



Women Abused in Intimate Relationships



The life after: *Overcoming abuse*

Almost certainly, a woman you know has been abused. You might not know about it.

Across Alberta, women are living with men* who insult, intimidate and manipulate them, hurt them physically and degrade them sexually. They are trapped in a pattern of abuse. They live in turmoil and fear.

Across Alberta, women have created new lives for themselves. They have been able to break free of abuse and move on. They have survived and they have healed. They are an inspiration.



What is in this booklet

This booklet provides you with information about the abuse of women in intimate relationships. When you read this booklet, you will learn:

What is abuse

- Understand major kinds of abuse in intimate relationships
- Know what to look for so you can recognize abuse

What you can do

- Know what you can do if you realize you are in an abusive relationship or if you are concerned about someone you know.

Where to get help

- Know where to get help for people you are concerned about or for yourself

* Abusers can be male or female. This publication deals with female victims. For more information about male victims, see "Men Abused in Intimate Relationships" information sheet or booklet, available at www.familyviolence.alberta.ca.

*Definition of family violence**

Family violence is the abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency that endangers the survival, security or well-being of another person. It can include many forms of abuse including spouse abuse, senior abuse and neglect, child abuse and neglect, child sexual abuse, parent abuse, and witnessing abuse of others in the family. Family violence may include some or all of the following behaviours: physical abuse, psychological abuse, criminal harassment/stalking, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse and spiritual abuse.

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* This is Alberta Government's definition of family violence as identified in the *Finding Solutions Together* report.

“Sometimes when I see the signs, I send the kids to the neighbours so they won’t be in the house. Then I provoke him, because I know the explosion is going to happen and I want to get it over with. I’d like to leave, but he has total control over our finances. I won’t get far without money. I don’t know how I would support the kids if I left. Not only that, I’m afraid he would track us down and then it would be even worse.”

“When I was young, I never dreamed my life would turn out the way it did. When I met Jason, I thought he was perfect. He thought I was, too. We were happy. I was thrilled to learn I was pregnant but Jason seemed to be uncomfortable. He acted like I thought the baby was more important than him. He got really tense and angry. I was seven months pregnant when he first hit me. I couldn’t believe it. I was totally dependent on Jason to support me and the baby. What could I do? How would I raise a child alone? So, I stayed.”

Who is abused? What is abuse?

WHO IS ABUSED? SOME FACTS

In 2006, a Statistics Canada report¹ stated that:

- 7 per cent of Canadian women, including 10 per cent of women in Alberta, reported being abused by their intimate partner between 1999 and 2004
- 9 per cent of women under the age of 25 years reported sexual assault or criminal harassment in 2004
- 24 per cent of Aboriginal women in Canada reported abuse
- 21 per cent of abused women were assaulted during pregnancy
- 1 in 5 homicides involves the killing of an intimate partner

Women of all ages, all ethnic and cultural backgrounds and all income levels may be victims of abuse. Abuse happens in male-female and LGBTQ* relationships.

ABUSE IS A PATTERN OF CONTROLLING BEHAVIOUR

Abuse in intimate relationships happens when one partner develops a pattern of trying to control the other. The abusive partner uses many tactics to try to have power over the other person. He wants to get his own way, to show his power over her and to stop her from leaving the relationship. The woman tries to change her behaviour to meet his demands, hoping the abuse will stop.

The abuse can and does result in any combination of physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual and financial harm. Being subjected to abuse lowers a woman’s sense of personal strength and value. Being threatened with or subjected to violence creates ongoing fear.

Abuse and violence in intimate relationships rarely happens “just once.” It is not “an isolated incident.” Abuse generally happens over months and years. If the abuse continues, it usually becomes more frequent and more severe.

Abusive behaviours are always a choice. It does not matter what the abuser’s background or experience is. He must take responsibility for his actions. No one has the right to abuse someone else, and no one deserves to be abused.

ABUSE TACTICS

Abuse can take many forms. All forms of abuse are tactics to increase the abuser’s power and control in relation to the abused person. The most visible form of abuse may be physical abuse, but less visible forms of abuse can be just as destructive.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE TACTICS cause emotional pain and injury. The abuser uses emotional or mental weapons instead of physical assaults on the abused person. Psychological abuse tactics include:

Verbal abuse

- Name calling and putdowns
- Yelling or swearing at the woman
- Ignoring her feelings
- Humiliating her and making fun of her in front of others
- Blaming her
- Making the abuse seem less than it is, or denying or lying about the abuse

Controlling the abused person’s activities

- Interfering with sleeping, eating, bathing or using the bathroom
- Isolating her from other relationships
- Dictating what clothes she wears and her hair style
- Restricting or forbidding her involvement in spiritual or cultural practices
- Controlling employment

*A commonly used acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, trans-identified, two-spirited and queer identities. Sexual minority is a synonymous term.

- Denying her any power to make decisions

Financial abuse

- Forcing her to give the abuser her property or possessions
- Forcing her to give him signing authority
- Withholding financial information from her
- Making financial decisions that affect her without consulting her
- Preventing her from accessing the money she needs for daily living

Bullying and threats

- Threatening to hurt her or others
- Threatening to take the children away
- Threatening to commit suicide
- Threatening to deport foreign wives
- Threatening to put disabled women in institutions

Degradation and humiliation

- Forcing her into activities she is ashamed of
- Treating her like a servant
- Deciding who does what in the relationship
- Forcing her to do something illegal or lie for him

Emotional terrorism

- Unreliable or scary driving, like speeding through traffic
- Playing with or cleaning weapons when he is angry
- Stalking her
- Using eye contact, body language or threatening movements to let her know he plans to hurt her

Destroying property or hurting loved ones

- Cutting, tearing up or burning clothing or keepsakes
- Punching holes in the walls
- Tearing off staircase rails or tearing out the phone
- Attacking, threatening to harm or kill, or killing family pets

PHYSICAL ABUSE TACTICS include a wide range of physical assaults by the abuser. Their purpose is to cause pain or physical injury to the abused person's body. Examples of physical abuse include:

- Pushing, slapping, kicking, choking, biting or punching her, or pulling her hair
- Hitting her with an object
- Threatening to use or using a weapon to cut, stab or shoot her
- Not allowing her to move, or locking or tying her up
- Not allowing her to get medical care
- Preventing her from using the prescription drugs she needs, or over-medicating her

SEXUAL ABUSE TACTICS (which cause both physical and psychological harm) include physical attacks on her breasts and/or genitals, and forced sexual activity.

- Unwanted sexual touching
- Sexual relations that she does not freely agree to
- Unsafe sexual behaviour
- Humiliating, degrading or painful sexual acts
- Forced sex with people outside the relationship
- Sexual activity immediately following a physical assault

“Darren knocked me around for years. He broke my wrist and my ribs at different times. I got good at making up excuses when people asked me how I got some bruise or other. He made me believe I was worthless. I was afraid to make decisions because whatever I did was wrong. After a while, I hardly ever left the house. I didn’t believe I could survive in the world on my own, because he always told me I couldn’t. Even when he wasn’t physically violent, he was always criticizing me and talking to me like I was dirt. But all that changed the day my eight year old son told me he didn’t have to do as I asked because I was stupid. He called me an obscene name he’d heard his father use. I packed up my kids and went to a shelter. We started to learn about treating each other with respect. It took a few years to get on our feet. But when I look at my son, I know I did the right thing.”

“For 16 years, I lived with it. The doctor said I had nowhere else he could hit. The night we left, he had a rifle and was shooting holes in the walls. I thought he was going to murder the kids. And me of course. We ran to the neighbours with the kids in their pajamas. I was so humiliated having the neighbours see us like that. And scared because if he came after us the neighbours could get shot too. They called the police. But now I feel so guilty. He’s all alone in the house, and I know he’s lonely. I feel bad for him and I think maybe I should go back. But then I remember the night we left and I know we can never go back.”

IMPACT OF ABUSE: IF ABUSE HAPPENS TO YOU, YOU MIGHT FEEL...

...like you are all alone.

You are not alone. Between 1999 and 2004, ten per cent of Alberta women reported having been abused by an intimate partner.² Friends, other family members, neighbours, social workers, doctors and others are all possible sources of support. There are also many community resources available to help you. There is a list of options at the back of this booklet.

...like you are worthless, ugly, stupid or unlovable.

You are not. You are a normal person in a bad relationship. Living with abuse lowers your self-esteem, your self-image and your self-confidence. But abuse is not about your worth. It is about how your partner chooses to behave.

...like you can’t tell anyone.

You can tell someone. Pick a person you trust. It could be a friend, family member, counsellor, health care worker or community services staff person. It is okay to ask for help. Silence and acceptance will only give the abuser more power and allow the abuse to continue.

...like it is your fault.

It is not your fault. Abuse does not happen because of you. It is not because you wear the wrong outfit or because you talk to the wrong person. It is not because you do not have the house clean enough or because you are not a good enough wife or mother.

Maybe you said something, fought back or provoked him. That may not have helped build a safe and healthy relationship. But your words and actions do not cause the abuse. Abuse happens because your partner chooses to act in an abusive way. You do not deserve the abuse. Nobody does.

...like it might not happen again.

It will happen again. Abuse does not stop until someone does something to stop it. Usually violence and abuse become more frequent and more severe over time.

...like there is nothing you can do about it.

There is something you can do. The choices you are facing may not be easy. Whether you leave the abusive relationship or work to create a relationship that is not violent, you may need to let others help you. Many people and agencies are available to help, no matter what you decide.

...like you should accept the abuse to keep the family together.

Abuse is never acceptable. Your vows and commitment to your partner did not include an agreement to be insulted, hurt, raped or scared. You are already living in a family unit that is not together, even if family members live under the same roof.

Abuse harms your physical and emotional health. If you have children, the abuse causes them trauma and impairs their ability for healthy development. They may have trouble learning and forming healthy relationships. You are worth more and so are your children.

...like his jealousy is because he loves you so much.

It is not. Abuse is about wanting power over another person, it is not about love. When he cuts off your contact with your friends or is jealous and possessive, it is not love. When he tells you what to do or how to behave, it is not love. When he hurts you or forces you to have sex, he is controlling you, not loving you.

...like your abuser was stressed or drunk, so the abuse does not count.

It does count. Stress, gambling, substance abuse and other addictive behaviours often go along with abuse. However, they do not cause abuse. Lots of people who experience stress or use alcohol and drugs do not hurt other people. Abusive behaviour is learned, and it is a choice the abuser is making.

...like your partner will hurt you if you try to leave.

Your partner already hurts you. It is true that the time of leaving an abusive relationship is a dangerous time. It is important that you understand the risks of further abuse, and of harm to yourself and others. Whether you plan to leave or stay, there are ways to plan for safety. Later in this booklet, there is information about making a safety plan.

One thing is for sure. If nothing is done to change the relationship, the hurt will likely continue.

...like you are as scared to leave as you are to stay.

Recognize the gift of fear. The human brain keeps us safe by telling us when to be afraid. If you are getting signals to be afraid of the person you love, it is because he is threatening your safety. He may also threaten the safety of your children or others who care about you.

The change from living in a violent relationship to having a non-violent life is a process. It requires commitment and support. Whether you leave your relationship or you and your partner stay together, you need to pay attention to your fear and take practical steps to be as safe as possible.

Other women have been in this situation and were able to move on to a life of safety and happiness. You can too.

You do not need to do this alone. Call on community resources to help you. The ones listed at the back of this booklet are a good place to start. The important thing is to know that you can do it and that you are worth it.

An abusive environment harms children now and in their future³

Sometimes women abused by their partners think their children do not know about the abuse or that the abuse does not harm the children. But children are harmed, even if they are not directly abused.

Being exposed to anger and violence affects children's brain development

- Brain scans show that children in abusive environments use much of their brain to watch out for danger. Less of their brain is available for healthy growth and development.
- This affects their physical, emotional and mental development
- It affects their ability to form healthy relationships
- It affects them even when the children are not consciously aware of the violence in the home

When a child is in a threatening environment over time, such as in a home where the adults are abusive, systems in the child's brain undergo changes. These changes result in emotional, behavioural, intellectual and physical symptoms.

All children in a threatening environment are affected by fear

They may:

- Feel anxious or panicky
- Have an increased heart rate – babies in violent or angry homes have faster heart rates even in their sleep
- Be very watchful and attentive all the time, as though on “red alert”

Because their brain is distracted by fear, they may:

- Find it hard to concentrate or pay attention
- Have difficulty sleeping
- Have difficulty learning

Children in a threatening environment use different ways to cope

Some children react by becoming more aggressive. These children may:

- Be defiant
- Be impulsive
- Have angry outbursts
- Be bossy or pushy
- Bully or hurt others

Sometimes these loud children do not appear to be affected because they look like they feel confident and in charge. But their aggressive behaviours grow out of fear expressed outwardly as anger.

Some children react by becoming quiet and withdrawn

These children may:

- Try to stay safe by becoming “invisible”
- Go into their own fantasy world and tune out the world around them
- Be more obedient or passive than other children
- Be numb and disconnected from their own feelings
- Be detached from other people
- Have a hard time getting along with others
- Be depressed

Sometimes these quiet children do not look like they are affected by what is going on around them because they do not seem to react. However, this “unaffected” appearance is a danger sign. In the face of fear and feeling helpless, they have disconnected from their environment.

You may think that the abuse between adults in the home does not affect children, or that you can shield them from what is going on. That is not true. As long as children live in an abusive environment, the trauma will continue to affect their brains. They will not be able to heal.

There is hope

Even if the trauma of living in an abusive home changes a child’s brain in unhealthy ways, the brain can heal over time if the child has a safe, predictable and loving place to live.

If there are children in your household, take responsibility for their safety and well-being. Do this even if you are not their biological parent. The children did not choose the adults in their home. They deserve a healthy and safe environment, so they can grow to become healthy and flourishing adults.

If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected by a parent or guardian, report your suspicions immediately. Call the police, your local Child and Family Services Authority or the 24-hour Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-387-KIDS (5437).

If you suspect someone other than a parent or guardian is abusing a child, report your suspicions immediately to the police. Look in the emergency pages of your local telephone directory to find the telephone number of police in your area.

How can I tell if my relationship is healthy, unhealthy or abusive?

This chart will help you compare healthy relationships to unhealthy or abusive ones. Look at the chart and think about your relationship. Is it most like the healthy, unhealthy or abusive relationship?

	HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP	UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP	ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP
Sharing Feelings	You feel safe and strong enough to tell your partner how you really feel.	You feel awkward telling your partner how you really feel.	You are afraid to tell your partner how you really feel because you fear getting put down or threatened.
Communicating	You respect and listen to each other even when you have differing opinions on a topic.	Your partner ignores you and does not respect your opinions when there is a difference of opinion.	Your partner treats you with disrespect and ignores or makes fun of your ideas and feelings.
Disagreements	You can have disagreements and still talk respectfully to each other. You resolve your disagreements.	Your disagreements often turn into fights.	You are afraid to disagree because you do not want to unleash your partner's anger and violence. The disagreement is an excuse for abuse.
Intimacy and Sex	Both of you can be honest about your feelings about physical affection and sex. Neither of you feels pressured to do anything you do not want to do.	You are embarrassed to say how you feel because you think your partner may not listen or care. You "go along" with some things.	Your partner ignores your needs and wants. Your partner pushes you into situations that make you uncomfortable, frighten or degrade you.
Trust	You trust each other. You are comfortable with your partner spending time with another woman.	Your partner feels jealous every time you talk to another man. You feel jealous every time your partner talks to another woman.	Your partner accuses you of flirting or having an affair, and orders you not to talk to another man.
Time Alone	You can each spend time alone and consider this a healthy part of your relationship.	You think there may be something wrong if you want to do things without your partner. Your partner tries to keep you to himself.	Your partner does not allow you to spend time doing things on your own. Your partner sees this as a challenge or threat to your relationship.
Violence	You and your partner take care not to speak harsh words or make mean comments. There is no physical violence in your relationship.	There have been a few incidents of emotional abuse or controlling behaviour in your relationship. There is no pattern of abuse or violence.	There is a pattern of increasing, ongoing abuse in your relationship: emotional, physical, sexual and/or intimidation.

“I did everything I could think of to prevent the violence. I’d try to figure out what might set him off. I’d make excuses for him — he had an unhappy childhood, or he was under stress at work. I’d shush the kids, and do things I thought he liked. I’d try to believe he didn’t really mean it when he said cruel things. A good day was when he didn’t yell. Then a good day was when he didn’t hit anybody. I didn’t even notice our life had turned into hell.”



If you are in an abusive relationship

NINE THINGS YOU CAN DO IF YOU ARE BEING ABUSED

1. First, make sure you and your children are physically safe.

- If you are in **immediate danger**, call 911.
- Make a safety plan. See “Safety Plan” suggestions at the bottom of page 9, or call the 24-hour Family Violence Info Line toll-free at **310-1818** for assistance.

2. Know you are not responsible for the abuse. The abuse is the responsibility of the person who is abusive. Know that you did not cause the abuse even if he would like you to think so.

3. Understand that the abuse and violence will likely continue without intervention. In fact, abuse and violence usually become more frequent and more severe over time. When you are thinking about your choices, be as realistic as you can be in determining what the risks are in your situation.

4. Tell someone you trust about the abuse. Secrecy gives abuse more power. When you tell another person, you are already gaining some power to make the situation better. If the person you tell does not seem to take you seriously, find someone else to talk to. Do not give up.

5. Find out more about abuse in relationships. You are not alone. About 11 per cent of Alberta women have been abused by a male partner. Other women have had this experience and lived through it. They were eventually able to create new and healthy lives for themselves. Once you start looking for sources of help, you will meet people who understand your situation.

6. Find out what help is available in or near your community.

You do not have to do this alone.

Visit www.familyviolence.alberta.ca or call the 24-hour Family Violence Info Line toll-free at **310-1818**.

Women’s shelters have information about services for women who are abused. Even if you do not plan to stay at a shelter, you can call your local shelter to find out what help is available in your community.

7. Get professional help from a qualified counsellor. Make sure the person understands abuse and violence in intimate relationships. If the first counsellor is not a good fit for you, try someone else. People who work in the area of family violence may be able to help you find an appropriate counsellor.

8. Care for yourself. You are in a difficult situation. You need energy and strength to change it. Make time to do some things that make you feel good. Anything you do to uplift your body, emotions, mind or spirit will help you to get through this situation and create the life you want for yourself.

Other women have been in abusive relationships and have gone on to have happy relationships and a good life. You can too. In the meantime, be kind to yourself, care for yourself and do things that uplift you so you have the energy to get past this situation.

9. Spend time with healthy people. Even if they cannot help you directly, being with healthy people will remind you that most people are kind to one another and many people have healthy and rewarding relationships. You can too.

SIX THINGS TO DO IF THERE ARE CHILDREN IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD

- 1. Think of the safety and best interests of the children first.**
- 2. Get legal advice** about custody, access and maintenance issues.
- 3. Tell the children** that even though the adults in their home do not get along, the children are not to blame and the abuse is not their fault.
- 4. Do everything in your power to expose the children to healthy relationships** and to environments that are safe, predictable and loving. Children need to know that most adults are kind to one another and that most homes are safe.
- 5. Help the children connect with healthy adults** outside the immediate household. Find adults who care about the children's well-being and whom the children can count on to be stable and predictable.
- 6. Help the children find ways to succeed.** Children who know they are good at something are stronger in themselves, even when they are in abusive environments.

Only you can decide what to do about your relationship. Whether to stay or leave is your decision. However, you do not have to do this alone. Whatever you decide to do, please get the help you need. The resources listed at the back of this booklet may be a helpful place to start.

SAFETY PLANNING

If your partner has ever been violent, the violence could happen again at any time. You will need a safety plan so you can get to a safe place quickly if necessary.

If you decide to leave the relationship, you need to know that separating is one of the most dangerous times in an abusive relationship. Your abusive partner is losing control over you and will do everything possible to get it back. In this situation, there is an increased risk of violence, harassment, threats and increased emotional abuse. That does not mean you should stay in the abusive situation. It means you need to assess the risk and plan how to stay safe.

MAKE A SAFETY PLAN

- 1. Tell people** you trust that you are in an abusive relationship.
 - Talk to them about how they can help you be safe
 - Let them know about any custody or no-contact orders
 - You may want to keep the abuse private, but when people outside your home know about the abuse, they can watch for danger signs and help keep you safe (and, if you have children, help protect their safety too)
- 2. Plan where you can go** if you need to leave in a hurry.
 - Look for places that are open 24 hours where you can be safe while you call for help
 - If you plan to go to someone's home, arrange this ahead of time. That way if you arrive with no notice, they will know to let you in, lock the doors and ask questions later (Do NOT plan to go to the home of a friend or relative where the abuser will think to look. That might endanger all of you.)
 - Make sure you have car keys and gas in the car, or bus tickets, taxi fare or other means of transportation
 - Be sure to check out exactly how to get to where you plan to go
 - Have a back-up plan in case you are not able to get to the place you intended to go
- 3. Memorize emergency numbers** like the numbers for the police or taxi. Learn the phone numbers of trusted friends or relatives, so you can tell them where you are going. You may not have time to look up these numbers if you need to leave fast.

4. **Find out about emergency protection orders**, restraining orders, peace bonds or other legal ways to stop your partner from contacting you. Your local police service or a police-based Victim Services Unit can give you information.
 5. **Learn to erase phone numbers from call display** so your partner will not know who called you or whom you called and learn to erase your usage history on your computer so your partner will not know which kinds of help you are accessing.
 6. **Pack a small emergency bag** and put it in a place where your partner will not find it. You could leave it with a trusted friend or in a place that only you know about. Include some things you will need, such as:
 - Cash
 - Debit or credit cards
 - Health care cards
 - Car keys or another way to have transportation
 - Important documents like your driver's license and passport
 - Prescription drugs or medications
 - Copies of any no-contact orders
 - If you have children, whatever they will need for a few days
 7. **If your former partner is stalking or harassing you:**
 - Report this to police. Stalking is a crime called criminal harassment
 - Keep a record. Write down what happens, including times and dates. The record of more than one incident will help to prove the harassment. ("Criminal harassment" is considered a crime if incidents happen several times.)
 - Tell key people (for example, co-workers, friends, your children's teachers) that your ex-partner is stalking or harassing you. Show them a picture of your ex-partner so they can watch out for him
 - You may need to arrange for a no-contact order of some kind (see point 4 above)
 8. **If you have children**
 - Tell them exactly what they should do in an emergency
 - Tell them how they will know it is an emergency
 - Tell them exactly where they should go and what they should do when they get there
-

Changing or leaving an abusive relationship

A PROCESS, NOT AN EVENT

It may take time to realize your relationship is abusive. It may take time to admit that a person you love, someone you thought loved you, is willing to say and do things that hurt you.

Many women who realize they are in an abusive relationship want the abuse to stop but want to keep the relationship if they can. It takes time to find out if it is possible to keep the relationship but stop the abuse. If there are children involved, the issues are even more complex.

Changing or leaving an abusive relationship is not easy. It takes time and effort. Sometimes it seems like taking two steps forward and one step back.

Though each woman's experience is unique, there are stages in the process of recognizing abuse and beginning to do something about it. Abused women may move back and forth between the stages, depending on any number of factors.

TYPICAL STAGES IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGING OR LEAVING AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP⁴

Stage 1: Deny the abuse

- Play down or deny the abuse
- Make excuses
- Blame yourself
- Try to make it better

Stage 2: Admit the abuse

- Admit your partner's behaviour is abusive
- Admit the impact of the abuse on yourself, the children and other friends and family
- Admit how your relationship really is instead of living in a fantasy about the kind of relationship you wanted

Stage 3: Find someone who agrees it is abuse and find help

- Talk to someone you trust
- Get information about abuse
- Find out what help is available

Stage 4: Move away from the relationship and back again

- Separate yourself from the abusive partner emotionally and/or physically.
- Think about the alternatives:
 - Is it possible to keep the relationship and stop the abuse?
If so, how would that work?
 - If not, what options are available?
- Stand up to his power and control
- Move in and out of the relationship – leave and return, emotionally and/or physically

Stage 5: Leave the abuse

- Take action
- Live through today
- Let go

Stage 6: Heal

- Tell the story
- Rediscover yourself
- Invest in new relationships and a new life free of abuse



“I went to a counsellor because I was depressed. I finally told the counsellor what was really going on in our home. She helped me understand that I am not responsible for what he does. Lots of people had unhappy childhoods or are under stress but they don’t hit other people. Then one day I looked at him and thought, “What a jerk. Why am I turning myself into a pretzel to try to please him? I don’t even like him.””

WHAT HELPS AND WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF CHANGE⁵

This chart can help you understand what helps and what can get in the way of changing or leaving an abusive situation. Whether you are in an abusive situation or concerned about someone else, the information can help you build on what helps and deal with what gets in the way of changing or leaving.

STAGE	WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF LEAVING OR CHANGING ABUSE	WHAT HELPS PEOPLE CHANGE OR LEAVE ABUSE
Acknowledge the abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling numb, not in touch with your emotions• Fear so strong it stops you in your tracks• Guilt, self-blame• Shame and fear of rejection• Low self-esteem• Feeling helpless• Health problems• Isolation• Hanging on to the dream of marriage and family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being aware of the risk to you and your children• Being aware that the way you live is not right and that the situation is not “good enough”• Extreme unhappiness (“however scary leaving may be, it could not be worse than this”)• Knowing you are good at some things (gives you more confidence)• Being angry at your abusive partner and losing respect for him
Find someone who agrees it is abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shame at being the victim of abuse• Fear of being rejected by the person you tell• Low self-esteem• The social disgrace of being abused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Having someone to trust and approach• Being believed and accepted• Resources like films, books, etc.• Your children’s responses to you being abused (a wake-up call)• Realizing the situation is harming the children
Move away from the relationship and back to it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Terror of what the abuser will do if you leave• Feeling numb, not in touch with your emotions• No resources: little or no money and no place to live and be safe from the abuser	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anger at the abuser and at being abused• Abuse getting worse so that it is clearer how dangerous it is for you and the children• More afraid to stay than to leave• The support of others
Leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Threats from the abuser about what he will do to harm you or the children• Deep-seated and long-standing fear• Lack of resources or people who can help• Low self-esteem• Shame and disgrace	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As the violence and abusive behaviour get worse, you get more determined and you know you are doing the right thing• Fears for yourself or the children if you stay• Anger as a force that moves you forward
Heal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leftover negative feelings about yourself• Low self-esteem• Unexpressed anger• Deep-seated fears• Feeling numb, not in touch with your emotions• Guilt• Believing the negative things the abuser said about you• Fear of being rejected by others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Restored self-esteem from deciding to leave and then acting on the decision• Successes at work or school, in friendships and parenting• Support of people as you create a new life for yourself• Resources like women’s groups, counselling, reading

If you are concerned about a woman you know

HOW YOU CAN RECOGNIZE ABUSE: CLUES THAT A WOMAN MAY BE ABUSED

1. **Check the Relationships Chart.** Look at the chart about healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships on page 7. What do you see, hear or feel when you are with the couple? In which category does their relationship fit?
2. **Check the list of abusive behaviours.** Look at the list of behaviours describing psychological, physical and sexual abuse on page 2. Have you observed these behaviours over time? If so, it may be an abusive relationship.
3. **Consider if there have been changes.**
 - Has the woman stopped coming to events she used to attend regularly?
 - Is she withdrawing from friends and family?
 - Do you notice changes in her personality? (For example, does she often seem sad or angry when she used to be cheerful? Does she seem tired when she used to have energy?)
 - Is she on medication? Does she show signs of depression or anxiety?
 - Does she have any bruises or other physical injuries that do not match up with the story they tell you about how she got them?

These are all clues that she might be dealing with abuse.

4. **Notice if there are other clues.** Here are some other clues that abuse may be taking place:
 - Signs of injury like bruises, sores and broken bones that are not explained or not clearly explained
 - Depression, withdrawal
 - Anxiety, fear
 - Not willing to make even simple decisions without her partner
 - Limited access to money
 - Very little time spent with friends and family outside the relationship
 - Drug or alcohol abuse to blot out the pain

IF SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS BEING ABUSED, YOU MAY FEEL...

...like it's none of your business.

It is. Preventing abuse is everybody's business in a safe and caring community.

...like there's nothing you can do.

There is. An act of support and positive encouragement can make a big difference to someone who is being abused. Some specific suggestions for what you can do are listed later in this booklet.

You can contact one of several community or government resources for advice or ideas on how best to help. Information listed at the back of this booklet will give you a starting point.

...like it's hopeless to get involved.

It isn't. People who are abused tend to develop low self-esteem and lose their self-confidence. It may take time for them to stop the abuse and find their way out of the relationship. They must overcome their fears, plan for their safety and take steps toward independence. Your positive support and encouragement can help.

“And then one day the pain of staying was greater than the pain of leaving.”

“A few years ago, I would never have believed I could have the life I have now. I am safe. I have learned I am a beautiful and valuable person. I know how strong I am. I spend time with people who love me and are good to me. I have a good job that I enjoy. The man I am with is considerate and loving. He treats me with respect and helps me move forward. Life is good.”

“The constant putdowns, the lies and broken promises, the mind games, they all ground me down until I had almost no belief in myself at all. I started to believe all the things he said about me. Sometimes I thought it would actually be easier if I had a bruise. Then I’d have something I could see. It took three tries, but each time I left, I learned something else and I got stronger. Each time I was clearer about what I had to do. Today I stand tall. I know my own worth.”

How you can help

IF YOU SUSPECT THAT SOMEONE IS IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

1. Understand she may not recognize that this is abuse or may not want to talk about it.

Many abused women do not realize that the behaviour they are living with is abuse. It may take time before they begin to understand that their partner is abusing them. This is a painful thing to admit. It means realizing that someone they love, that they thought loved them, is willing to hurt them.

Some abused women may be careful to hide the abuse because they feel ashamed.

Recognizing abuse and deciding what to do about it is a process, not an event. Your understanding and patience will support the woman through the process.

2. Find the right words to open the door for talk. There is no perfect way to bring up the subject of abuse. Telling her you care about her safety and the safety of the children can be a powerful way to start.

Because abusers isolate abused women, the women may think no one knows what they are going through. Letting a victim know your concerns may be a welcome surprise.

Ask permission to share what you know about abuse, and be sure to let the woman know you will help in any safe way you can.

Examples of things people said to women in abusive situations that they found helpful:

- “I have noticed lately you are more and more withdrawn and we do not see much of you anymore. When we do, I have noticed that you are quieter and look troubled. I am not trying to pry, but sometimes that means a woman is not being treated very well by her partner.”
- “I have been in an abusive situation and I can see the signs. (Say this only if it is true.) Here are some things I see and hear that tell me you are dealing with power and control tactics from your partner. (List them.) Here are two things I can tell you from my experience, and the experience of lots of other women. I can tell you that it does not get better, and I can tell you that you do not deserve to be abused.”

Because this is someone you know and care about, just let her know you care and the door may open to begin talking about the abuse.

3. Once the woman understands this is an abusive relationship, encourage her to get help. She can contact community agencies and get help from groups like women’s shelters and police. They can help her assess how dangerous her situation is. They will help her with safety planning and connect her to other sources of help. The list at the back of this booklet may give you a place to start looking for help.

IF A WOMAN TELLS YOU SHE IS IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

SEVEN THINGS YOU CAN DO

1. **Let her know you believe her.** Listen to what she is saying.
2. **Tell her she doesn’t deserve to be hurt.** Tell her the abuse is not her fault. The abusive person is responsible for his actions. She does not deserve to be abused. Nobody does.
3. **Privately express your concern and ask, “How can I help?”** Encourage her to talk to someone who can help her identify the risks and develop safety plans.
4. **Honour her feelings and experiences.** She may need to talk about the good stuff as well as the bad stuff in her relationship.
5. **Find out what she wants to do** and support that. She may be confused – abuse will do that to a person. She may decide something and then change her mind. That is okay.

- 6. Accept that she may want to stay** in the relationship or try again to make it work. She may need to test out if it is possible to stop the abuse and save the relationship. Don't criticize. Just remind her that you are there for her, no matter what she decides.
- 7. Be prepared for many different feelings or reactions.** The woman may feel guilty or embarrassed for telling you — or even angry that you know. Don't take any reactions personally. Keep reminding her that you are there for her, that you accept her exactly as she is and that you will back her in her choices.

FIVE THINGS NOT TO DO

- 1. Do not make judgments or give advice.** You don't know what the woman's experience is like. You don't know what is right for her, even if you have been in a similar situation. You can be helpful without telling her what she should do. Listen and accept her no matter what.
- 2. Do not criticize her partner.** Abusive partners may not be bad all the time – in fact, good times may keep people in abusive situations. If you criticize the woman's partner, she may feel forced to defend him or she may believe you think she is stupid for being involved with him.
- 3. Do not ask unnecessary questions.** A woman who feels uncomfortable discussing the abuse may shut down if you ask her questions. To her, any question may feel like prying. Open the door for her to talk and just listen.
- 4. Do not over-react.** If you express shock or horror, she may stop talking.
- 5. Do not confront her partner.** The partner appears to be an abusive and possibly violent person. Standing up to him and confronting him about the abuse could make a bad situation worse. Instead, talk to the woman about what options she has. Ask her how you can help and keep reminding her that you are there for her.

IF YOU KNOW A MAN WHO IS ABUSIVE

Confronting a violent person is dangerous. Be very aware of the risks and do not leave yourself open to harm. However, if a man you know acknowledges that he is abusive to family members and tells you that he wants to change, there are some things you could say to him.

ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR IS LEARNED

You can let him know that abusive behaviour is learned, it's not genetic. Some men who have abused their female partners have learned to change. He can too. His abusive behaviour is a choice. If he is going to find other choices that do not harm his family, he will have to be committed to changing his behaviour.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

Encourage and support him in getting help or finding resources to stop his abusive and violent behaviour. Resources listed at the back of this booklet give a place to start.

HOLD THE ABUSER ACCOUNTABLE

Family violence is not caused by the victim, by stress, by addictions or by any other circumstances. The abuser makes a choice to hit, belittle, control or dominate. He alone is responsible for these choices. The abuser needs to understand this so he can make the mental shift to end his use of violence.

“I ran into the bathroom and locked the door and cried and cried. And then I had a moment of pure clarity. The fear was gone. The hurt was gone. The confusion was gone. I knew. “I am worth more than this. I need to raise my children in safety. I know what I have to do. It’s not going to be easy but I will do it.” I lifted my head. I opened the door. I felt the power of my own spirit. I knew: I will never be trapped again.””

Get help

HELP FOR IMMEDIATE DANGER

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911.

Visit www.familyviolence.alberta.ca or call the 24-hour Family Violence Info Line toll-free at **310-1818**.

Emergency protection orders, restraining orders and peace bonds are some of the legal ways to stop an abuser from contacting someone.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN SOME ALBERTA COMMUNITIES

Local women's shelters can provide information to help women abused by their male partners. Even if you do not plan to stay in a shelter, you can call your local shelter for information about abuse in families. They will be able to give you information about resources or services in your community. Visit www.familyviolence.alberta.ca or call the 24-hour Family Violence Info Line toll-free at **310-1818** to find a shelter near you.

A BOOK TO INSPIRE YOU

Standing Together: Women Speak Out about Violence and Abuse, edited by Linda Goyette. Brindle and Glass Publishing, 2005.

Standing Together is a collection of personal stories and poems written by Alberta women who have experienced violence and abuse. You will meet brave women of all ages and backgrounds — the youngest is 16, the oldest is 84. You will meet many people who admire their courage and help them to rebuild their lives — children, sisters, daughters, parents, new husbands, loving friends and caring strangers.

Speaking for themselves, in their own unforgettable words, these women offer a message of hope and inspiration: You are not alone. You can make a change. You can get through a terrible time and build a better life. You have the strength.

Standing Together is available from the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. To order, phone **780-456-7000** or order online at www.acws.ca.

¹ Statistics Canada (2006, October). *Measuring violence against women: Statistical trends 2006* (Catalogue No. 85-570-XIE). Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/85-570-XIE/85-570-XIE2006001.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Perry, B., (2005). The destructive impact of domestic violence on Children. In Alberta Children and Youth Services, *Family violence it's your business: Community resource guide* (pp.9-10). Edmonton, AB: Queens Printer. Retrieved from http://www.child.alberta.ca/home/images/familyviolence/FVP_CommunityResourceGuide_20080528.pdf

⁴ Adapted from Turnbull, E. (1994). *The Process of leaving an abusive relationship*. Unpublished masters thesis. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta.

⁵ Ibid.



**Alberta Children and Youth Services
Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying**

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Women Abused in Intimate Relationships