# Radical SELF-CARE

## Safety & Exit Plan

*Preparing to leave an abusive or coercively controlling relationship*

### THE RADICAL SELF-CARE RULES FOR LEAVING

**1. Safety comes before property.**
Furniture, money and possessions can be litigated later. Your body cannot.

**2. Information is power.**
Know the finances, assets, debts, rights and options before making major decisions.

**3. Do not negotiate from fear.**
Do not sign important documents because someone is pressuring, intimidating or rushing you.

**4. You do not have to announce your plan.**
Preparing quietly may sometimes be safer than confronting an abusive partner.

**5. Leaving is not one moment. It is a process.**
Prepare. Exit. Stabilize. Protect. Recover. Rebuild.

**Prepare → Exit → Stabilize → Protect → Recover → Rebuild**

Radical SELF-CARE

Safety & Exit Plan

# Read This First

**If you are in immediate danger, call 911.**

For confidential support in the United States, call 800-799-7233, text START to 88788, or use live chat at TheHotline.org from a safer device.

This plan supports preparation, emergency departure, and safety after leaving. A domestic violence advocate can help adapt it to your situation.

**Do not delay an emergency departure to collect financial information, documents, possessions, or a complete checklist.**

Information is power when it is safe to prepare. Your safety comes first.

## Protect this plan

Printed copies, downloads, messages, and shared cloud accounts can expose preparations. Complete worksheets only if you can keep them safely private. Private browsing does not guarantee that activity is hidden.

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Safety & Exit Plan

# 1 Start with safety

Before money. Before property. Before divorce. Safety first. Leaving or announcing separation can increase danger. A domestic violence advocate can help assess your situation and personalize your plan.

- Has the violence recently escalated?
- Has he ever strangled me or put pressure around my neck?
- Has he threatened to kill me, himself, the children, pets, or someone I love?
- Does he have access to firearms or other weapons?
- Has he stalked or tracked me?
- Does he monitor my phone, car, email, location, or finances?
- Does he become especially volatile when I talk about leaving?
- Is substance use involved?
- Does he control transportation or prevent me from leaving?

**These questions are warning signs, not a scoring test. Answering “no” does not establish safety. Abuse does not have to leave bruises to warrant help.**

## Strangulation needs medical attention

Recent strangulation requires urgent medical evaluation, even without visible marks. Serious internal injuries and delayed complications can occur. Call 911 for breathing or swallowing difficulty, loss of consciousness, seizures, or other emergency symptoms. Tell the clinician that pressure was applied to your neck.

**The goal is not to prove you are strong enough to confront him. The goal is to get yourself safely to the other side.**

### While I am still preparing

Identify areas with accessible exits away from weapons. Keep a phone accessible when safe. Plan what to do if an incident escalates or he discovers your preparations. Do not try to remove or confront him about weapons. Ask an advocate about safer options.

## 2 Create a confidential circle of support

Choose two or three people who can respect your privacy and follow your wishes. This circle might include a domestic violence advocate, attorney, trusted friend, sibling, therapist, doctor, clergy member, neighbor, employer, or security person.

Establish a code word for “Call emergency services” and another for “Come get me.” Agree on exactly what each person should do, including a missed check-in plan. Avoid asking anyone to confront the abuser.

• What is happening and how to reach me safely

• Where I am and where I might go

• What vehicle I drive

• Identifying information about the abuser

• Who to contact if something happens

# 3 Create two exit plans

## Plan A Planned departure

There is time to prepare. I know where I am going, my transportation, when I will leave, who knows, what I am taking, where important documents are, and what money is available.

## Plan B Emergency departure

There may be no suitcase and no perfect plan. There is only: Get out safely. Identify accessible exits, where keys and essential items are, who can pick me up, a safe neighbor, an emergency destination, and backup transportation. If safe, practice the route.

**A safety plan should never become another trap: “I can’t leave yet because I haven’t completed my checklist.”**

# 4 Decide where I am actually going

Identify a primary and backup destination: a trusted person’s home, domestic violence shelter, hotel, temporary rental, or apartment. When possible, confirm shelter availability, intake arrangements, transportation, accessibility, and accommodation for children and pets. An advocate can help find alternatives.

**Sometimes the most emotionally comforting destination is not the safest one.**

## 5 Transportation plan

Ask: Who owns the car? Whose name is on the title? Is the vehicle trackable? Does the abuser have a second key? Is insurance shared? Keep fuel available when safe. Have more than one way out: friend, family, rideshare, rental car, public transportation, or shelter transportation.

Shared rideshare accounts, payment records, and vehicle apps may reveal a trip. Use a safer arrangement when possible. Plan accessible transportation if needed.

# 6 Build the document vault

When safe, obtain copies of important documents. Store them outside the home or in an account the abuser cannot access. Do not risk your safety or delay an emergency escape to collect them.

## Identity

Driver’s license, passport, Social Security card, birth certificate, marriage certificate, and immigration documents.

## Children

Birth certificates, Social Security cards, passports, custody paperwork, school records, medical records, and insurance cards.

## Financial

Checking and savings statements, credit-card statements, investments, retirement accounts, mortgage, loans, tax returns, pay stubs, insurance policies, utility bills, and debt statements.

## Property

Home deed or lease, vehicle titles and registration, receipts for valuable items, business documents, and safe-deposit-box information.

## Health and legal

Prescriptions, medication list, insurance information, relevant medical records, protective orders, and other court documents. Include disability or caregiver records where needed.

## 7 Document the property

When safe, photograph or inventory furniture, artwork, jewelry, electronics, tools, vehicles, collectibles, household contents, and other valuable property. Include serial numbers and receipts when available. This can help document assets if they disappear, are sold, moved, or denied.

## 8 Understand the money before touching the money

Find out: What do we own? What do we owe? Where is the money? Whose name is attached to what? When safe, create a private financial snapshot.

### Assets

Cash, bank accounts, retirement, investments, real estate, business interests, vehicles, and valuable property.

### Debts

Mortgage, credit cards, auto loans, personal loans, medical debt, tax debt, and business debt.

Ask: What belongs only to me? What is joint? What belongs only to him? Legal ownership and rights may depend on local law.

**Do not sign legal, financial, property, custody, loan, settlement, or marital documents because you are being pressured, threatened, frightened, or rushed.**

## 9 Do not make assumptions about joint accounts

Before moving substantial joint assets, get legal advice if circumstances permit. Learn what accounts exist, account numbers, balances, automatic payments, income deposits, debts, whose name is on each account, and whether you can establish an individual account safely.

Account changes, mailed statements, new cards, and banking notifications may reveal preparations. Ask the institution about safer contact and mailing options.

## 10 Establish independent financial identity

Where safe and legally appropriate:

• Open an individual bank account and establish a safe mailing address.

• Obtain a credit report, understand my credit score, and identify accounts in my name.

• Create an emergency cash reserve; consider individual credit if appropriate.

• Determine health-insurance options and benefits I might qualify for.

• Research housing costs and calculate basic monthly living expenses.

### The Freedom Number

What is the minimum amount I need each month to stand safely on my own two feet? Housing. Food. Transportation. Insurance. Medication. Utilities. Phone. Childcare. Legal expenses. Pet care.

# 11 Get legal advice before negotiating

Talk privately with a family-law attorney, domestic violence legal advocate, or legal-aid organization. Know my rights before I make irreversible decisions. If cost is a barrier, ask about free or reduced-cost assistance.

## Questions to ask

• What happens to the house or lease?

• What is marital property and separate property?

• What should I do with joint accounts?

• What should I absolutely not do?

• What are my rights regarding children and existing custody orders?

• Can I relocate, especially across state or national borders?

• Should I seek a protective order, and what happens when it is served?

• Can pets be included in protection where local law permits?

• What are my options if immigration status is being used to control me?

• Can I use an address confidentiality program or protect my address in court records?

A protective order can be one part of a safety plan; it does not guarantee physical safety. Plan with an advocate for possible retaliation and what to do if an order is violated.

## Document abuse safely

If safe, preserve threatening messages, voicemails, emails, photographs of injuries or damage, medical records, and reports. Keep an incident log with dates, times, witnesses, and a factual description. Save original messages where possible, and keep backup copies outside shared devices or accounts.

**Do not put yourself at risk to collect evidence. Ask an attorney about recording laws before making secret recordings. Safety comes before proof.**

If you need to retrieve belongings after leaving, ask an advocate or local authorities about safe accompaniment and available options. Avoid returning alone or meeting privately if there is risk.

## 12 Think through privacy and technology

Consider phones, tablets, laptops, Apple or Google accounts, vehicle GPS, AirTags, smartwatches, shared calendars, shared phone plans, home Wi-Fi, cameras, doorbell cameras, smart-home devices, email forwarding, cloud photo libraries, social-media logins, password managers, bank notifications, recovery email addresses, two-factor authentication, and location sharing.

**Important nuance: do not necessarily change everything immediately. A sudden password change, disabled location service, or removed tracker can alert an abusive partner. Plan the timing with an advocate when possible.**

Use a safer device the abuser has never accessed to research and plan. A new account may still be exposed if used on a monitored device. Private or incognito browsing does not guarantee that activity is hidden.

### Protect this plan itself

Downloaded PDFs, shared cloud storage, messages, print history, and paper copies can reveal your preparations. Complete or save worksheets only if you can keep them safely private. Do not write destinations, dates, or document locations where the abuser may find them. Deleting history or files can also attract attention and may not erase all traces.

## 13 Prepare the go-bag

If safe, store it where it cannot be discovered, perhaps outside the home.

- Clothing, toiletries, glasses or contact lenses
- Medication, prescriptions, and a plan for refills
- Essential medical equipment, mobility aids, batteries, or chargers
- Spare keys, cash, phone charger, and important phone numbers on paper
- Copies of documents and insurance information
- Children’s necessities and pet supplies
- Irreplaceable sentimental items only if safe to retrieve

If you rely on the abuser for personal care, arrange replacement support, accessible housing, and transportation with an advocate where possible.

**Things can be replaced. You cannot.**

## 14 Children require their own safety plan

Depending on age, children may need to know:

• Where to go and which safe adults to contact

• How to call 911 and give their location

• That their job is not to intervene physically

• The family code word and what to do when they hear it

• Who may pick them up, consistent with applicable court orders

Custody and relocation questions need legal advice. Ask about emergency custody options and existing orders. With appropriate guidance, notify school or daycare about safety needs, pickup arrangements, and relevant orders.

Plan safer custody exchanges with an advocate and attorney, including supervised arrangements where appropriate and available. Do not use children as messengers. Review children's devices and location sharing as part of the technology plan.

## 15 Do not forget the animals

Include veterinary records, medications, food, leash or carrier, microchip information, ownership records, temporary foster options, pet-friendly shelter or hotel options, and a trusted caretaker.

When safe, review microchip and veterinary contact details so they do not expose your destination or give the abuser access. An advocate can help find temporary animal care. Do not return alone to retrieve a pet if that would put you at risk.

## 16 Choose the departure window carefully

When possible, leave when confrontation is least likely. Plan who will help, where they will meet you, and what to do if the timing changes or the plan is discovered.

**Safe separation matters more than a dramatic final conversation. I do not owe anyone one more explanation, closure, or an opportunity to convince me to stay.**

If danger escalates, use the emergency plan. Do not delay for luggage, possessions, or a complete checklist.

# 17 The first 24 to 72 hours

Exhaustion, fear, grief, or the urge to return may surface. Have a short checklist and someone safe to help you work through it.

## Safety

Secure location; trusted person checked in; advocate contacted; attorney contacted if necessary; protective-order questions addressed; emergency help if needed. Confirm backup housing if the first location becomes unsafe.

## Technology

Review passwords, account recovery, location sharing, cellular plan, and device security when safe. Carry forward the timing precautions in the privacy and technology section; reaching a new location does not automatically make all changes safe.

## Money

Access to funds, card security, deposits redirected if appropriate, and financial institutions contacted if legally advisable.

## Physical needs

Medication and refills, food, sleep, clothes, transportation, medical evaluation for injuries, and essential equipment or personal-care support.

## Children and pets

School arrangements, childcare, medications, applicable custody orders, and pet care.

## 18 Control attempts may continue

Leaving may not end the abuse. It may transform into stalking, repeated calls, threats, love bombing, financial retaliation, smear campaigns, using children as messengers, legal threats, workplace contact, online harassment, or showing up unexpectedly.

Agree with an advocate on what to do if he appears, follows you, violates an order, or threatens harm. In immediate danger, call 911. Do not feel obliged to meet him or manage threats of suicide yourself; seek emergency or crisis support as appropriate.

## 19 Create a communication protocol

If continued communication is necessary, keep it brief, factual, documentable, and limited to necessary topics. Avoid defending myself, explaining the relationship, responding to every accusation, correcting every lie, or relitigating the marriage by text.

Ask an attorney or advocate about safer channels, communication through counsel, or court-approved parenting tools when applicable. Follow protective orders and custody orders. Preserve threatening contact safely; discuss blocking or muting with an advocate if it affects evidence or safety.

## 20 Build safety after separation

Depending on circumstances and where legally permitted: change locks and garage codes; alert trusted neighbors; secure devices and accounts; review location permissions; notify workplace security; modify predictable routines; consider security devices; keep copies of protective orders; and document unwanted contact.

Ask trusted people not to disclose your location, tag you at places, or post photographs that identify your destination. Review mailing addresses, deliveries, shared accounts, and public records with an advocate. Consider address confidentiality programs where available.

Make specific plans for work, school, childcare, appointments, and any necessary contact with the abuser. Revisit the plan as circumstances change.

## 21 The Emotional Exit Plan

Leaving may still come with fear, shame, grief, cognitive dissonance, trauma bonding, self-doubt, hypervigilance, financial terror, loneliness, guilt, love for the person who hurt me, longing for the good parts, confusion, and the impulse to go back.

**These feelings do not mean leaving was a mistake.**

Choose someone safe to call when I question myself. Keep a private reminder of why I left, if safe. Seek individual support that understands abuse and coercive control. If I return or cannot leave yet, I still deserve support and a safety plan.

**Radical self-care here is protecting my life, my money, my legal rights, my privacy, my future, and my ability to make choices for myself again.**

# 21 The Emotional Exit Plan worksheet

Getting your body out of the relationship is only one layer. Fear, grief, love, guilt, or longing can exist alongside the need for safety.

**These feelings do not mean leaving was a mistake.**

Write here only if you can keep this page safely private. You can also reflect without recording your answers.

What will I do when I miss him?

Who will I call when I question myself?

What will remind me why I left?

Where have I safely documented what actually happened?

What helps my body feel safe?

How will I begin rebuilding a relationship with myself?

What support do I need today?

# My Safety & Exit Plan

Complete this page only if you can keep it safely private. Do not record addresses, dates, or hiding places where the abuser may find them. You may keep details with a trusted advocate instead.

My primary and backup safe places to go

My trusted people and safe contact numbers

My code word or signal and what helpers should do

My planned departure window and emergency exit route

My primary and backup transportation

My legal or advocacy contact

My safe document and evidence storage

My Freedom Number and emergency funds

My safer device and technology plan

My children, pets, medical, or accessibility arrangements

My first 72-hour priorities

Who I will call when I question myself

# A Gentle Note and Resources

This resource is intended for education, personal reflection, and self-care. It is not a substitute for individualized safety planning, legal advice, medical care, mental health care, or emergency services.

**Some safety steps can increase risk in certain situations. Trust your instincts, move at your own pace, and consider working privately with a domestic violence advocate and attorney when possible.**

You are not responsible for another person's abuse. A plan can reduce some risks; it cannot guarantee safety. You deserve support whether you leave now, leave later, or need to revise your plan.

## Emergency and confidential support in the United States

**If you are in immediate danger, call 911.**

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-7233
Text START to 88788
Live chat, safety planning, and local service referrals:
https://www.thehotline.org
Use a safer device or contact method when possible.

The Hotline can connect you with local services; it does not directly provide cash, hotel vouchers, or transportation vouchers. Ask local providers about available assistance.

## Additional resources

NNEDV Safety Net — technology safety and documentation
https://www.techsafety.org/resources-survivors
WomensLaw — legal information by state
https://www.womenslaw.org

Your self-advocacy matters. Seek qualified legal help to understand your rights and options, and consider working with a domestic violence advocate to make a plan that fits your circumstances. You do not have to navigate this alone.

**Radical self-care here is protecting your life, your money, your legal rights, your privacy, your future, and your ability to make choices for yourself again.**

Take what supports your safety and healing. Leave what does not.