

Feeling Your Way:

A survival guide for after an abusive relationship ends



A joint initiative of The Woman Abuse Council of Toronto and St. Joseph's Health Centre, Women's Health Centre



Abuse takes many forms.

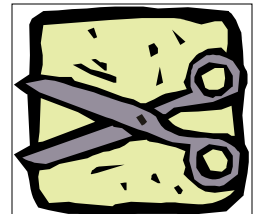
It can be physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, financial, or spiritual. This booklet is for anyone who has been in an

abusive relationship. Often, women make the decision to end an abusive relationship. Some women are forced to leave suddenly when there is a crisis, such as police involvement or being in great danger. Sometimes, it is the abusive partner who leaves. In any case, when a relationship ends, you will have lots of feelings about it.

Although this booklet mainly addresses women with male partners, people who have left a same-sex relationship that was abusive may share many of the feelings and experiences mentioned here.

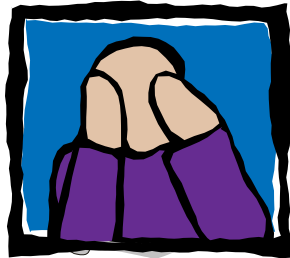
LEAVING AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP IS NOT EASY.

It is normal to experience a whole range of feelings after an abusive relationship ends. The feelings talked about in this booklet are the most common ones. You may experience some or all of them. You may also experience others that are not mentioned here. There is no right or wrong way to feel after leaving an abusive relationship.



After an abusive relationship ends, you might feel:

- Afraid for your safety or your children's safety
- Worried about the future
- Worried about your children
- Hopeful that your ex-partner still might change
- Love for your partner despite the abuse
- Safe for the first time
- Shock/numb
- Hopeful/Calm/Relief
- Angry/Frustrated
- Shame/Guilt
- Unlovable/
Abandoned
- Depressed/
Overwhelmed
- Determined/Stronger
- Denial/sense of unreality
- "Jumpy"/on high alert
- More confused
- Sad/grief
- Fearful/anxious/nervous
- Regret
- Vulnerable
- Emotionally exhausted/weak
- Fearful that no one will believe you
- Self-doubt/self-blame
- Lonely/alone/"lost"
- Free
- Suicidal*



*if you are having suicidal thoughts, call a crisis line and/or go to the nearest emergency department.

(See section on **Where to Get Information and Support**)

Is it normal to feel this way?

YES! You may have different feelings at different times after the relationship ends. During the first few days and weeks, your feelings may be very intense or you may feel completely numb. Some feelings might last for months or for more than a year after the relationship has ended. This is normal.

If some of these feelings are becoming more intense and greatly interfering with your life, find someone to talk to. A counsellor or health professional who is knowledgeable about abuse and relationships can help you find the best way to deal with your feelings. Many women have found that talking to someone they trust has been very helpful in healing from the abuse and coping with the changes in their lives. You don't have to be alone with your feelings. Talk to someone.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE RELATIONSHIP ENDS

Immediately after an abusive relationship ends, you might feel confused and overwhelmed. You may feel many different feelings at the same time. You might cycle through extreme emotions such as

relief and anxiety, fear and calmness. Some women describe a feeling of shock. Whatever your feelings, this is the time to get as much support as possible. Talk to supportive people such as your doctor, a friend or a counsellor.

(See section on **Where to Get Information and Support**)



THE FIRST YEAR

Leaving an abusive relationship is very stressful. There are many different ways to deal with the stress and these are called coping strategies. Some coping strategies women use to avoid or numb painful feelings or memories are



- using alcohol, street drugs or prescribed medication
- over-eating/not eating
- over-spending
- withdrawing from family and friends
- pretending that everything is ok
- starting another relationship right away
- putting themselves down
- blaming themselves for the abuse and/or break-up of the relationship
- tiring themselves out by doing too much (e.g.: excessive exercise, overtime at work, taking on many tasks all at once)
- using sex as a way of connecting with others.

These coping strategies can lead to other problems, especially if you use them over the long term.

Coping strategies that can help you feel more supported and more in control of your life include:

- writing about your feelings and experiences
- finding a counsellor or women's support group
- talking to supportive friends and family
- reminding yourself that the abuse was not your fault
- telling yourself that you made the right decision.



(See section on **Things that Might Help** for additional helpful ways of coping)

WHY DON'T THEY UNDERSTAND?

Some women continue to have the support of family and friends after an abusive relationship has ended. Others may find that family and friends have “disappeared” over the months or years that they were with their abusive partner. Some family or friends might be angry at you or judge you. These reactions are not uncommon, but you are not responsible for their feelings.

Sometimes women feel that they are losing their community as well as their partner when the relationship ends. For example, some mutual friends and members of his family may blame you for breaking up the family or for him being charged by the police. Or they may just decide to support him because of their relationship with him.



Being around people who are supportive and non-judgmental is vital to your healing. You can decide to spend less time with hostile family and friends in order to recover from the abuse. You may decide that you no longer want certain people in your life. It is important to spend time with people who respect your choices and can provide you with the kind of support that you feel is best for you at this time.

HEALING ONE DAY AT A TIME

The healing process is different for everyone. Some feelings might last a lot longer than you expect. You might start to ask, “What is wrong with me?” or “Why is it taking so long?” It is normal for certain feelings to take a long time to heal. It is also normal to have good days and bad days. It might take longer than expected because:

- You still have very little support in your life (e.g. family, friends, a counsellor)
- You have been in many abusive relationships

and never had a chance to heal from any of them

- You were in one abusive relationship but for many years
- You have had some of these feelings since you were a child or teenager
- Your coping strategies are not working as well as they used to

You can heal from any kind of abuse that happened at any time in your life if you have supports that meet your needs. It may take some time, but the healing can last a lifetime.



GOODBYE CHAOS, HELLO PEACE!

Abusive relationships are normally tense and unpredictable. This creates an environment of constant crisis and chaos, which can mean that you may be living in a continuous state of high alert. After a while, this way of living may feel normal. When an abusive relationship ends, it can feel strange to be living without this daily crisis and tension. This could lead to feelings of depression, loneliness, sadness, boredom and anxiety. It takes time to adjust to a new way of living even when you have left a dangerous or violent situation for one that is safer and calmer. Over time, life without crisis and chaos will begin to feel familiar and normal. Welcome peace into your home.

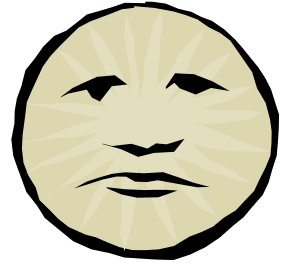
FEELING THE FEELINGS

Depression and anxiety

It is normal to feel depressed and anxious after the relationship has ended. You may also experience flashbacks and nightmares, and be unable to concentrate or sleep. If these symptoms interfere with your daily activities, such as getting up in the morning or parenting, it is important to get some help to prevent these feelings from getting worse. Talking to an experienced counsellor or doctor, or joining a support group, can be helpful.

Loneliness

It is normal to feel lonely and alone after a relationship has ended. It may be especially hard if you have been in relationships throughout your adult life. You may find it difficult to be by yourself even while doing daily activities such as grocery shopping, cooking and taking care of household problems. It will take time to feel comfortable with being on your own.



Although being alone can feel scary, it can be a chance to recover from the abuse. It may also be an opportunity to heal from other painful experiences such as childhood trauma, death of a loved one or addictions.

You might be tempted to return to your relationship or to become involved in another one in order to avoid your painful feelings, memories and loneliness. It's normal to feel this way. Find someone to talk to and/or things to do to help you feel less lonely. Finding a balance between being busy and being alone will help you to heal.

Why am I sad when it was so bad?

You might wonder why you still feel so sad months after the abusive relationship ended. This might lead you to doubt yourself and the decisions you made. It is normal to feel deep sadness at the end of a relationship even if it was an abusive one. You have the right to grieve. You may feel sad because:

- You miss your partner and the routine of the life you had
- You have lost the dream of a happy life with a loving non-abusive partner
- You have lost the hope that your partner would stop being abusive

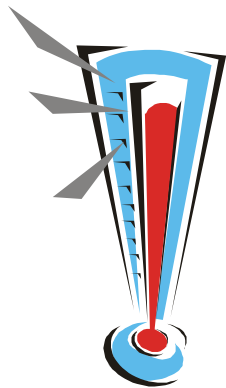


- You miss your home (if you were forced to move)
- You have lost financial security
- You miss things about the relationship that were good
- You feel responsible for the breakdown of the family
- You feel sad or guilty about the impact this has on your children
- You have lost family and friends who have chosen to be your ex-partner's allies
- You are reminded of other losses (e.g. death of a parent)

Anger

Many women struggle with feelings of anger and rage after an abusive relationship ends. This is normal. Anger is not wrong or bad; it is just a feeling. Women who have experienced abuse may be fearful or uncomfortable with expressing their anger for lots of different reasons.

- Some may have learned that anger always leads to violence. Many women had to keep their angry feelings inside to prevent serious consequences or punishment by their abusive partner.
- Others, who have kept angry feelings inside for a long time, are afraid to express it for fear that they will lose control and become violent like their partners. Some women may have thoughts and feelings of taking revenge on their ex-partner.



Now that you are in a safer situation, it is okay to express anger. Finding safe and different ways to express and release anger can be a huge relief and feel fantastic. Try scrubbing the bathtub or floor, pounding pizza dough, throwing rocks in the lake, ripping up newspapers or venting to a supportive

person to release some of your anger. Acknowledging and understanding your feelings of anger can help you to become more assertive and to take positive actions such as setting clearer boundaries and expectations with people in your life.

Self-Doubt/Self-Blame

It is also common to have ongoing feelings of self-doubt and self-blame. This is not surprising, because blaming is often central to an abusive relationship. You may feel “stuck” and unable to move on with your life because you continue to believe that the abuse was your fault. As part of your healing, it is important to continually remind yourself that you are not responsible for your partner's abusive behaviour. The only thing that you are responsible for is healing from the abuse.

Children have feelings too!

After the relationship ends, your children will have a whole range of feelings, similar to yours. This will be a time of adjustment for them too. Depending on the age of the child, they will express their feelings in many different ways, including aggression towards you or clinging to you. They may continue to have strong feelings of attachment to your ex-partner; they may feel unsure, or they may not want to have contact at all. Your children may feel torn between their loyalty to you and their loyalty to their other parent. In some instances, children are denied access to relatives on their other parent's side such as grandparents and cousins; they may be upset about this loss. All of these reactions are normal. Validating and respecting their feelings and reactions, even if they don't make sense to you, will go a long way in helping your child adjust and heal.



Some of your children's behaviours might remind you of your abusive partner. You can get help with how to talk to your children about the abuse and the separation and how to respond to their feelings. There are special programs for children to help them understand what has happened, develop helpful coping strategies and practice safer and healthier ways of expressing their feelings.

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DEALING WITH YOUR EX

For many women, the end of the relationship does not mean the end of contact with the abusive partner. Because of shared custody and access visits, you might have to talk to or see your ex-partner on a regular basis. Many abusive partners continue to be abusive even after the relationship has ended. Even if children are not an issue, your ex-partner may continue to make attempts to contact you and even harass or stalk you.



In either situation, this contact might make you feel scared, angry, hopeless and powerless. It may also make you feel like you are unable to get on with your life. Ongoing abuse is not acceptable. Many of the behaviours abusers continue to use, such as stalking, are criminal acts. It is your right to seek protection from the police. There are other legal options such as talking to a family lawyer to deal with custody and access of children. Keep asking for help until someone listens to you and takes action. A counsellor can also help you deal with the legal system.

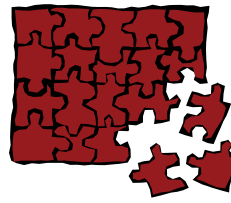


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STARTING OVER

Leaving an abusive partner is both an ending and a beginning. It is hopefully the end of the abuse and

the control, and the start of a new life of healing and of making and fulfilling new goals and dreams. It will require energy, patience, time and most importantly, faith and trust in yourself. And it will be worth it.



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IT TAKES A VILLAGE

To heal from abuse, you might need different kinds of help for practical and emotional needs. You can find support to deal with legal or financial issues, to find affordable housing and childcare, to find counselling or a support group, and to have fun again through recreational programs. With a network of different supports, you may cope better with all of your feelings and reactions. Over time, with support, you are likely to notice a shift in your feelings and attitude. Many women start to feel more confident making decisions, solving problems, feeling independent and finding a new sense of hope.



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A DIFFERENT KIND OF TO-DO LIST

Different things work for different people. Here are some suggestions from survivors of abusive relationships:

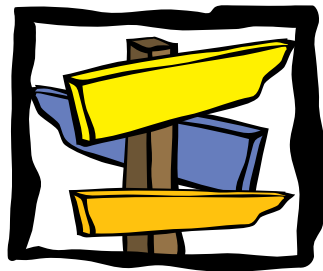
- Join a support group
- Find ways to sleep better and eat well (talk to your health care provider for support in these areas)
- Express your feelings (e.g. write in a journal, draw, paint)
- Trust your instinct
- Be gentle with yourself
- Find people to laugh with



- Make realistic goals
- Dream
- Adopt a pet
- Exercise (e.g. walk, ride a bike)
- Play with your children
- Do all the things you couldn't do when you were in the abusive relationship (e.g. have coffee with a friend)
- Get political (e.g. join a social justice group for women and children's rights)
- Get involved in your community (e.g. volunteer at a local community centre)

FINDING YOUR WAY

You will no doubt have to be in contact with many different “systems” after an abusive relationship ends. You might have to deal with the criminal justice system, family court, Children’s Aid, immigration, social services (i.e. welfare) and/or other government departments. It can be really helpful to find an advocate such as a Transitional and Housing Support Worker* (see at end of this section), a counsellor or a community worker, who can provide you with practical and moral support during this time. You do not have to go through this alone.



Finding your way through the different systems and having certain ideas and information about what to expect may cause a whole range of feelings. For example, it is normal to experience a great deal of anxiety when waiting for and finally attending criminal, immigration or family court hearings.

Sometimes women feel exhausted by all the paperwork and appointments expected by various government agencies. Again, finding a person in a community agency who can help with form-filling or even accompanying you to court and other

appointments will relieve some of the stress and worry.

*Transitional and Housing Support Workers are located in local community agencies across the province. In Toronto, contact 211 for the program in your community.

WHERE TO GET INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

The following resources can help you find supports in your community. They can tell you where to go for emotional and practical support such as counselling, support groups, legal support, housing, financial assistance, information about immigration rights, parenting and support for your children.



Some community supports are free and some charge a fee. Some serve specific communities of people based on culture, language, ability and/or sexual orientation/identity. When asking for a list of resources, be clear about your specific needs. Keep looking and asking until you find the support that best meets your needs.



YOU CAN CALL THE FOLLOWING FOR LOCAL RESOURCES (24 HOURS/7 DAYS):

Assaulted Women’s Helpline

(416) 863-0511

(GTA)

1-866-863-0511

(Toll Free, Ontario)

211

(Directory of Community Services in Toronto)

Distress Centres

(see local phone book – white pages)

Websites

These websites have information about resources and links to other websites. They also have a feature that allows your visit to the website to be anonymous and not traceable.



www.womanabuseprevention.ca

(woman abuse information)

www.shelternet.ca

(women's shelters and safety planning)

www.211Toronto.ca

(general community services)

www.cleonet.ca

(legal information)

www.owhn.ca

(women's health)



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