
CREATE YOUR OWN SAFETY PLAN

A guide for women in abusive relationships & those assisting them



Produced by the **Muskoka Women's Advocacy Group (MWAG)**, a charitable organization operating Muskoka Interval House and Chrysalis, 24-hour crisis shelters that provide free support services and short-term accommodation for women and their children fleeing abuse in Muskoka.

For information about abuse or MWAG's services, please visit: www.mwag.ca



Muskoka Interval House (shelter)
1-800-461-1740 or 705-645-4461
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Chrysalis (shelter & transitional apts.)
1-866-789-8488 or 705-789-8488
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INTRODUCTION

It is important to understand that, although you do not have control over an abuser's actions, you CAN take steps to increase your safety, as well as that of your children or anyone else in your home. Creating your own safety plan includes identifying steps to increase safety and preparing for the possibility of violence. A good safety plan should be practical and personalized – designed to fit *you!*

This guide offers suggestions and ideas that have been useful for others living with abuse, violence and threats. Hopefully, it will be helpful in keeping you and your loved ones safer. You don't have to do everything suggested here – only do what makes sense for your situation, one step at a time.

These are some key things to keep in mind when creating your own safety plan:

- You cannot control someone else's violence or abuse but you CAN improve safety for yourself and your children.
- When there's a possibility of violence, it is important to have a safety plan that will identify specific action you can take.
- If you have children in your care, your safety plan should include steps and action that will increase their safety too.
- It's vital to be familiar with your safety plan and to update it regularly, since situations and risk factors often change.
- Safety planning includes telling trusted friends and family members about your abuse; their assistance and emotional support may be helpful.



PREPARE AN EMERGENCY ESCAPE PLAN

When you are living in an abusive situation, you may need to leave in hurry, in order to keep yourself and/or your children safe. What can you do in advance to prepare for this possibility? Here are some ideas; do what makes sense to you.

#1. This is a list of items you should try to hide in a safe place, outside your home (such as at the home of a trusted friend or family member, with your lawyer or in a safety deposit box). You may want to make photocopies or take photos of some documents or important pieces of I.D. and store them in a separate location, away from the originals.

- Passports, birth certificates and immigration papers for you and your children
- Health cards for you and your children
- Social insurance (SIN) card
- Driver's licence and vehicle registration/insurance
- Bank/credit cards and other cards you normally carry in your wallet
- Bank books or account statements
- Children's school and vaccination records
- Medical records and list of medications/prescriptions for you and your children
- Ontario Works identification or work permits
- Marriage/divorce certificates, custody documents, restraining or court orders
- Lease/rental agreement or deed/mortgage papers
- All insurance policies
- Contact information for family, friends or others who are important to you
- Photos of your abuser and your children

#2. Try to keep the most important, frequently used items in your wallet or purse – your driver's licence and vehicle registration/insurance, bank/credit cards, health and social insurance cards.

#3. Along with your wallet, try to keep vital items in your purse – such as keys for car/home/work/safety deposit box, cell phone/charger, bank books/statements, address/telephone book, photos of partner/children and emergency cash (hidden). Make sure your purse is in a handy place, in case you need to leave in a hurry.



#4. Also try to have a suitcase or backpack ready for a quick departure. It should contain immediate personal needs (extra medication and health necessities you use every day, such as contact lens case/fluid), children's special toys or important items, family photos or things of sentimental value and jewelry or small saleable items.

#5. Make a list of things you would like to get later, if you have the chance to return to the home. If arranged in advance, the police may be able to provide an escort for this; you will typically be allowed to remove your own and your children's personal belongings, but not anything that is jointly owned with your abuser.

#6. Other suggestions to do in preparation for leaving an abusive relationship include:

- Open a bank account in your own name and arrange that nothing pertaining to it comes to your house – no bank statements and no phone messages or calls. You may need to have information sent to a trusted friend's home instead.
- Consider getting a safety deposit box your partner doesn't know about, at a bank he doesn't use.
- Keep some emergency money in a safe place, which you can grab quickly for cab fare, etc. Try to do this, even if it means secretly setting aside some grocery money or loose change.
- Plan your emergency exits and rehearse the steps you would take to get out of the home, if you have to escape quickly.
- Keep your emergency suitcase or backpack handy, so it is ready to pack quickly or just grab and go. You may also want to keep extra clothing, spare keys, cash, etc. at a friend's place.
- Take photos of valuable items you jointly own with your abuser, as well as photos documenting the state of the home before you leave.

#7. If you have children, it is vital that you take them with you when you leave, if at all possible. Until a court order regarding custody is in place, both parents usually have equal rights to their children. The police will not be able to assist in removing children from an abuser's care and control without the proper legal paperwork.



MAKE YOUR SURROUNDINGS SAFER

A woman can do many things to increase her own safety, even if she is living with a violent abuser. Do what you can to put safety measures in place, one piece at a time. Here are some suggestions that may help you improve the safety of your surroundings.

AT HOME... If you are living with your abuser:

- Prepare an emergency escape plan and review it often; teach your children about safety planning and practice using emergency exits.
- Create a list of contacts that includes the police, local women's shelter(s) and/or 24-hour crisis lines, counselors, supportive family members and friends – your children's friends too.
- Violence in the home often follows a cycle and you know your abuser's triggers or patterns better than anyone; try to predict when the next incident may occur and, if possible, have the children spend the night elsewhere.
- Make standing arrangements for you and your children to temporarily stay with friends or family, on short notice, for several days if necessary.
- Train your children to let you know when someone is at the door, rather than answering it by themselves.
- If you have call display on your phone, be careful to erase any numbers in the log that may give your abuser information about your emergency escape plan.
- Teach your children how to call 911 on any phone and to ask for the police.
- Create a code word or phrase to use with your children and friends/family so that someone outside the home will know they should send help if you say it.
- If they are old enough to understand, teach your children how to make collect calls, so they can get in touch with you if your partner takes them away.
- Try not to wear scarves or necklaces that could be used to strangle you.
- Keep potential weapons (such as kitchen knives or hammers) put away or locked up, as much as possible.
- If you drive, make a habit of backing the car in, so you can make a quick getaway.
- Think of plausible reasons why you might leave the house on short notice or at an odd time, in case you sense trouble is brewing and want to get out without tipping your abuser off.



AT HOME... If you are NOT living with your abuser:

- When your abuser is no longer residing with you, change the locks on all doors, including the garage and mailbox, if applicable; make sure windows are lockable or blocked from opening; install a peephole in the front door.
- Teach your children to let you know when someone is at the door, instead of answering it by themselves.
- If you have a restraining order, keep a copy of it with you at all times, as well as any relevant court papers.
- Make sure your children's school, daycare and local police have a copy of all legal papers that pertain to your children – restraining orders, custody/access orders – and photos of your children and abusive partner.
- If you live in a home you formerly shared with your abuser and believe he may break in, consider rearranging the furniture to present unexpected obstacles; put kitchen utensils, knives and other sharp objects in different cupboards.
- If you live in an apartment, check the hallway before getting off the elevator and be wary of doorways – mirrors or shiny surfaces can help you see around corners or behind you; if you feel security can be improved in your building, talk to the superintendent and neighbors about how to keep everyone safer.
- If your home is above ground level or has a second floor, you may want to purchase a rope ladder for emergency escape; if you have a balcony that could be accessed by climbing, consider putting wire around it.
- If possible, replace wooden doors with stronger doors made of metal.
- Be sure there are working smoke detectors and fire extinguishers on each floor.
- Consider the pros/cons of getting a guard dog.
- Install an outside lighting system that is activated by motion.
- Do whatever you can to enhance your home's security, including the installation of an electronic alarm system, additional locks on doors (deadbolts are safest), window bars, poles or braces to wedge against doors, or anything that makes sense to you.
- Have your phone number listed as 'private' so it won't be displayed when you call someone; make sure it is unpublished and unlisted.



WHILE AT WORK OR GETTING TO/FROM WORK...

Each woman must decide for herself if/when to tell others her partner is abusive and her safety may be at risk. Friends, family members and co-workers may be able to help protect you but it is important to carefully consider who you ask for assistance.

- Tell your boss, security supervisor and other key people or friends at work about your situation; if possible, make a safety plan with them.
- Find out about company policies and government legislation regarding protection from an abuser at the workplace.
- Ask to have your calls and visitors screened at work; you may want to have calls and visitors documented too.
- Discuss the possibility of having your employer contact the police on your behalf, if you are in danger from your abuser.
- Ask someone to be your 'check-in' person; let her/him know your work schedule so you can check in with each other before work and when you return safely home.
- Vary your patterns; try to change the times when you arrive at and leave from work, as well as the route you take.
- If you are walking to/from work or elsewhere, try to take a route that is well lit, on a busy street and has plenty of buildings/homes.
- If you are driving, try to avoid underground parking, always scan the parking lot, park under a light and do a visual check of the car before getting in – walk around to look for someone hiding inside or under it, and to check for signs of tampering (a puddle of brake fluid could indicate tampering, for example).
- If your partner follows you when you are driving, go to a place where there will be people, such as a hospital, coffee shop or police station but, please note, many rural police stations are not staffed at night; if it makes more sense to stop and call the police on your cell phone, be sure to lock your doors.
- If your partner follows you when you're walking, call loudly for help and go into a store or other public place; 24-hour coffee shops can provide refuge at night.
- Carry your keys in your hand when walking and keep a 'CALL POLICE' sign in your car, in case of emergency.



AROUND THE NEIGHBORHOOD...

- Tell your neighbors that your partner no longer lives with you and they should call the police if he/she is seen near your home; you may want to give them a photo and/or description of your abuser and his/her vehicle(s).
- Ask neighbors to call police if they hear screaming or fighting at your home.
- If your children are looked after by someone, provide the caregiver with a list of who has permission to pick your children up.
- Ask neighbors in advance to look after your children, should an emergency occur and you're not immediately able to be with them.
- Hide clothing and other emergency items at a trusted neighbor's home.
- Change your shopping and banking patterns – use different stores or malls and vary the times you shop; switch to a different bank, branch or bank machine.
- If possible, change your doctor, dentist and other professional service providers; if this is not possible, explain the situation and discuss your safety with them.



BE SAFER WHEN USING TECHNOLOGY

Abusers can be extremely persistent and creative when it comes to maintaining power and control. Although you may no longer be living with your abuser, computer and cell phone technology can be used against you. If an abuser is a 'techy' person, it is especially important that you take steps to protect yourself. Even if you're not sure you're being monitored, trust your instincts and cover your Internet tracks! Also, keep in mind that technology is constantly changing and newly created applications (apps) could have a negative effect on your life. In order to keep yourself as safe as possible, consult with computer and cell phone experts.

- Computers store an incredible amount of information that gives clues to where you are and what you are doing; try to use a 'safe' computer at a library or another public facility, especially when preparing to leave an abuser.
- If your abuser has had access to your email, online banking or other accounts on the Internet, you may want to set up a new, secret email account and make sure that any billing or other information goes only to this new e-address.
- Regularly change your passwords, security questions and personal identification numbers (PINs) on all your accounts to something that is not easy to guess; abusers who gain access to their victims' accounts can impersonate them and cause harm, financially and in other ways.
- If your online accounts or other services require an email address for updates or if your password is lost or forgotten, be sure to update this information so that the only link is to your new, private email address.
- Browser histories of sites you have visited should be erased from both computers and cell phones (particularly 'smart phones,' which are like mini-computers); you may want to see if you can have a password-protected app installed that allows you to browse the Internet without the history being stored, especially if you are still living with your abuser.
- To maintain privacy and improve safety when using a cell phone, turn off notifications, banners or badges that are visible without unlocking or waking up the phone – even just the first line of a text message or the sender's name could give an abuser information you don't want him to have!
- It's also a good idea to change your contact list to show someone's name, instead of the support service organization or agency where she/he works –



listing a person's name or initials with a phone number or email is safer than identifying that contact information as being a women's shelter, for example.

- To find out what information about you is on the Internet, use a major search engine like Google or Yahoo and type in your "Full Name" in quotation marks; have phone/address directories unlisted or blocked whenever possible, and don't give this information to anyone you don't know or trust.
- If you use a computer at home, turn it off when it's not in use and be sure it does not identify your location on Facebook or other social media programs; if you don't know how to disable or change the GPS (Global Positioning System) locator setting, consult someone who does.
- When using Facebook, even under an alias, be cautious; your abuser could find you or learn about your activities by looking at your friends' pages, posts and photos – geographical landmarks and other identifying information can indicate where you're living and what you and your children are doing.
- Ask people not to post anything on the Internet without your permission because it could jeopardize your safety; if you have friends in abusive relationships, do the same for them.
- If using Facebook for communication with trusted friends or family members, keep in mind that private messages (chat boxes) are somewhat safer and can be used even if you are not actually 'friends' on Facebook.
- If you use a cell phone, make sure the GPS function is turned off, so your location cannot be tracked through it – unless you intend to use a cell phone application that requires this information for emergency assistance.
- Photos taken on cell phones or cameras may have automatic 'geotagging,' a geographic location indicator similar to GPS that embeds data with the image, making it available to Internet viewers; this function can be turned off or disabled to enhance your safety.
- Change your PIN or password frequently on any voicemail services you have, whether for a cell or regular phone, and be sure bills only go to private, secure mailboxes or emails; call records or logs can reveal a lot of information.
- For added safety and privacy, when possible, use a traditional telephone with a cord; conversations on cellular and cordless phones (as well as baby monitors) can sometimes be overheard and monitored outside the home.
- If you have received threatening messages via the Internet, cell phone or answering machine/service, be sure to save them; print them out, if you can, on pages that show the date and time the threats were made.



PREPARE AN EMOTIONAL SAFETY PLAN

The experience of being abused and verbally put down is often physically exhausting and psychologically draining. Getting out of an unhealthy relationship and building a new life requires courage and strength. In order to conserve your emotional energy, it's important to take care of yourself during difficult, stressful times. Here are some ways to do that:

- Take care of yourself by getting enough sleep and eating well.
- Make time to read, meditate, play music or do something that helps you relax; be creative and do whatever makes you feel good!
- Write something positive about yourself every day – your own personal affirmations; you may want to post them on your mirror or fridge.
- Spend time with supportive people who help you feel good about yourself.
- Join women's support groups or attend drop-ins; it's a great way to network!
- Get involved in community projects and social activities; this will help reduce feelings of isolation.
- Join a health club, exercise program or walking group; physical activity can help increase your energy level and sense of well-being.
- Enroll in classes or take courses to increase your skills; it's also a good way to meet people with similar interests.
- Consider getting a part-time job to help reduce isolation and improve finances!
- Take time to prepare yourself emotionally before any stressful situation, such as talking to your ex-partner, meeting with a lawyer or attending court.
- Try not to overbook yourself; limiting your number of appointments to one per day can help reduce stress.
- Be careful to avoid excessive shopping and impulse buying, as well as excessive consumption of alcohol or food, which can be detrimental.
- Keep a personal journal to write about your feelings, especially when feeling low or vulnerable; be sure it is in a safe place or, perhaps, burn it when finished writing.
- Remember that it's okay to feel angry but it's important to find a constructive way to express anger.



MAKE A CHILDREN'S SAFETY PLAN

This plan is designed to help mothers teach their children about basic safety. It is based on the belief that the most important thing children can do is get away from an area of violence. They cannot stop abuse in their homes, although they often try by distracting the abuser or getting directly involved in an abusive situation. It is vital to tell children that the best and most important thing for them to do is to keep themselves safe.

Children who witness abuse can be profoundly affected. It is very traumatic for them to be faced with violence, whether it is directed at them or at someone they love. Making a personal safety plan is essential for children living in violent homes. Children should be taught how to protect themselves from harm. Here are some ways you can work with your children to develop safety plans:

- The first step of any safety plan is for children to get away from an abusive situation; help your children pick a safe room/place in the house to go if feeling in danger, preferably one with a lock on the door and a phone.
- Emphasize the importance of being safe, and make sure the children understand it is *not* their responsibility to keep *you* safe – only themselves.
- Decide on a code word/phrase with your children so they will know that, if you use it, they should immediately do as planned to stay safe and, if possible, call for help.
- Teach children how to call 911 for help (from any type of phone); make sure they understand that they should not use a phone in the abuser's sight because this puts them at risk and, after dialing 911, if they have to leave the phone, they should not hang up – just lay the phone down and go somewhere safe.
- Although 911 systems can trace calls, it's a good idea to teach children to give the operator his/her full name, age and home address; practice with them and suggest saying something like: "Send the police. Someone's hurting my mom."
- Talk to your children about going to a neighbor's house or using a pay phone to make an emergency call, if it is not safe or possible to call from home.
- Pick a safe place to meet your children outside the home (such as a neighbor's home), so you will be able to find each other easily when the immediate danger is over; teach your children the safest route(s) to get to this meeting place .



IF/WHEN VIOLENCE OCCURS

It is not always possible to avoid violent incidents, but there are some things you can do to increase your safety and help protect your children. Here are some ideas:

- Remember that you've made an emergency escape plan – and try to use it!
- Use your code word with your children so they will know to keep themselves safe and call for help; you will be better able to protect yourself if you don't have to worry about them.
- Make as much noise as you can, so neighbors will hear you and call the police on your behalf; yell, scream, break things and, if possible, set off a fire alarm or car alarm.
- Start to position yourself to get out quickly and/or to make a 911 call.
- Try to move to an area where the risk of harm is decreased; when arguments occur in kitchens or garages, for instance, there are many potential weapons nearby and, if you are in a bathroom or other small room, you may become trapped inside.
- Use your judgement and intuition – if the situation is getting serious, you may want to agree with or give your partner what he/she wants in order to calm things down a little; your goal is to keep yourself physically safe.
- If you've been assaulted, call 911 as soon as possible and request assistance.



MUSKOKA AREA SERVICES/RESOURCES

Emergency services (police/fire/ambulance): 911

OPP regional dispatch for Muskoka: 1-888-310-1122

OPP detachments: Bracebridge 705-645-2211; Huntsville 705-789-5551

Muskoka Women’s Advocacy Group (MWAG) crisis shelters:

Muskoka Interval House (MIH), Bracebridge 1-800-461-1740 or 705-645-4461;

Chrysalis, Huntsville 1-866-789-8488 or 705-789-8488

Muskoka/Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services (MPSSAS):

Muskoka 1-877-406-1268 or 705-646-2122;

Parry Sound 1-877-851-6662 or 705-774-9083;

After-hours crisis line 1-800-461-2929

Hospitals:

Bracebridge 705-645-4404; Huntsville 705-789-2311; Orillia 705-325-2201

Regional Sexual Assault Centre, Orillia: 1-877-377-7438 or 705-327-9155

Muskoka Community Services (Ontario Works and District Housing):

Bracebridge 1-800-461-4215 or 705-645-2412; Huntsville 705-787-1201

Family Youth and Child Services of Muskoka (FYCSM):

Bracebridge 705-645-4426; Huntsville 705-789-8866;

After-hours crisis line 1-800-680-4426

Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP):

1-800-665-9718 or 705-645-9718

Muskoka Community Mental Health (MCMH):

Bracebridge 705-645-2262; Huntsville 705-789—8891;

After-hours crisis line 1-800-461-5424

Legal support services: Legal Aid Ontario 1-800-668-8258;

Lake Country Community Legal Clinic 1-800-263-4819 or 705-645-6607

For a more complete list of support services/resources,

visit this website: www.mwag.ca

