

Finding safety

Support during or after
living with an abusive partner



Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence
ACTIONALLIANCE

Introduction

The Bill of Rights in this country tells us that we all deserve to be safe, treated as equals and respected. We live with family, we have friends, we date, and sometimes we have partners whom we love and who love us. We want to live in a home where we are safe and we want to live in a county, city or neighborhood where we are safe to walk, do our jobs, enjoy play, and live a nice life. These are our basic human rights.

Sometimes people we love or those we depend on hurt us, control us, and use their power to abuse us in order to get their way. It does not matter what you do, no one has the right to abuse you or force you to do something you do not want to do.

This booklet is written for any person in Virginia who is afraid or who is being controlled by another person and asks, "What can I do?" Here you can read about people and domestic violence programs who want to help you make up your own mind about what is best for you. There are questions for you to think about, and information that can help you get the things you need to have a safe life. **Everyone deserves to be safe, no matter who they are, what age they are, where they came from, or what they do.** Tens of thousands of people in Virginia are abused every year. Communities all over the state have teams of people who are working to end abuse.

Questions to consider:

- 1) What do you like about where you live now and the person or people who live with you?
- 2) Do people care about you and listen to you?
- 3) Do they respect what you want to do with your time?

You are not to blame for the abuse.
You are not alone.

What is abuse?

Are you afraid of someone you care about or who lives with you?

This person could be:

- your partner
- a family member
- someone who takes care of you, or
- someone whose care you provide.

You could be married and not living together. It could be someone who had a child with you. Abuse is caused by people who do not believe that everyone is equal. Our society does not always take abuse seriously. Sometimes people and organizations do not pay attention to the needs of people who have been abused.

Are you being hurt by a person who is being abusive? If they are hitting you or telling you they will hurt you to get what they want, this is called abuse. Abuse happens in different ways, such as hitting, pushing, and kicking. It is abuse when someone forces you to do something you do not want to do by telling you they will hurt you if you do not give in. It is abuse when someone says they will hurt your family, your friends, or your pets if you do not do what they say.

An abusive person might make you stay at home and stop you from seeing your friends and relatives. They might take your money, your medicine, or take the batteries out of your wheelchair. They might say they are going to take away your immigration papers, car keys, or identification. They can even tell you they will take away your children. They might make you have sex when you do not want to have sex, or hurt you when you are having sex. They might yell and call you bad names, like “stupid” or “crazy,” in order to hurt you.

For many people, love may have turned into fear and pain because their partner or former partner has changed since the beginning of the relationship.

This is not your fault. Some people think that it is OK to hurt the people they say they love. They may think that they are better than you. This is wrong.

We all deserve to be safe, respected, and treated as equals. **You are not alone.**

Questions to consider:

- 1) Has someone been hurting you with words or actions?
- 2) If you need help taking care of yourself, is that person kind to you when they help you?
- 3) If you have children, does that person show love for them and help you care for them?

Talking to a good friend or advocate can help you find ways to heal from the effects of abuse and control.

How does abuse affect you?

When someone uses abuse and power over you, they can make you feel badly about yourself. Your thoughts and feelings can change because you are living with fear and stress. You might feel upset and cry more and might feel angry. You may stop doing the things you like doing, such as taking your children to the park or visiting with friends. You may feel like something is wrong with you, because you are being called terrible names and blamed for the abuse.

You may get physically hurt with bruises, cuts, and broken bones. Physical abuse can be serious, and you may need to get help from a doctor or go to an emergency room. You may have trouble sleeping or eating. You may feel nervous and scared. You may get headaches or pains in your stomach from worrying about what to do.

You may feel confused, and have trouble remembering what you are saying. Your job may feel harder because you cannot pay attention. You may be bothered by phone calls from your partner at work, accusing you of spending too much money, having an affair, or other things. You may be followed. This causes a lot of stress and can feel like too much.

Questions to consider:

- 1) Do you have feelings of fear, sadness, and anger because your partner or former partner is abusing you?
- 2) Is your body hurt, or are you having a hard time getting through the day, because you are tired and cannot think clearly?
- 3) Are you being cut off from your friends and family because of your partner's threats or criticisms?

These are common reactions to abuse, and it does not mean that you are going crazy. It means that your brain is trying to figure out what to do so you can be safe. **This is not your fault.** The person who is abusing you is doing something wrong – not you. Talking to a good friend or advocate can help you find ways to recover from the effects of abuse and control. **You have strengths that have helped you survive.**

Trust yourself to decide on a plan that helps make you safe. You are the expert about what is best for you.

Being safe

When you have felt afraid that you were going to be hit, what did you do to protect yourself from getting hurt? This is called your **safety plan**. You have been able to stay alive, because **you** did something to get safe.

- You may have gone into another room.
- You may have done what you were told to do.
- You may have run out of your home (and taken your children with you if they were home).
- You may have called someone you know for help.

Many people try different ways to stay safe. Sometimes these choices work, and sometimes they do not. Physical abuse is a crime. If you or your children are injured, trapped, or need a doctor, you can call 911 for police and an ambulance. In Virginia, a police officer must arrest someone if they learn the person attacked someone else.

What has worked for you? You may know the abusive person's habits and the time of day that they are more violent or controlling. They may be worse when they get their paycheck, because they drink more. You may be able to get away from them at these more dangerous times. However, it is important for you to try not to hit a person or throw things at them, because you do not want to break the law yourself.

Trust yourself to decide what a safe plan is for you. Some people may give you ideas that help. Other people may tell you to do something that does not feel right to you. **You are the expert about what is best for you.**

There is information that may help you find more ways to stay safe. Leaving or staying with an abusive person can be dangerous. You can learn new ways to be safer whatever you decide to do. You can call the statewide toll-free Family Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-838-8238 v/tty) if you want to talk to someone about your safety plan.

Questions to consider:

- 1) Do you have a safety plan for what to do if someone tries to hurt you or your children?
- 2) What are all the ways your partner or ex-partner controls you?
- 3) What inner strengths are you using to survive?

Getting help

We live in a country that has laws to protect you. If someone is hurting you or making threats to hurt you, it is against the law. There are organizations called domestic violence programs that want to help every person who is afraid and hurt by someone they know. They believe that safety is everyone's right. Domestic violence programs are in cities and counties in Virginia.

You do not have to tell the person your name or home address to get help. They will answer your questions and connect you with someone who can help you.

Domestic violence programs give free services to people who are being abused. If you need to leave your home to be safe, they can help you find a free place to stay for a short time in a shelter, hotel, or apartment. They can give you food and clothing. They can tell you what the police and courts are able to do. The workers in these organizations are called advocates. They are trained to help you figure out what you need, so you can make your own choices about what to do.

Advocates in domestic violence programs can help you contact other places in your community to find a job, a long-term place to live, health care, and day care. They can talk with you about what you want from the police. For example, they can help you contact the police who may arrest the person who has abused you. If the police make an arrest, you will need to tell a judge in court what happened. Domestic violence programs have people who can go to court with you to ask for a Protective Order. A Protective Order can be given to the abusive person, and they may be told to stay away from you.

Questions to consider:

1) Who is the most helpful person in your life now?

2) Do you and your children have a place to go if you are in danger?

3) Have you called 911 before, and did they help you?

You can get help by calling the statewide toll-free Family Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-838-8238 (v/tty).

Talk to your children about the abuse.
Tell them it is wrong and is not their fault.

Helping your children and family members

If you have children, they need your help to stay safe if someone is hurting or controlling you. Some abusers hurt children too. You can teach your children to go to a friendly neighbor if you decide they need to leave your home to be safe. If there is no place to go, you can teach them to hide in a safe place in your home, like under a bed. Even young children can learn how to dial 911 to call the police if you are afraid of what the abusive person might do to you or them.

It is important for you to **talk to children** about the abuse and tell them it is wrong. **It is not their fault.** Explain to them that they may get hurt if they try to stop someone from hurting you. You can help them make their own safety plan so they can go to a safe place. Show them how to take their younger brothers and sisters with them.

Have your family and friends tried to help you? They also need to learn about domestic violence and how to be safe. They may tell you to leave the person or that you have to stay no matter what, but these are your decisions. Friends and family can be helpful to you. Try to explain to them what is happening and talk to them about what you need. They may also need help with their feelings of confusion, anger, or fear. They can also call the toll-free Family Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-838-8238 v/tty) and talk to an advocate.

Questions to consider:

- 1) If you have children, have you asked them where they can hide to be safe?
- 2) If you have never told anyone about the abuse, who is the one family member or friend you think will listen to you with respect?
- 3) If your children are having problems because of abuse, can you talk to someone like a school guidance counselor to get help for them?

You deserve a partner who respects your decisions and listens to you.

Making choices and decisions

When someone you love is hurting and controlling you, it can be difficult to decide what to do. You may feel like you do not have any choices. You may not have family who can take you in. You may only be working part-time. You may not have much money.

How many more options could be available if our society made the choice to end domestic violence? Our communities could give more help to people living with domestic violence, but some people in our society do not understand abuse. For example, some religions believe that divorce is not a choice even if a person is being abused. Your family or your culture may say you have no choice, but it is **your life**, and **you have the right to make up your own mind**.

You may decide that the safest thing to do is move to another town, but some of your friends may not like your choice. Finding your own home may seem difficult because rents can be high. A shelter can be a safe place to think about your choices. They may have apartments (called “transitional housing”) that you can rent for two years. You may find other places where you can be safe to think and talk to people.

You deserve a partner who respects your decisions and listens to you.

Domestic violence advocates can help you make a list of your choices.

They can help you learn what resources are in your community to help you.

You can find new information so you can make the best decisions for you.

It is important to keep talking to people. **Do not give up on yourself and your children.**

Questions to consider:

1) Have you had to make an important decision in the past?

2) What or who helped you look at your options and make your choice?

3) Have you had to face a big change before? What or who helped you?



The healing process takes both rest and action.
Think about what you need to heal.

Allowing time to heal

If you are being abused, making changes can help you and the people you care about be safe. It will take time to heal from the abuse and control you have experienced. Give yourself time to move forward in your life. Many feelings, such as fear, anger, and sadness may slow you down before you start to feel better.

Letting go of a person or a home is a loss. You may feel very sad for a year or more. Your body and brain may have changed because of being hurt and feeling fear. You may have nightmares and feel jumpy or stuck. Taking care of your body with sleep, exercise, and healthy eating can help. You may want to talk to your doctor or a counselor if the activities of daily life become too difficult.

The healing process takes both rest and action. Think about what you need to heal. You may need time alone to listen to your own voice. You may want to join a support group to talk with other people who have been abused. Remembering what you have done to heal in the past can help you plan activities that are positive. **It takes courage to grow.**

If you stay with a partner who is abusive, respect your decision. There are many reasons why people stay, like not having enough money to make ends meet. Only you know what is best for you. People sometimes change, but you cannot fix someone else. You can add to your support system and find new ways to be safe. Advocates can help you make a safety plan for work, home, and school.

Questions to consider:

- 1) What do you do when you are letting go of someone or ending a relationship?
- 2) What activities can you do for yourself to heal from an abusive relationship?
- 3) Are there new ways you can take care of yourself if you choose to stay in the relationship?

Take your time to let new relationships develop.

Moving on

If you have left an abusive person, you may want to meet someone new and start dating. Everyone is different, but most people hurt by abuse will feel better if they take some time before they start dating again. You have been through a shock and need time to trust yourself and others. It helps to go slowly and learn who you are and what you want in a relationship. As you heal, you can find new interests and new friends who will support you. You can also take action to help other abused people and their children.

Learning about healthy relationships can give you more power to find a person who is not abusive.

Questions to consider:

- 1) Do you know someone who is in a healthy relationship?
- 2) What behaviors are signs of a healthy relationship?
- 3) What can you do to get ready to meet someone new?

A healthy partner:

- is a good friend who loves you and treats you with respect.
- includes you in making decisions.
- understands that you want to talk with and visit your friends and family.
- cares about your children and pets and is kind to them.
- believes in fairness, equality and the right to make choices about your own life.
- is not jealous.
- does not force you to do things you do not want to do.
- lets you be yourself.

You deserve to be safe, respected,
and treated as an equal.

Conclusion

This booklet may be a beginning for you. You may not feel ready to take action and make changes now, but you can start thinking about what you want. It is often useful to talk to friends and family members. You may find a nurse or professional person who knows about domestic violence. Domestic violence advocates can also help you look at the choices you have. They know what resources are in your community to help you. If there is no domestic violence program near you, go to any city or county building or fire station and ask for help.

You deserve to be safe, respected, and treated as an equal. Do not give up on yourself, and work for a healthy future for your children. You can change yourself and work with others to change your community so abuse is no longer accepted.

More information is available from the Family Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-838-8238 (v/tty). If you use a TTY, the Hotline Advocate will also use a TTY. If you do not speak or understand English well, the Hotline Advocate can get a telephone translator for you. If you can use a computer, information about abuse and how to get help is at www.vsdvalliance.org. You are not alone, and many people want to help you be safe.

Additional resources

Planning For Your Safety, Brochure published by VSDVAA. (free)

But I Haven't Been Hit, Brochure published by VSDVAA. (free)

When Love Goes Wrong, by Ann Jones and Susan Schechter, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992.

Getting Out, by Kathy Cawthon, Louisiana, Huntington House, 1996.



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Virginia Family Violence & Sexual Assault Hotline

Crisis intervention,
information,
support,
and
referrals to community programs
and resources.

For survivors of domestic violence
and/or sexual violence,
family and friends,
and professionals working to respond
to sexual and domestic violence.



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