

Escape the everyday dangers of an abusive relationship.

Surviving Domestic Violence

BY RICHARD L. JOHNSON

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“Please help my mommy!” screamed a little girl of about four. She was standing inside the front door of a large home, and I was standing outside. I was a police officer and had responded to a reported disturbance.

Panicked, the girl was not able to unlock the door. Hearing screaming and the sickening thud of someone being hit, my back-up officer and I forced entry into the home. Following the screaming upstairs, we found a man straddling his wife on the bed. He was so intent on repeatedly punching her, he never saw us before we grabbed him.

Domestic violence is an ugly thing. Perhaps all violence is ugly, but when an abuser attacks a loved one it is reprehensible. Unfortunately, domestic violence is far more common than most people would believe. If you are being abused in a relationship, you are in grave danger. While not every case of domestic violence leads to murder, far too many do. According to recent FBI statistics, about one-third of female murder victims were killed by an

intimate partner.

Breaking away from the abuser is often the best course of action for the long-term health of the victim and children. However, the time when the victim leaves the abuser can be the most dangerous period of the relationship. If you are caught in an abusive relationship, there are things you can do to increase your safety. There are also things you should avoid doing. Here are a few of each.



BOTH IMAGES: BIGSTOCK PHOTO

10 Things You Should Do

1. COMMIT TO SURVIVING You must commit yourself to surviving the violence that is in your life. Acknowledge you deserve to live a good life and you are worth the efforts to improve your circumstances.

If you have children, commit yourself to their well-being. Children who witness violence in the home are more likely to commit or be victims of it when they enter a relationship. Also, consider that the abusive partner may also be physically or sexually abusing your children when you are not present. Be prepared to make hard decisions to survive the violent relationship and thrive in the future.

2. SEEK HELP There is a wide range of resources available to victims of abuse. Most areas have a local shelter that can offer help and advice without the requirement that you stay with them. Assistance agencies can be found through an internet search or by dialing the 2-1-1 referral line.

3. DEVELOP AN ESCAPE PLAN When you attempt to leave a violent relationship, the abuser will see that they are losing control and may become extremely violent. It is important you have a plan for how to leave to minimize the danger to you. Decide when would be best to leave, and what you will do when you go. Plan on where you will live and make the arrangements ahead of time.

4. PREPARE AN ESCAPE BAG

Having essential things already packed and ready to go can make a separation safer and easier. Keep the bag at a safe location, such as with a close friend or at a family member's home. You could also rent a small locker at a local gym or storage facility. The escape bag should contain the essential things you will need, including important documents, cash, a change of clothing and a list of phone numbers to family and local resources. You should also consider obtaining a pre-paid phone for the bag. Your regular phone could be taken by the abuser, or even used to track you in some circumstances.

5. OPEN A SEPARATE BANK ACCOUNT

Opening an account in your name will allow you to establish a banking relationship and start saving money covertly. The account should be opened at a different bank from where you and your abuser already do business.

6. TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN Do talk to your children and reassure them, but do not tell them of any plans you have made. A child may accidentally let some piece of information slip that will put you and them in danger from the abuser. If the child is old enough, develop a "safe word" that can be used in an emergency. You may tell the child that when you use the specially selected word, they are to leave the house (or not come home if you are talking to them on the phone) and call 911.

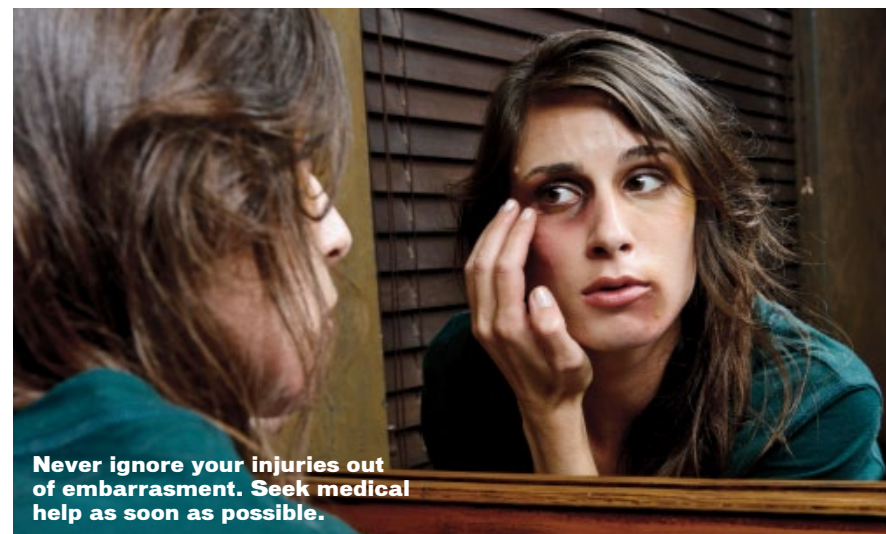
7. CONSIDER A PROTECTIVE ORDER

Protective orders are judicial orders issued to restrain an abusive party from contacting the victim. Different states may call the orders different things. "Injunction for protection" and "temporary protection order" are two common terms. The orders can instruct an abuser to not contact the victim and the victim's family. Orders may also evict the abuser from the residence and award custody of any children to the victim.

8. OBTAIN SELF-DEFENSE TRAINING

Everyone is entitled to defend themselves. Many times an abuser is able to intimidate a victim through size and strength. A victim who learns self-defense techniques can turn the tables on the abuser. Self-defense includes a broad range of options that includes weapons such as pepper spray, stun guns and firearms. Good training will teach the student a variety of options, as well as when each is appropriate.

If you decide to get a concealed weapons permit, the process can take several months. Some states, however, have provisions for people to accelerate the process or obtain a temporary permit. Colorado, for example, allows a sheriff to issue a 90-day emergency permit to anyone that is believed to be in immediate danger. Kentucky recently enacted a law that allows a domestic violence victim who is given a protection order to obtain an emergency concealed weapons permit from the state police.



Never ignore your injuries out of embarrassment. Seek medical help as soon as possible.

SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTO

9. BE ALERT TO YOUR SURROUNDINGS

If you are still living with the abuser, know the rooms you want to avoid if attacked, such as small rooms with no avenue for escape. If you have separated from the abuser, pay attention to your surroundings. Abusers are frequently known to stalk victims.

10. OBTAIN GOOD LOCKS

Once you separate from the abuser, make sure you have good locks and a security system in your new home. Surveillance systems are relatively inexpensive, and they can record any violations of a protection order the abuser may commit.

10 Things You Should NOT Do

1. DON'T BLAME YOURSELF Abuse victims will often believe they are at fault for the violent behavior of their partner. The only person responsible for the violence is the abuser.

2. DON'T THINK YOU ARE ALONE Abusers take steps to isolate their victims. Many abusers will force a partner to move away from family, stop seeing friends and even quit their job in an effort to maintain control over them. Seek assistance from a local agency and you may be shocked at how many people are willing to help.

3. DON'T IGNORE YOUR INTUITION

Every abuse situation is different, and it is impossible for anyone on the outside to give you 100-percent correct advice on what to do. You have to trust your instincts and follow the best course as you believe it to be.

4. DON'T LIE TO POLICE There may be times when it might seem like a good idea to lie to officers about what hap-

pened. However, the consequences of lying can range from a loss of credibility in a future incident to arrest for obstructing an investigation.

5. DON'T LIE TO YOUR FAMILY Your family will often recognize that something is not right in your relationship. Instead of shutting them out, you should rely on them for support.

6. DON'T ACCEPT ABUSE AS RELIGIOUSLY APPROVED Abuse is not love. Some abusers play with words in religious texts to support their position, but no faith condones the abuse of a partner.

7. DON'T BELIEVE YOU ARE BEYOND HELP Do not think that you are unable to escape the violence. There are many people willing to assist you if you ask for help.

8. DON'T DECLINE MEDICAL ASSISTANCE Declining medical assistance from a sense of embarrassment or concerns about costs is understandable, but it could be a fatal error. Certain forms of abuse, such as strangulation (commonly called choking), can cause permanent damage or death if not promptly treated.

9. DON'T GO BACK Abusers can be charmers. After an incidence of violence, an abuser can act nice and caring, seemingly the person you originally fell in love with. However, abusers don't change overnight, and most never change at all. Be very skeptical of any sudden positive changes in the abuser.

10. DON'T GIVE UP No matter how bleak the situation appears, things can improve. Getting out of a violent relationship will take a lot of work, and it is not without risk. However, enjoying a fulfilling, peaceful life is worth the effort. ☑

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RESOURCES TO GET HELP & STAY SAFE

Common Ground Sanctuary

Common Ground Sanctuary provides resources for individuals and families in crisis 24 hours a day through the organization's hotline. Operating for more than 40 years, the organization claims to help more than 70,000 persons in crisis situations every year through its services. (commongroundhelps.org, 800-231-1127)

Domestic Abuse Helpline For Men & Women

The Domestic Abuse Helpline For Men & Women (DAHMW) is a 24-hour crisis and information hotline for domestic abuse. Founded in 2000, the DAHMW is unique in that it specializes in providing resources for men who are abused by their female partners. Aside from this specialization, all are welcome to call the hotline. (dahmw.org, 888-743-5754)

Haven

Haven is a 24-hour crisis hotline and resource provider for victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault based out of Oakland, California. The organization's website features links to nationwide resources and success stories from those who have sought its help in the past. (haven-oakland.org, 877-922-1274)

National Domestic Violence Hotline

The National Domestic Violence Hotline has been providing aid for individuals and families affected by domestic abuse for the last 17 years. Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, the Hotline's staff provides confidential support to victims in the form of crisis intervention and contacts to more than 5,000 community agencies and resources nationwide. (thehotline.org; 800-799-7233)

Safe Haven

Safe Horizon is the largest victims' services agency in the United States with a mission to provide support, prevent violence and promote justice for victims of crime and abuse, their families and communities. Since 1978, Safe Haven has touched the lives of more than 250,000 children, adults, and families affected by crime and abuse throughout New York City each year, offering assistance to victims through shelters, in-person counseling, legal services, and more. Its programs also partner with governmental and other community agencies to offer additional assistance, including finding resources for those living outside New York City. (victimservices.org, 800-621-4673)