

## 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF A SAFETY PLAN

If you are being hurt by an intimate partner, you may be wondering how you got into this fix. You may be asking yourself if there is a way out. Perhaps you are thinking that your life is nothing like what you hoped for—and neither are you. Maybe you wish you could get back to being the person you used to be. You probably feel humiliated or depressed a lot of the time. Sometimes you may feel very angry. These feelings can drain you of most of your energy. They can make it hard to think clearly, and even harder to find a way to be safe. The suggestions and Activities in *You Can Be Free* and in these excerpted pages from that book and *Getting Free* (<http://www.powells.com/>) can help you feel better about yourself and more able to take action. The first thing to think about is increasing your safety.

You might have decided to leave an abusive partner. It is very important to make a safety plan first. If he has struck you or threatened to, the violence likely will get worse if he thinks you are going to leave him. That period of time and right after you leave can be very, very dangerous. If you do leave, the abuser might do everything possible to track you down. You need to plan to be in a place where he—or she—cannot find you. If you have children, it is urgent to find ways to protect them.

### **In an Emergency, Where Can You Go? Make this plan *before* an emergency happens**

- Think of a safe place to go if you are attacked or threatened. It could be a neighbor's house, a police station, or somewhere open all night. Try to think of a place where you can phone a friend. The friend should be part of your early planning.

- Practice how to get there. If you can get away in a car, keep the key with you all the time. If you have to walk or take a bus, check out the route at night. Is it safe?

- If you live close to a neighbor, talk to her about a signal you might give if you are in danger. It might be banging on a wall in a particular way. It could be shouting a word, or a telephone call with a coded message.

- Pack a bag with important papers, medicine, extra clothes, money, and things for your children. If you are Deaf or an immigrant or have a disability, you may need to have extra things ready to take if you leave in a hurry. See *Getting Free* (<http://www.powells.com/>) for suggestions.

- Memorize telephone numbers of the National Domestic Violence Hotline (<http://www.ndvh.org/>): 800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233 and TTY: 800-787-3224 and of your local shelter or hotline.

### IN AN EMERGENCY AT HOME

- Try to get to a room that has a way out.

- If that is impossible try to get to a room that has a phone and a door that locks.

- Stay out of the bathroom or kitchen, which contain possible weapons such as razor blades or knives.

- Use the plan (above) that you made to escape the house.

### SAFETY AT WORK

- Tell trusted coworkers about danger you are in.
- Tell them about phone harassment on the job.
- If it seems safe, tell your boss. Ask for help with your safety plan.
- Ask your boss to make your work phones secure.
- If you take a bus, ask a co-worker to walk to the station with you.
- If parking lots are not well lighted, ask to have the lighting improved.
- Ask a security guard or other employee to walk you to your car. Show that person a picture of the person who abused you.
- If you drive, take a different route each day.

### SAFETY FOR CHILDREN

- Teach your children how and when to dial 911.
- See “Helping Your Children Be Safe at Home” Chapter 14 of *You Can Be Free*.(www.Powell’s.com)

### Uses and Limitations of Safety Plans

Guidelines can help you figure out how to cope with terrifying circumstances. But they are not rule books. You may even face risks in *following* those general guidelines. They can save your life, but unless you carefully evaluate how they will work for you, they could even increase your danger. Your plan will be shaped by the abuser’s traits and your responses. It will be affected by your emotional and physical condition. Availability of services will have a big impact. For instance, how quickly can you get help from police, family, or friends? Your community’s reactions can make a big difference, too. You can develop a safety plan that is right for you now. Then as your life changes, you can adapt it.

General safety plans can be useful. But they have limitations. Like the suggestions we have listed above, they usually advise you to call 911. They tell you not to get trapped in a room without a

second exit. Stay out of the kitchen. All those suggestions are useful to consider. But they do not allow for your personal situation, because there are too many variations. What if your partner is pointing a gun at you? Reaching for a phone could save your life. Or it could increase your danger.

Think seriously about the suggested plans. But consider alternatives. Maybe in the past you “talked down” the abuser. That might be a safer choice than trying to reach the phone. The general safety plans advise you to arrange a signal to a neighbor to call police. But what if your neighbors are too far away to get the signal? You know what has happened before. You know how your partner reacts to your attempts to be safe. That information is invaluable in figuring out a workable plan. You can combine it with the ideas in the general safety plan to fit your needs.

Sarah created a safety plan that suited her best. She was blind and Deaf and not able to predict her husband’s violent episodes. Sometimes her guide dog pawed her, and she thought he was misbehaving and needed more training. But when she discussed the problem with an advocate, Sarah realized the dog was agitated because he sensed her husband was working up to a rage. The dog was warning her that she was in danger. Sarah made a new safety plan. When the dog got upset, she would calmly tell the abuser the dog needed to go out. Then she would stay away from the house until her husband’s violent impulse receded.

This story illustrates the kind of plan that can emerge when you brainstorm with an advocate. Such a highly individual safety plan would never show up on a standard list, but an advocate helped her figure out what the dog was agitated about and it worked for Sarah. (“Sarah”’s name is fictional. Some details have been changed for her safety.)

## STEPS TO SAFETY

Well-meaning people may try to talk you out of carrying out your plan. They may not understand what your goals are or why you are taking steps they regard as dangerous or unnecessary. Their objections may reflect their worry about you. Perhaps they are only trying to help. If they point out the dangers of staying with an abuser, they may even be right. But they need to understand the dangers of leaving too. **It can be more dangerous to leave unless you have a solid safety plan. More women are killed soon after they leave than when they are with the abuser.** Either choice could risk your life or those of your children. If you leave and are not able to stay away, you might return to an even more dangerous situation. But making – and then following -- a carefully made safety plan might keep you out of danger.

## MAKING AN EMOTIONAL SAFETY PLAN

You may face serious physical injury almost every day. But there are many other kinds of danger. Living with an abuser can cause you to lose your independence. Your self-confidence drifts away. You may not notice it. Nearly all abusive people want to gain control over their victims. The best way to accomplish that is to isolate you. The abuser may first tell you he loves you too much to share you with your friends. Next he says your family is a bad influence. Pretty soon his opinions are the only ones you hear. When he says you are stupid, ugly, or no good you begin to believe him. Once that happens, it is easy to shame and humiliate you. You become depressed. You begin to believe you deserve to be abused. By then you might have lost contact with people who could help. If

that has happened, he has succeeded. He may not even have to use physical threats to control you. Being in his power begins to feel normal.

Think hard about whether that has happened to you. Watch for signs that a person wants to make you feel helpless. “Helping” can develop into controlling. Keep doing things for yourself, even when you feel worn out. Your first step in your safety plan might be to tell the abuser you know he is trying to control you and that he must stop. But consider the risks of speaking up. Might he punish you more? Have you tried it before? What happened? If he reacts with violence, do you have a plan to protect yourself? To get your kids to a safe place? To make a sound safety plan, you need to weigh your risks. You will need reliable information about your options. A domestic violence advocate can help you find it. See [Help Now “Working with an Advocate.”](#)

## SAFETY PLAN: STEP BY STEP

Decide what goal is most important to you. Safety? Saving the relationship? Preserving your community or religious connections? Protecting the kids? Having enough money to get along? Being free? Once you are clear about the goal, focus on the first step you need to take. Think of it as a ladder you’re going to climb, if that helps. Put your foot on the lowest rung. Then the next rung. And the next. If you feel stuck, enlist a friend to help. Don’t worry about choosing precisely the right first step. If it doesn’t work for you, change it. Do what you *can* do. If your physical safety is endangered, do whatever is likely to keep you safe for a short while. Give yourself time to make a longer-term plan. If you are not in physical danger, focus on ways to strengthen your confidence. Increase your energy. Give yourself some pleasure. Fix yourself a treat. Pick some flowers. Read a story to your child. Take a walk. In other words, get moving. Do something different even if it seems a small step.. It will give you energy and make the second step easier.

Your second step could be talking to a neighbor. The third might be asking her over for coffee. These may not seem like safety steps, but they are. They lead you toward taking control of your life. Take the steps one at a time. If you need smaller ones in between, take them. At each point, weigh the risks. Do what seems right for *you*. After you have taken a step or two or three, notice how far you have come. You may not be very high yet. But not long ago, you were afraid to get off the couch. Now you are on the steps.

Keep going. That will be the next challenge. For the first few steps you might want to stay close to an advocate or friend. Choose someone who can be your cheerleader. She has to know where you are headed and to understand the risks involved. She has to appreciate how hard some steps are for you. She will want you to achieve what you want for yourself. As you travel up the ladder the abusive person will probably try to stop you. The less he knows about what you are doing, the safer you may be. But even if you are knocked down, you can always get up again. Begin again and again, if necessary. A carefully thought out safety plan can keep you and your children out of danger.

Adapted from *You Can Be Free* (<http://www.powells.com/>)