



Safety Planning and Intimate Partner Violence



A Toolkit for Survivors and Supporters

COMMUNITY JUSTICE EXCHANGE

Introduction



This toolkit was created for those grappling with how to support survivors through intimate partner violence, with the intent of strengthening community-level responses to abuse by sharing practical skills and information for safety planning. Though it was written with prison abolitionist and activist communities in mind, it is also intended to be a useful resource for a broader range of people across varying experiences.

Intimate partner violence, also known as domestic violence, can affect any one of us across our disparate communities, privileges, and politics. Despite its ubiquity, supportive responses to address it remain painfully underdeveloped and under-resourced: official sites of support like domestic violence shelters are stretched to the brink by demand and routinely incorporated into policing institutions; law enforcement and legal systems generally refuse to protect or even outright endanger survivors as a matter of course; in communities, victim-blaming, justifications for the abuse, and avoidance are the norm.



Intimate partner violence, also known as domestic violence, can affect any one of us across our disparate communities, privileges, and politics.

Safety planning can be described as a process of identifying risks, mapping out resources, and assessing options in order to increase safety for people surviving abuse. However, safety planning in the context of mainstream domestic violence work often fails to locate the risk of survivor criminalization inherent to many situations of intimate partner violence, assumes the survivor is willing to have their partner criminalized or potentially harmed by police intervention, and individualizes what steps the survivor can take alone to escape a dangerous situation. While this type of safety planning can still be helpful, its scope is constrained by the mainstream imagination of who a survivor is, and what systems will mobilize to support them: as feminists and prison abolitionists have highlighted, an overwhelming majority of survivors and their domestic violence service providers report that police contact is regularly accompanied by not only neglect, physical force, and targeted harassment of survivors, but also by the criminalization of those same survivors via the criminal, immigration, and family law systems.¹

In this toolkit, safety planning is defined as a form of community organizing that aims to increase safety and reduce harm, including the harm of criminalization, for people surviving intimate partner violence. This can be done through strengthening relationships, gathering resources, and strategizing options to increase a survivor’s ability to gain power back over their own life and decision-making. This definition of safety planning hinges upon the understanding of the police and criminal legal system as twin entities that regularly heighten abuse and gender-based violence against survivors, and the understanding of everyday people as what they could be and often are: first responders to their loved ones in times of crisis, who can help shift the devastating trajectory of intimate partner violence.

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¹ Ritchie, Andrea. 2020. “Police Responses to Domestic Violence: A Fact Sheet.” Interrupting Criminalization. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee39ec764dbd7179cf1243c/t/615d2d8d53ef604bf219fa3f/1633496919504/Police+Responses+to+Domestic+Violence_English.pdf.



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What is intimate partner violence?



Intimate partner violence (also referred to as domestic violence, dating abuse, or relationship abuse) is a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship.²



“I had spent many years with my abuser before I realized that it was really abusive. It’s hard to safety plan if you’re not currently acknowledging the situation, or don’t realize that the behaviors being exhibited are abusive to begin with. So I think that everybody could use a little bit more of these conversations, a little bit more of this type of planning with other people in their lives.”

—Yves Tong Nguyen

² National Domestic Violence Hotline. n.d. “Understand Relationship Abuse.” The Hotline. <https://www.thehotline.org/identify-abuse/understand-relationship-abuse/>.

ABUSE CAN LOOK LIKE...

ISOLATION: Discouraging connection with others; punishing other relationships; repeatedly creating divisive conflict between someone and their family and friends, etc.

VERBAL ABUSE: Belittling; put downs; constant criticism; yelling; etc.

FINANCIAL ABUSE: Using money to coerce, extort, and exploit; controlling all the finances; stealing someone's earnings; forcing financial dependency by barring access to opportunities, including education, language skills development, and employment; incurring massive debts under someone else's name; forcing someone to pay for things by leveraging guilt, fear, or threats; sabotaging income by breaking work equipment, interfering with transportation to work, or calling an employer nonstop; forced labor; etc.

PHYSICAL ABUSE: Assault; pushing; strangulation; physical intimidation; withholding medical care; tampering with medications; sleep deprivation; destroying belongings; creating dangerous situations through reckless behaviors meant to intimidate, such as driving at extremely high speeds, starting explosive fights with third parties, pressuring to use an unsafe amount of substances; knowingly putting someone at risk for physical harm; etc.

SEXUAL ABUSE: Rape; sexual assault; marital sexual abuse; drug-facilitated sexual assault; coercing or cajoling for sex; demanding unwanted types of sex; forcing sex with others; reproductive coercion by denying birth control or abortions; "stealthing"³; taking or sharing sexual images and videos nonconsensually; using sexualized language to degrade someone; etc.

³ "What Is Stealthing?" n.d. Love Is Respect. <https://www.loveisrespect.org/resources/what-is-stealthing/>.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE: Controlling; blaming; manipulating someone into disbelieving their reality and experiences; using a survivor's physical, mental, or emotional needs to manipulate, control, and isolate; conversely, an abusive partner may also use their own physical, mental, or emotional needs to manipulate, control, isolate, and force others into a caretaking position; threatening suicide/self harm as retaliation; etc. All forms of abuse constitute emotional abuse—for example, physical abuse is also emotional abuse as it communicates severe disrespect for someone's bodily autonomy.

COERCION AND THREATS: Threats to kill or seriously injure; threats against children, pets, or other close family and friends; threats to self-harm or commit suicide as punishment; stalking behaviors; incessant and intrusive contact; forcing or manipulating someone into behaviors and survival strategies that create more vulnerability to arrest and criminalization, such as forcing into holding drugs, stealing food, or participating in armed robberies; etc.

USING INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND/OR COMMUNITY NORMS: Threats and retaliation leveraging legal, financial, criminal, and cultural institutions; using social stigmas (such as LGBTQ identity, involvement in the sex trades, substance use) to increase risk of ostracization or criminalization; intentionally harming child custody cases or sabotaging parole/probation; using social and institutional connections to isolate, control, or silence; weaponizing social, religious, and/or community norms around gender, race, class, etc. to isolate, control, or silence; etc.

These are not rigid categories, but rather, co-constitute and reinforce one another.



PLEASE NOTE:

Threats to kill, strangulation, and the presence of a firearm significantly increase the potential for lethal violence to occur.⁴ Survivors are five times more likely to be killed by an abusive partner when they have access to a gun.⁵ Domestic violence escalates when a survivor becomes pregnant, and the World Health Organization reports that pregnancy significantly increases the risk of intimate partner homicide.⁶ Attempts to leave often result in escalation of the violence—one study of domestic violence homicides indicates that victims’ threats to leave, or victims’ actual departures, were most often the precipitating events that lead to murder.⁷

While tactics of abuse can be similar across contexts, they are still very specific to the individuals within the abusive relationship. Within activist communities, for example, tools of power and control may include distortions of social justice language, progressive politics, and sex positivity. Similarly, within queer relationships, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and racism may be leveraged to enforce patterns of power and control, regardless of an abusive person’s own experiences of marginalization. The communities, norms, and values that each individual is situated in shapes how abuse is enacted, hidden, or justified.

4 “High Lethality Risk Factors.” n.d. VAWnet.org. Accessed February 17, 2022. <https://vawnet.org/sc/high-lethality-risk-factors>.

5 “Domestic Violence and Firearms.” 2020. The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence. 2020. <https://efsgv.org/learn/type-of-gun-violence/domestic-violence-and-firearms/>.

6 “Intimate Partner Violence during Pregnancy.” 2011. World Health Organization. World Health Organization. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/70764/WHO_RHR_11.35_eng.pdf.

7 Tjaden, Patricia, and Nancy Thoennes. 2000. “Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey.” U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/181867.pdf>.

SOME EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- Manipulation of social justice language to establish coercive control, minimize harm, or otherwise justify and enforce a significant imbalance of power within a relationship.
- Creating a dynamic in which individuals are conflated with and scapegoated for societal discrimination and marginalization; thus barring the ability to object to cruel or degrading treatment.
- Coercing survivors into staying silent about the abuse so as to not undermine a community leader or cause; characterizing survivors who speak out as untrustworthy enemies to the community, by equating them to dominant or outside forces such as police, white supremacists, cisgender straight men, etc.

Does it disrupt oppressive dynamics of power to create a more balanced, loving relationship, or does it seek to establish an individualized dynamic of control?

NOTE:

Abuse is the presence of an established pattern and context, and not only individual acts that seem “bad”. The presence of individual actions that could be characterized as abusive does not automatically constitute intimate partner violence. For example, pushing and yelling can be done in self defense; lying and manipulation may be used in order to deescalate a violent conflict. Rather than looking to a checklist of red flags or prescriptive gender tropes to assess a situation, some guiding questions might be: whose life has become smaller? Whose demands have grown? Whose sense of self has fallen away, and whose desires, grievances, and anger animate the relationship as a whole? Whose reality is supposed to be “baseline” and whose feelings are considered just “reactions” to that reality?



What does support look like?



“When I was younger, I was a hothead and I was like, Well, you already made your plan, you have to follow through. I’d keep trying to push them, and sometimes it’s better to just back off. You know, it’s hard to leave someone that you might love, no matter how bad they treat you. It’s hard. You know, it could be anyone, it could be a family member who’s mistreating you, or a friend you’ve known since childhood. These are loved ones and there’s nuances to the situation, reasons why it’s so hard to move on, especially if you don’t have the resources to move on.”

—Tamika Spellman



There are many ways to support a loved one experiencing intimate partner violence.

NURTURE CONNECTION

Isolation is one of the primary outcomes of abuse, and it is compounded by a complex range of emotions like shame, self-blame, and love. Connection to someone who cares can be a lifeline to a survivor who's feeling trapped and alone. While a simple "I'm here anytime you need me" is nice, actively maintaining contact and offering specific forms of support demonstrates that help is actually accessible. Nurturing connection also requires patience and generosity: because intimate partner violence operates in a pattern, certain conflicts and grievances may be both recurring and long-term. Neither the violence nor the support end with just one or two conversations—if it were that easy, domestic violence wouldn't be nearly as common or dangerous. Most people, even in non-abusive relationships, can find themselves repeating unhealthy dynamics with partners, friends, and family. With the added pressures of violence and isolation, breaking out of patterns becomes even more difficult.

ASK QUESTIONS WITH THE INTENT OF LEARNING, NOT JUDGING

It is important to ask questions from a place of compassion and curiosity. Starting the conversation can be simple:

- ◇ How are you doing these days?
- ◇ How are things going with so-and-so?
- ◇ I've been thinking about the last time we talked. How are things going now?
- ◇ How have you been feeling since we last talked?

Questions that offer opportunities to reflect, process, and externalize feelings are invaluable in supporting someone to reconnect with themselves and their own feelings in the context of their relationship. Consider, too, what can be offered if the person shares that they are not okay.

PRACTICE COMPASSIONATE LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION

It's important for a survivor to feel safe enough to process their experiences with someone. Having all the answers or knowing exactly what to do is not necessary. Giving unsolicited advice, rushing to "fix" the situation, attempting to rationalize the abusive partner's actions, passing judgments and blame, or projecting outside thoughts and feelings onto the situation can undermine supportive efforts. What usually makes a greater impact than proposing immediate solutions is the slow, delicate work of growing trust through kindness, patience, and non-judgmental listening.

One helpful way of engaging the survivor is to share observations about what they've disclosed, and asking for their thoughts. Below are some examples:

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">"This fight seems really similar to the one last month."</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Observation</i></p> | + | <p style="text-align: center;">"Do you think so too, or does this time feel different?"</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Reflection Question</i></p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">"I'm so sorry, it sounds like you're feeling hurt by their accusations when you've worked so hard to show how much you care."</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Observation</i></p> | + | <p style="text-align: center;">"How have you been feeling since that conversation?"</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Reflection Question</i></p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">"The way they got so angry at you sounded scary, and it seemed like they were threatening you."</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Observation</i></p> | + | <p style="text-align: center;">"What do you think? Are you worried about it escalating?"</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Reflection Question</i></p> |

This format helps the survivor to

- ◇ Feel heard
 - ◇ Acknowledge and validate their feelings
 - ◇ See patterns that they may not realize they've been describing
 - ◇ Have the opportunity to expand on their thoughts and correct any misinterpretation.
-

When the survivor opens up more about things that are happening, affirming their experiences and challenging abusive narratives can look like:

- ◇ I can see how much you love your partner; everyone can. I wish they could see that, too.
- ◇ I totally get that your partner's stressed right now, but it's still not your fault, and it's not okay to take it out on you. You've been having a stressful time, too, but it doesn't seem like there's much room to talk about that.
- ◇ Their response doesn't seem proportional to the actual conflict that happened, and you've gone above and beyond to try and reassure them. You've done more than enough.
- ◇ It's okay to feel upset about how they're treating you. Their trauma can give you context for their actions, but it doesn't justify the way they're treating you or make it any easier to deal with.

Try to follow the survivor's lead in how they talk about their partner. It's possible to be honest about concerns without adding in harsh judgments that may push the survivor to defend them, make excuses for the behavior, or close off.

INSTEAD OF...

They're acting like a creep and a stalker, and they need to get a life.

TRY...

Honestly, that makes me a little worried, but how do you feel?

INSTEAD OF...

When did they become such an entitled asshole?
You don't need to put up with this.

TRY...

It seems like they've been consistently disrespectful towards you lately, and I know they can do better than that. Do they act this way when others are around, too, or only when you're alone?

INSTEAD OF...

They're a raging narcissist and a walking red flag. They freak me out.

TRY...

I know you've really wanted to work things out, but I don't know if they're capable of being that person right now. It seems like the fights are escalating, and I'm concerned they'll really hurt you. How are you feeling about it?

PRIORITIZE SURVIVOR SELF-DETERMINATION

“If I’m telling you, ‘it’s not the right time,’ let it go. Because you pushing me could force my hand and something more catastrophic could happen. I know the objective is to be able to move away from those that are hurting us. But you’re not helping the situation by being so forceful. It’s easier to make people move by being gentle, being thoughtful and intentional.”

—Tamika Spellman

An abusive relationship can take over someone’s life, compromising their autonomy in the process. Supporting someone to reconnect with their own needs, feelings, and intuition helps to restore a sense of self-determination. However, this doesn’t mean that they will automatically be able to turn around and make the changes that others think they should make. The survivor has insights into their partner’s patterns that others may not be privy to, and is making the best decisions possible given the circumstances. Be mindful of when love and protectiveness for someone begins to feel resentful, frustrated, or condescending, because this may risk replicating a dynamic in which the person’s self determination is not valued or respected: replacing one set of controlling behaviors with a “supportive” set of controlling behaviors is unhelpful, and can even be dangerous to the survivor in the long term. Because survivors become so attuned to their partners’ moods and behaviors, they usually have the most accurate assessments of what constitutes danger.



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OFFER TANGIBLE FORMS OF SUPPORT

Intimate partner violence can happen to anyone, regardless of race, class, gender, or ability. However, these factors can determine one’s access to resources that would make it possible to survive or escape abuse—such as housing, transportation, healthcare, and childcare—and poverty is one of the greatest barriers to safety. Surviving abuse is often a [financially devastating experience](#) that can wipe out someone’s savings, put someone in enormous debt, and damage someone’s ability to make a stable income in the future.⁸ Financial abuse occurs in 99% of domestic violence relationships.⁹ Offering concrete support such as baby supplies, cash, childcare, or transportation is invaluable for creating more safety.

*Financial abuse occurs
in 99% of domestic
violence relationships.*



8 McLean, Gladys, and Sarah Gonzalez Bocinski. 2017. “The Economic Cost of Intimate Partner Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking.” IWPR 2020. August 14, 2017. <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-general/the-economic-cost-of-intimate-partner-violence-sexual-assault-and-stalking/>.

9 Adams, Adrienne. 2011. “Measuring the Effects of Domestic Violence on Women’s Financial Well-Being.” Center for Financial Security Research Brief. University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://centerforfinancialsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/adams2011.pdf>.



“For many Deaf people, they are surviving on government benefits for disability. Often they stay with their partner because they have a place already; they don’t have other options.

One survivor I worked with, she was living in an SRO with her abusive partner with no microwave, food scarcity, bug infestations... and then she asked me one day, could you help me with a refrigerator? And I realized, oh, because many agencies say no. So we got the refrigerator, a good size, delivered it to the address and everything.

And yeah, it worked. The fighting got much less. We also gave them gift cards for food. And we know they’re going to share with the person who caused the pain. But if there’s less fighting, you know, we don’t see anything wrong with that. Because they want to be with the person.

And this is a way to increase safety.”

—Aracelia Aguilar

What is safety planning?



Safety can be defined as freedom from violence and injury, and the freedom to make decisions about one’s life and body without fear of harm. Safety can look and feel different depending on the individual and the context. When basic needs are not met, people have to make decisions about which forms of safety to prioritize—for example, one may decide that living with an abusive partner is safer than losing their housing by leaving.

“What I need for safety... that is a home of my own, and the ability to move about.

To have a car of my own, because it’s easier for me to leave situations if I can jump in my car and get away in short order, instead of being reliant on public transit or having to call an Uber.

It’s having adequate finances so that I’m not dependent on someone else, because that could lead into some very hairy situations.

I need to know that I have enough food to take care of myself.

Because again, lacking these types of resources are what put people in danger. These are basic things required for life.”

—Tamika Spellman

When basic needs are not met, people have to make decisions about which forms of safety to prioritize.



Safety planning is the process of identifying risks, mapping out resources, and assessing options in order to increase safety for people surviving abuse.

“Safety planning means tools to help us think three steps ahead, so that we can better plan for unexpected or expected events that might make it difficult for us to stay safe. An everyday example would be if we know that we have to work a later shift than we’re used to, then mapping out our travel plans home so that if we are going to be taking the train late at night that we call someone before we get on we call someone as we get off, we might have someone meet us at the train, we might ride the train with someone together. It’s thinking through consequences and possible outcomes for things to help us stay as safe as possible in whatever we’re doing.”

—Shira Hassan



Safety planning is relational.

“Your relationship is the safety plan in a lot of ways. Keeping track of this person, and making sure that they are still alive, checking for moods and listening for patterns—because it cycles. It’s a useful opportunity to help survivors start thinking through and recognizing their isolation, which they may feel but they may not fully be able to see a path out of. Just send a text and see if they get back to you, you know? Help them access some semblance of a reminder that they weren’t always this isolated.”

—Rachel Caidor

Safety planning helps to shift the conditions for what is possible.

“I would talk to people on the hotline and after safety planning, people often feel like, ‘oh, I’m capable, I can do this. It’s a lot right now, I don’t think I can do it today or tomorrow. But now that I know this information, I can do it next week. And I can tell my sister who’s been helping me and we can work on it together.” It’s good for people to feel like they can do things, and safety planning, whether or not the person always goes through with it, changes what they thought was possible.”

—Keisa Reynolds



Safety planning is for everyone, not just “the professionals”. When everyday people learn that someone they know is experiencing domestic violence, they often assume that domestic violence shelters and hotlines are the only ones who can offer meaningful help.

“The professionalization of the work invisibilizes the violence of the domestic violence service system itself. In doing domestic violence work, I found that a large part of my job was bracing people for the inevitable institutional disappointments. Sometimes, staying in the abusive relationship was actually a more viable option. That’s not what funders want to hear, but it’s true. When you’re working with a survivor, and they’re like, Okay, so when it’s time for me to get my go bag, I can just call this shelter, right? I’m like, Nope, there’s an intake process. And you might have to call six shelters, and you might have to go to a homeless shelter first. And that shelter may not take your kids. And they are definitely not going to take your dog.”

—Rachel Caidor

“As a transgender woman, a lot of us have extended family members that are not necessarily blood related to us, out of the necessity of having someone to relate to. And because of that, I can’t just plan around my own safety. I have to plan around the safety of everyone that’s in my circle. When I look at how domestic violence shelters work, they don’t allow for that. They don’t allow for nuances, for different kinds of circumstances and situations that are people’s lives. That’s where we have this huge disconnect: that there’s nowhere to go for domestic violence victims that’s gonna give them the hand up they need to make those moves. Our system is set up to punish people, and then maybe they’ll give you a handout. But the handout is not adequate. It is not all-encompassing. And it is not geared towards moving you along. It is geared to prop you up momentarily, just so that they can say, ‘we did something for you.’”

—Tamika Spellman



Safety planning in mainstream domestic violence organizations typically involves gathering important documents, stowing away cash, and finding a safe place to go. While these things are all helpful, mainstream safety planning for further escalation primarily involves calling 9-1-1. This model assumes that law enforcement can arrive at any scene, assess the level of danger, accurately identify the survivor (who is often visibly upset and emotionally escalated) versus the abuser (who is often calm when the police arrive), and offer immediate protection and resources. The police are imagined to be natural allies to survivors; people who create safety rather than potential agents of escalation.

This does not account for the realities of many: Black survivors, immigrant and refugee survivors, sex working survivors, or poor and criminalized survivors who have been targets—directly or indirectly—of law enforcement abuse. Imagining that police will secure safety from domestic violence helps to create situations in which survivors are not adequately informed or prepared for subsequent legal issues, including potential arrest, loss of child custody, criminalization, or even incarceration and deportation.

Imagining that police will secure safety from domestic violence helps to create situations in which survivors are not adequately informed or prepared for subsequent legal issues, including potential arrest, loss of child custody, criminalization, or even incarceration and deportation.



“Safety planning is not just a thing where you sit down and tell someone what to do, especially if they are people who do sex work or engage in anykind of criminalized labor. Do you actually know their needs and options, and the risks involved? In every experience possible of doing survivor support, it’s more about listening, being there, being a resource for them.”

—Yves Tong Nguyen

“My communities—Arab and Muslim communities—don’t really call the police or go to shelter. They would rather problem solve with someone they trust. So maybe a family member, or someone in their immediate circle that speaks their language and understands their culture. Many of my clients do not call the first [violent] incident. They wait until years later, when things get leaked to a doctor or a teacher. Often, they actually didn’t call the police... someone else did. So safety planning is really different for my clients, because, well, racism. A lot of survivors won’t call the police because they don’t think they will help, because they’re Muslim, or they don’t speak English, or they’re afraid of retaliation from the authorities. They don’t even call organizations because they think they are government agencies, and they will not be helpful.”

—Mouna Benmoussa



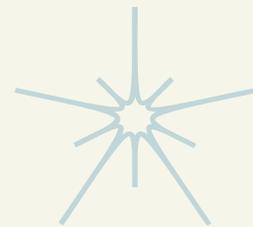
Components of a safety plan



“Nothing fits in the same box for everybody. There are times that I’ve had to meet people at safe places to help them or I had to come to their home and bring reinforcements. People are reluctant to be violent to somebody. If there are multiple people in the space that will be a barricade to them doing harm to someone. I have had to use that shield multiple times. And planning beforehand is one of the best things you can do. You can’t do these kinds of things, just because you are ready to leave. It takes time to make that move. You have to make sure that all of the keys are in place before you can turn that lock. You just can’t step up and make a move without planning your next move. Or you can end up back in that scenario with the person you’re trying to leave.”

—Tamika Spellman

“Even if it’s rudimentary, even if it’s experimental, it’s important to have something in place. Because the alternative is nothing. And that’s unacceptable.”



—RED SCHULTE

These safety planning worksheets are adapted from Just Practice, and are meant to provide an example for how a safety plan could be mapped out and organized.

THIS SAFETY PLAN IS FOR THE FOLLOWING SITUATION:

| <i>Risk Assessment Chart for Safety Actions</i> | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Potential future risk/harm? | Who or what is the cause of the harm? | Who is the target of the harm/risk? | What is a possible safety action? | Who will do or support this action? |
| | | | | |

OPTIONS FOR INTERVENING OR ESCAPE

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Where are safer places you can go? How will you get there? Who can help you get there/how will you let them know?</p> | | |
| <p><i>Immediate</i> (tomorrow or this week)</p> | <p><i>Secondary</i> (two weeks)</p> | <p><i>Long Term</i> (a month or more)</p> |

OPTIONS FOR HEALING/SUPPORT

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>What are you already doing to feel supported? Who can help remind you to do these things? What kinds of resources do you need to feel supported?</p> | | |
| <p><i>Immediate</i> (tomorrow or this week)</p> | <p><i>Secondary</i> (two weeks)</p> | <p><i>Long Term</i> (a month or more)</p> |

FOLLOW-UP AND NEXT STEPS

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>When will I re-visit this safety plan? Who will I share this plan with? By when?</p> | | |
| <p><i>Immediate</i> (tomorrow or this week)</p> | <p><i>Secondary</i> (two weeks)</p> | <p><i>Long Term</i> (a month or more)</p> |

Identifying support



Often, survivors are only telling a select few people about the abuse—if anyone at all. At some point, a survivor and their existing support people might become interested in bringing in additional trusted individuals who can help. Though opening up to more people is often terrifying, growing wider support networks can be incredibly helpful for increasing safety. To explore suggestions on expanding or restoring a survivor’s key relationships, visit Northwest Network’s [It Takes a Village, People!](#) Toolkit.



The following questions are adapted from the Creative Interventions Toolkit, in “Mapping Allies and Barriers: Who Can Help?” These may help identify additional sources of support.

- Who is usually a source of support in a crisis? Would they be helpful in this situation?
- Is there someone who could be influential with and helpful to the person abusing? Could they help support this person to stop using violence?
- Who is connected to the situation and could help out in some way?
- Who is disconnected from the situation but could still help out in some way?
- Who might seem good at first glance, but could actually pose some problems or challenges?
- Who might be great if they had the right information and got some support?
- Who is good at thinking through complex situations without jumping to conclusions or leaping to take action on their own?
- Who is a great communicator?
- Who can stay calm in stressful situations?
- Who has resources they could share—a car, a living room, a safe place to sleep, a temporary cell phone, etc.?
- Would these people be good allies to help support and safety plan? Why? Why not?
- If not, is there anything that can be done to help make them more supportive? What kind of role could they play?



However, because isolation is one of the defining characteristics of intimate partner violence, it can be extremely difficult to mobilize the types of support needed to safety plan more holistically.

“So many of the strategies that we're building around [police and prison] abolition are around mutual aid and interdependence. We may assume that people have whole networks that they're not activating. But part of how intimate partner violence functions is through isolation, and a primary tactic of abuse is removing those things. So then suddenly introducing these options may not actually be a soothing strategy. It could actually be terrifying. On the other side, those things will be very soothing, but in the middle of it, those things are both scary and often not possible.”



—SHIRA HASSAN

Opening up to ask for help is already very challenging, even without the types of stigma and fear associated with abuse. There is nothing wrong with feeling like there aren't people close enough to reach out to. Many people lack the kinds of dependable relationships that can hold this level of connection, trust, and intensity. Disconnection, loneliness, and isolation are expected outcomes in a society that is anchored in individualism, racism, economic inequality, gender violence, ableism, and the deeply rooted colonial practices of extraction, dispossession, and violent repression. Many are forced to seek care, support, and community in unfamiliar, intimidating, or outright hostile places because they simply do not have anywhere else to go. For confidential support, please consider reaching out to the organizations listed in the Resources section.

Practical considerations for safety planning



Crisis events in intimate partner violence do not arise out of nowhere—they are often events that a survivor has dreaded or anticipated due to the trajectory of their partner’s actions. These crisis scenarios can be hard for survivors to prepare for or even talk about, simply because they are painful, overwhelming, and scary. They may withhold these concerns out of fear of judgment, their partner’s potential retaliation, or general emotional hardship. Staying compassionate and present is important for building the trust needed to better understand the whole situation. This helps to more accurately assess the risks and possibilities for any future plans.

“People will tell you a lot, even before you ask what they need. I listen and validate their fears. Maybe they’re really scared ICE might come and deport them, or CPS can take their children away, or their family could hurt them because they’re queer and trans and being outed is dangerous. But, you know, there’s steps to something happening. I try to walk them through what’s scaring them. How do you think it will happen? For example, is your partner going to call CPS and lie? Okay, then a CPS worker will have to come and do an interview. Are you afraid that will happen? Let’s see if we can do something about it.”

—Mouna Benmoussa

*Some practical considerations can include the following.
This is a partial list only.*

DOCUMENTATION: Can the survivor document their experiences, the timeline, and any photographs? Can someone help document their conversations with the survivor about important incidents or evidence? Who could help with safekeeping these? **Though retroactive, documentation is critical for a survivor's self-defense case (if they become criminalized), child custody, or immigration relief.**

FINANCES: If the survivor's money is generally controlled by their partner, how can they gather some cash of their own? Where could they store it and maintain access to it? Could someone help to safely hold onto their funds for them? Can someone help look into, find, or contribute resources? Are there any organizations or mutual aid groups in the area that would be willing to help provide emergency financial support for the survivor?

EMERGENCIES: Where can the survivor go in case of an emergency? Is there a public place that's open 24/7 nearby for them to regroup? Is there anyone they could stay with longer? Who could pick up the children from school if the survivor is not able to? Is there anyone that the family pet could stay with? What local resources are available, and who can help contact them to reduce stress and overwhelm for the survivor?

CHILDREN: Who can help take care of the children in case of an emergency? What could be some helpful and age-appropriate ways to talk about the violence to them? Can they be instructed to go to a different room in the house and close the door, or go to a neighbor's house, when violence breaks out? Who or what can help the survivor to manage stress and avoid taking out the stress onto the children? Who can help with contacting the childrens' school to let them know of the situation? If there are visitation exchanges with the abusive co-parent, these drop-offs/pick-ups can be occasions for violence, manipulation, and enormous stress for the survivor—are there any local resources or loved ones who could help provide a neutral and safe space for exchanges to occur?

PETS: Who can help feed or watch pets in case of an emergency? Who can help the survivor find out about local domestic violence shelters' policies on pets? Can anyone help the survivor get emotional support animal certification for their pet, which would protect them under housing laws? Are there local organizations who can help with finding a foster home for their pet? Animal shelters, rescue organizations for particular breeds, a local dog training school, or even a local Facebook group can potentially help connect the survivor to other animal lovers who may be willing to help out.

LANGUAGE ACCESS AND INTERPRETATION: Are there basic phrases that could be helpful to learn? Who could be trusted to help demand or provide language access? What recourse exists if language access isn't provided?

LEGAL ISSUES: Who can the survivor call if they are arrested during a violent incident, or in the course of doing something for survival (such as writing a bad check, shoplifting, or doing sex work)? Can this person help bail them out of jail or connect them to a defense attorney? Is there a friend who can help clarify what survivor's legal options may be in various contexts, for situations ranging from immigration to child custody? No one has to be a lawyer to start learning, they just have to be willing to make some phone calls to find out more or set up appointments. For example, a survivor may be eligible for immigration relief via the Violence Against Women Act—the only form of immigration relief for survivors that does not require a police report or prosecution. Is there a legal clinic in the area that could help with that?

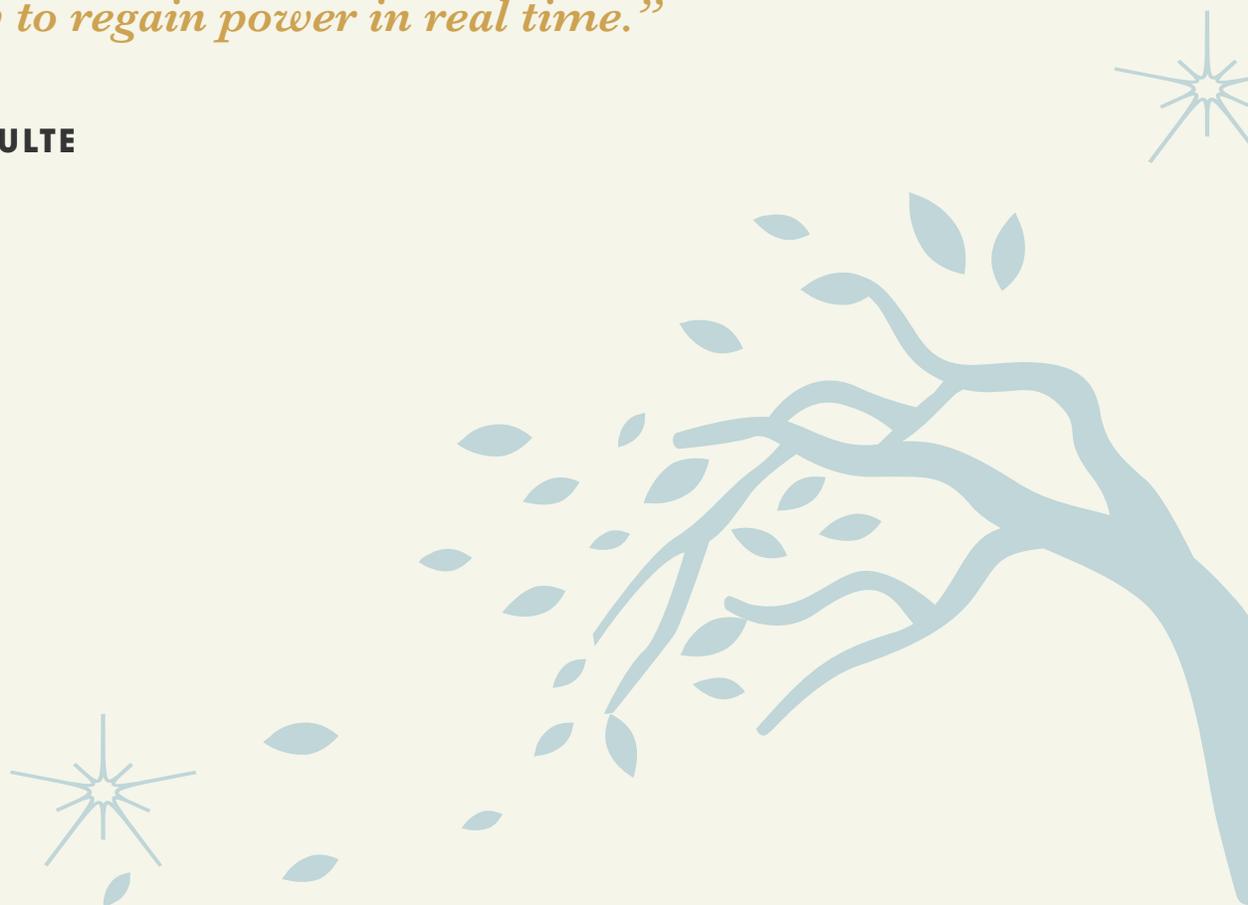
IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS: Can someone help hold onto important documents like social security cards or passports? If not hold the documents, could they hold onto copies at their home or on an online cloud service? If they aren't possible to get, who can help with getting new ones?

HEALTHCARE: If the survivor is reliant upon their partner for healthcare benefits or any health-related responsibilities such as caregiving, who could help with finding accessible alternatives for support? Can someone help make a phone call making sure that they can get their medication refilled when needed? How can they get their health care needs met at an alternate location from their usual clinic?

A large part of safety planning is gathering information and mapping out resources. This means finding supportive individuals, networks, and organizations who have the ability to help with specific things. It can increase a sense of agency and hope when the isolation of the abusive relationship is contrasted with other options for the survivor. It can also be an exercise in self-determination to learn and make informed decisions of one's own volition.

“Even if we have the ‘best safety plan ever’ ahead of time, every situation can throw incredible curveballs at us. And we can even have people on our crews that hurt us. Sometimes you have to make decisions on the fly and trust your gut. It was a learning experience, to listen to myself and what was scaring me, and think about what I could try to regain power in real time.”

- RED SCHULTE





*A large part of safety planning
is gathering information and
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*It can also be an exercise in
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one's own volition.*

Criminalization and domestic violence



“Most have already gone through community and family if they have any. And then the last resort is to call the police. They already know they’re not going to trust the institution, but they feel they don’t have any other choice.”

—Mouna Benmoussa

Most survivors of intimate partner violence never call the police¹⁰—many outright refuse to do so for many well-documented reasons. However, the threat of police involvement is often still present: a neighbor or loved one might call 911 to try and help, or the abusive party may call the police or immigration enforcement themselves in an effort to punish and control the survivor through the legal system. The mainstream domestic violence movement and law enforcement have spent decades funneling survivors through the criminal legal system if they want any chance at resources, safety, or protection.^{11 12} This has profoundly shaped advocates’ conceptions of safety planning to exclude serious risks like survivor criminalization and police misconduct, which regularly compound the effects of domestic violence for many survivors. As a result, the police continue to be imagined as a final, if heavy handed, solution to danger.

10 Oudekerk, Barbara A., and Rachel E. Morgan. 2019. “Criminal Victimization, 2018.” BJS.gov. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). September 2019. <https://www.bjs.gov/>.

11 Gira Grant, Melissa. 2020. “An Anti-Rape Movement without Police.” The New Republic. October 20, 2020. <https://newrepublic.com/article/159850/anti-rape-movement-without-police>.

12 Project NIA. 2020. “Letter to the Anti-Rape Movement, 1977.” Issuu. 2020. <https://issuu.com/projectnia/docs/letter-to-the-antirape-movement>.

On the other hand, there are many reasons why a survivor may feel their best or only option is to call the police for help, even if they themselves may fear them or have experienced criminalization. There are no large-scale institutions of support that are not enmeshed with policing. Survivors who do voluntarily contact the police are vulnerable to the same dangers that survivors who never called 911 themselves face. Whether or not a survivor ever calls the police of their own volition, they have no power over how the legal system will respond next. The momentum of criminalization can easily become redirected towards them. The following section outlines some considerations for common situations in which criminalization becomes a factor in domestic violence.

“Something I wish abolitionists understood is that because of how isolation functions, the legal system is often what people have left. Because there’s not a community of people to intervene. The main thing I do with survivors [who turn to the legal system] is help them understand the full weight of the string that they’re pulling; what it unravels.”

—Shira Hassan

“People who imagine themselves to be abolitionists can have a really hard time understanding the [escalating] pattern based nature of domestic violence and why law enforcement can be such an attractive option. When a survivor chooses to call law enforcement to get someone away from them, the reality is that a physical separation can actually be a life saving thing for them. Should that physical separation put someone in a jail; a death machine? No. But it’s actually true that people do need somebody to just pull a motherfucker off them sometimes. In the same way that the anti violence field wants a perfect victim of domestic violence, [prison] abolitionists want a perfect victim of the state.”

—Rachel Caidor

CALLING THE POLICE

There is always a chance that one or all parties will get arrested. Some considerations may include:

- ◇ If there is time, is there someone the survivor can call to the scene for in-person support before or after the police arrive?
- ◇ How might the survivor and their supporters prepare for the possibility that the survivor is viewed as the aggressor? Remember that once police are there, anything the survivor says can be used to bring charges against them even if they were the person who called.
- ◇ Has the survivor been criminalized before? If so, what will this interaction trigger in the legal system? How would an arrest or criminal conviction impact immigration status? What resources exist for potential immigration relief? Is either person on parole or probation or have a live child custody case?
- ◇ What person or organization can the survivor call for help if they are detained? Does everyone know how to accept [collect] calls from jail?
- ◇ If the survivor is not arrested but their partner is: how might the survivor want to prepare for their eventual release?

“In the Deaf community, I have to be clear and say, You need to be careful of what you say [to the police]. The police may get an interpreter, but the interpreter can also cause harm. How do we know what they are interpreting, or what the police are taking down in their report? Some of them are so honest. Most tell everything; they struggle with what they should say or shouldn’t say. So they just give it all up and that hurts them. We’re tired of seeing this with police and interpreters, and it ending with the Deaf survivor ending up in jail. It’s ongoing.”

—Aracelia Aguilar



“The police showing up at your house is not the end of the TV episode. Fast forward to a week later, a bunch of stuff could happen. What’s going to happen if you are out of sorts, the adrenaline kicks in, you start trying to hit them back? Do you or your partner have stuff in the house that they’re going to look at and decide that that’s a crime that’s more prosecutable than domestic violence?”

It’s not enough to be like, well, here are your rights. It is presumptuous about how these interactions actually go. You are not in control of the interactions with the police.

They’re not trained to tell the difference between you freaking out because somebody just tried to kill you, and somebody else [who is] freaking out because they didn’t get to kill you. A lot of people make this assumption, whether or not they trust the police, that the police are going to come and immediately take the survivor’s side.”

—Rachel Caidor

CHILDREN AND CRIMINALIZATION

Children are often used by abusive partners to control or threaten a parent. A common threat to leverage is to have children removed from a parent by a local “child welfare” agency, more popularly known as Child Protective Services (CPS). This often starts with a hotline call or a report to the local child welfare agency, which then activates an investigation by the child welfare agency representative. It will then involve local police. Racism, misogyny, classism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination play major roles in how the government determines who is fit to parent, and the added layer of victim-blaming in domestic violence relationships can make things even more challenging.

When children are involved in domestic violence, it is important to note that CPS intervention and criminalization of one or both parents may occur. Some considerations for safety planning around children and criminalization may include:

- ◇ If the survivor is speaking to a professional about the abuse, whether it is a hotline worker, domestic violence advocate, teacher, healthcare worker, or childcare provider, they should consider finding out if the professional is a mandated reporter¹³, and what things specifically would require them to make a report to the local child welfare agency. This doesn’t mean they should keep everything secret, but that they may want to discern what details they choose to share.
- ◇ If children are present in the home when police arrive at the scene for a domestic violence call, they may automatically make a report to the local child abuse agency. They may be mandated to make the call, depending on local laws. While this doesn’t automatically result in child welfare intervention, it does open an investigation into the family. If the survivor doesn’t leave the abuse with their children within a certain period of time, this agency may deem the situation unsafe for the children and act to remove them from the home. It does not matter whether or not the survivor initially called the police themselves.

¹³ A mandated reporter is a working professional who is required by law to report suspicions of potential child abuse, domestic violence, and elder abuse. The guidelines for what must be reported differ state-by-state.

◇ If a survivor flees an abusive partner/co-parent with their children, they can be reported for kidnapping. To avoid being prosecuted for child abduction and losing custody of their children, a survivor and/or their domestic violence advocate must file a “good cause report” with the local district attorney as soon as possible. Filing does not lead to criminal consequences for any party. Depending on the state, the survivor may have a few days’ grace period after leaving to file the report. After filing the good cause report, the survivor must file for custody in family court within a short period of time (time dependent on local laws). Without these steps, they risk being charged with kidnapping and losing custody of their children.¹⁴

◇ Failure to protect laws are in place nationwide and criminalize parents, primarily mothers, for “failing to protect” their children from abuse. Failure to protect laws often result in mothers getting much harsher prison sentences than those who directly abused the children themselves.¹⁵ Domestic violence can be seen as a mitigating factor, but requires documentation and extensive evidence—consulting with a legal resource, such as the National Clearinghouse on the Defense of Battered Women, may help.

◇ If a survivor loses custody of their children to their abusive partner, they have the option of filing for joint or full legal and physical custody in the future. However, this takes time—they may only be allowed supervised visits at first, then unsupervised visits, then partial custody.¹⁶

◇ In the case that CPS takes a survivor’s child/children away from them and the abusive partner, a family member has the option of filing to be their primary caregiver. They must fill out paperwork and may be subject to multiple interviews. If there is no close family member who can assist, the child/children may be placed into foster care. Depending on the location, they may end up hours away in a foster home. It can become challenging for a survivor to regain custody of their children at this point: they may be required to travel long distances to see their children, be allowed only supervised visits, and be subjected to parenting evaluations from child welfare workers who are not competent to assess the situation, especially if there are cultural or linguistic barriers.

◇ Lastly, criminalization means entanglement not just in juvenile or adult criminal systems, but schools, hospitals, family court, and immigration systems. In these difficult situations of support, all of these multifaceted risks and planning will have to be taken into account.

14 “Parental Kidnapping.” 2017. WomensLaw.org. May 30, 2017. <https://www.womenslaw.org/laws/general/parental-kidnapping>.

15 Hess, Amanda. “When Domestic Violence Victims Are Imprisoned for Their Abusers’ Crimes.” Slate Magazine, 3 Oct. 2014, [slate.com/human-interest/2014/10/buzzfeed-domestic-violence-investigation-how-victims-are-imprisoned-for-their-abusers-crimes.html](https://www.slate.com/human-interest/2014/10/buzzfeed-domestic-violence-investigation-how-victims-are-imprisoned-for-their-abusers-crimes.html). Accessed 16 Feb. 2022.

16 To learn more about family court proceedings and custodial issues, visit WomensLaw.org for state-by-state information.

RESTRAINING ORDERS

Restraining orders can help survivors feel witnessed and validated in their suffering, and may feel like the only significant thing that testifies to the severity of their abuse.

However, survivors are often not well-informed about the limits of restraining orders or the many strings attached—or that they, too, can violate their own orders of protection.

Restraining orders, also known as orders of protection, are court orders that criminalize any specified forms of contact between two parties.

They can be domestic violence criminal protective orders or civil ones, though the terms of the one issued by criminal court will supersede that of others. In general, restraining orders are filed in civil court and the violation of those protective orders are handled by local criminal systems. Police can issue emergency temporary restraining orders that last a few days, with the intention of giving a survivor time to file for an order that is longer-term. Sometimes, police may issue an emergency order that the survivor is not aware of. If there are criminal charges, then the judge will customarily issue a restraining order during the time frame of the criminal case. There are also instances where a judge will issue restraining orders on all parties, or grant the abusive person a restraining order against their non-abusing partner. Laws differ state-by-state, so checking with local agencies and legal aid is helpful for understanding the scope of these orders.

Restraining orders are not preventative. They are retroactive tools to enforce punitive consequences such as arrest and jail time for certain kinds of contact.

If someone violates their restraining order to show up on the survivor's doorstep, there is no consequence unless the police are called right away to enforce the order by arresting the person. While some people may be deterred by the existence of a restraining order, many more will not—because the outcome generally depends on the survivor's willingness to escalate a situation by calling the police, as well as the unpredictable response of the police themselves. Many survivors still care about their partners, and may not want to get them arrested or jailed again. For survivors who co-parent with their abusers, they may not want to have them arrested in front of their children, and thus choose not to have the order enforced.



WHEN REQUESTING A RESTRAINING ORDER, SOME HELPFUL CONSIDERATIONS MAY INCLUDE:

When this person gets served, what is the plan?

The abusive party may take a restraining order as an act of escalation and increase retaliatory violence against the survivor. If they show up on the survivor's doorstep, an order won't keep them away—they've already decided that they do not fear it. If the survivor chooses to have the order enforced by calling the police, what can they do in the time between when they call and when the police arrive?

Does the timing and scope make sense?

Restraining order forms include locations that the restrained party should avoid—including the survivor's new address, their children's new school, or the survivor's new workplace. If these are included, are there ways to mitigate the possibility that this may escalate violence?

Restraining orders mean that the survivor, too, cannot make contact.

Violating one's own restraining order can have unexpected consequences for the survivor, such as getting their children taken away, or being deemed by the legal system as not a "real" victim in any future issues that arise. Many abusive partners may weaponize this against survivors to discredit them and downplay the violence. It's important to be aware of the potential legal consequences for continuing to contact the recipient of the order, which may vary state by state, or the unspoken biases that may form in the courtroom.

"I had a case where the survivor didn't want to leave or file for anything. She thought it was enough that the father of her children got arrested and was detained for seven days, that he would learn his lesson. She wanted to see what happens; if he could get it together. So she got the community involved, and told a lot of people to talk to him, including family from her country of origin. But things got out of hand again. There was a temporary restraining order from the [day of the] arrest that she'd had no clue about, and because she accepted him back, her children were taken away. At that point, it was such a mess. We went to court and there was no interpretation, and the father, he didn't want the children to be separated either. He was trying to say, I want my children back to their mom, I will leave if you just give her the children back. But it was too late—the children were taken away to a foster home three hours away. It took about 21 days to get them back. She never wanted a restraining order! She never wanted any of that."

—Mouna Benmoussa

Restraining orders can facilitate criminalization, even for survivors.

Some may find themselves on the other end of a protective order and domestic violence charges as the alleged perpetrator. In these cases, it is important to seek legal advice to understand the parameters of the order, possible implications in criminal, civil, immigration, or family court, as well as potential legal remedies to avoid further criminalization.

PROSECUTION

WHEN THE LEGAL SYSTEM RECOGNIZES THE SURVIVOR AS THE VICTIM

Survivors' control over the process is extremely limited to nonexistent: rather, they serve as forms of evidence for the prosecution to present. Criminal charges are determined by the District Attorney's office alone, and hinge upon numerous factors ranging from police testimony (one of the most major factors), to the amount of usable evidence, to the perceived credibility of the alleged victim versus the alleged perpetrator. Survivors may cooperate or refuse to participate for a variety of reasons, and the process is traumatic to many, regardless of what they may choose. Some legal jurisdictions can jail a survivor or bring criminal charges against them for refusing to testify by finding them in contempt of court. Remember that a survivor's refusal to cooperate with prosecution does not mean they are then responsible for any future acts of violence their partner may commit, either to them or to other people. Rather, it is a sign that they may be weighing numerous other safety concerns, including their own criminalization. On the other hand, some survivors may feel it is necessary to cooperate—for example, for undocumented survivors of domestic violence, potential immigration relief through the U-Visa hinges on having official police certification.

The prosecution, or even conviction, of an abusive partner does not mean that the survivor is automatically safe. It is important to continue safety planning, to stay connected, and to be aware of any potential retaliation. Extending emotional support to the survivor, who may be feeling retraumatized and harmed by the process, is helpful as well. Because there is often little validation or recognition for survivors of domestic violence, it can be easy to internalize and overemphasize the outcome of a legal case as a necessary component of healing and closure. The lack of control throughout the process, manifesting as unending postponements or grueling cross-examinations, can also compound a survivor's feelings of helplessness. Helping someone to unlink their sense of self-worth or healing from the twists and turns of the legal system can aid a survivor in moving forward.

WHEN THE LEGAL SYSTEM CRIMINALIZES THE SURVIVOR

On the other hand, many survivors find themselves on the other side of the law. Criminalized survivors are punished for self defense and other acts of survival. In these situations, staying connected is even more critical, because the isolation of domestic violence has become further compounded by the isolation of the criminal legal system—sometimes literally, in remote jails, prisons, and detention centers. What networks and resources could be tapped into for finding legal aid?

“It’s weird to say, but the person who does harm usually speaks well, even if they’re Deaf or not, or they have a family member that speaks well. The police ask what happened, and they get their side of the story. And then the Deaf survivor, who has no family and no interpretation, is just sitting there and gets arrested for domestic violence. They go to jail, and there’s still no interpreter. They get to court, and then, “Oh, they’re Deaf! Let’s get an interpreter.” And it goes on, they wait and wait. It’s weeks before they get information, and the interpreter the police get, how do you know what they’re saying, or what the police are writing down? It’s unspoken, the way they work with each other and have so much power. And later, the survivor says, no, wait, that’s not what happened. But then it’s the police and the interpreter—it’s their word against the survivor’s—and now they have a felony charge for domestic violence.”

—Aracelia Aguilar

If the survivor desires more intensive support, expanding a network to mount a community defense can be immensely helpful.

To learn more about legal defense campaigns for criminalized survivors, please refer to Survived and Punished’s toolkit: [#SurvivedAndPunished: Survivor Defense as Abolitionist Praxis \(2017\)](#).

When they don't leave



There will be times when a supporter has done all there is to do: they've been consistent and present; they've done their research to learn more about how they can help; they've discussed and planned—maybe multiple times with the survivor—how the survivor can safely exit the relationship. Perhaps they've given everything they can to respond to a crisis scenario such as severe physical injury or police intervention, and after all of it, the survivor still returned to the person causing them such grave harm. While someone may intellectually understand all the myriad reasons why someone might continue to stay in their abusive relationship, it is always heartbreaking to see it play out in real time.

This is a common point at which supporters throw their hands up and walk away, or even try to punish the survivor by scapegoating them for their own abuse. It's easy to take things personally, but it's important for supporters to try to understand that what's happening is not about them, the survivor's care and respect towards them, or their own feelings of powerlessness and frustration. If the most dangerous time in domestic violence is when a victim is attempting to leave the abuse, then the most isolating time may be when they decide to stay. This is when many simply give up, or even decide to take matters into their own hands and override the survivor's wishes. They may attempt to confront the abusive party, or otherwise make it known that they know about the abuse and hold them responsible for it. In some cases, this may be helpful; more often, it can not only breach the survivor's trust but further endanger them. If a supporter decides to act independently of the survivor to express animosity towards the abusive party, they should understand that they are unlikely to be the one to face the consequences—the survivor is.



If the most dangerous time in domestic violence is when a victim is attempting to leave the abuse, then the most isolating time may be when they decide to stay.



If a supportive person has the capacity for it, staying in touch and refraining from expressing judgment helps increase both connection and safety. Of course, they can be furious at the person causing the survivor so much suffering, but it is important for them to assess how and where that should be expressed. Being subjected to the degradations and violence of intimate partner abuse already distorts a survivor's sense of self. Disclosing and being witnessed in such a moment of extreme vulnerability can intensify their shame and self-blame. What might it mean to the survivor to experience such harm at the hands of a loved one? And what might it mean that others have seen it? To self-soothe and maintain a sense of agency, the survivor may begin to withdraw and refuse to talk about their relationship. They may minimize what happened, blame themselves, excuse or defend their partner's actions towards them, and become even more protective and secretive around the relationship. What's happening for the survivor internally is complicated and profoundly difficult—more than others may ever know. Because domestic violence is defined by its patterned and cyclical nature, crises will emerge again. An escalation may have even already happened without anyone else's knowledge.

It is understandable for supporters to feel frustrated and exhausted by this point. They should do what they need to do in order to set helpful boundaries and maintain their own wellness. It is important to figure out how to manage expectations in this context, both for individual mental health as well as balanced relational dynamics between supporter and survivor.



Support for the support



“After thirteen years of this work, I started focusing on what I can do, how I can keep it there, and how to communicate clearly what people can expect from me. That wasn’t a skill that just came with the territory. I had to learn to just do that. Some days are better than others. But I just have to leave the work where it is and leave. And tell myself also that I’m doing my best. I did everything there is to do, and I leave it at that.”

- Mouna Benmoussa

Support and safety planning are often long-term processes that demand time, energy, and resources. It’s normal to feel sadness, frustration, guilt, fear, and feelings of helplessness, and to reach points of burnout and overwhelm. While a first impulse might be to suppress these emotions out of obligation, guilt, or love, they may actually provide important insights that should not be ignored. When a supporter does not tend to their feelings or needs, it can harm all parties, manifesting in depression, disillusionment, hopelessness, victim-blaming, paternalism, or sudden aggression or avoidance. Here are some things supporters can try to alleviate the impacts of emotional overwhelm and trauma exposure.

A supporter can be clear and specific in what types of help they will offer.

They can let the survivor know what to expect from them. They can offer bi-weekly check-ins, help with a housing search, or make some phone calls to widen the network of support for the survivor. They don’t have to offer “everything” because no one person can offer “everything”.

A supporter can set limits and communicate them.

Boundaries do not have to be value judgments, especially if they are communicated with kindness and clarity. A supporter can have protected time for themselves during certain hours or days, wait until the morning to respond to text messages, let someone know that they'll be busy with work for the next two weeks, or communicate that they need to take some time to rest, and that they'll get back in touch soon. They can tell someone that they can't help right now, but offer to connect them to someone who can.

A supporter can set boundaries and expect kindness, even from within difficult situations.

It's okay to not be present for every single crisis that arises. Survivors are incredibly resilient and resourceful, and have had to repeatedly manage impossible situations without help. Offering support does not require complete self-sacrifice. A survivor may feel hurt, disappointed, or even upset over mismatches in expectations or communication; however, these conflicts can be resolved and build stronger trust. It is far more damaging to be treated with resentment or as a burden by a supporter who did not communicate their needs.

A supporter can seek support for themselves.

They can talk about the situation to others while exercising caution and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity for the parties involved; they can ask for insights and emotional support for themselves; they can even ask the survivor if it would be okay to bring more people in for support. It is okay to explore different options that increase support and decrease isolation as a whole.



A supporter can prioritize their own safety.

In some situations, a supporter can also be at risk for retaliatory violence. If they feel afraid or even slightly worried, it is worth taking a pause to assess the level of threat and to think of strategies that may mitigate escalation. It can be helpful for the supporter to check in with the survivor about their concerns, and ask for the survivor's insights on their abusive partner's patterns of violence: have they harmed others who are not intimate partners in retaliation before? Who have they been comfortable showing violence to? Are there situations or places in which they may not escalate—for example, in a public space? Supporters should use their best judgment to consider the security of modes of communication, their own visibility in the situation, what types of places they meet survivors in (e.g. someone's house, in a public park, in a private study room at the local library, in the car in a parking garage), their own vulnerabilities (e.g. public social media accounts, living alone, history of criminalization, etc.), and so on, so that they can develop their own safety plans.

A supporter can accept that they, too, are only human.

Supporters often take on feelings of guilt or shame for not being able to change a situation or do more to help. However, self-blame does not do anything to change one's limitations; they simply reroute energy into a dead end. At the end of the day, supporters are still people who come with their own memories, experiences, and hardships. It is normal to feel emotional or need time to process. All a supporter can do is their best—and they should allow themselves the compassion they so freely give to others.



Resources

SUPPORTING SURVIVORS:

- ◇ [National Domestic Violence Hotline Safety Planning Tools](#)
- ◇ [On Ultimatums and Forced Interventions](#)
- ◇ [It Takes a Village: Advocacy, Friends, Family, and LGBT Survivors of Abuse](#)

INFORMATION:

- ◇ [Domestic Violence Laws, State-by-state](#)
- ◇ [Immigration Relief for Survivors](#)
- ◇ [Gender-based Violence Online Resource Library](#)
- ◇ [Lethality Assessment in Domestic Violence](#)
- ◇ [Safety Planning With Children](#)
- ◇ [Seeking Shelter: What to Expect, How to Share Your Story, and What to Do If You Are Denied Assistance](#)

RESEARCH AND ORGANIZING:

- ◇ [Creative Interventions Toolkit and Workbook](#)
- ◇ [Interrupting Criminalization](#)
- ◇ [Survived and Punished: Survivor Defense as Abolitionist Praxis Toolkit](#)

BOOKS:

- ◇ *Fumbling Towards Repair*, Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan
- ◇ *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado
- ◇ *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

About the Contributors

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TAMIKA SPELLMAN (she/her) is an unapologetically Black trans woman leading a movement for harm reduction and the end the criminalization of sex work. She organizes so that present and future Black and Brown sex workers in Washington, D.C., can truly know what full freedom and belonging means in a world that tries to criminalize and control their bodily and political autonomy.

RED SCHULTE (they/them) is a queer, non-binary femme educator, community organizer, and maker. Their current organizing efforts center criminalized survivors, prison/police abolition, and the destigmatization of sex work.

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