

The Greatest Escape

Special Information for Victims of Domestic Violence

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“Offering a Listening Ear”



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Introduction

The following tips on escaping domestic violence are meant to help you in your initial planning to get free of the violence and to guide you through the first steps of seeking help. Keep in mind that the suggestions and thoughts provided here are presented only to assist you in your own thinking, and they shouldn't be taken as absolutes. So read the text here, gather as much information from others as you can, and then remember that you know your own circumstances best. Your own thinking and intuition about what to do is your best guide of all.

Part I: Things to Think About

Your Struggle to Escape Domestic Violence Is Heroic.

The most admired heroes of any culture are those who have stood up to tyranny and oppression and fought for liberty and justice. Yet rarely have these acclaimed heroes battled alone, without weapons or troops of any sort, with children in tow, and with the enemy entrenched in their home, in their hearts, and sleeping in their beds.

Yet these are exactly the extreme and painful conditions under which women all over the world set out to make their escapes from domestic violence. And even so, right up until today, the bravery of women's struggles for freedom is still too often met with the cruelty of questions like "Why don't you just get up and leave," instead of being given the admiration and respect their struggles deserve.

So as you start out on your own struggle to get free of domestic violence, remind yourself often, even though others may not, that yours is one of the most difficult and worthy struggles of all. You are rescuing yourself and your children from a life of terror and crushed spirits. Your struggle to escape the oppression of domestic violence elevates the dignity of all women, and brings your whole community closer to the ideals of liberty and justice for all.

You Deserve Help! You're Going to Need Lots of Help. You Can Find Help!

Living with domestic violence and all the degrading isolation and insults that go with it, you may be feeling ashamed and unworthy of asking for help. It's important to remember that it's the abuser who made you feel this way, and that it's his behavior that is criminal and unacceptable, not yours.

You deserve as much help as you need to get you safely free of the violence and securely started on a peaceful new life. Because abusive men establish so much control over so many parts of a victim's life, very few women get out of domestic violence without getting lots and lots of help. So don't be shy about asking for help every step of the way.

Some of your most sympathetic support can come from the everyday people around you; from friends, neighbors, family members, co-workers, your children's teachers, people at your church, your work, or your school.

More and more people everywhere are aware of the damage and the wrongs of domestic violence. And even if you don't know them very well, many will be happy to have the opportunity to help you. So start by making a list of the people who your intuition tells you are kind, smart, and supportive. As you make your way out of domestic violence, there are going to be many occasions when their help can make all the difference in the world. They can help with an afternoon of child care, by accompanying you to police, to court, and to appointments with officials, by making phone calls to get information, by providing transportation, helping you deal with the landlord, helping you keep a notebook, talking to your employer, lending you money, and much more.

You don't have to tell people everything to ask for help. But do try to start talking to people, and you'll be surprised how many will be sympathetic. If you still feel timid about asking others to help, pick one person and ask that person to make the requests for you. Or ask a victim advocate to call these people for you.

You Have Many Legal Rights. Know Your Rights.

If you live in the Canada, whether or not you are married or single, whether or not you are here legally, you have many legal rights. Most violent, abusive men lie to women about their rights, to make you believe you don't have rights, and to make you believe he can get you in trouble. They especially do this if you are an immigrant to Canada. So it's very important for you to know your rights.

You have a right to equal protection of the laws. You have a right to take your children and hide yourself and your children from your violent partner, even if he is their father. You have rights to express yourself freely. You have rights to associate with whomever you please. You have rights to come and go as you please, at any hour of the day or night.

You have rights to refuse sex at any time. You have a right to use birth control. You have a right to choose if and when you want children, and if so, how many children. You have a right to live free of violence and threats. You have a right to equal protection of the laws even if in some way you have broken a law, such as using drugs, or driving without a licence, or entering the country illegally.

You also have many rights that are related directly to your escape from domestic violence. As you make your way out of domestic violence you're going to need to exercise many of your rights freely. If you encounter people along your journey who do not respect your rights then it's very important that you don't give up. And it's very important that you don't think that it's your fault. If anyone disrespects your rights, immediately seek help from others. Tell a friend. And ask that friend to help you find other professionals or officials who will help you.

Dealing with Fears and Risks.

Most all domestic violence victims feel fear. Sometimes these fears are so intense they can immobilize you and keep

you from acting on your own behalf. There is the fear that if you try to leave your partner his violence will only get worse. There is fear that you won't be able to make enough money to feed your children, fear that you may become homeless, fear that the police might side with the abuser or simply ignore you and put you in more danger, fear that the abuser may take the children from you, and more. And always there is the fear that if even one of these things actually occurred, it would be devastating.

The truth is your fears are justified and the risk of these things actually happening is also very real. That's why so many women remain trapped in domestic violence. The dangers of trying to get out of domestic violence without strong support and adequate protections are all very real. Without the proper protections in place, it's true that your partner's violence will probably escalate as you try to leave. It's true money doesn't fall out of the sky just because your children are hungry. It's also true that most abusive men will attempt to use or take the children in order to keep you under his control.

We spell this all out because too many people think women should be able to just get up and walk out of domestic violence. Or they think that women are just exaggerating and being overly fearful. You might even think these things yourself. But you are not crazy or stupid because you feel trapped by the fears. The dangers of leaving domestic violence are very real.

So here's two key things that should help you to start dealing with your fears. One, over the last thirty years women rights groups and society have created many very effective protections to help you deal with each and every one of the risks. And even if things go momentarily wrong there are backup protections and corrections that can be made along the way. As you read through the rest of this text and begin to ask others about the resources and safeguards that are available to you, you should start to feel some relief from the anxieties of your fears.

Two, having friendly, supportive people at your side as you go through your escape will greatly reduce your fears. If you're like most victims of domestic violence, your partner's abuse has kept you very isolated from human contact. This isolation greatly magnifies your fears. So start reaching out and start talking openly with others, now.

The Best Strategy for Breaking Free of Domestic Violence is often the Exact Opposite of the Strategy for Surviving in Domestic Violence.

In order to survive in domestic violence women usually do everything possible to avoid offending or upsetting the abuser. While living in domestic violence most women avoid asserting their own power. They especially avoid a show of power that might in any way be seen as a challenge to the abuser's power. In addition, in order to survive in domestic violence women usually minimize the physical and mental harm to themselves. Women bury their own resentments, needs, and pain, and stay intently focused on the needs of the abuser. Women trapped in domestic violence are also generally very careful not to reveal the abuse to others in order to keep others from confronting the abuser and setting him off on another round of attacks.

These survival strategies aren't unique to women in domestic violence. These are the survival strategies practiced by prisoners of war, slaves, and by all human beings who find themselves trapped living under violent, oppressive regimes.

Escaping from domestic violence, on the other hand, generally requires the exact opposite strategy as that used for living under domestic violence. Escaping requires gathering your strengths and asserting your power against the abuser to the maximum extent possible. It requires focusing intently on your own and your children's needs while suspending your vigilance for the needs of the abuser. And it requires repeated and open telling of the details of the abuse to others so they can best be of help.

It can be very difficult and very frightening to make this kind of a sudden shift in your behavior especially when you are exhausted, beaten down, and in terror. So the more you can rehearse yourself mentally for this shift, the better you'll be able to focus your energies when you need them.

Don't Be Ashamed If You Still Love Him.

Many women love the men who abuse them, and this is nothing to be ashamed of. The things you love about him are probably very real and very worthy of love. So don't get down on yourself for feeling love. It is completely possible to love the abuser and to simultaneously be conscious and determined that his violence and abuse must be stopped. And if you're reading this, you probably already know that he's not going to stop on his own, because you've probably tried, and begged, and pleaded, and he's promised and promised, and then he's turned around and broken his promises again and again and again.

It's also possible that you don't love your abuser anymore. And that's nothing to be ashamed of either. Remember, it was he that extinguished the possibility of love, and not you.

What if you don't want to get him in trouble?

This is a common feeling among many domestic violence victims. Unfortunately, what often happens when women try to protect the abusive man from trouble is that you and your children end up in worse danger, and the abuser ends up getting in worse trouble than before.

It happens like this. The victim holds back and doesn't tell the police everything, or she doesn't go to police at all and just gets a peace bond, or she tries to leave without any protections. In short, the victim tries to use the minimum power to escape the violence in hopes that that will be sufficient to make the abuser stay away and stop the violence.

But the great danger in using this approach is that an abusive, violent person is almost always willing to use even more violence in order to re-establish his control. So if you don't build your wall of protection high enough, the abuser will recognize that immediately, and almost certainly escalate his abuse to get back in control of you one way or the other.

So consider this other strategy. Consider using the maximum power against him, all at once. Tell the police everything, get the peace bond, get custody of the children, get him kicked out of the home, call the police again if he so much as calls you to say he's sorry, don't drop the peace bond, and follow through on the criminal charges - even if you hold hopes of getting back with him in the future.

In the first place, this strategy protects you so that you have time to think and breathe and act without having to worry about him coming up behind you. Second, it focuses the abuser on the immense weight of the system coming down on him, and shifts his attention off of you. Third, this approach shocks the abuser. It makes him feel off balance and out of control, so he's the one worried about what could possibly happen next. Fourth, it delivers the message clear as a bell that any wrong move or attempt at manipulation on his part is futile.

By overwhelming the abuser, all at once, with as much weight as you can bring against him, it serves not only to best protect you and your children, it also serves to protect the abuser from even thinking about retaliations and from getting himself in worse trouble yet.

There are no guarantees about which approach will work best for your situation. But in our experience, the best way to get the violence stopped once and for all is to put as much power of the system against the abuser as you can, and keep it there. And this is true even if you hope to get back together. In fact, it's especially true if you have hopes of getting back together because you want to drive the lesson home as hard as possible that his abuse will simply not be tolerated, and that he will be held accountable.

What if You Don't Want Him to Go to Court or Jail and You Just Want Him to Get Counseling?

This wish is similar to the above, and is also very common. It's also based on a misunderstanding of the judicial system. In general, the courts cannot order someone into domestic violence counseling unless the person has been found guilty of domestic violence. And in order to be found guilty of domestic violence, the person must be charged with domestic violence, and go through the court process.

In general, however, if the court finds a person guilty of domestic violence, if it's the person's first offense, and if your injuries were not severe, it's most likely that the court will order him into counseling and not into jail.

But the Children Need Their Father.

The concern for the children's future relationship with their father is a heartbreaking conflict for many women. In fact, it may appear to you that your abusive partner seems to get along quite well with the children. The first thing you should know is that no matter how serious the abuse, it is highly unlikely the courts will completely sever the relationship between the children and their father. What the courts will very likely do is supervise the relationship between the children and their father until the court is assured he is not harming them.

The other thing you should know is that even if the children aren't being directly abused by their father, the domestic violence against you is seriously effecting and damaging the children. All the research shows that children of all ages are aware of the violence and abuse, even if you think they are sleeping while the actual violence is going on. In fact, the younger the child, the more serious the effect. The research also shows that your partner's abuse against you frequently does long term damage to the kids.

Remember, you are the children's mother. The children are dependent on you for their security and nurture. When the children see their mother living in fear and humiliation and despair, the children's lives are also filled with fear, humiliation, and despair. This is true even if the father doesn't directly abuse them. Children who live in a home where there is domestic violence frequently have learning difficulties, emotional problems, and behavior problems. These problems often continue all the way into the child's adult life.

On the other hand, when the children see their mother put a stop to the abuses, the children are not only rescued from

the immediate oppressive environment, they also learn one of the most valuable lessons of their life. They learn that they themselves don't have to take abuse. They learn they have a right to make abuse stop in their own lives. It's an invaluable lesson they carry with them for the rest of their lives.

So as you take your own steps to break free of domestic violence, talk to your children often. Talk with them in many short conversations that don't overwhelm them with too many details. Ask them how they feel. Assure them that their father will always be their father. Tell them the separation doesn't mean that their father doesn't love them. Tell them directly that some of his behavior was abusive, and no one should tolerate abuse, so their father needs a long time out. Tell the children it wasn't their fault. Tell them it's OK to be sad. It's OK to miss their father and love their father. And it's OK to be angry with their father, too. Explain that you're helping their father and the whole family by putting a stop to the abuse.

No, You Are Not Crazy!

When you live 24 hours a day under the threats and fears of abuse in your home, you become very traumatized, not crazy.

It may feel like you're crazy because you've been holding so much of your pain and suffering inside. But once you get free of the violence and abuse, these feelings of being crazy will usually start to go away on their own. Sometimes it can take three or four months or even more, and with lots of ups and downs. So don't give up because things don't change overnight.

Take one step at a time. Keep focused on the tasks you have to take care of and on your goals. At some point too, you may want to take advantage of the many counseling services available for victims of domestic violence to help you sort it all out. But, no, you are not crazy! And once you get out of the abuse and back on your feet, you're going to be just fine.

Reawaken Your Dreams

One of the many serious injuries of domestic violence is that your hopes and dreams are often extinguished by the abuse, sometimes to the point that victims of domestic violence can't even remember a time when they had hopes and dreams. This happens because when another person has violent control of your life, there's no way to pursue or fulfill your own dreams. So your mind suppresses the dreams.

At the same time, you're going to need your hopes and dreams to help you through the obstacles and hard times of escaping. So even though your life may be very difficult as you make your way out of domestic violence, take a minute here and there to think about all the sweet things you'd like to have in your life. Dare to dream again, even if in the moment it seems impossible to attain your dreams. One of the things women express to us all the time after they've been out of domestic violence for a while is that they just never believed it was possible. But it is possible! And you can find happiness again, too.