

...sometimes give faulty information. As well, your partner may have intimidated you with legal threats that you will want to check out with an expert. It is very important for you to know your legal rights, especially when children are involved. You can access legal information by calling Legal Aid or Legal Services in your phone book.

How can I plan ahead?

It may be difficult to plan for the future. Part of the struggle may be that your partner's abuse leaves you exhausted and off-balance. Because of this, it may be difficult to do more than just get through the day. For some women, the physical, financial or social threats their partner throws at them keep them from making plans for the future. We recognize all of these barriers and understand what a paralyzing effect they may have on you.

We would, however, encourage you to do as much thinking about the future as you are able. It may be difficult right now to contemplate needing to leave your home, but this need may arise at some point. It is much more difficult to think about what you should do when you are in the middle of the crisis than if you have a plan in place ahead of time. Remind yourself that just because you have a plan doesn't mean you have to use it. For example, you can say to yourself, "If I had to leave, this is where I would go."

You may also be thinking about separating from your partner permanently. Often this seems completely overwhelming. Working on a long-term plan for leaving can break a seemingly overwhelming problem into smaller, attainable steps. Start by gathering resources and information for yourself.

For example, going to a lawyer and seeking advice about protecting your children and your financial security can be an important step. It would be wise not to tell your partner if you see a lawyer. Even though it may seem deceptive to keep this information from him, remember that your partner's belief structure permits him to put his needs and desires before yours or your children's (see chapter 7). In the event of a separation, his main concern will be his own well-being. Unfortunately, that leaves only you to be concerned about yourself and your children. Consulting a lawyer is an important step in protecting yourself and them.

Every woman is in a unique situation and has different things to consider as she thinks about her future. For this reason we have included some concrete ideas about planning in different situations. Please look at these ideas and decide what fits your experience.

If you are living with your partner

- ▶ Decide where you will go if you have to leave home, even if you don't think you will have to. Where would you go if your first choice didn't work out?
- ▶ Know how to exit safely. What doors, windows, elevators, stairwells or fire escapes would you use?
- ▶ Keep your purse and car keys in a place where you can get to them if you have to leave quickly.
- ▶ Tell your neighbours about your concerns and ask that they call the police if they hear suspicious noises coming from your house.
- ▶ Teach your children to use the phone to contact the police and fire department.
- ▶ Use a code word with your children or friends so they can call for help.
- ▶ When you expect that there is going to be an argument, avoid the bathroom, garage, kitchen and other areas near weapons, or rooms without access to an outside door.
- ▶ Use your judgment and intuition. If the situation is very serious, you may decide to give your partner what he wants to calm him down. Do what you need to do to protect yourself until you are out of danger.

If you are thinking about leaving

- ▶ Consider opening up a savings account for yourself.
- ▶ Consider opening your own post office box.
- ▶ Consider opening a floating voice mail box. Do not give your partner the phone number.
- ▶ Try to find employment if you are unemployed.
- ▶ Research resources in your community (e.g., food bank).
- ▶ Speak to the staff at a transition house.
- ▶ Discover which friends will support and help you.
- ▶ Look at places to rent.
- ▶ Keep copies of important documents, keys, clothes and money with a friend or family member.
- ▶ Keep numbers of important resources with you or memorize these numbers.
- ▶ Explore employment courses through local colleges.

If you or your partner has left

- ▶ Change the locks on doors and replace wooden doors with metal doors. Install additional locks, window bars or poles to wedge against doors.
- ▶ Get an unlisted phone number and call screening.
- ▶ Teach your children how to use the telephone to make a collect call to you in the event your partner takes the children.
- ▶ Tell people who take care of your children who can pick them up and that your partner is not permitted to do so.
- ▶ Inform neighbours and friends that your partner no longer resides with you and that they should call the police if he is seen near your home.
- ▶ Plan ahead for what you can do if you feel down and ready to return to a potentially abusive situation.
- ▶ Find friends or family members you can call for support.
- ▶ Develop a plan that best protects your safety for when and/or if you have to communicate with your partner in person or by telephone.

This chapter has listed a lot of practical suggestions, which we hope will help you. It may be overwhelming to think about all you could do to gather support or to plan for the future. Try not to get overwhelmed by taking on too much at once. Instead, ask yourself if there is one thing you could do to get more support for yourself or to plan for the future. For example, one woman realized she needed to get out of her car loan and buy a less expensive car if she was ever to be financially independent of her partner. She hadn't decided yet if she was going to separate from her partner, but she wanted to be debt-free regardless. Putting her car up for sale was an attainable step that made it more possible to leave her partner. It did not mean, however, that she had to leave him.

Women sometimes find there are things they can do that will give them more support or open up some options for them without forcing a decision about staying or leaving. Each little step you make is very significant. Some of the steps you make do not seem visible. They have to do with how you are thinking and feeling rather than what you are doing. However, women who have worked through this process tell us that some of these small steps, such as changing how they thought about themselves, made a big difference. By beginning to realize that you are in a very difficult situation and deserve some affirmation and support, you are taking a very significant step.