in time.

Grief

Grief is a large part of the process of letting go of a relationship. When you feel grief, feel free to let yourself cry. It may feel like you will never stop. Remember, you are facing a death - the death of your relationship and you will stop crying when the mourning is over. You may not

understand why you are sad, especially if you were badly abused. There were probably some good things that you will miss. This is the reality. **Remember** - you did have to pay a price for the good things - a very high price.

Euphoria

You may experience a great euphoria when you leave the relationship. This may last for weeks or months. This is usually felt if you have made a clear decision. This euphoria can help give you energy to get yourself on your feet again. Don't be surprised, if a month or a year later, you feel grief or anger or depression. This is normal and part of the process of change or separation. You will have to work through the grief stages at some time. The timing may vary with each individual and the process is usually finished after you have let yourself feel fully at each stage.

Anger

You may feel more anger after separation than you have ever felt before. You may suddenly experience all the anger that was stockpiled and denied during your relationship, along with the built-up frustration of not getting your needs met, and the powerlessness of the position you were in. It is safe to feel angry now. Try to accept that your anger is normal. Anger can give you power and motivation. Use it to your advantage. The goal of letting yourself feel anger is to express it constructively so that you become free of it. Do not turn it on those around you and don't use it for revenge. **Acting** in revenge may destroy your self-respect in the long run; although it is **okay** to fantasize about it.

Grieving Symptoms

While you are going through the separation, it is normal for you to experience both physical and emotional stress reactions. Physical symptoms you may experience include: sleep disturbances; diarrhea or constipation; nausea; changes in heart rate; menstrual changes; weight gain or loss.

Psychological symptoms may include: sadness, hopelessness or feelings of futility; edginess and being easily irritated; crying often; poor concentration; great difficulty making decisions; and, poor memory. Good physical exercise (i.e. walking, jogging, cycling, etc.) can help you cope.

Feelings of Failure

You may feel that admitting "failure" in your relationship means you are inadequate. This is not true. You have made a lot of sacrifices in your relationship. It was not your efforts that failed, but rather the lack of effort made by the abuser to stop abusing. Relationships take two people

working together to make it a success. Also, remember that your decision to leave was a painful and difficult one. Recognize your success in making that decision. Give yourself credit!

Anxiety & Loss of Control

You are probably accustomed to judging your safety by predicting your partner's mood and picking up the signals from him/her, so you could anticipate and react. When you leave, the absence of your partner may feel frightening. You may feel you have lost control. Your feelings of safety are gone when you lose those signals.

The feelings of loss of control are normal in transition. You are moving the centre of control from your partner to yourself. It can be as frightening as it is freeing and it just takes time.

Disorientation

Because your perspective on your relationship has changed, you may see your past, yourself, and your partner differently. This can make you feel disoriented and you may doubt your memories and the decisions you have made. You may selectively remember only the good or only the bad times. This is normal. Your situation has changed and you now have additional information so your view of the past will change too.

Loneliness

Your friends may change over time, as well as your interests and concerns. Friends may feel threatened by your new position. They may take sides with your partner. It may hurt you a great deal if your former in-laws reject you. Family blood is often thicker than you want to believe. It may take you a while to trust, or to have energy for anyone else. This is normal and self-protective. You may want to isolate yourself, but friendships are very important. Friends are especially important at this time, especially those who don't judge us. You don't have to wait for an invitation. Reach out, even though it may seem less painful to isolate yourself, in the long run it is not.

Temptation to Reconcile

Many women who leave go back a number of times before leaving permanently. What some call the "honeymoon" period, is in actuality a tactic of manipulation used by the abuser to continue to maintain power and control. When you have been away for a while and your partner is pleading with you to return, promising you that he/she has changed and will not hurt you again, the temptation to reconcile may seem overwhelming.

You have heard promises before. If you think your relationship is worth saving, take the time that is necessary to be sure there is now a strong foundation of mutual respect for you to build

your lives on. Generally, as time passes, indicators of whether or not your partner is following through on his/her promise to change may become clear.

New Relationships

New relationships may trigger memories of your old relationship. It takes hard work, a great deal of commitment, and communication to be in a relationship. Be sure you feel strong enough to live independently before you make the choice of living inter-dependently again.

It is important to remember that life is up and down. You will have good days, when you are feeling strong and capable, and bad days, when you are feeling depressed and vulnerable. Know that feeling bad will not last forever and there are things you can do to help yourself through the down times.

Many women find that the first anniversary of their leaving is particularly painful. It may be important for you to be aware of that and plan for it. You may arrange to spend that time with close friends. You may also wish to get in touch with the staff of the shelter in your community to get reinforcement and support

WAYS YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

1. Let yourself feel your emotions fully. Do not judge yourself for having them. You will pass through each one.
2. Take time out for you. Do what feels nurturing for yourself, i.e. take a hot bath, go for a walk, curl up in bed and read a book. You have a right to pamper yourself.
3. Eat small, nutritious meals regularly, rest when you can, even if you cannot sleep, and exercise to release tension. Treat yourself to a massage.
4. To regain a feeling of control in your new environment: develop a daily routine; set and accomplish small goals each day; control where you go and who you are with so that you are safe.
5. Find out about and use community resources for support: support groups; single parent support services; free community counselling services; recreation centres; educational resources. If you don't know what these services are, ask the staff at the shelter (642-3000) or call Information London (432-2211).
6. Holidays and special occasions such as anniversaries can be especially hard times. It is important to establish new customs for yourself and your children. You can spend these times with close friends who are experiencing the same feelings and difficulties. Do something different. For example, organize a pot luck with friends or neighbours, spend the holiday out of town or volunteer to help those less fortunate.

When You Need More Help

When you leave an abusive relationship, it is normal to feel any or all of the emotions outlined in this brochure and it is normal to feel that your life is in a state of upheaval. However, it would be wise to seek more help for yourself if you feel any of the following: suicidal; depressed to the point of not looking after yourself or your children; euphoria to the point of threatening your own safety by drinking too much; spending excessive amounts of money or being promiscuous; rage that expresses itself by hurting people or destroying property.

A counsellor can help you work through the emotions that are overwhelming you. The following people and agencies can help:

- **family doctor**
- **crisis lines:**
 - Abused Women's 24 hour Helpline (642-3000)
 - Mental Health Crisis Service (433-2023)
 - London & District Distress Centre (667-6711) - please note that these are volunteers, not professionals

- **counselling programs:**
 - London Abused Women's Centre (432-2204)
 - Family Service London (433-0183)
 - London Interfaith Counselling Centre (434-0077)

Children's Feelings/Experiences/Behaviours

Ideas For Communicating With Them

Your children's behaviour may be different than usual. Remember that their lives have changed too. It is normal for them to be afraid, upset or angry. Even if they become extra quiet or try to please you all the time, they still need that little bit of extra attention and explanation about what is going on. It is especially important for children to know that the abuse was not their fault.

There is a Group Treatment Program for Children Who Witness Woman Abuse that you can access through the Children's Aid Society (CAS) of London & Middlesex (455-9000) for ages 4 - 16 years of age. Even if your kids seem to be coping well, this counselling for your child(ren) is well worth accepting as children often bury the emotions that they don't know how to deal with. These emotions can resurface in later years and cause all kinds of problems.

Helping Your Kids

1. Assure them that you love them. Give them lots of hugs and cuddles. It is important for them to have physical contact, and in hugging them you will also be receiving hugs.
2. It is important for them to trust you. Tell them as much as you can without name-calling. It is better that they know and that they feel a part of the decisions being made, than if you say nothing or lie.
3. Listen to their feelings and let them know it is okay to have them. They may be angry with you for taking them away from their friends, their home or their father/step-parent. If they tell you this, it means that they feel safe enough with you to share their feelings. If you show them that you understand their feelings and share some of theirs, you will help them.
4. They may have confused feelings about you and their father/step-parent. You can let them know that they can still love their father/step-parent and he/she is still their father/step-parent, even if you decide not to live with him/her again. They do not have to choose one parent.
5. They may test you by misbehaving. Do not be afraid to set limits on their behaviour in a firm, loving manner. They may be more insecure and confused, and test for your control even more than usual. They need to know that you are there to take care of them.
 - Tell them clearly what they can and cannot do.
 - If they misbehave, make the discipline fit the behaviour and be prepared to carry it out as soon as possible.
 - **DO NOT HIT YOUR CHILDREN!** They have come from an abusive situation and they need to feel safe. Children who grow up with abuse often become abusive adults.
6. Children need to feel loved, accepted and safe in their family. Living in a home where there is no abuse is better for them than living in a home where they never know when the abuse will erupt.
7. It is important that you take a little time every day to have fun with your children. You can learn new, inexpensive ways to have fun with them. For example, going to parks, to a library, museum or just going for walks. You don't have to have money to spend time with your children.
8. You have needs too. You need your friends, you need time alone. If your children try to make you stay in, tell them your needs and that you are sorry if it makes them angry or

sad. Go ahead with your plans. If you are giving them quality time, you do not need to feel guilty about taking time for you.

9. Accept that you are not perfect. Don't feel guilty about it. Keep doing your best and be open to changing what doesn't work and learning new ways.
 10. Remember your children need to depend on you. Don't depend on them to act as your best friend or partner.
 11. Encourage them to have friends in the community as soon as you settle. Friendships can help them regain security.
 12. If you feel that you need help dealing with your children, explore parenting and children's support services in your community.
- **Merrymount Children's Services** - 434-6848
 - **Childreach (Parent/Child Resource Centre)** - 434-3644
 - **MAPP** (Mutual Aid Program for Parents & Your Children) - 455-9000 ext. 396
 - **Kids Helpline** - 1-800-668-6868. Post on fridge, kids can call it themselves, sometimes they don't want to burden mom because she is dealing with so much already.
 - **Youth Line** - 660-4357.
 - **Group Treatment Program for Children Who Witness Woman Abuse** - 455-9000 ext. 316

You have made positive choices for yourself and your children. Remember to credit yourself for your courage and strength!

*BC Council for Families
Adapted from a brochure by Laura Hotson titled
"Transition: Leaving An Abusive Relationship"*

*Further adapted by the London Abused Women's Centre
2002*

Community Resources

- **London Abused Women's Centre** provides short-term individual counselling and advocacy for women subjected to abuse in their intimate relationships. Your advocate/counsellor can provide you with support and a safety plan whether or not you decide to leave. (519) 432-2204.
- **24-hour Abused Women's Helpline** counsellors are there to listen, offer support and information, as well as prepare a safety plan with you. (519) 642-3000 / 1-800-265-1576.
- **Women's Community House** is a shelter and safe place for women and their children. (519) 642-3000 / 800-265-1576.
- **Zhaawanong** is a shelter and safe place for women and their children. (519) 432-2270.
- **Police** are required to charge your abusive partner if you make a complaint.
- **Police Family Consultants** provide sufficient counselling to begin the crisis?resolution process, and then make arrangements for ongoing support from community agencies, extended family, and other resources as appropriate. The Consultants provide officers with feedback and interventions. The process of building support, or further counselling for the family usually continues during office hours the following day, with team members following up with agencies, clients and officers.
- **Victim/Witness Assistance Programme (VWAP)** provides emotional support and information about the criminal justice process and your role as a victim. VWAP can provide information about the status of the criminal case, arrange for you to meet with a Crown Attorney before you testify, and when possible, accompany you to trial.

It's okay to look for and accept all the help you can find.