



CREATING A SAFETY PLAN

PCAWA
PEEL COMMITTEE AGAINST WOMAN ABUSE

WORKING TOGETHER TO **END VIOLENCE** AGAINST WOMEN

2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Peel Committee Against Woman Abuse (PCAWA) would like to thank our funders for their generous support.



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Creating a Safety Plan ©Peel Committee Against Woman Abuse

2nd edition: March 2004, 3rd edition: July 2005, 4th edition: April 2006, 5th edition: July 2010,
6th edition: February 2017, 7th edition: April 2019, 8th edition: November 2020

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is designed to provide women/survivors with safety strategies for dealing with experiences of violence or the risk of violence.¹

Violence Against Women (VAW) is a social problem rooted in gender inequality. Women's experiences of violence differ greatly based on their lived experiences of racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, ableism, sanism, colonialism, islamophobia, and other intersectional barriers. Many women experience Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and they are not to blame for this violence. But they must inevitably face the challenge of reducing risks and protecting themselves and any dependents who may be affected.

If you have experienced violence, remember you are not alone. PCAWA member organizations believe you and will support you in ways that meet your individual needs.

Whether you are currently experiencing violence, thinking about leaving a violent situation or relationship, or have already left a violent situation, this guide will provide you with some strategies you can implement for you and any children or dependents.

Since violent situations and risk factors can change quickly, it is important to acknowledge that you will probably need to update your safety plan as your situation changes over time.

In creating a safety plan, it is important to remember that:

- You are *not* to blame for the violence or for your children's exposure to it.
- You are *not* responsible for causing the violence.
- You are *not* alone. There are resources available in the community to provide support (for example, counselling, crisis lines, housing, financial assistance, etc.).

Violence Against Women can take many forms. Other common terms for VAW include: domestic violence (DV), family violence, sexual violence, sexual abuse, woman abuse, gender-based violence (GBV) or intimate partner violence (IPV).

Women can experience violence in any relationship, including in an intimate relationship (including 2SLGBTQ+ relationships), from a family member or from in-law(s), at work or at school. Women can also experience violence from a stranger, an employer or peer, or from multiple people simultaneously. Throughout this booklet, the person(s) you are experiencing violence from are referred to as the abuser.

¹ The terms 'woman/women' or 'Violence Against Women' are used throughout *Creating a Safety Plan*. However, we acknowledge that gender-queer, trans, intersex and non-binary people who may or may not identify as women are also at high risk of exclusion and violence. This heightened risk also affects many people who identify as cis-gender women but who are not heterosexual in their orientation.

Violence Against Women can take many forms, such as:

- Physical (for example: hitting, pushing, choking, confining, or grabbing)
- Psychological or emotional (for example: put-downs, name-calling, threats, manipulative or frightening actions)
- Sexual (for example: sexual assault, sexual coercion, forcing someone to engage in degrading or harmful sexual activity or to watch or engage in sexual acts without consent)
- Economic (for example: taking or withholding income, or not letting a partner participate in making financial decisions; keeping a partner from taking on paid work or disrupting their paid work)
- Spiritual (for example: belittling or limiting a partner's ability to take part in spiritual activities, or 'clerical abuse' where trusted religious leaders target followers).
- Stalking/harassment (for example: following a person, showing up at their workplace uninvited, constant emails/phone calls)
- Cyber-violence (for example: posting demeaning messages, sharing explicit photos without permission, blackmail, spreading gossip or rumours online)

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

One of the most crucial yet frequently overlooked aspects of safety and safety planning is taking care of yourself. Experiencing violence can be exhausting and emotionally draining. There are many ways you can try to practice self-care. These are just a few suggestions:

- If you are in need emotional support, try to take the time to call a supportive friend, relative, counsellor or other person you trust.
- Get connected to community resources. There are many organizations that can help you find services and supports that will meet your needs. (See page 20)
- If you want to or must communicate with the person(s) you experienced violence from, in person or by telephone, arrange to have a supportive friend/relative present. Or whenever possible, communicate in writing.
- Become involved in community activities to reduce feelings of isolation.
- Join a peer support group for mutual support and to strengthen your relationships with other people.
- Take time for yourself, if at all possible.
- Fulfill your spiritual needs in whatever ways feel good for you.
- Give yourself permission to feel your anger or grief, and find ways to express those

feelings that are safe and meaningful to you.

- Spend time with people who are supportive and help you feel good.
- Try to get adequate sleep and nutrition, stay hydrated and rest.
- Write or talk about your feelings.
- Take time to prepare yourself emotionally before entering stressful situations.
- Try not to overbook yourself and limit yourself to one appointment per day to avoid added stress, if possible.
- Write down the dates, times, and locations of your appointments to keep track of them and reduce added stress.
- Seek support in gathering and preparing your documents.
- Be creative and do what makes you feel good.
- Focus on your strengths.
- Remember that you are the most important person to take care of right now.

EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE AND/OR PLANNING TO LEAVE

If you are experiencing ongoing violence, you have already probably begun to work out ways that may reduce your risks. When we do this in an organized, systematic way, we call this 'safety planning', and this kind of 'risk reduction' is important whether we are in an ongoing violent situation or are planning to leave a violent situation.

This guide shares some ways that you can manage risk or prepare to leave. We encourage survivors to discuss safety planning with a counsellor or social worker. Someone experienced in this kind of work can help you develop safety planning processes that are tailored for your unique situation.

A. IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS, CARDS AND PAPERS

Make a photocopy of the following documents or cards and store the copies in a safe place, away from originals. Hide the originals someplace else, if you can.

- Passports, birth certificates, First Nations status cards, citizenship papers, immigration papers, permanent residency (PR) cards or citizenship cards, work permits, etc. for all family members
- Driver's license, vehicle registration, insurance papers
- Health cards for yourself and all family members
- Prescriptions, medical and vaccination records for all family members
- School records

- Any social assistance documentation (e.g., Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program)
- Marriage certificate, divorce papers, custody documentation, court orders, restraining orders, or other legal documents
- Lease/rental agreement, house deed, mortgage payment book
- Most recent Canada Income Tax Return
- Bank statements
- Address/telephone book
- Photograph of the person(s) you are experiencing violence from
- All cards you normally use, such as credit cards, bank cards, phone card, Social Insurance Number (SIN) card

Try to keep all the cards you normally use in your wallet or purse:

- Credit cards
- Phone card
- Bank cards
- Health cards
- Identification (e.g., driver's license, age of majority card, First Nations status card, etc.)

B. ITEMS TO PRE-PACK

Try to keep your wallet and a bag handy, containing the following:

- Keys for your home, car, workplace, safety deposit box, etc.
- Chequebook, bankbooks or statements
- Driver's license, registration, insurance
- Address/telephone book
- Photograph of the abuser(s)
- Emergency money (in cash) hidden away
- Cell phone
- Sanitizer or sanitizing wipes and face masks

C. QUICK GRABS

Preparing an emergency bag containing immediate needs, or having a bag that you can pack quickly, can be helpful if you have somewhere safe to keep it.

Keep the following items handy, so you can grab them quickly:

- Medications
- Special toys and/or comforts for your children
- Items of special sentimental value
- A list of other items to take if you get a chance to return to your home to collect more belongings later

D. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Open a bank account in your own name and arrange that no bank statements be sent to you or calls be made to you. Try to direct mail to a trusted friend or family member, or set up an online banking account with paperless statements and notifications.
- Plan your emergency exits, taking into consideration mobility and accessibility needs, as well as appropriate modes of transportation and how to arrange them (e.g., taxi, bus, TransHelp, Wheel-Trans, etc.).
- Plan and rehearse the steps you will take if you have to leave quickly and learn them well.
- Know the numbers of emergency shelters or organizations you can call for support/go to if you need. (See page 20)
- Make arrangements to stay with friends or family if necessary.
- When you leave your home, take the children if you can. If you try to get them later, the police cannot help you remove them from their other parent unless you have a valid court order.
- Consider and take note of what triggers the abuser's violence. This could help you predict the next likely violent incident and give you a chance to prepare.
- Document abuse patterns and the date, time of abusive incidents, and all contacts with abuser.
- Provide resources to other family members who may be impacted or at risk of violence as well. (See page 20)

E. VOLUNTARY OR INVOLUNTARY POLICE INVOLVEMENT

- If you have children, police involvement will likely result in the involvement of child protection services as well (e.g., Children's Aid Society).
- Police involvement can result in arrest, detainment and/or deportation if you are without legal status in Canada.
- There is a chance you may be charged. This often occurs if the person(s) you experience violence from claims you have assaulted them, even if you acted in self-defence.
- The police officer will provide you their name, badge number and telephone number for future contact and reference, upon request.
- The police can escort you back to the home later to remove additional personal belongings, if this is arranged through the local police division. At this time, you can take the items listed above as well as anything else that is important to you or your children.
- Police may charge the abuser(s). If this happens, find out if they will be held in custody or released. You can provide the investigating officer your input into release conditions. Ask for a copy of the conditions of release.
- Keep a copy of your protection order near you at all times. Give a copy to the police in the community where you live, work or visit frequently. Inform your friends, colleagues, family, and/or neighbours that you have a protection order in place.
- Should your protection order be lost or destroyed, you can obtain another copy from the Victim Witness Assistance Program. They can also assist you in preparing for court.
- If the abuser(s) violates the protection order or if they threaten you in any way, you can call the police to report the violation.
- Key things to identify to the police are: whether there has been a pattern of abuse, or whether the abuser owns or has access to weapons. If the police do not assist you, you can report the violation to the detachment commander of the local Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) or to the Chief of Police of the Police Service in the jurisdiction where the violation occurred.
- Make sure that the school, daycare, and police have a copy of all court orders, including restraining orders or custody and access orders, as well as a photograph of the abuser.
- Request that the police put a "premise history" of your address on file. This will provide additional information and security for officers responding to your call and alert them of a potentially hazardous history at the location.
- Tell your neighbours if you would like them to call the police if they hear a fight or

screaming in your home.

- Teach your children how to contact the police by dialing 911.

For example:

Dial 911.

An operator will answer and say: "Police, Fire, Ambulance."

Your child should say: Police.

Then your child should say:

My name is . I need help. Send the police.

Someone is hurting my mom.

The address here is .

The phone number here is _____.

It is important for children to leave the phone line open or phone off the hook after they are done talking. The police may call the number back if they hang up, which could create a dangerous situation for yourself and your children.

SAFETY PLANNING

Here are a few suggestions for safety planning for different situations you may experience:

A. ESCAPING A VIOLENT INCIDENT

- Try to notice if there are any triggers for the violence. This can help you try to predict the next likely incident and give you a chance to prepare (i.e., by making plans for the children to be sent to friends/family in advance).
- Use your judgement and intuition. If verbal self-defence is a possibility, you may consider pretending to agree with the person in order to calm them down so that you can buy yourself time to escape.
- Try to move to a space where you think the risk is the lowest. Avoid areas without a clear exit path or where there could be a weapon at hand (e.g., kitchen, garage, basement).
- Start to position yourself to get out quickly or near a phone so you can call a trusted friend or family member, or 911 if necessary.
- Make as much noise as possible to draw attention to the situation (e.g., set off the fire alarm, yell "FIRE", break things, break a window).
- Use the code word you have created with your children so they can call for help.
- Remind yourself that you have a list of items you have planned for and set aside. If you decide to call 911 (*it is your choice*), tell the operator you are being assaulted or have been assaulted and that it is an emergency. Do not hang up the phone if the violent incident is still occurring and you can no longer speak. Leave the phone line open or the phone off the hook.

B. SEEKING MEDICAL ATTENTION

- Once you are in a safe place, you may want to seek medical attention for any physical injuries sustained during an assault.
- If you choose to seek medical assistance, you can go to Trillium Health Partners' Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Services. (See page 22)
- If you agree, a trained professional will examine you and collect evidence.
- You do not have to decide right away if you will report to police. Try to keep the clothing you were wearing during the assault, unwashed and sealed in a bag, so you can provide them for use as evidence if you decide to pursue charges against the person who assaulted you.
- It is helpful to Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence professionals when you do not

bathe or shower after an assault so they can collect more physical evidence, but this is entirely your choice.

C. REMAINING IN A RELATIONSHIP AND SHARED LIVING SITUATION

- Try to notice if there are any triggers for the violence. This can help you try to predict the next likely incident and give you a chance to prepare.
- Be aware of resources for support such as the nearest women's shelter, Assaulted Women's Helpline, family members, friends, counsellors, children's friends, etc.
- If you have call display on your phone, be careful who can access to stored numbers such as the last number you dialed or received a call from.
- Check your vehicle for a Global Positioning System (GPS) which the abuser may have installed in or under your car to track your movements. If you find a device, consider seeking support to remove it or taking alternate forms of transportation.
- Teach your children to use the telephone (and cell phone, if you have one) to call a safe person.
- Teach your children how to make a collect call to you and to your safe person in case the abuser takes the children.
- Create a code word with your children and/or family and friends so they know when to call for help.
- Plan your emergency exits and teach them to your children.
- Teach your children their own Safety Plan. (See page 15)
- Consider a plan for the safety and wellbeing of your pet(s), such as making arrangements with friends or family to care for them if need be.
- Be aware of any weapons in the home or the abuser's access to weapons.
- When using the computer, be aware that the abuser may track the websites you have visited. For information on hiding your tracks, review the section on Technology and Cyber-Violence. (See page 17)
- Remind yourself that you have a list of items set aside and a plan.

D. IF YOU DO NOT LIVE WITH THE ABUSER

- Have a pre-recorded anonymous message on your telephone answering service rather than your own voice and do not identify yourself by name.
- Consider installing a lighting system outside your home that lights up when a person is coming close to your house.
- Meet in a public place to limit your isolation, if you have agreed to meet with the

abuser(s). Make sure someone knows where you are and when to expect you to return.

- Talk to a lawyer about getting supervised access or having access denied, if the abuser(s) has legal access to your children.
- Arrange for transportation for your children so that you do not have to have contact with the abuser(s), if they have visitations with your children.
- Use different grocery stores and shopping malls, and shop at hours that are different from when you were living with the abuser.
- Do not put your name in your apartment building directory or mailbox.

E. OUTSIDE THE HOME

You must decide for yourself if or when you will tell others that you are experiencing violence and that you may be at risk. Friends, family and co-workers may be able to support you. However, each woman should consider carefully which people to ask for help. If you are comfortable, you may choose to do any or all of the following:

- Show a photograph of the abuser(s) and provide a description of their car to colleagues, neighbours, and building security personnel to make them aware of and alert to your safety needs.
- Talk to your employer about Bill 168 Workplace Violence and Harassment legislation to determine what supports can be put in place to reduce your risk at work.
- Ask to have your calls screened at work or use voicemail to screen your calls. Document any unwanted calls from the abuser(s).
- Block unwanted emails or document them by sending them to a folder where you do not have to read them.
- Alert a trusted neighbour about your situation and how they can support you in case of a violent incident.
- Tell people who take care of your children, including schools and daycares, which people have permission to pick up your children.
- Tell the school, daycare, babysitter, and people who have permission to pick up your children that the abuser(s) is not permitted to do so and ask that they not give your contact information to anyone.
- Ask your neighbours to look after your children in an emergency.

When arriving at or leaving work or school:

- Let someone know when you'll be home and when to expect you to arrive at work, and that you will call them when you have safely arrived.
- Consider carrying your keys in your hands so you are prepared to leave quickly or so that you can press the panic button to draw attention to yourself if you are in danger.
- Walk with someone to your vehicle, if you drive.
- Scan the parking lot when walking to your vehicle.
- If the abuser is following you, drive to a place where there are people who may support you, e.g., a gas station, the police station, etc.
- If problems occur while you are driving, use your cell phone, honk your horn continuously, and drive directly to a well-lit, open, populated place or your identified safe place.
- Plan to take a route that is populated and well-lit.
- Change the patterns of when you arrive and leave work, school, or other routine activities, and change the routes you take as much as possible.
- If you see your abuser on the street, try to get to a public place such as a store or call attention to yourself and ask for help.
- If you use public transit, you can choose to sit near the driver and have someone you know meet you at the bus stop to walk home with you. Consider changing your transit route if possible.
- Once you have arrived home or to your destination, call a friend or relative to let them know you have arrived safely.

SAFETY PLANNING WITH CHILDREN

This section of the guide is designed to help survivors teach their children how to keep safe.

The most important thing for children is to get away from where violence is occurring. Although children often try to help stop a violent incident, it is important to tell children that the best and most important thing for them to do is to keep themselves safe.

Children exposed to Violence Against Women can be profoundly affected by it. It is very traumatic for them to be faced with violence directed at them or someone they love. Personal safety and safety planning are extremely important and necessary for children whose families are experiencing violence. Children should learn ways to protect themselves. Tell your children that their only job is to keep themselves safe.

There are several ways to help you develop a safety plan with your children:

- The first step of any plan is for the children to get out of the room where violence is occurring.
- Have your child pick a safe room/place in the house, preferably with a lock on the door and a phone.
- Stress the importance of being safe, and that it is not the child's responsibility to make sure their parent is safe.
- Create a code word to use with your children so that they know when to run to safety and to call for help.
- Teach your children how to call for help. It is important that children know they should not use a phone that is in view of the abuser, as doing so puts them at risk. Talk to your children about using a neighbour's phone or payphone if they are unable to use a phone at home. Remember there is no cost for dialing 911 from a payphone or cell phone.
- If you have a cell phone, teach your children how to use it.
- Ensure that children know their full name and address (children living in rural areas need to know their Concession and Lot number).
- Rehearse what your children will say when they call for help.
- Pick a safe place to meet your children, out of the home, so you can easily find each other after the situation is safe.
- Teach your children the safest route for them to take to the planned place of safety.
- Practice and roleplay your safety plan with your children including what to do and where to go during a violent incident.
- Have a discussion with your children about safety and their technological devices and social media accounts. (See page 17)

TECHNOLOGY AND CYBER-VIOLENCE

A) TECHNOLOGICAL DEVICES

There are steps you can take to make it more difficult for someone to track your activities. However, an abuser (s) may still find ways of tracking your activities on devices.

If you are concerned about the safety of your home computer, it would be better to use a computer an abuser cannot access – for example, at a public library, a school, an internet café, or at the home of a trusted friend.

Here are some general safety tips regarding technology:

- Change your passwords regularly and avoid writing them down.
- Log out of computer profiles and social media accounts before leaving electronics unattended.
- Be aware of which social media interactions and settings are public and familiarize yourself with privacy settings on the social media apps you use.
- Check whether the abuser can access your phone's incoming and outgoing call lists.
- Check if any of your devices and social media accounts have a tracking application or location services enabled and visit the websites below for information on how to remove or disable any apps or accounts that can track or display your location.
- Avoid posting any current whereabouts or check-ins.

If you are experiencing cyber-violence and online harassment, keep a record of any harassing or unwanted communications to you or anyone you know. Document any content found online by taking screenshots to capture the image and any information posted with it, including full email headers which may contain Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. Also, keep a record of the addresses/URLs of the sites, and save all original emails or messages if possible.

There are a few easy ways for someone to find out what websites you have visited:

Computers have what is called a *cache file*. The cache automatically saves webpages and graphics. Anyone who looks at the cache file on your computer can see your browsing history, showing what information you have looked up and viewed recently on the internet.

Also, most web browsers (the software on your computer that lets you search the internet and display internet pages, e.g., Internet Explorer, Safari, Firefox or Google Chrome) keep a list of the most recent websites and links visited in a 'history' file. You can look at your browser's history by clicking on the 'history' button on your toolbar.

While it is possible to clear the cache and history files so that your computer doesn't keep a list of the sites visited, **you may want to be cautious about doing this.**

If the abuser(s) is very comfortable with computers and sees you have cleared all the cache and history files on your computer (including the sites they have visited), they could become suspicious or angry.

You can use your web browser anonymously or in 'private mode'. Visit the following website for detailed instructions: www.techlicious.com/tip/how-to-browse-the-web-anonymously/

If you do decide to clear your browser history, visit the following website for detailed instructions:

<https://www.sheltersafe.ca/staysafe/#stay>

For more detailed instructions to help you hide your digital activities, visit:

<http://nnedv.org/resources/safetynetdocs.html>

B) SOCIAL MEDIA

There are steps you can take to make it more difficult for someone to track your social media activities, however the abuser may still find ways of tracking your activities through your social media accounts. If the abuser knows a lot about social media platforms, it might be better for you to use an anonymous account/name and change all your social media passwords and security questions to something the abuser does not know.

Cyber-violence is an increasingly common form of violence that survivors are experiencing. Types of cyber-violence you may experience include: hacking, surveillance/tracking, impersonating, spamming, malicious distribution, etc.

For any social media platform you use, check the privacy settings to find out ways to limit who sees your posts, photographs, etc. or learn how to block, remove and report someone. You may also need to have a conversation with people you are close to about the photographs or information they share online, in case people in your networks post anything that identifies your location or routines or gives away any information that can put you at risk.

To find more information on cyber-violence and harassment, including 'smart' homes, safer use of social media apps, and ways to increase your online safety, visit the links provided below. Because technology develops quickly, it is important to check recent, reliable sources like some of the websites suggested here.

Depending on the age of any child or children involved, conversations about online safety and careful review of any apps on their phones or devices may also be necessary:

<https://www.techsafety.org/appsafetycenter>

<https://www.techsafety.org/documentationtips>

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Suggested citation: PCAWA, [Safety Planning Guide](#), 8th ed., PCAWA: Peel Region, 2020.