

Section III: What Can I Do To Keep Myself Safe?

If you feel that you are experiencing domestic violence, you are not alone. It is not fair that you are living with this abuse. You do not deserve to be treated this way by your partner.

There are steps that you can take to keep yourself safe and people available to support you through your journey as you make the decisions that are best for you.

If you have been assaulted or are living in fear of your partner:

I. Call the Police

Find out where the closest Police station is to your house. Make sure that you have the phone number to the station in a handy place. If you have a cell phone, you can save the number to the police in your phone under a different name. The last section of this handbook contains a list of important numbers; you may decide to highlight the ones that you would use in an emergency.

If your partner has assaulted you or if your partner has threatened to hurt you, call the Police. The law states that the Police have a duty to protect you if you have been assaulted or are in danger of being assaulted. It is part of their job to protect you.

The police can:

- Take you to the hospital.
- Escort you to a place of safety.
- Take you to safely retrieve your personal things from your home.
- Enforce your Protection Order

If you have a Protection Order against your abuser – have a copy ready to show the police when they arrive. The officers may ask you to come into the station to give a statement about the assault. Try to give as much detail as possible including the time of the assault, any physical injuries or damaged property. You may want to ask the police to take pictures of your injuries. You may also want to note the time that it takes for the police to respond to your call. This information will be helpful if you decide to press charges against your assailant.

II. Apply for a Protection Order

A Protection Order is an order of the court that makes it illegal for your assailant to come near you or to harm you in anyway. A Protection Order also gives the police the authority to arrest your assailant for violating the order. See Section IV to find out more about how to apply for a Protection Order.

III. Keep Records

Often, the trauma of being assaulted and the pain and confusion that accompanies the abuse can make it difficult to remember exact dates and times that an assault occurred. At some point, you may decide to take legal action against your assailant. You may decide to press charges against him for hurting you, you may make a decision to file for a legal separation or you might want to apply for a protection order. Having a record of all incidents of abuse will be helpful to your court case.

Important information to record is:

- Time and date of assault
- Details of assault (injuries, threats, length of time)
- Location of assault
- All Police contact
- Photographs of injuries
- Medical records
- Any unwanted contact
- Phone messages
- A copy of your statement from the police
- Court dates and papers

IV. Safety Plan

One of the most important things that you can do to keep yourself safe is to develop a SAFETY PLAN! A safety plan is a list of things that you can do to keep yourself safe from your abuser and to help you prepare for situations where you may need to leave in a hurry.

Each person's safety plan will be very different depending on the situation. You should develop a safety plan if you are living with your assailant or if you are planning to leave.

The following are some suggestions that might be helpful:

- Make sure that you have access to important phone numbers
- Try to identify "warning signs" that come before an assault. This may give you extra time to escape.
- Talk to your neighbors about calling the police if they see your assailant coming onto your property. (This applies if you have a Protection Order)
- Develop a code or signal with your children or neighbors that would let them know you need help or that you need them to call the police. An example of

this might be a code word or a signal such as flicking your porch light on and off.

- If you have a car, have a spare set of keys made. Hide them in a safe place.
- Pack an emergency kit in case you need to leave in a hurry. This could include money, birth certificates, medication, extra diapers, change of clothes, phone card, passports, and important numbers.
- Try hiding important papers or numbers in a place where your assailant is not likely to look such as a diaper bag or a tampon box.
- If you are in the same room with your assailant and you feel that he is about to assault you – try to move into a room that has two exits in case you need to run.
- Get a dog that will warn you when someone is coming near your house.
- Change your locks.
- Move your bed away from the window.
- Have a friend or neighbor call or come by to check on you periodically.
- If you have a Protection Order, keep a copy with you at all times.
- If you have recently left your home – be careful who you tell where you are staying.

V. Get Out

Making the decision to go can be terrifying. Assailants often make threats to their partners about what will happen if they try to leave. Your fears are completely normal and very real. However, many women in the same situation as you have left and are now able to live a life free of fear and abuse.

Only you can make the decision to leave.

The first step in getting out is finding a safe place to go. You may have friends or family members that you can stay with until you get back on your feet. You may also decide to stay in the shelter.

Belize currently has one shelter for women and their children who are escaping abusive relationships. It is called the Haven House. The exact location has been kept confidential for the safety of the women who stay there. Women from any district in Belize can stay there. The shelter provides food and a safe place to sleep. The Haven House can provide shelter for up to 21 days. They also provide counseling and information about your rights and can help you develop a plan for staying safe when you leave. In order to stay at Haven House you will need to contact the Women's Department or call the Haven House hotline number. They will help you decide if the shelter is right for you.

VI. Identify Support System

Having a strong support system can be very important when you are deciding the best way to escape the abuse. During this time, you may need to rely on the help of other people while you make this difficult transition.

Your assailant may intentionally make this hard for you. Abusers often try to ruin your relationships with other people. They may cause a scene, tell lies about you or do whatever they can to destroy your interactions with friends, family or colleagues. When you are considering leaving an abusive relationship, it may be helpful to identify the people who you feel will be supportive to you. You may want to make contact

with friends or family members, explain the situation and let them know that you may be in danger.

You may also find support from other women who have gone through what you are going through. The Women's Department offers a support group for women. They are here to help you.

Remember that the abuse is not your fault. You should not feel ashamed or embarrassed about asking for assistance. What you are doing is extremely courageous and is a reflection of your inner strength.

VII. Go to the Women's Department

The Women's Department is a resource and support center for women who are experiencing domestic violence. The women who work at the department are there to help you. They can assist you with safety planning, legal information, staying at the shelter and working with the police. They are also there to provide emotional support to you and to help you make important decisions about your safety.

The Women's Department, in Belize City, offers a weekly support group for women who have been affected by domestic violence. The support group offers emotional support, a safe place for women to share their stories or to listen to other women talk about their experiences and provides skills training. There are currently plans to begin support groups in other districts.

Other services available at the Women's Department countrywide include public education about domestic violence and a variety of classes for women including

computer training, cake decorating, sewing, arts & crafts and relaxation techniques.

Joining a class can be a way to network with other women and a good way to build self-esteem. You may also decide to volunteer your time to helping other women who are going through the same situations that you have.

Each district has a representative from the Women's Department called a Women's Development Officer or WDO.

They are there to help you.