

Making Connections for Women with Experiences of Abuse

A stylized tree with a trunk that forms a heart shape, symbolizing connection and support. The tree is rendered in a dark red color against a lighter red background. The leaves are small and detailed, and the roots are visible at the bottom of the trunk.

You are not to blame.
You are not crazy.
You are not alone.

**Woman Abuse Response Program,
BC Women's Hospital & Health Centre**

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this workbook is to help you believe in and trust your inner voice and feelings. We also hope it will help you find clarity and direction as you move through the confusion and overwhelm of living with experiences of abuse.

Over the past few years the Woman Abuse Response Program has conducted focus groups with 140 women throughout British Columbia to hear about their experiences of violence/abuse, and how these experiences have affected their health, mental health and substance use. We have also talked to 460 service providers in BC about how violence, mental health and substance use are connected in women's lives.

Using this information, we developed the Making Connections support groups for women with experiences of violence, substance use and/or mental health concerns. These low-barrier support groups provide women with the opportunity to share their experiences and explore the connections between woman abuse, mental health concerns and substance use in a supportive, safe and non-judgmental environment. This workbook, *Making Connections for Women with Experiences of Abuse*, was created in conjunction with the support group curriculum.

Women shared with us countless stories about the challenges and barriers they encounter when reaching out for support. We hope that the section “Where to get help” will assist you in identifying and accessing resources and supports in your community. Some of the information may be more relevant to your life than others.

We understand how isolating and “crazy-making” it can be to live in an abusive relationship, even once you have left your partner. We hope that the information offered is helpful, offers you a different perspective on your experiences of abuse, and helps you find hope in your journey to achieve safety and well-being.

A MESSAGE FROM WOMEN

The following message is from women who participated in the Making Connections Support Groups and who provided input into this workbook. We asked them to tell us what they would like to say to women who had similar experiences of abuse. Here is what they had to say:

Sometimes it seems impossible to imagine things will get better: you might feel trapped, hopeless, afraid, and unsure of where to turn. We want to assure you, things can and do get better—there are people who understand, who won't judge, and who have been through similar challenges. Your feelings are valid, and no one has the right to tell you how you should be feeling or acting. Listen to, and trust in, yourself. When you start to blame yourself, remember that you have always done the best you can with what you had, at the time. Reaching out can be hard, but is also the first step towards reclaiming your life.

You are beautiful, smart, strong, talented, interesting, funny, resourceful, and worthy. You deserve it. You are worth it.

It does get easier. It is okay if you feel like you are moving backwards, or are at a standstill; just keep trying, and progress will continue. Be kind to yourself. Overcoming what you have gone through, or are going through, is hard work; it is normal to get tired and to feel overwhelmed, but getting your life back is worth the work.

You are not alone.

You are not crazy.

You are not to blame.

AM I EXPERIENCING ABUSE?

Have I Experienced Abuse?

It's hard to believe that someone you love is hurting you. No woman wants to believe that her partner could be abusive. Yet, one in three women will experience abuse from a partner over the course of her life. If you think you might be experiencing abuse from your partner, this workbook might be helpful for you.

We often talk to women who say, *"I don't know if I am being abused."* Or, *"She doesn't hit me, so I guess I'm not being abused."* Women receive so many messages about abuse from family, friends, and the media, that they don't always feel clear on what abuse is. Your inner voice is a powerful voice; even if many women have learned to silence it, women still know if they feel unsafe, afraid and anxious around their partner. The information in this workbook might help you believe in your inner voice and trust your feelings.

How is Woman Abuse Defined?

Woman abuse is an ongoing misuse of power and control, often from a partner—whether you are married, living together, dating, or separated. In an abusive relationship, the abusive partner uses tactics and strategies to gain and maintain total control over their partners. There are many different kinds of abuse, including emotional abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse, cultural abuse, verbal abuse, and psychological abuse. The key to understanding woman abuse is that it is a pattern of power and control. Incidents or acts, taken by themselves, may not appear violent or abusive. When added up and experienced over time, however, they result in one person in the relationship misusing their power and having a lot of control over the other. Generally, incidents may

seem harmless enough at the beginning, but escalate over time, leading to women feeling degraded, isolated and like they have little control over their lives.¹

Statistics tell us that abuse is most often committed by men against women, so throughout this workbook we use the pronoun “he” to refer to the abusive partner. This does not discount or minimize abuse that happens in same sex relationships, which can consist of the same forms of abuse as in heterosexual relationships: including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and financial abuse. The reality of abuse in same-sex relationships helps us to clearly see that abuse stems from a person’s sense of entitlement and misuse of power, and is not simply because of the person’s gender. We also acknowledge that there are various forms of woman abuse, and that it can be perpetrated not only by partners, but also by family members, authority figures, pimps, johns, and many others.

Throughout this book we use “violence,” “abuse,” and “woman abuse” interchangeably to reflect all the forms of abuse.

Violence can be:

- ▶ Physical- such as punching, kicking, choking, stabbing, restraining
- ▶ Sexual- such as rape, any unwanted touching or act of a sexual nature, forced prostitution
- ▶ Verbal/psychological- such as threats to harm the children, repeated insults, forced isolation from friends and relatives, threats of further violence or deportation if the woman attempts to leave
- ▶ Stalking- such as persistent and unwanted attention, following and spying, monitoring of mail, email or conversations
- ▶ Financial- such as taking away wages or other income, limiting or forbidding access to the family income²

Myths and Realities about Experiences of Abuse

When we think about abuse, we often think about physical abuse or sexual assaults, because this is what we see most in the media- in television shows, newspapers, movies and books. Women might wonder if other, non-physical forms of abuse, such as, verbal and mental, are “really that bad.”

Abusive men threaten, intimidate, and manipulate women in a lot of different ways to gain power and control over them. All of these forms of abuse can have serious consequences for women’s safety and their physical, mental and social well-being.

Sometimes, women and the people around them don’t recognize abuse because of the stereotypes and myths we are told about the characteristics of “abused women” and “abusive men.” These stereotypes and myths may come from family, friends, service providers, the Internet and other media outlets.

Do you identify with these stereotypes? Probably not. Women who are abused by their partners are like all other women: some are professionals, some are homemakers, some are wealthy, and some are living in poverty. Women who experience abuse come from all racial and cultural backgrounds, have different levels of education and income, and are young and old.

Because of stereotypes, people may think abusive men are all monstrous, scary, and out-of-control. But these men often seem very charming, reliable, and sociable, especially to those outside the relationship.

Here are some of the common myths or stereotypes about woman abuse. Can you add any others that you have heard?

- ▶ All abusive men are mentally ill
- ▶ Alcohol makes men abusive
- ▶ It couldn't have been that bad, or else she would have left
- ▶ Abuse doesn't happen in rich families
- ▶ Some women are attracted to abusive men or think abuse is normal
- ▶ Women provoke sexual assaults when they dress sexy or get too drunk
- ▶ Fights or heated arguments are a natural part of relationships
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

How do Women Describe Experiencing Abuse from their Partner?

Women and those around them often don't recognize abuse at first, because isolated incidents or tactics used by abusive men may not fit their ideas of violence or abuse. But when all of these experiences are added up as they happen over time, they result in one person in the relationship using power over, and having a lot of control over, the other. In our society, men often have more physical, financial, and social power than women.

An abusive man doesn't "play fair." Abusers use fear, guilt, shame, and intimidation to wear you down and to keep the power and control in the relationship. Your partner may have manipulated other people by being charming and charismatic, so that you felt no one would believe you if you told them about the abuse.

"A lot of it was just verbal, but I wished he would have hit me instead of said what he said. The words were just as bad, they hurt more than probably any beating could have. And they did more damage for the long term."—Sarah

What We Know About Woman Abuse

- » One in every two women is the victim of at least one act of physical or sexual violence after the age of 16.³
- » In Canada, one in every three women will experience violence or abuse in their relationship at some point in their lives.⁴
- » Approximately 87% of the victims of violence in relationships are women. And 80% of the accused are men.⁵
- » Eighty-three percent of all police-reported assaults by a partner are assaults on women. This pattern is consistent for every province and territory across Canada.⁶
- » There are many forms of woman abuse, and it can be perpetrated by partners, family members, service providers, pimps, and others.

**“I used to get, ‘Oh, you’re crazy!’
He always presented himself in
a good way. Most of them do
and you’d never know...people
don’t know what goes on
behind closed doors.”—Maggie**

Who is Vulnerable to Experiencing Abuse?

All women are vulnerable to experiencing violence; however, there are factors and times in a woman's life that may make her more vulnerable:

- » Girls between the ages of 13-15 are at the highest risk of being sexually assaulted.⁷ More than half of all women who are sexually assaulted are under 18.⁸
- » Women under 25 are at greatest risk of being killed by their male partners.⁹
- » Abuse often begins or worsens during pregnancy, when a woman is most vulnerable and most dependent on her partner's support. Twenty one percent of women abused by a partner were assaulted during pregnancy, and 40% reported that the abuse began during pregnancy.¹⁰
- » Rates of violence in the relationships of First Nations and Inuit women have been found to be higher than the Canadian average.¹¹ Aboriginal women are approximately 8 times more likely to suffer abuse than non-Aboriginal women.¹² These higher rates of abuse are believed to stem from and be worsened by poverty and ongoing experiences of colonization, including the mistreatment and abuses that arose through the residential school system.¹³
- » Aboriginal women also experience racially-motivated attacks, and are harassed on the streets by the public and police, more so than non-Aboriginal women.¹⁴

- » Violence against women occurs in all income levels and social classes. However, low-income women may be more trapped in abusive relationships because of a lack of financial resources for housing and income support.
- » Women with disabilities are more vulnerable to violence than women without disabilities because they may experience violence from a partner but also from family members or other people who act in a caregiving role.¹⁵ Depending on whether they live in an institution or community setting, women with disabilities are 1.5 to 10 times more likely than women without disabilities to experience abuse.¹⁶
- » Lesbian, bisexual, queer, transsexual and transgendered women can face increased difficulties obtaining support in the social context of homophobia and heterosexism, especially within some communities. This may lead to a greater sense of isolation, and make leaving an abusive relationship that much more difficult.¹⁷
- » Women who are part of minority racial, ethno-cultural, or language groups, and who experience violence, are often trapped in abusive relationships because of language and cultural barriers, isolation and discriminatory immigration policies.^{18, 19}
- » Women working in certain occupations are more vulnerable to abuse, such as women working in survival sex work, and foreign domestic workers. For example, often when a sex trade worker is assaulted by a partner or a john, her story is discredited because of her “choice” of lifestyle.²⁰

What are Some Signs That I may be Experiencing Abuse?ⁱ

All relationships are different, and women experience abuse in different ways. **Do any of these common signs of an abusive relationship sound familiar to you?**

Your Inner Thoughts and Feelings

Do you:

- Feel afraid of your partner much of the time?
- Avoid certain topics out of fear of upsetting your partner?
- Feel that you can't do anything right for your partner?
- Hide certain aspects of your relationship from your family and friends?
- Feel like you're going crazy?
- Try to numb, or cope, with alcohol or drugs?

Controlling Behaviour

Does your partner:

- Humiliate you or yell at you?
- Criticize you or put you down?
- Treat you in ways that you are embarrassed or ashamed for your friends or family to see?
- Ignore or dismiss your opinions or accomplishments?
- Blame you for his abusive behaviour?
- Act excessively jealous or possessive?
- Control where you go, or what you do?
- Keep you from seeing your friends or family?
- Limit your access to money, the phone, computer or car?
- Constantly check up on you?

Violent Behaviour or Threats

Does your partner:

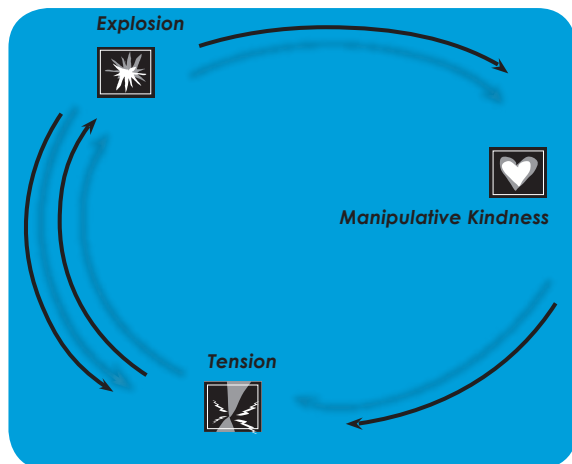
- Have a bad or unpredictable temper?
- Hurt you, or threaten to hurt or even kill you?
- Threaten to take your children away or harm them?
- Threaten to hurt or kill your loved ones?
- Threaten to commit suicide if you leave?
- Force you to have sex or do things sexually that you are not comfortable with?

MAKING SENSE OF THE CHAOS: THE CYCLE OF ABUSE

Women living with a partner who is abusive may find it hard to see any pattern to the abuse. Their partner's behaviour seems unpredictable. It seems unbelievable that the same person who is kind and affectionate one day, could be cruel and malicious the next day. You, and others you have talked to, may think of him as a "nice guy" who does some really awful things once in awhile. You might even think that you just fight a lot, or that you are the cause of the fighting. This is not true.

Abuse has a pattern of behaviour called the "Cycle of Abuse." The three phases of the cycle of abuse are: **Manipulative Kindness** (also called Honeymoon or Entrapment), **Tension**, and **Explosion**. Each of the Cycle's three phases is abusive, because your partner is in control, not you, and you don't have many safe choices. Each phase is abusive in different ways, and has different impacts on you.

Just like anything else in life, there are many variations in how women experience the Cycle—so each woman's experience of the Cycle isn't always as straightforward as this diagram shows.ⁱⁱ



ii Adapted from Walker, Lenore E. (1979) *The Battered Woman*. New York: Harper and Row; and *When Love Hurts: A Woman's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships*. <http://whenlovehurts.ca/>

“I was in a very abusive, violent relationship for too long. I was so worn down because his moods would change just like that. One minute he would be telling me how much he loves me and the next minute he’d be hitting me or screaming at me. And I never knew when he would switch.”—Pam

Honeymoon/Manipulative Kindness

The Cycle most often begins with the **Manipulative Kindness** or Honeymoon phase. This is usually the first phase of the cycle. The beginning of the relationship, when you and your partner are getting to know each other, is often very intense. This phase seems positive at first, and is the phase that attracts women and draws them into the relationship. Abusive men may:

- » Be attentive and considerate.
- » Give you gifts or make promises.
- » “Paint a picture” of a promising future together.
- » Show interest in your children, your work, and/or your family.
- » Spend time listening to you, and telling you that they appreciate you.
- » Behave in a way that seems acceptable or “normal.”

You may realize that you have mutual interests or experiences: both of you may want a family; may have struggled with depression; may like to party; or may like hiking. The two of you begin to establish a relationship together. This first phase is what originally makes you interested in him. Once you are experiencing abuse, this phase is what keeps you hopeful and keeps you believing that your partner can be the same person that you fell in love with during this phase.

Tension

The **Tension-building** phase comes next. This phase of the Cycle varies in length; at first, it might seem like a normal fight or disagreement.

Some abusive men may:

- » Be sullen, silent, unpredictable or moody for a period of minutes, hours, weeks or months, creating unbearable tension in the relationship.
- » Be angry or hostile. Women often describe their partners as being very critical of them.
- » Be disinterested, distant and withdrawn from the relationship.
- » Justify their behaviour with excuses such as stress from work, mental health struggles, trying to stay sober, or financial problems.
- » Not take responsibility for their behaviour.
- » Explain their behaviour by blaming you or the children for creating the problems.
- » Blame your drinking, or your substance use.
- » Blame you for financial stresses.
- » Blame you for various things you do, such as wearing a revealing dress, not having dinner ready, or letting the children stay up too late.

During this phase, some women say they feel like they are walking on eggshells, or stepping through a minefield. They are living in fear and are trying to avoid the next fight or disagreement.

“I felt like I had to drop a lot of the charges. I went through with the charges but then he asked me to not go through with it. So I wasn’t even thinking for myself, I was thinking for the man. Seeing how he felt and ignoring my own feelings. They push you down so far that you feel worthless and nothing. Training the women’s brain to be what they want it to be.”—Jessica

Explosion

The final phase of the cycle is **Explosion**. The first time you experienced this, you might not have described it as abuse. It may not have seemed that bad, but you might still have been upset by it. Perhaps your partner:

- » Raised his voice or swore.
- » Slammed a door or banged down a pot.
- » Didn't listen when you said you didn't want to have sex.
- » Forced you to get drunk or use drugs.
- » Walked away and gave you the "silent treatment."
- » Pushed you.
- » Showed up drunk for a date.
- » Broke something of value.
- » Made fun of you in front of friends.
- » Threatened to hurt a pet, or actually hurt a pet.

As the cycle goes on over the years, the **Explosions** often become more intense and frequent—whether they are physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, or another form of abuse.

The Cycle Continues

After the **Explosion**, many partners return to the **Manipulative Kindness** or Honeymoon phase. However, some women's experience of abuse constantly moves between **Tension** and **Explosion** without the **Manipulative Kindness** phase.

If your partner does return to the **Manipulative Kindness** phase, he will again behave in a seemingly positive or neutral way. He may make big or public gestures, like giving you flowers or planning a romantic weekend. He may take the kids to school, let you sleep in, or allow you to visit family or friends. He may apologize and promise not to act that way

again, return to more acceptable behaviour, act in less aggressive ways, or act like nothing happened. Any behaviour that seems acceptable or positive, would be considered **Manipulative Kindness** behaviour.

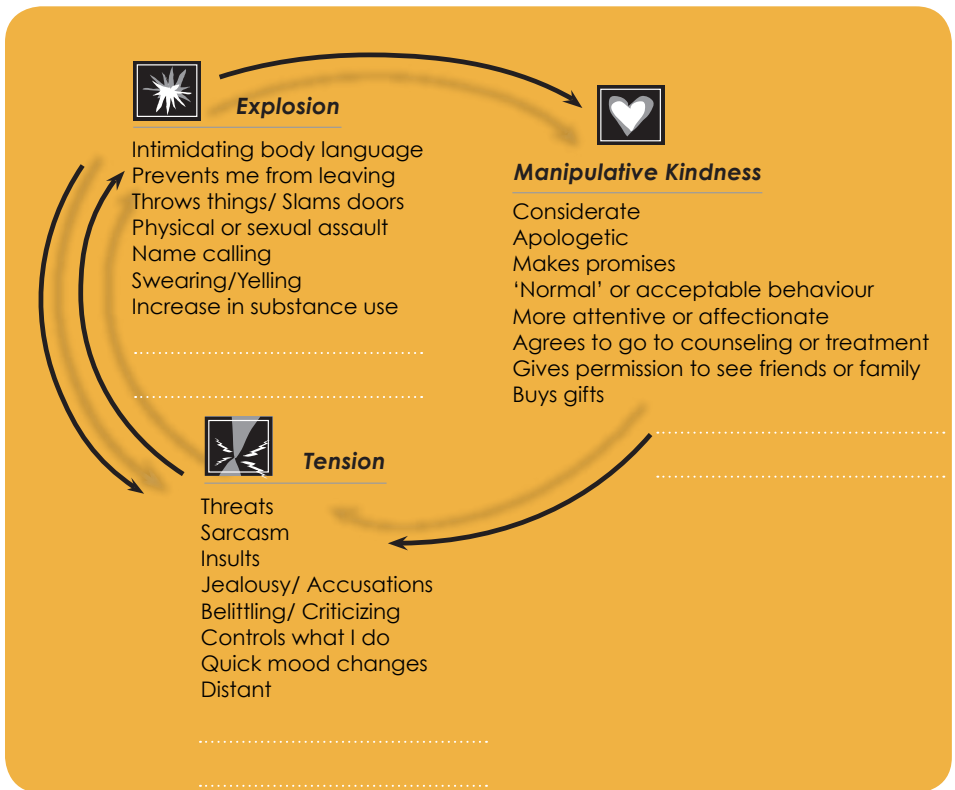
Abusive men use powerful hooks to draw women back into the relationship. The **Manipulative Kindness** phase keeps women feeling like the relationship is worth working on. Your partner may behave in acceptable ways again, and you may feel attracted to him as you see glimpses of the man you were first attracted to. Perhaps you have been asking to go to marriage counseling for years, and he finally agrees. Perhaps he starts to spend time with the kids. Perhaps he agrees to go into a treatment program, or supports you to seek treatment. Your partner may seem sincere during this phase, and you want to believe him. Hoping that your partner will change, or that he will be sincerely kind to you, is the “hook” that keeps you in the relationship.

The **Manipulative Kindness** or Honeymoon phase is very powerful. You are **not** foolish or weak for accepting this behaviour at face value. The **Manipulative Kindness** is so powerful that most people around you (family, friends, counsellors) accept your partner’s **Manipulative Kindness** as who he really is. Many women describe this phase as a time of feeling trapped.

Over time, you may notice that his behaviour during the **Manipulative Kindness** phase changes; he may give you more gifts, and make you more promises, to “win you back.” You may also notice, over time, that your partner’s behaviour during the **Tension** and **Explosion** phases becomes more extreme. In some cases, you may notice over time that the **Manipulative Kindness** phase gradually disappears, and the relationship just moves between the **Tension**-building and **Explosion** phases.

What Are Some Examples of Tactics Your Partner Uses During the Cycle of Abuse?

Some women have had more than one abusive partner or may have experienced abuse from someone other than a partner, such as a family member or a pimp. When reflecting on the Cycle of Abuse diagram below, feel free to think of examples or experiences from any of your relationships.



WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU DURING THE CYCLE OF ABUSE?

Women experience many different reactions, emotions, and impacts throughout the Cycle of Abuse. Your partner is in control of the Cycle, so going through the phases can be a very “crazy-making” experience for women. Do any of these examples from women, about how they feel during the Cycle, resonate with you? Feel free to add your own examples.

During the Manipulative Kindness / Honeymoon phase, I...

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel hopeful | <input type="checkbox"/> question the relationship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel loved | <input type="checkbox"/> use drugs or alcohol less |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel relieved | <input type="checkbox"/> feel skeptical |
| <input type="checkbox"/> can ask for things | <input type="checkbox"/> feel more confident |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel confused | <input type="checkbox"/> wonder how long it will last |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel guilty | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel trapped | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel exhausted | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel like I should try harder | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

During the Tension phase, I...

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel afraid | <input type="checkbox"/> think about suicide or self harm |
| <input type="checkbox"/> can't sleep | <input type="checkbox"/> feel angry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> use drugs or alcohol more | <input type="checkbox"/> feel frustrated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel like I'm walking on eggshells | <input type="checkbox"/> get headaches or migraines |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> try to keep things 'perfect' | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel isolated | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel overwhelmed | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |



During the Explosion phase, I...

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel scared | <input type="checkbox"/> use drugs or alcohol to cope |
| <input type="checkbox"/> try to protect myself | <input type="checkbox"/> feel like I'm going crazy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fight back | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feel hopeless | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> get hurt | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> try to get away | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> give in to him | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> shut myself down | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yell | |



Myths About the Cycle Of Abuse

Women have heard many ideas about men, relationships and abuse that are **not** true. Have you ever wondered if any of the myths below are true?

Myth	Truth
Each partner is equally responsible for the problem	Abusers are 100% responsible for the abuse
Abusive acts are random and isolated incidents	The abuse is patterned and intentional
The abuser can't control the abuse	Abusive men are in control and make choices to use abusive tactics
Women are attracted to abuse or abusive men	Abusers often hide their abusive behaviour in the beginning

What other myths have you heard? What is the truth behind them?

Women are often told by their partners (and possibly by friends, family, or service providers) that they need to “try harder,” “change their behaviour,” “stop doing something,” or “start doing something” to end the abuse.

For example, women might be told that they should:

- » stop drinking or using drugs
- » clean the house more often
- » lose weight or gain weight
- » look after the children better
- » get control of their depression or other mental health concerns
- » dress more nicely, or in a more sexy way
- » go to a counsellor
- » stop nagging
- » have dinner ready at 5:00 pm instead of 6:00 pm

Are Any of These Examples Acceptable Reasons for Abuse?

Since your partner is in control of the Cycle of Abuse, he is the only one who can decide to stop the abuse. No matter what you do, or don't do, in the relationship, you cannot stop the abuse and you are **not** responsible for the abuse.

Am I Making Bad Choices?

Many people continue to believe that women “make bad decisions.” Yet, if you are living with an abusive partner, your choices are very limited because of the real fear that he will hurt you and/or your children. You may feel like you face life and death choices, and that you are always trying to weigh the risks of any option.

We hope that this woman's experience helps you see that you are making the best decisions you can, under the circumstances.

“My hip was broken. My partner had broken my hip and I *chose* not to go [to the doctor] until I was out of the situation. He had refused to take me. He had basically stopped me from going. I heard people say that you make your own choices; you can do whatever you want. And to an extent I agree, but when you make that choice, you and your children could be killed if you do.”—Neila

Am I Addicted to My Partner?

Before women learn about the Cycle of Abuse, they sometimes wonder if they are “addicted” to their partner. It can be confusing when you want to see or call someone, even though they have hurt you.

We do not think you are addicted to your partner. We think you are having the natural thoughts and feelings that many women have as they try to figure out their abusive relationship.

It can be helpful to think about the Cycle of Abuse: when you first met your partner, he showed you a lot of positive qualities. Maybe, he presented himself as thoughtful, considerate, and interested in you. These seemingly positive ways of behaving, are part of **Manipulative Kindness** or Honeymoon behaviour. It is this behaviour that attracted you to him, but by now in your relationship, you have also experienced the **Tension-building** and **Explosion** phases.

This can leave women confused: how can one person appear to be both so loving, and so hurtful? You may look back on the early days of your relationship with fondness. There is nothing wrong with that. You want to be treated well—the way he treated you in the beginning. It is really painful to consider that his behaviour at the beginning was designed to manipulate you into the relationship, and was only part of the **Manipulative Kindness** phase of the Cycle. He did not tell you at the start of the relationship that he was an abusive and controlling man, because if he had, you would have run the other way. Perhaps even now he is still trying to manipulate you, with apologies or promises to change.

This behaviour looks and sounds good, but ask yourself: “Is it real? Will it last? Is he really concerned about me, or about himself?” An abusive relationship is devastating for women. Your sense of self-worth may feel

shaken. You may feel depressed and anxious. Your partner may have told you that no one else would want you. You may have lost some of your friends or family, because of the relationship. You may feel very alone and vulnerable. It is normal to want those feelings of loneliness and vulnerability to go away, so of course your thoughts go back to the beginning of the relationship, when things were better. This is perhaps why it is so hard to leave.

We do not think you are addicted to your partner. We think your partner has been acting out the Cycle of Abuse. This pattern of **Manipulative Kindness**, **Tension**-building and **Explosion** leaves you hurt and confused. It takes time to recover and to rebuild from this abuse.

This is a difficult time in your life, but with some time, space and good support, you will start to feel better. You will not always feel as emotionally raw as you do right now. This is a time to be as kind to yourself as you can be. Try to think of ways you can be good to yourself: What could you do to feel less lonely? Is there someone you could reach out to for support? Many women have told us that when they feel like calling their abusive partner or ex, they phone a friend instead. Having a plan to do this might help you.

Reflecting on “Am I Addicted to My Partner?”

Can you describe how you feel in the **Manipulative Kindness** phase, and how your partner pulls you back into the relationship?

What are some strategies you might use when you are feeling lonely, or are being “drawn back in” by his **Manipulative Kindness**?

AM I ABUSIVE TOO?

Sometimes women wonder whether they are also abusive, like their partner. Maybe you have fought back, yelled at, or hit your partner. Abusive men, family members, the police, or other “helping professionals” sometimes tell women they are also abusive. The ideas that it “takes two to tango” and that relationships are “50/50,” are predominant in our culture. When considering whether you are also abusive, ask yourself what has happened in your relationship over time. Ask yourself what your partner was doing before you behaved in a way that you thought might be abusive: Was he verbally attacking you? Was he stopping you from doing something? Was he harassing you? Most of the time, women report to us that their seemingly “abusive behaviour” happens in the midst of a lot of different types of abuse from their partner.

For example, a woman yells and smashes a dish on the floor after her partner has been berating her for hours. Her partner latches on to her “bad behaviour,” calling her “crazy” and “abusive” while dismissing or rationalizing his treatment of her. The abusive partner may also say that both his behaviours and the woman’s behaviours are the same, but they are not: the woman’s behaviour is not equal in severity or impact to the partner’s behaviour. She is *reacting* to his abuse.

Next, ask yourself: What is your motive when you act in ways that you think might be abusive? Are you trying to dominate your partner, control him, or get your own way even if it hurts him? Or, is **your motive self-protection**? Are you just trying to protect yourself physically and emotionally? Do you just want to be heard and respected?

As we explore these questions, it becomes clear that most women we have talked to are not interested in dominating or controlling their partners: their actions are in response to being silenced, controlled and humiliated; women often talk about wanting to be heard, and about protecting themselves.

Women may also behave in ways that seem to be an **Explosion**, in an attempt to end the **Tension**-building phase. You may be aware of doing this yourself. If your partner has been increasing the tension for days or is building it to a level that you can no longer tolerate, you may do something to “break it” and move into the inevitable **Explosion** phase. Often, women choose to stand up for themselves, or yell. Some women do this when the kids are at school. Some women may do this while they are drinking or using, so the physical abuse doesn't hurt as much.

Lastly, consider the role of fear in your relationship: Are you afraid of your partner's reactions? Most women say that they are afraid of their partner. However, usually in relationships where the male partner is abusive, he is not afraid of her.

Although you may have behaved in ways that feel uncomfortable to you, it is important to remember that you are attempting to protect the physical and emotional well-being of yourself and your children. You may also be attempting to be heard, or to have some say in your relationship. Your partner is in control of the Cycle: no matter what you do, your partner will find a reason to be abusive. He will try to use your behaviour to justify his explosive behaviour and will try to compare your “bad” behaviour to his abusive behaviour. He is trying to regain control, and is using abusive tactics to do that.

Reflecting on “Who is Abusive in My Relationship?”

Who is initiating the abuse?

- Me My partner

Who is responding to the abuse?

- Me My partner

Who is trying to have power and control?

- Me My partner

Who is defending themselves?

- Me My partner

Am I afraid of my partner?

- Yes No

Is my partner afraid of me?

- Yes No

Does my partner control his actions because he worries that I will hurt him?

- Yes No

Do I control my actions because I worry that he will hurt me?

- Yes No

What are my intentions when I am arguing with my partner? Do I want...

- control?
- to be heard?
- respect?
- power?
- to defend myself?

Additional Thoughts:

IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT

Many women in abusive relationships feel responsible for the abuse, and often ask themselves and others: “*How did I get myself into this situation?*,” “*Why have I put up with it?*,” “*What could I have done differently?*,” or “*How did I allow this to happen?*”

Society gives women many unhelpful ways of answering these questions. You may have been told that you have “poor boundaries,” are “attracted to abuse,” or think abuse is normal because of your “bad childhood experiences.”

We hope the Cycle of Abuse helps you understand the **real reasons** you entered into the relationship, and why you stayed for such a long time: the **Manipulative Kindness** or Honeymoon behaviour draws women in, and keeps them invested in the relationship; then, the **Tension**-building and **Explosion** phases create fear, confusion, and uncertainty, making it dangerous and costly to step away from the relationship. Most women living within abusive relationships are just trying to survive day-to-day; thinking about leaving may seem impossible. It is exhausting and overwhelming to live with the Cycle of Abuse.

You have probably tried many different things to stop the abuse, “fix” the relationship, or avoid **Explosions**, but the truth is, there is nothing you can do to change your partner and his abusive tactics. **He is 100% responsible for the abuse, so he is also 100% responsible for changing and ending the abuse.**

“The biggest thing my counselor said to me was to repeat over and over again: ‘It’s not my fault; it’s not my fault.’ It makes you cry your eyes out. But, it’s not your fault. That’s the biggest thing.”—
Kimberly

Abusive men are constantly changing the rules, and their expectations, to maintain control over you and keep the Cycle of Abuse going. This tactic often keeps women feeling like they might be going crazy, because they never seem to get anything “right”: if a woman decides to stop drinking, her partner may start complaining that she’s boring and never wants to party; if she starts dressing nicely to be more attractive to him, he might accuse her of being a slut or having an affair; if she starts taking anti-depressants, he might complain that her prescriptions cost too much money; if she starts to discipline the children more, he might accuse her of being a bad mother.

The abuser is 100% responsible for the abuse and is 100% responsible for driving the Cycle: he decides where you are in the Cycle, and for how long. In an abusive relationship, you can never win. No matter what you do, he will find a way to blame you, change the rules, or change his expectations. No matter how hard you try, you cannot bring about change to improve the situation. Change will only happen if your partner decides to change his abusive behaviour. **You are not responsible for “making” him abusive.**

“I think when you’re in an abusive relationship, you kind of [want to make] everything numb... I know I felt like that, I just didn’t want to think about everything that was going on. I just wanted to focus on something else, something outside. So I think that’s why, you know, I kind of had the [eating disorder]. I could think about that and I could deal with that, and I didn’t have to worry about anything else... I also found, sometimes, cigarettes would do that for me as well. So I can see that a lot of people would want to turn to substances....” —Wendy

Is the Problem My “Poor Boundaries”?

Women who have experienced abuse are often told by service providers and others that they do not have good “boundaries.” But, if a woman’s partner is abusive, it is **unsafe** for that woman to have boundaries. Perhaps you can recall a time when you said “no” to your partner, or tried to set some limit on his actions. What was his reaction? Did he respect that limit? Abusive men see boundaries as a threat to their power and control. It can be very scary to say “no” to an abusive man. It might also be dangerous. An abusive partner will see you saying “no” as a challenge to his power and control. When you accommodate your partner’s demands, you are looking out for your safety in a very threatening situation.

It is impossible to have boundaries if you are living with an abusive partner. It is possible, but can be extremely difficult, to set up boundaries even if you are separated. After women leave abusive relationships, they often try to build a wall of protection around themselves and their children by moving to a different house, changing locks, refusing to talk to their ex-partners on the phone, or refusing to meet their ex-partners in person. However, abusive ex-partners will often do everything they can to get through these boundaries. They will threaten, manipulate, or coerce their way through. They may use the courts, or custody exchanges, or recruit others to try to convince the woman to “be reasonable,” or to “communicate with him for the good of the children.”

Abusive men will not respect a boundary or a limit. **Your boundaries are not the issue; your partner’s abusive behaviour is the issue.**

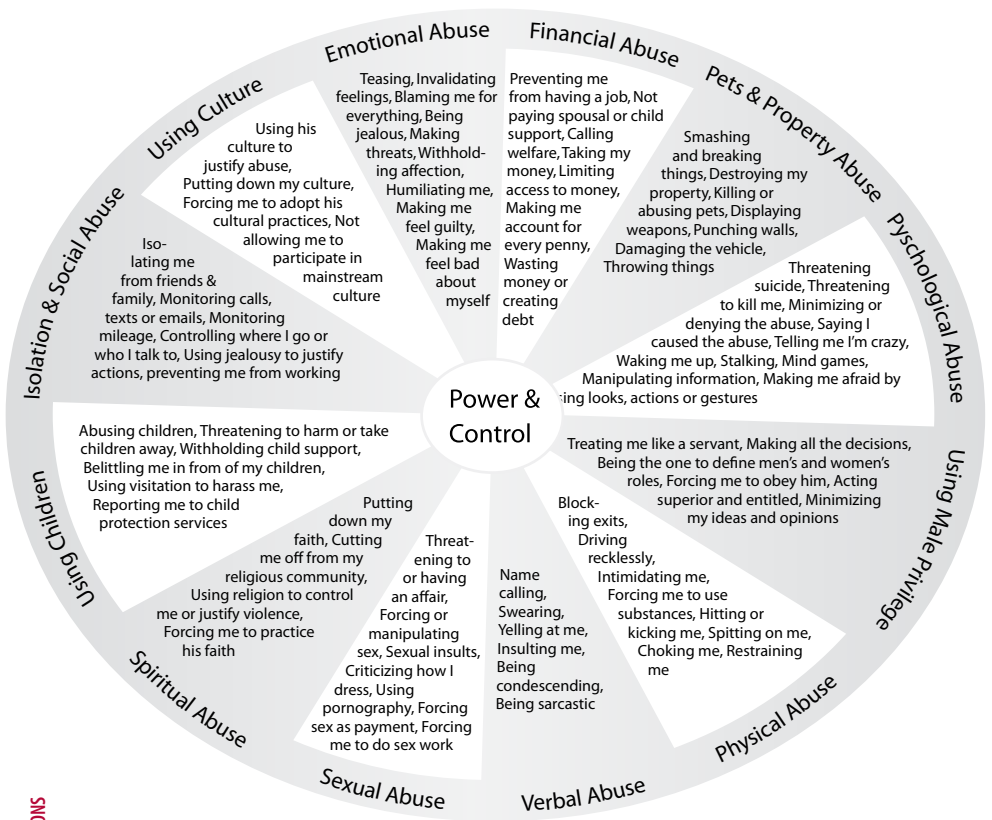
Reflecting on Establishing Boundaries

What happens if you stand up for yourself or for your children: Do you get treated with respect? Does your partner listen to you? Does your partner give you the safety and freedom to make choices for yourself?

Describe what happens if you say “no” to your partner?

THE PROBLEM IS POWER AND CONTROL

An abuser systematically uses threat and intimidation to instill fear, and to intentionally control or dominate his partner. Here are some of the many forms of abuse women experience:ⁱⁱⁱ



ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from the Domestic Violence Intervention Program, Duluth Power and Control Wheel: <http://www.theduluthmodel.org/training/wheels.html>; and When Love Hurts: A Women's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships: <http://whenlovehurts.ca/>

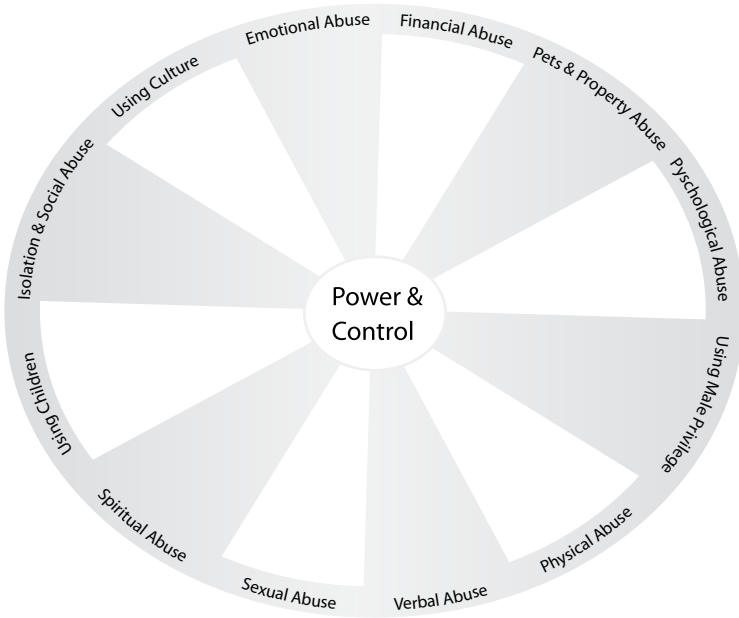
As abusive tactics for power and control occur in every phase of the Cycle of Abuse, women are living in a constant state of anticipation, fear and anxiety. It is no surprise that they might have mental health symptoms (anxiety, depression, stress), and/or turn to prescription medication, alcohol, or other drugs to cope.

You may feel that you have no control over the situation, but may be told by the abuser and by others around you that you **do** have control: “If you would only change your behaviour and/ or responses, things would improve.” However, women say that they have tried everything possible to improve the relationship and their safety, with no success. This is because both the abuse and the Cycle are not caused by you, and have absolutely nothing to do with what you do or do not do.

This may be validating to hear, but it may also affirm your fears about the relationship: that you cannot make him change. It can be devastating to realize that he has to make the decision to change his behaviour—not you. Yet, he must change, for you to be safe in your relationship.

“But when you are verbally abused for so long it’s like [being] brainwashed and you start believing what you are being told.”—Charlize

What Are Some of the Tactics Your Partner Uses to Maintain Power and Control Over You?



ABUSE AFFECTS YOUR MIND AND BODY

Living in an abusive environment takes its toll on women. However, women often don't link the abuse to their physical or mental health concerns, or to their drug or alcohol use.

Some health care and service providers might not understand these links either. For women who are using substances or who have mental health concerns, this can add additional layers of harm and shame.

We invite you to shift your focus from your partner's behaviour, and to pay attention to your experience—to **what happens to you as your partner moves through the Cycle of Abuse**. How does it impact you? How does the Cycle affect your physical or mental health? How does each phase of the Cycle affect your desire to use alcohol or drugs? It is important to keep in mind that **your partner is in control of the Cycle and the abuse**. The abuser decides what tactics of control to use and what stage of the Cycle you are in. We want you to switch from asking, "*What is wrong with me?*" to asking "**What has happened to me?**" and "**How has it affected me?**"

Some of the different ways women describe how abuse affects their health and their lives are listed on the next page. Place a check mark beside the different impacts you have experienced.

Mental Health and Substance Use

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Drinking
- Lack of concentration
- Perpetually worried
- Sadness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anger
- Feeling like you are going crazy
- Using substances or drugs
- Taking lots of prescription drugs
- Forgetfulness/ confusion
- Self harm/ thinking about suicide
- _____
- _____
- _____

Physical Impacts

- Exhaustion
- Not sleeping well/ Insomnia
- Weight loss or gain
- Bladder infections
- Stomach aches
- Headaches/ migraines
- Chronic fatigue/ fibromyalgia
- Injuries
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Miscarriages
- Unwanted pregnancies
- Heart palpitations/Racing heartbeat
- Nausea
- Sexually transmitted infections (e.g. HIV or herpes)
- Disruption in menstrual cycle
- Arthritis
- Forced abortions
- _____
- _____
- _____

Social Impacts

- Living in poverty
- Isolation
- Pressured by service providers, family or friends to leave
- Not being able to see children
- Child protection involvement
- Rejected by family or community
- Losing freedom
- Losing your job or being forced to quit job
- Custody battles
- Being arrested and/or charged
- Feeling judged
- Being insecurely housed or homeless
- Losing friends and family
- Being forced to stop activities you enjoy (e.g. yoga, book club, volunteering)
- _____
- _____
- _____

Women who have been affected by abuse can have many physical and mental health concerns at the same time. Some of these concerns are serious, and some can last for a long time.

“It has affected my health in ways that I don’t even know. The obvious one for me was that I wasn’t getting sleep and I was tired....When you’re in a really stressful situation, you start exhibiting weird symptoms and your body reacts in certain ways... eczema, or I’ll get heat rashes or other bizarre things that just show up where there’s no real cause... And you deal with all your health problems longer.”—Beth

It may be overwhelming to identify all the ways that the abuse has affected you. Yet, you may also feel relieved to discover why you might be so exhausted, depressed, or anxious all the time. In addition to knowing that all of these impacts are natural responses to abuse, it is important to know that these impacts and symptoms often begin to lessen once women are able to get distance from the abuser. Similar to the decrease in physical and mental health symptoms, women also reported that once they were free of abuse and had some safety, security, and adequate housing, their use of alcohol and/or drugs often decreased. Some women require treatment or counseling for their substance use, but it is important to understand that women’s drinking or drug use is often related to their experiences of abuse.

We understand that using drugs or alcohol may be an important way of coping. You may not want to give this up, or you may be unable to make that decision if you are still living with an abusive partner who is also using substances.

Can you think of other ways that the abuse you have experienced is affecting your health and social well-being?

"I have been sick on and off this whole last year, and I think a lot of it is because of stress."—Sarah

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MY MENTAL HEALTH AND EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE?

While living with an abusive partner, you may feel like you are going crazy. You are living in fear, which can create a number of mental and emotional reactions—such as anxiety, depression, hyper vigilance, panic attacks, amnesia, flashbacks, and nightmares.

“Going to my doctor, I used to break down and cry in his office and he’d say, ‘You’re depressed.’ [I would say] ‘No, I’m just sad. I’m just going through a really sad time.’ He said, ‘There’s a name for that. It’s depression.’ Finally, he convinced me I should go on an anti-depressant. Like that was going to stop me from being beat up.”—Laurie

How is Abuse Related to Mental Health Concerns?

- » Rates of violence and trauma are higher in women who access mental health services (in-patient and out-patient) than in the general population of women.
- » Seventy percent of women in psychiatric in-patient care and 80% of those in secure settings (i.e. have been committed) have histories of physical or sexual abuse.²¹
- » Women who have endured violent relationships are four to five times more likely to require mental health treatment.²²

- » The rate of depression among women with experiences of abuse is at least three times higher than the general population of women.²³
- » The rate of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among women with experiences of abuse ranges from between 45% to 84%.²⁴

Research shows that mental health concerns often develop in connection with women's experiences of abuse. The evidence is strong enough for some researchers to suggest that *violence against women is a risk factor for mental health concerns.*²⁵

This means that the abuse often happens first, and that the distress from the abuse may lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, confusion, forgetfulness, not wanting to live, and other mental health symptoms. You might feel like you are going crazy. You might develop eating or sleeping problems: eating too much or too little, throwing up, insomnia, or sleeping too much.

At the same time, mental health concerns can make you more vulnerable to abuse from partners and others. If you have a mental health diagnosis, some providers may see your partner as a good caregiver and may not believe you when you tell them about the abuse.

While we know that sometimes having a diagnosis can help you to begin to understand what is happening to you, and make you feel less “crazy,” you may also have had experiences of feeling like you were not taken seriously, or that you were not believed by service providers or other support people.

“Because he always participated. This is another barrier. He always participated in my sessions with my mental health worker. He had them believe, for the little while, that he was Mr. Support. He insisted. And they agreed [to let him participate]. So I could never speak completely freely, or anywhere freely, about the relationship...All that was being dealt with was the mental health issue. But the mental health issue had so much to do with the relationship issues.”—Vivian

Unfortunately, we have heard from women that some counsellors, doctors, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals do not have enough understanding about the links between women's experiences of abuse, and their mental health impacts or symptoms. That means they may not ask you about your experiences of abuse, or may minimize your experiences of abuse when you raise them. Because of this, some women report being wrongly diagnosed with mental health concerns—such as depression, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder—when they may be displaying the normal reactions and symptoms of living with an abusive partner.

The chaos, fear, and uncertainty of living in an abusive relationship can result in some women having legitimate mental health concerns that require medication. But many women report that their mental health symptoms are reduced, or even disappear, once they are out of their abusive situation and have some safety. It is important that you and your health care provider understand and recognize how your mental health concerns can be linked to your experiences of abuse. You know best what works, and doesn't work, for you: **trust yourself**. Women have talked about the judgment they have encountered from family, friends, and service providers about their experiences of abuse and/or mental health concerns. You may have to be the one who begins a conversation with your health care provider about the links between abuse and how it is connected to women's mental health concerns.

We understand that **your mental health concerns may be natural reactions to experiencing abuse, and to living in fear.**

How Has Your Mental Health Been Affected by the Abuse You Have Experienced?

Since experiencing abuse, my mental health has:

improved worsened stayed the same

The abuse has affected my mental health in the following ways:

"I don't call it mental health; I call it symptoms of abuse, because to me that is what it is."²⁶—Gail

AM I SUFFERING FROM POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)?

Perhaps a health care professional or support person has suggested to you that you are experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). You may, or may not, have found this helpful, depending on how you understand PTSD. PTSD may occur when a person has experienced one, or multiple, traumatic situations. The idea behind PTSD is that a person who has experienced a traumatic event in the past (at least one month ago) still responds as though this event is putting them in danger. The person's body and mind behaves like the trauma is ongoing and that danger still exists, when in fact the danger has passed, and the person is now safe. This leads to various physical and mental responses while trying to cope with this fear, including flashbacks, nightmares, and heightened anxiety.²⁷ The word “**Post**” in PTSD speaks to the idea that these symptoms or reactions are happening *after* the traumatic event and doesn't necessarily recognize situations like abusive relationships where there may be current, ongoing harm and/or threats.

A common example of a traumatic event that may lead to PTSD is a bad car accident, which is one single traumatic event. Women who have lived with an abusive partner have not suffered just one traumatic event, but many frightening events, sometimes over a long period of time. While someone who is rescued after a car accident is no longer in jeopardy, women dealing with an abusive partner may still be in danger and have a legitimate reason to be fearful. Even after separation, women continue to be at great risk for injury and other forms of violence, abuse, and intimidation. Abusive partners often continue to stalk, harass and

threaten women after they have left. In fact, the most dangerous time for women can be the weeks and months after separation. For these reasons, the use of PTSD to describe women who have experienced abuse by a partner is not always accurate.

The reactions that people have to trauma are natural human responses. These responses are how our brain tries to deal with the stressful sensations that occur during traumatic events. They are also the brain's way of trying to keep you safe from further harm: these responses are your brain saying "be careful," "be on guard," "be alert." It is normal to be more cautious, on guard, or to experience nightmares or flashbacks after a traumatic event. In fact, in the case of women with abusive current or ex-partners, these are reasonable and, often helpful, responses to harm or threats. Women are dealing with **current** trauma or fear, not just **past** trauma. Some experts call these responses **survival-based fear reactions** that women use to keep themselves safe.²⁷

It might be helpful to rename PTSD for yourself, and call it Post Traumatic Stress *Response* or *survival-based fear reactions*, instead of Post Traumatic Stress *Disorder*. You may or may not be experiencing post traumatic stress response or having survival-based fear reactions. If you think that you are, it might be helpful to think of it as a way that helps describe *what has happened to you*, instead of a label that describes what is *wrong with you*. You have experienced abuse. This abuse has left you feeling overwhelmed, afraid, confused and exhausted. These are normal responses to what your partner has done to you. This is just another impact of the abuse.

If you are still with your partner, or if he continues to make you feel unsafe, these reactions are your body and mind's way of trying to keep you safe. Some intensive therapies and counselling techniques used to treat PTSD may suggest you change your behaviour to improve your situation. These therapies and techniques may not recognize the legitimate fear you continue to live with and the control your partner

has over you—they may even be unsafe for you. Support from someone that understands the complexity of your situation may be helpful as it can give you an opportunity to talk about your experiences of abuse and its impacts.

Reflections on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

The concept of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (or Response) is **helpful** to me because...

The concept of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (or Response) is **unhelpful** to me because...

IS MY LOW SELF-ESTEEM TO BLAME?

Some women have been told that if they “work” on their self-esteem, their relationship will improve. If your partner is abusive, this is likely not the case. It is extremely difficult to hold onto a positive image of yourself while you are with an abusive partner.

Women may wonder if a problem with low self-esteem is the reason they have “put up with abuse” for so long; they do not think they deserve better.

No one develops a solid sense of self on their own. Humans are social beings by nature. Our self-image is shaped by the people around us, especially by those we are close to. People in our lives act as mirrors, reflecting information back to us. If you have experienced abuse and/or are currently with an abusive partner, you have had one huge mirror dominating your life—your partner—and that mirror is sending back false information to you. Your partner is like one of those distorted mirrors you might find at a carnival. Those mirrors are designed to distort reality. They may distort your image so much that you can hardly recognize yourself. He may say things like you are “lazy,” “stupid,” or a “bad mother.” **These descriptions are not true.**

Abusive men want to dominate a woman’s life and push out others; your partner has perhaps discouraged your friendships with people who might reflect a more positive and more accurate picture back to you.

We don’t believe that your problem is “poor self-esteem.” You may not feel like you have much self-worth, but this is the result of how your

partner, and possibly others, have treated you and manipulated your idea of yourself, not because of your weakness.

Over the years, women have shown us that once they get some positive support and/or get some distance from their partner's control, they start to feel better about themselves. They finally have the freedom to invite people into their lives who will tell them about their strengths and positive qualities: people who will reflect back an accurate picture of themselves. A women's support group is a great place for this part of the healing process to begin. The facilitators and other group participants help women see themselves in a more accurate way.

Some women say that they entered their relationship with a poor sense of self. If you had negative experiences as a child, you might have difficulty seeing your good qualities. This is not a reason or an explanation for abuse. A loving, respectful partner helps us to see the best in ourselves, and is protective and kind about our vulnerabilities. Your partner likely presented himself as a kind and affirming person in the beginning of your relationship, but ultimately took advantage of the negative ideas that you had about yourself: they became fuel for his abuse.

Sometimes, helping professionals may suggest that women with "poor self-esteem" take an assertiveness training course. We think this can be potentially dangerous advice. Your partner is not abusive because you lack assertiveness. An abusive partner sees any effort to assert yourself as a challenge to his power and control, and could become more abusive. You are cautious and accommodating to your partner because he is dangerous, and you are doing your best to keep safe. When women are told that the problem is their "poor self-esteem" or "lack of assertiveness," the blame is put on women instead of focusing on the real problem—their partner's abuse.

It is hard to trust yourself and disagree with a professional, but women know if it is safe to try some of the suggestions providers give them. The best way of deciding if a suggestion is worth trying, is to assess whether the provider is thinking about how to change something within you, or about how to increase your safety. If they are trying to change you, they might not really understand your experiences of abuse and how important it is that you focus on keeping yourself safe.

Reflections on “Self-Esteem”

How did you feel about yourself when you entered into your relationship?

How have your experiences of abuse changed how you feel about yourself?

AM I CODEPENDENT?

The term “codependent” has its origin in the Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) movement. The concept of codependency was first applied to couples in which a partner had an alcohol or drug problem. The other partner, the “codependent one,” worked hard to try to “fix” the problem, often neglecting their own needs. The term has also been used for people in relationships with individuals that have chronic mental health concerns. Today, however, the term codependency is broadly used to describe any “dysfunctional” family or partnership. The term is sometimes used to define women in abusive relationships.

It is important to note that the word “codependent” is not a medical term: it is simply a label that some people use to describe what they see in the behaviour of those who live with addicts. What is it they see? Codependency, has been defined as:

“a condition or a relationship in which a person is controlled or manipulated by another who is affected with a pathological condition (such as an addiction).”²⁸

It also refers to an individual’s pattern of relying on other people for approval, safety and self-identity. Other common characteristics include always putting other people’s needs ahead of your own and being ‘excessively compliant’. Engaging in behaviours such as unnecessary ‘caretaking’ (taking responsibility for another person’s behaviour) and ‘rescuing’ (trying to fix the damage caused by someone else’s behaviour) are often associated with being codependent.^{29,30,31}

If your partner is abusive, this has a very negative impact on your life. You have to pay a great deal of attention to his needs and demands, so you can keep yourself and your children as safe as possible. You will have to put his needs ahead of yours to try to avoid an explosion. We believe

that what some people describe as “codependent behaviour” can be better understood as “the impact of living with an abusive person.” Putting your needs at a lower priority, and paying close attention to your partner’s needs, is a very important safety strategy.

The A.A. movement encourages people to emotionally “detach” from the addict’s behaviour, but this makes a number of assumptions: that you have choices you may not actually have, and that “detaching” is an option. If you try to “detach,” your partner may become angrier and more abusive. It may not be safe for you to “detach.”

The term codependent suggests that something is *wrong* with *you*, and that *you* need to change. This puts the focus on your behaviour, and leaves you working hard (once again) to try to improve things in the relationship. This does nothing to promote your safety and well being. The problem is your partner’s abuse. You are not to blame and you do not need to change. And there is nothing you can do to change him. He is the one who needs to take responsibility and change.

Reflections on “Codependency”

How has your partner’s abuse forced you to be more attentive to his needs or reactions?

How has your partner’s abuse forced you to ignore or minimize your own needs?

HOW IS MY USE OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL CONNECTED TO MY EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE?

Women who experience abuse find many ways to cope—escaping into TV; shopping; seeking food as comfort; reaching out to a friend. Women who have current and/or past experiences of abuse are found to use alcohol and other drugs more often. Coping with these experiences of abuse is often the reason that women start using alcohol or drugs, including prescription drugs.

Between **67% to 80%** of women in addictions treatment have experienced physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives. This number rises to between **90% to 100%** when psychological abuse is included.³²

Often women use drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with someone who is hurting them or threatening to hurt them. Many women have told us that they can escape the experiences of abuse by using drugs or alcohol, and that it helps numb the effects of the abuse. Some women have injuries or pain from being abused, and find that drugs or alcohol can reduce this pain.

Unfortunately, women who drink or use drugs may be judged by friends and family, service providers, and society in general. We recognize that

“With drugs it’s not really a means of addiction, it’s more a means of survival. You do them to sell them, and to get away from the guy you’re with. You go to a house and do drugs instead of sit at home and be abused....” —Willie

“It went from mental abuse to physical to emotional. The way I dealt with it was by drinking all the time. That’s the only way I could cope.”—Sherri

this is often a useful coping strategy for living in an abusive relationship: women who use substances to cope or escape have found an important way to survive their constant state of fear, domination and uncertainty. It is important to respect that you have found ways to protect yourself, and to survive emotionally and physically.

What Women Say...

- » Some women drink alcohol or use other substances to numb or escape the emotional and physical trauma of abuse.
- » Women tell us that they “self-medicate” to help reduce feelings of fear, pain and isolation. It can also help deal with the physical pain you have from being injured or hurt.
- » Substance use can sometimes calm down or mellow out abusive partners. Or, it can be a time when men become more violent and aggressive.
- » Trying to stop using substances may cause your abusive partner to increase his abusive or controlling behaviour. Any attempts to stop your alcohol or drug use may be threatening to your partner, and some abusive men will actively try to make you relapse or start using again. Even if you are committed to reducing or abstaining from drugs or alcohol, your partner’s behaviour may make this difficult.
- » In many cases, a woman’s initial or escalated use of alcohol or drugs is forced or manipulated by her partner.

“We use the drugs to try and mask the abuse. And once you stop using them, flashbacks come. It’s just a constant. We just self-medicate. Trying to push those memories out.”

—Gladys

“The first incidence of abuse started with mental, and then physical. I thought, once is okay. We just bought a house, which was a big investment. We had a three year-old daughter. I was working full-time...[but] I lost my job due to strangulation marks on my neck. Eventually, he got me to take his medication so I could cope...with having enough energy for my daughter and to suit his needs.”—Kate

Often, men point to their use of drugs and/or alcohol as an excuse for violence. Perhaps you or others believe that “he’s only abusive when he drinks or does drugs.” **Abusive men are always abusive.** Maybe the Explosion is worse when he is drinking, but he is likely using other forms of power and control when he is sober. **Ask yourself: When he is not using or drinking, are you free to do whatever you want and make decisions without the fear of consequences?**

Women have had bad things happen to them—like losing their homes, their jobs, or their children, because of the abuse they are experiencing. This can be very painful. Without support, women can sometimes use substances to numb these painful feelings.

“My life was just starting to get good. And then they [child welfare] ripped my kids away. It literally threw me down the darkest hole I’ve ever been in, even after being raped and tortured. This was almost worse...I went straight to the crack dealers house and he handed me the pipe and a big pile of dope and I was gone for a week. I never slept...I was a mess.”—Penny

Many women who have had their children removed from them, turn to substance use as a coping mechanism. If you were actively using when your children were apprehended, you may continue to use substances to

numb the pain and shame associated with the loss. Some women may have multiple experiences of loss associated with child apprehension, custody battles and/or death.

How do You Cope with Your Experiences of Abuse?

How do Alcohol and/or Drugs Help You Cope with Abuse?

**“My addiction was the solution—my problem is abusive relationships....”
—Stella**

Have You Ever Worried About How Much Prescription Medication You Are Taking?

Women in abusive relationships are more likely to be prescribed medication than women not experiencing abuse.^{33,34,35}

Women express fears of becoming addicted to prescription medication, or a loss of alertness when on medication. The most damaging side effect of inappropriate prescriptions is the impact the medication has on a woman's ability to think or feel her way out of a situation.

Unfortunately, if your health care provider and other professionals don't understand how your health concerns might be related to your experiences of abuse, you may be given lots of prescriptions or medications to treat each individual "problem" or "complaint." You may have never been asked about other factors in your life that might be contributing to your health issues, or you might not have felt comfortable talking about it with your doctor or health care provider. You are not alone; many women have told us their worries about whether they could trust health care providers enough to share their stories. Women also shared that when they expressed concern over the amount of medications they were prescribed, their concerns were often minimized, and they felt pressured to keep taking them.



"My doctor was my drug dealer..."—Sam

WHY DON'T THE 12 STEPS WORK FOR ME?

Some challenges posed by the 12 Step model for women with experiences of abuse may include:

- » It requires buy-in to the idea that you are powerless over unwanted substance use.
- » Abstinence from all drugs and alcohol is the ultimate goal.
- » A woman's expertise of her own situation is not acknowledged.
- » The model may not fully appreciate the experiences of women with varied backgrounds and circumstances.
- » Support falls away during periods of substance use or relapse.³⁶

The 12 Steps have their origin in Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), which was started by two men, Bill Wilson and Robert Smith, in 1935. Wilson and Smith based the 12 Steps on their experience of working with 100 white men and one woman who were struggling with their problematic use of alcohol. They described alcoholics as egocentric, arrogant, resentful, controlling and violent.³⁷

Although this definition may describe your partner, it likely does not describe you.

The first clients Wilson worked with were privileged white men, men of power and influence. Wilson saw the need to deflate the “overblown egos” of these men, which is part of what he created the 12 Steps to do. Generally, this worked for the white, upper-middle-class men that Wilson worked with. But this approach does not fit the needs of most women

who have experienced abuse. Women who have experiences of abuse or who have been oppressed in other ways, do not need to be degraded and further put down. They need to be encouraged and supported.

A.A. was also first developed in a Christian context and makes reference to a male God. Some groups have worked to take away this male language, but for some, any language about any God is a barrier to healing. This may be especially true if you have experienced spiritual abuse from your partner or your religious community. As well, you may want to draw on your own spiritual beliefs. Indigenous people often want to approach their healing in a way that honours their own spirituality.

The 12 Steps is one model of recovery. It has its strengths but also its limitations. Many women have expressed discomfort with the way that men seem to often dominate A.A. meetings. Perhaps being in a mixed group with both men and women does not work for you. Some women have found it preferable to find a group that is for women only.

Some women have also found the 16 Steps that are outlined in Charlotte Kasl's book *Many Roads, One Journey* helpful. The 16 Steps were developed with women and their experiences in mind. She identifies that women often start using substances as a coping and survival strategy. She looks at women's use of substances in the wider context of their lives.

If you are seeking to reduce your use of street drugs, alcohol, or prescription medications, you are making a very courageous step. You deserve support that recognizes all of the challenges in your life, and that especially recognizes the impacts of abuse in your life.

Reflections on the 12 Steps

Have you tried the 12 Steps?

Yes

No

I don't know

The 12 Steps are useful to me because...

The 12 Steps are not useful to me because...

MOTHERING AND TRYING TO PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN

Women living in abusive relationships do their very best to care for and protect their children. You may have been told that you aren't doing enough for your children, or that you are being neglectful by staying in the relationship. However, you are most likely doing a number of things to ensure your children are as safe and provided for as you can:

- » You may be worried about where you would live and how you would financially support your children if you left.
- » You may be concerned that the courts will allow your partner to have access to the children when you can't be there to protect them.
- » You may be worried because your partner has threatened to hurt you or your children if you leave.
- » You may be concerned because your partner has threatened to take the children and never return them.

“When I left my partner, I... didn't know where to go for help with two little ones. And I had a good career, I had an amazing career, but I couldn't go [to work] because I had to look after my kids. And I knew I wasn't mentally stable enough to go back into my career. So I had to literally get to the poverty line before social services would help me. I literally had to be without a car, without a home, before they would give me any money.

These fears add an additional layer to the difficulty of living in an abuse relationship, and to thinking about leaving that relationship. Many women who have left abusive relationships talk about the financial challenges and pressures they face in providing for their children.

Because women with children are often on income assistance once they leave their relationship, even looking after the most basic needs—such as finding somewhere to live—becomes a challenge. Affordable housing is lacking in many communities across Canada. Women have also told us that the amount of money they receive from income assistance is not enough to pay for rent, food and clothing for their family.

I had to go to the food bank, and... thank God it's there, but you know you feel like less of a person when you're standing in line at the food bank. I would make it so that I'd leave my kids at a friend's house and then go do all of my running around to go... get the food, get the clothes. And I went to social services to arrange parenting courses so that I knew how to handle things when I was at my breaking point with my kids...

And it took me about two years to be able to put all the necessary steps in line for me and for my kids. I've had so many doors closed in my face because I was a single parent. People would not let me rent because I was on welfare and a single parent."—Sally

Use This Space to List the Things You are Doing for Your Children

I am protecting and caring for my children by:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Women are often judged negatively for not protecting their children from an abusive partner. In our work, women described the amazing lengths they go to, to keep their children safe. This often involves protecting children from court decisions that do not recognize the risks imposed by abusive men.

“I went from a mentally abusive household to a husband who physically abused me and did drugs. And my home was so full of drugs; I had no control over what he was selling in the house, what he was doing in the house or doing to me. And then I had my kids, and I knew then that I didn’t want them growing up in a household like that. It didn’t feel safe for me or for my kids... And... that was enough for me to leave...

But where I went was even worse than where I left. And the hardest part for me was [that] they didn’t believe me...the courts didn’t believe me, the judge didn’t believe me. I had to pay for supervised visitations, because family services didn’t believe me. No one believed what I was telling them [about] what was going on in my home. So I had to provide the necessary steps to keep my kids safe.”—Alison

Can you relate to this woman’s experience?

If your partner is abusive, he may be preventing you from caring for your children the way that you want to. He is also adding stress to your life, and this makes it difficult for you to be patient and attentive to your children. We want you to recognize that you are doing a lot to protect and care for your children.

IF YOU NO LONGER HAVE CUSTODY OF YOUR CHILDREN

Some women have been forced to give up custody of their children to an abusive partner when trying to end the relationship. Often family courts do not want to hear about how abusive your partner has been, or they think that men should be allowed to have access to their children no matter how they treat their partner. Sometimes an abusive man is able to convince the courts that his partner is a bad mother and incapable of looking after the children. Women are often labeled as an “unfriendly parent” or simply not believed when trying to tell the courts about the abuse they are experiencing.

In cases of violent relationships, child protection workers do not always distinguish between the abusive parent and the non-abusive parent. Non-abusive mothers are sometimes lumped in with abusive partners and also seen as a danger to the children. Or they are blamed for not protecting their children from their abusive partners. **This is not fair.**

Perhaps your partner has custody of the children through a court order; or because he threatened to harm you and/or the children if you didn't give him custody. Perhaps child protection was involved. Regardless, losing your children is incredibly painful. Despite the fact that women often feel a great deal of grief related to the loss of their children, it is often an invisible loss that does not get talked about. Women who have had their child(ren) permanently removed from their care, carry a great deal of shame and blame in addition to their heavy feelings of loss.

When women lose their child(ren), they may lose many other relationships and supports such as social workers, counsellors, or friends and family. These losses are traumatic for both women and their child(ren), and it can take a long time to work through the associated emotions. These feelings of loss are worse for women who have had their own childhood experiences of removal, child protection, foster care, and/or institutional abuse (for example in residential schools).

“...maybe a support group for women who are trying to get their children back. I just don’t know anyone who is in the same shoes as me. To find friends that I can hang out with, friends that are safe...I try and make friends, and then they relapse, and then I can’t hang out with them because it will trigger me, so I gotta cut that tie, right? I gotta do what I gotta do to keep myself safe. So it’s just trying to find a safe environment.”—Cathryn

The loss of your children is painful, and it changes your identity as a mother. You are not to blame for your children being exposed to your partner’s abuse; you did everything you could to protect them. We recognize that knowing this does not take away the pain of this loss. It is unfair and tragic that many women and children have to go through this experience.

YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING GRIEF AND LOSS

“But [my counselor] said to me, ‘You’ve been grieving.’ I said, ‘What?’ A few years ago, I went through a whole bunch of deaths at once and because I was with the person I was with [her abuser], I didn’t have time to grieve. But, a lot of women are labeling it as depression when they’re actually grieving. And they’re grieving all the losses. They’re grieving not being with a spouse that they expected to retire with, they’re grieving because they’ve lost their children, and they’re grieving because of a huge number of things. Yet, grieving after leaving a violent relationship is really not talked about out there. So maybe there needs to be a program for women that are grieving and talking about all the losses, and moving on from there. Because until these things were put in perspective in my own mind, that’s when I started to heal. Okay, I’m depressed, [but] I’m not going to be depressed my whole life. No, if I’m grieving, this is not going to last forever. This is normal.”—Lianne

Each woman’s journey to safety and well-being is unique. Yet there are similarities. The healing process tends to involve periods of intense grief and sadness, as well as periods of rebuilding and hope. Whether or not you have left your partner, you may find yourself confused and overwhelmed by these mixed feelings.

What Women Say About Their Grief and Losses

Their hopes for their relationships and for their families:

- » I grieve the loss of who I thought my partner was.
- » I no longer trust the person I thought I could trust the most.
- » My life is not at all how I wanted it to be.
- » My family, as I knew it, is gone.

Mothering:

- » I only have my children 50% of the time now.
- » I lost custody of my children.
- » I lost the opportunity to be a “stay at home mom.” I have to work to support my family.
- » My children have turned against me.

Their health:

- » I now have an alcohol or drug problem.
- » I now have a mental health diagnosis.
- » I now have lots of health issues.

Their identity and sense of self:

- » I lost most of my friends and my social network.
- » I’ve lost social status.
- » I feel labeled as a “single mom,” “mentally ill,” or an “addict.”

Their financial security and belongings:

- » I lost all my financial security.
- » I am now living in poverty.
- » I lost all of my personal belongings, including family pictures and keepsakes.

Their hopes:

- » I feel like I’ve lost the best years of my life.
- » I grieve the loss of my hopes and dreams.

Their pets:

- » I had to give up my pets.

“I had five cats and two dogs before I met my abuser. We acquired another two cats at the beginning of the relationship. When I decided to leave the relationship, I had to put all of my pets except one dog in foster care. Later, they were adopted. This was the most devastating thing I ever had to do. I still grieve and feel the loss of them. I miss them...” - Farrell

Women Experience Grief in Many Different Ways.

How is grief affecting your health and well-being?

- Sleeping more
- Loss of appetite or over-eating
- Heightened anxiety
- Feeling more isolated
- Crying a lot
- Using drugs or alcohol to cope
- Self harming or cutting
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

The Grief and Rebuilding Cycle



For many women, healing is a process of “cycling” through periods of grief and periods of rebuilding, like the figure 8 diagram above.^{iv} Sometimes women will feel all of the losses they have experienced; at other times, they will feel like they are moving forward and rebuilding their lives. As with most emotional things, it is not all neat and tidy. You may spend hours, days, and weeks in the grief process, and little time feeling positive about your future.

Early on, the rebuilding part of the process is often limited: you may have a good day or week, then may suddenly find yourself swept back into grief; you may be spending a great deal of time in grief, feeling many painful and uncomfortable emotions, then without warning feel great joy or hope for the smallest of reasons.

iv Used with permission from When Love Hurts: A Women’s Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships: <http://whenlovehurts.ca/>

Many women are afraid there is something wrong with them because they are “still” grieving, even years after separation. There is an opening at the top and bottom of the figure 8, a reminder that **this intense emotional process will come to an end at some point**, but it is good to remember that it is normal for this to be a long process.

The shape of the figure 8 will likely change over time. Immediately after a separation, a woman may spend the majority of her time in the grieving part of the process and only get tiny glimpses of rebuilding. After being separated for a long time, she may be focused almost exclusively on rebuilding and be surprised when grief comes up again, perhaps because of a significant event like a holiday or family wedding.

Processing Grief

Women experience feelings of grief and loss while in an abusive relationship, as well as after they leave. Some women find it hard to grieve until they have been separated for a while from their abusive partner—this is called “delayed” or “complex” grief.

Even though an enormous amount of grief comes from living with or separating from an abusive partner, society makes it very difficult to grieve these losses. When a woman loses a partner due to death, she receives a great deal of support—including time off work, life insurance, childcare, and gifts of food. When a woman loses a partner due to leaving an abusive relationship, she is often subject to judgment and stigma.

Divorce and separation, especially from an abusive partner, are not recognized as a cause for grief. There is no societal recognition of how difficult it is, and how much strength it takes, to leave an abusive relationship. It is also a complicated grief, as women often still love their partner but know they need to leave for their safety.

Your feelings of grief may be linked to loss: the loss of a relationship that you put a great deal of time and energy into; having to let go of your hopes for a happy future with your partner; or the loss of the family unit you had hoped for.

For these reasons, sometimes a long time after separation, feelings of sadness may sweep over you unexpectedly and you can feel quite overwhelmed by your losses. Unfortunately, by this time some family and friends think you should be “over it.”

Expectations of family and friends—who think that you should not only be fine, but happy that you’ve left your partner—place a great deal of pressure on you. This can make you feel again that there is something wrong with you, because you continue to feel sad, or continue to struggle. As a result, you may feel more shame because you just can’t “get over it.” You may have been given prescription medication, or may be self-medicating with alcohol or drugs to deal with these intense, overwhelming feelings. **You are not alone.**

Whether you are still in an abusive relationship, or have left one, what are some of the losses you have experienced?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

WHY DO I STILL LOVE HIM?

Women often struggle with their feelings of love for their partner. Perhaps others have suggested that you are “crazy” for still loving your partner. When you first met your partner, he demonstrated a lot of positive behaviour and it was this version of himself that you fell in love with. You have now experienced him being very hurtful and abusive, but you still remember the person you first thought he was. On top of this, the more positive-looking behaviour keeps “coming back” around. This is part of the Cycle of Abuse—**Manipulative Kindness, Tension, and Explosion**. He first presented you with **Manipulative Kindness** and he returns at times to that more positive-looking or acceptable behaviour. If all you ever saw from him was **Explosion**, it would probably be easier to stop loving him. But the **Manipulative Kindness** or Honeymoon behaviour sparks hope in you: that is the intention of this behaviour.

Women have taught us that the emotion of love is not easily “turned off.” If you have been in a relationship for a long time and have loved your partner for many years, you will not likely lose those emotions overnight.

If you know your relationship needs to end and you want to be able to let go of your feelings of love, keeping a journal might help. Sometimes seeing the negative things in black and white helps women see just how devastating the abuse can be. Some women have reported that when they feel they are being “manipulated by his kindness,” they look back over their journal to help them see things more clearly. For many women, journals have helped them see that the “bad” greatly outweighs the “good.” **If you keep a journal, be sure to keep it well hidden from your partner. If there is no safe place to hide it, journaling is probably not a good idea for now.**

The fact that you are a loving person is not a flaw in you. But maybe your partner is not worthy of your kind and open heart, and maybe you want to begin to shift your love, care and concern away from him and towards people who deserve it. One person who certainly deserves your love, care and concern, is you!

Reflections on “Why I still love him”

What first attracted you to your partner?

What are the some of the ways your partner “manipulates you by his kindness” to draw you back into the relationship?

HOPE AND REBUILDING

Physical and Emotional Safety is the First Step to Rebuilding Your Life and Healing from Abuse.

“I used to have horrible migraine headaches. They would send me to bed for the day. The doctor told me I would have them for the rest of my life. I have been separated from my partner for six weeks now and I have not had a single headache since I left.”—Joni

Most women find the first few years after separation to be a roller coaster of emotions. Sometimes they feel all of the losses of the relationship (bottom part of the figure 8), while other times they are relieved and happy to have left (top part of the figure 8). As their lives evolve, many women begin to feel excited and even joyful in their newfound freedom and independence.

Rebuilding is linked to getting support from family, friends, and service providers that understand your experiences and care about you. Participating in a support group, where you can share your experiences with other women in a safe and supportive environment, can be a powerful way to help you heal. You will hopefully meet other women who have had similar experiences as you, and this can help you feel less alone.

For the process of healing, grief work is just as important as rebuilding work—one does not happen without the other. **You will move through it; you will not always feel the intense and uncomfortable feelings that you may have now.**

Women often feel discouraged about how long the rebuilding process takes. Our society sometimes believes that it should happen quickly, but it does not. Women have taught us that rebuilding and healing happen through a series of “baby steps.” Women are often hard on themselves because they don’t think they are accomplishing “enough.” Support groups or informal gatherings with other women can be a place where grief and the rebuilding process can be discussed, and where women’s steps forward can be celebrated.

It is normal to have lots of mixed feelings and emotions. Moving through various thoughts and feelings is a key component to healing.

How do you feel when you are in the ***grieving*** part of the healing process?

How do you feel when you are in the ***rebuilding*** part of the healing process?

It is important that you know there is no timeline for grief and loss. However, having supportive people around you, and having permission to talk about your losses and grief, can help you manage it.

How to Maintain Hope

Finding and maintaining hope while you are still in an abusive relationship, or after you have left one, can be very difficult. You will be processing the many emotions of loss, grief, sadness, anger, love, exhaustion, overwhelm, and fear. You may also be dealing with many health concerns at the same time.

Here are some suggestions that may help you cope and maintain hope:

- » Remember the message to you from other women at the beginning of this handbook: **You are not to blame. You are not crazy. You are not alone.** You are worth it. It does get better. Be gentle and kind to yourself.
- » If you have left, remind yourself why—journaling about your abuse can help you remember the reasons that you left, and can be particularly helpful if you're having second thoughts about leaving.
- » One of the hardest things to do, once you start to rebuild, is to learn to love yourself. Abuse—verbal, emotional, or physical—slowly erodes your self-worth and self-esteem in ways you may not realize. Learn to slowly build your self-esteem back up. Make a list of your best attributes (ask a trusted friend or family member to help) and keep it with you at all times.
- » Share your story with trusted friends, family, or service providers, in support groups or anonymously on websites or forums (for example: <http://violenceunsilenced.com/>)
- » Find positive affirmations and/or quotes that speak to you and that give you strength. Hang them on your wall, on the mirror in your bathroom, or in your wallet.
- » If it's possible, take a warm bath or read a book.
- » If possible, try to do some physical activity such as going for a walk, taking a bike ride, or practicing yoga.
- » Try to get in touch with hobbies or interests that used to bring you joy or fulfillment, such as cooking, painting, or gardening.

- » If you have children and taking time for yourself is very difficult, see if you can find a friend or family member who will watch them for a couple of hours. Or, find a local community organization that offers support to mothers. Some of these organizations offer limited free childcare.
- » Identify a friend you can call when you're missing your ex partner—talking to a friend can help you resist the urge to reach out to your ex when you're down.
- » Talk to a counsellor or join a support group.
- » Talk to family or to friends that understand and are sympathetic to what you are going through—community members and neighbors can also be a good resource.
- » When an anniversary, birthday, holiday, or other special occasion is coming up, prepare yourself. Try to make other plans or have a strong support circle in place to help you through these additionally challenging times.
- » Try and give yourself time and space when you need it. Healing is hard; go easy on yourself. Don't put a time limit on getting past your pain. This is your journey and your experience, and no one can tell you how much time it will take to heal. But, know that you will heal.
- » Be conscious of your emotional routines—maybe your partner was your go-to person when you needed support. You may want to find new coping mechanisms. This may take time, but you can do it.
- » Learn to trust your gut.
- » Have awareness, gentleness, and patience with yourself while you make little steps to healing and recovery.

Making the Decision to Seek Support

Deciding to seek out support can occur over time, with lots of contemplation, or it can happen in a moment of crisis. If you are still living in an abusive environment, it can feel scary to seek support; you may worry about what could happen if he found out. It might also feel

liberating; this may be the first time you have asked for support, so you are not sure what to expect. Most likely you will feel a combination of mixed emotions, including anxiety, fear, and hope.

Trust that you have lots of safety strategies in place already, and that you are doing your best to look after and protect yourself and your children. Seeking support will hopefully help you continue to do this.

It takes a lot of strength to reach out for support—acknowledge yourself for taking the step. It's hard to know what services are out there, and how to navigate them. Knowing who to call, and what will happen when you call, can feel overwhelming.

Finding Someone You Connect With

In many cases, when you reach out for support you will not get to choose what provider you see. It often takes time to feel connected to someone enough, and to trust someone enough, to share your experiences of violence. Sometimes, women feel judged or mistreated by a provider. When this happens, it is very difficult to have a supportive and therapeutic relationship with that provider. If this is the case for you, ask if you can change providers—if that option is available to you. You are entitled to feel safe, supported and validated.

List the qualities of a support person you would trust:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Talking to Other Women Who Share Your Experience

Many of the women that shared their stories with us expressed the importance of talking with other women who have also experienced abuse. Some counsellors have lived through their own experiences of abuse, and will share this common experience with you. Women-only support groups, or drop-in programs at local women's centres and community agencies, are also good options for connecting with other women. Women describe a number of benefits from connecting with women who have lived through similar experiences, including feeling more connected and less isolated; feeling less alone; not feeling judged; and feeling cared for.

"You know what is very helpful, is talking to someone that's been through the same thing as you, so you can relate to that person. So you don't feel ashamed, you don't feel like a loser..."—Liz

What Women Say About Support Groups

Support groups for women who have experienced abuse are often offered by women's centres, transition houses, or community services. If you don't know about support groups in your community, ask a service provider that you trust where they are offered.

Here is what some of the women from the Making Connections Support Groups had to say:

"Another thing that really helped...was coming here and getting the feeling that we mattered. Like if we missed a week...the next week people are saying 'Oh, where were you, what happened?' or if you don't call when you're not there, people are following up, 'What happened, what's going on?'. [It feels like] it actually matters, when you do come through a door it's like 'Oh, hi! Hi!' and just feeling like people are glad to see you."—Lynne

"I'm in the city but I'm still really isolated, and in my relationship that isolation was fostered 'cause he didn't want friends or family or anyone to come and help or even observe what was going on, 'cause it was a secret in the family. So, to come to this group is a window into the world 'cause we're isolated all week, and we do our own thing, but when we come together, it's a window on how other people live their lives, and that there's choices for us. When we go back...into our own worlds, and all the demands of raising children or working and other things, we don't see those options unless we talk to other people. So that's the wonderful part of it, it's a window that actually frees us from that isolation..."—Lana

“Everyone sharing, it gave me courage to be able to share what I had to share...it was very inspiring, to see all these women be strong with what they’re going through. And then, to not be strong too, and that was okay.”—Beth

“But that was so exciting to come here and meet all these beautiful women that have had these same experiences. We think no one else in the world would live like this. But...for me it does take away that crazy-making, like I’m [not] insane? ... And it’s very valuable.”—Sandy

“I need to get some answers from people that have been through what I’ve been through, you know, and that’s why I came, and that’s been awesome, every week you get insight from people that have lived through either the same thing or something very similar or completely different and yet it...it works. That’s so important.”—Tina

If support groups for women with experiences of abuse are not offered in your community, perhaps you can suggest to the women’s centre or transition house that they start offering one. Or, perhaps you can start to meet informally (for coffee, or at the park) with other women you know who have had similar experiences, and offer support to one another.

Challenges to Getting the Support You Need

Women consistently tell us they have difficulty getting help that is supportive and that reflects their needs. Your partner may impose limits on you, which makes it difficult to get to services (for example, he may not allow you to have a phone, car or money). Your partner may also threaten you, or not allow you to go anywhere by yourself, which prevents you from reaching out for support.

Most organizations have a mandate to provide services to individuals that fit certain criteria. You may have experienced calling somewhere for help, where they told you that you don't fit their service, or that you are not suitable for their program. When women have been excluded from services, they describe feeling embarrassed, ashamed, judged, and discriminated against.

“I’m always seeing judging eyes. Judging ears. It feels like they don’t want to hear your story. Or maybe, you’re fabricating some of your story? This is how it was. This is how I present it, because it’s the only way I know how to. It’s judging eyes. That’s the barrier I face every day when I leave the door. Which people are going to have those judging eyes?”—Freddie

Women have also told us of times when they made the brave decision to reach out for help and they were not believed. Other women say that when they disclosed their experiences of abuse, their fears and concerns were minimized or discounted. Some women also reported that when they talked to someone about the abuse, many decisions were made without their consent. Women have received these kinds of responses

by a lot of different service providers, including: doctors, nurses, police officers, social workers, transition house workers, counsellors, child protection workers, judges and lawyers.

Long wait lists are also a barrier to accessing support and to finding safe, affordable, and permanent housing. You are not alone in your struggles. Many women with experiences of violence are forced by circumstance to be on income assistance. In most communities, the amount allotted for housing is not enough to cover the cost of a safe and comfortable place to live, which leaves many women with very little money for food and other essentials. You may be going hungry to make sure you can pay your rent and feed your kids. **This is not right.**

“I have to walk all the way across town to mental health, and the next day you have to walk to Aboriginal family services.... Then sometimes if I need something to stabilize me, I have to walk over to the clinic to pick up a prescription. Walk across town to pick up that, and then come back and sit and wait so that they can monitor me and make sure I am okay. Then sometimes I am just like f--k it, I am tired and I don't feel like taking care of myself right now. I would much rather just lay here on the floor because that is easier.”—Millie

These examples are not intended to discourage you, but to highlight that there are a lot of external barriers to you getting good support. You are not alone in your struggle and **it is not your fault.**

Experiences with Services and Providers

Most communities have great services and dedicated providers that are supporting women with experiences of violence, mental health and

substance use. These services hope to provide you with what you need to be safe and supported, so that you can be on your way to improving your health, wellness and safety.

Still, we know that when women ask for help, some service providers are not always as supportive or helpful as they could be. The women we spoke to believe that service providers may not know how their actions may be hurtful to you—such as turning you away from services; judging your decisions; not believing you; or questioning your ability to protect your children.

Women tell us that these negative experiences with service providers can trigger or escalate their use of drugs or alcohol. They can also create a barrier to asking for help again in the future, or force them into a service that isn't right for them.

“I don't feel comfortable if it's a certain person. There's somebody there that makes you feel like you're a burden. And I've been a burden all my life. I don't need to feel that. You need people to love you when you can't love yourself... not feel like they are just there for a pay cheque.”— Brooke

If You Have Had a Negative Experience Accessing Support

Having negative experiences with a provider or a service can be really devastating when you are in need of support. Here are some things to think about when you access a service:

- » Trust your own experience and feelings about your contact with a provider.
- » You are entitled to support that is respectful and validating.
- » Not all providers understand the complexity of women's lives and how substance use and mental health intersect with violence.

- » Approaches between providers, even within the same organization, can be different. If you feel like the counsellor, doctor, social worker or advocate isn't right for you, keep looking for a provider that you connect with and trust.
- » Ask if it is possible to change providers. In cases where you are not able to change providers, try to find and connect with other women with similar experiences, look for online communities and support, or call a crisis line in your city or province.
- » Services do not always understand and reflect the complications in women's lives. Even if a provider is supportive, they may be limited to what they can offer you in terms of support.
- » We understand that it is incredibly frustrating to make the decision to get support and be turned away, put on a wait list, or be treated unfairly. You are deserving and worthy of support. Keep looking; there are providers out there that understand.
- » You are not alone. There are many women who are experiencing the same challenges and frustrations as you are when trying to get support. Try and connect with each other through your local women's centre; share childcare, transportation and your stories.

Recognizing Helpful Support

Many women have sought help through a variety of counsellors and other helping professionals. Sometimes counselling or other support is helpful, and sometimes it is not: counselling or advice-giving can be dangerous if it disconnects you from your inner voice, your wisdom, and your experience.

“... they gave me a counsellor that I trusted and connected with and [who knew] every little detail about my life. They have given me that one person.”—Allisa

For women currently in an abusive situation, helpful counselling or support should prioritize their physical and emotional safety. It is hard to trust yourself and to disagree with a professional, but remember: you are the expert on your own safety and life. The best way to decide if a service provider's suggestions are worth trying, is to determine whether the counsellor is thinking about how to change something in you, or about how to increase your safety and well-being. A service provider who asks you to make changes in yourself, might not really understand your experiences of abuse and how important it is that you keep your focus on your safety. The service provider may not understand that your choices, and ability to make changes, are extremely limited. Some women describe being given advice that would have put them at risk in their relationship, if they had followed it. Some women who have chosen not to follow the service provider's advice, have lost the support of that service provider.

Helpful counselling or support encourages you to hear your own voice and your own wisdom more clearly. Women tell us that having a service provider who has had similar experiences or struggles, can help them feel connected to, and trusting of, that person. Hopefully, you come away from a counselling session or appointment feeling that you have been listened to, affirmed, and that you are clearer about the negative impacts your partner's abuse is having on you. If you come away more confused,

doubting yourself, or feeling weighed down, you may question whether this service provider is right for you.

It may be helpful to know that some counsellors, health care and service providers are not trained in the dynamics and realities of abuse. Contact your local transition house or women's centre to find a counsellor who has specific training on the dynamics of abusive relationships and the impacts.

What IS helpful for you in a counsellor or support person?

What IS NOT helpful for you in a counsellor or support person?

IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT LEAVING

Women often say that they want the abuse to end, not the relationship. We recognize that living separately—whether that is establishing your own home, staying with friends or family, or going to a transition house—doesn't necessarily mean you intend to end the relationship. It might mean that you are trying to gain some safety; take a break from the fear and stress of living with your abusive partner; or are attempting to establish expectations for a mutual and respectful relationship.

It is incredibly difficult to decide to leave your partner. There are emotional considerations: you may still love him, or feel a great deal of guilt about leaving. There are also practical matters: children, housing, and finances. You might decide to leave after an **Explosion** but then feel drawn back into the relationship by his Manipulative Kindness. For all these reasons, it takes a long time to decide to leave, and women often leave several times before leaving for good. If you have left before and gone back, you can think of it as a “dress rehearsal” for what you want to do now, that has given you more information about your partner and about your support network. Maybe your partner promised to change, but never did or maybe you found out you needed more support to live independently, and you can try to find that support now. You now know what to expect, and know that his abuse will likely not stop because you leave. He will continue to display **Manipulative Kindness**, **Tension** and **Explosive** behaviour towards you, and he may do this through phone calls and texts, or he may do it through your children. He may present himself as a “great guy” to others, to win them over to “his” side. He may use the legal system to hurt you, or he may try to sabotage your relationships with people who support you.

We understand that you leaving does not mean that you have decided to permanently end your relationship. Maybe you have decided your relationship is over, but maybe you haven't. Many women leave for a few days or weeks because they need a break from the abuse, and then go back to the relationship. On average, women leave eight times before they leave for good. You are just doing what is best for you right now. Try not to put pressure on yourself about whether this separation is permanent or not; just take one step at a time. If you feel you need to get away for now, work towards being able to do that.

If it is difficult to even think about leaving, it might be helpful to remember how the Cycle and the multiple impacts of abuse play a role in keeping you in the relationship: abuse often leaves women feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and confused.

You are probably trying to make sense of the relationship for yourself. When you are ready, you will make a decision that is right for you.

What to Expect

Unfortunately, it is impossible to predict what will happen once you leave the abusive relationship. Research tells us that abuse often escalates when women leave. Women describe many ways that their partners continue to abuse them even after they have left. For example, he may use the court system by threatening to sue for custody of your children, or refusing to release 50% of the assets from the relationship. He may threaten you with child protection involvement, report your substance use or mental health concerns to others, or harass you at work. Abusive men often ignore protection orders, restraining orders or peace bonds that may be in place.

If you are in immediate danger call 911 or your local police station. If you live in a rural area or small town it might take awhile for the police to

arrive, so try to get to a safe place to wait for them. You may want to go to a friend or neighbour's house, or to a public place you think is safe.³⁸

After leaving, continue to use all of your existing safety strategies, get support, and trust your instincts.

Plan Ahead

If you need to leave urgently, take your purse and go to a transition house.

If you feel like you have some time to plan before leaving, here are some things you can do to prepare yourself:

- » Connect with a worker at a transition house or women's centre to help you create a safety plan.
- » If you are concerned for your safety, connect with RCMP Victim's Services and/or Community based Victim's Services to discuss the pros and cons of getting a protection order.
- » Decide where you will go: a transition house, women's shelter, friend or family's place, or hotel? If you live in a rural area or small town consider leaving your area, at least for a little while.
- » Connect with a lawyer or legal services to get some advice about protecting your children and your financial security.
- » Consider opening a bank account for yourself.
- » Keep copies of important documents, keys, clothes and money with a friend or family member.
- » Create a code word with family or friends that can be a signal that you need help.
- » Take with you or make copies of:
 - » Money, cheque book, debit/ credit cards, bank book or bank statements
 - » All financial statements, lease, rental agreement, house deed

- » Drivers license, social insurance card (SIN), birth certificates (yours and your children's)
- » Passport, permanent residence status card, immigration or refugee papers
- » Marriage license, custody and access papers, divorce papers, protection orders, peace bond or restraining orders
- » CareCard (health card), medications, medical records (yours and your children's)
- » Store any irreplaceable items at a friend's house (e.g. baby pictures, family heirlooms).
- » If you can't take your pets with you, ask someone you trust to look after them temporarily.
- » You may also want to clear your computer search history so your partner cannot see what you have been searching (i.e. transition house numbers).

Remember: your safety and the safety of your children come first. Sometimes women stay until they are certain they have the support they need to safely leave.

WHERE TO GET HELP

As the available services will be different in each community, use the following list as a guide to your local options and to how you can contact them. This resource was developed by women in British Columbia, but you should be able to find similar resources wherever you live in Canada.

Women's Shelters and Emergency Housing

"I was staying at a shelter...a women's shelter. They were really helpful. You could talk to anyone, and anytime. Tell them your story. They had clothes. Food. And we had to do chores. It was like a big house. Living room with couches. The ladies that worked there were so helpful."—Tasha

Transition Houses/ Women's Shelters: Safe spaces for women and their children when they are experiencing, or at risk of, abuse. Many accept women who are experiencing abuse or threats of abuse from family members, roommates or pimps. Many also accept women facing homelessness as a result of past and/or current experiences of abuse. They are often in a private, confidential location, to maximize women's safety. Facilities are for women and children only. Staff are available on site to support you and assist you with your needs, and with connecting you to other services such as Income Assistance and legal aid. Basic needs, including food and toiletries, are also provided. Depending on your situation, you will either get a private room or a shared room. Some Transition Houses allow you to bring your pet, or will help you make arrangements to keep your pet safe. Policies vary regarding women who are using substances; some Transition Houses accept women who are

currently using drugs or alcohol, or who are in early recovery, but others do not. The typical length of stay is 30 days.

Safe Homes: Community-based networks of homes that shelter women and their children when they are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, abuse. The length of stay is typically short, with the potential for longer if required. Safe Homes usually have staff available on-call. Facilities are for women and children only. They may offer outreach services, particularly in small rural communities.

Emergency Shelters: Providing the basic needs of shelter, food and hygiene, and other types of support. They are most often co-ed facilities, and are not always a place where women and children feel safe. Policies regarding substance use vary. They are often staffed 24/7 and may only be open in the colder months of the year. The typical length of stay is one or a few nights.

How to get help: Look up Transition Houses, or Safe Homes, or Emergency Shelters in your phone book. If you have access to a computer, you can do a similar search online or visit the BC Society of Transition Houses website and see their list of short term and emergency housing options organized by community:

<http://www.bcsth.ca/sites/default/files/Compendium.pdf>

You can also call **VictimLink** at **1-800-563-0808** and ask them what is available in your community.

What to expect when you call: A staff member will answer the phone and ask you to tell them a little bit about what is happening, and why you are in need of safe shelter. Each organization varies in how much they ask. The purpose of the conversation is to assess your safety and risk, and to determine if they are the appropriate place for you (and your children). If you are feeling nervous about calling, you can have a friend, family member or an advocate call with you.

Counselling and Support Services

Women’s Centres: Welcoming and safe women-only spaces where you can receive free, confidential support and assistance. There is often a variety of support available, which may include crisis support; children who witness abuse programs; resource centres; Aboriginal women’s programs; and multicultural services. In both rural and urban communities.

Stopping the Violence Counselling and Outreach Programs:

Offering confidential counselling and support to women who have experienced violence. In both rural and urban communities. Call your local Women’s Centre, or go online:

http://www.endingviolence.org/about/programs_we_serve

Community Services: Offering a wide range of services, which may include counselling, employment services, housing assistance, childcare programs, and a variety of children’s and parenting services. In both rural and urban communities.

Multicultural Services: May be a separate organization, or their programs may be embedded in other organizations in your community (as part of the Women’s Centre or Community Services). They offer a wide range of services which may include counselling; language and ESL courses; employee assistance programs; women’s and children’s programs; and settlement services. In both rural and urban communities.

“Just finding someone who is in the same situation as you, trying to stay clean, who is going through a bad relationship or whatever.” — Phillipa

Aboriginal Services: May be a separate organization, or their programs may be embedded in other organizations in your community (e.g. as part of the Women’s Centre or Community Services). In both rural and urban communities. Go online to “The Guide,” a comprehensive list of Aboriginal community-based services and organizations around BC:

<http://www.gov.bc.ca/arr/services/guide.html>

LGBTQI Services: Services and supports for individuals who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex, in both rural and urban communities. QMUNITY (based in Vancouver) offers a variety of services including Prideline, a crisis line accessible toll free around the province of BC at **1-800-566-1170**.

“Yeah, I found it was invaluable just seeing other people’s situations, having another perspective, getting out of my own head. I didn’t really know of any counsellors and couldn’t really afford counseling because my ex had stopped paying spousal support for a year and a half.”—
Kayli

Drop-in Centres: Part of a variety of different organizations, such as women’s centre’s, mental health and addictions services, and organizations for survival sex workers. They are welcoming, and you don’t need to call in advance. They are an opportunity to connect with peers and with a range of service providers. In both rural and urban communities.

Support Groups: Offering support on a variety of topics, including violence against women, trauma, grief and loss, and mental health and addictions. Found in many of the above listed services, they are most often facilitated by a service provider, and provide an opportunity to connect with others with similar experiences. Some support groups are women-only. There may be a Making Connections support group in your community.

Advocates: They normally work out of Women’s Centres or Transition Houses, but can also work for mental health and addictions, housing, and other community organizations. They can provide you with support, advocacy, information and accompaniment (going with you to appointments or services) around housing, income assistance, the legal system, and child protection concerns.

Outreach workers: They work out of many different organizations, including women’s centres, mental health and addictions, housing

programs, community-based programs (those that work with homelessness, HIV/AIDS, or sex workers). They may run drop-in programs, or provide you with support, advocacy, and accompaniment. They can often come to you or meet you somewhere that you feel safe.

Legal Aid: A range of free services, including information, advice, and representation. Apply either in person or online. Not all communities have a Legal Aid office. Call the province-wide Call Centre, **1-604-408-2172** in the Lower Mainland; toll free **1-866-577-2525** elsewhere in BC; or go online: http://www.lss.bc.ca/legal_aid/howToApply.asp

Food Bank: Offering free perishable and non-perishable food items. You do not need a referral to go to the food bank. Some food banks may require you to show ID. To find out about where and when your local food bank happens, contact your community services or public health centre. Food banks exist in many communities around BC. Call **1-604-830-3989** in the Lower Mainland, or go online: <http://www.foodbanksbc.com/find-a-food-bank/>

Crisis and Emergency Services

911 or Local Police: Offers immediate emergency police, ambulance, and fire services. Not all communities have access to 911 service. If your community does not, you need to call your local police station.

VictimLink: A confidential, multilingual telephone service available across BC and the Yukon, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It provides information and referral services to all victims of crime, and immediate crisis support to victims of family and sexual violence. Call toll free, **1-800-563-0808**.

Police-Based Victim Services: Operating out of BC's RCMP and municipal police departments. Staff and volunteers work with police to provide emotional support, information, referrals and court orientation to victims of all kinds of crime and trauma. Services are usually offered following a victim's first contact with the police. Contact your municipal police or RCMP department to find out about the program in your community, or go online: <http://www.policevictimservices.bc.ca/victim-services-in-bc/find-a-service/>

Community-Based Victim Assistance: Provide emotional support, information, referrals, justice system support, and liaison services for survivors of sexual assault, violence in relationships, and violence against children and youth. You do not need to be involved with the police to access their services. Contact your local Women's Centre, or go online: http://www.endingviolence.org/find_a_service

Crisis Lines: Most often 24/7, offering immediate, confidential support and referrals. There are a number of crisis lines around BC. You may also have a local crisis line offered by your local women's centre or Transition House. Some available provincial or national services:

- ▶ **Prideline:** QMUNITY's peer support/ information/ referral phone line. It operates weeknights from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., serving communities both locally and province-wide. It offers confidential support and referrals to LGBTQI individuals in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. Call in the Lower Mainland, **1-604-684-6869**, and around BC, toll free, **1-800-566-1170**.
- ▶ **Helpline for Children:** Children and youth, parents, caregivers and teachers can call the Helpline, at **310-1234**, free from anywhere in BC. *No area code is required.* If you are calling from a pay phone, call the operator at "0" and ask them to connect you to the Helpline for Children. This is a free call. You don't need a quarter. It will not show up on your phone bill. Your call is confidential.
- ▶ **Kids Help Phone:** A free, anonymous, confidential phone and online professional counselling service for youth. Kids, teens, and young adults from any community can ask about big or small concerns, 24/7, 365 days a year. Bilingual, professional counsellors provide anonymous, confidential, non-judgmental support. They can connect you to a service in your community, through their database of resources across Canada. Call toll free, **1-800-668-6868**, or go online: <http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/teens/home/splash.aspx>

How to get help: Look up any of the above services in your local phone book, or on a computer if you have access. You can also call 411 and tell the operator what community and service you need the number for. You do not need a referral.

What to expect when you call: The person that answers the phone will ask you what is happening for you in that moment (why you are calling), whether you are safe, and what kind of support you are looking for. If you do not know what your options are in terms of support, ask them to explain what they offer. They will talk with you about your needs and concerns, and if they are not able to support you, will most likely offer you referrals to other services.

Health Services

Mental Health and Addictions Services: Offering a wide range of services, including adult mental health; child and adolescent mental health; women's reproductive mental health; as well as support for addictions, substance use and eating disorders. In many rural and urban communities. Go online: <http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/mhd/residents.html>

Canadian Mental Health Association: Community-based centres promoting the mental health of individuals, and supporting the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental health concerns. In many rural and urban communities, they offer a range of services including information resources, education events, direct services and support, and research and advocacy. Go online: <http://www.cmha.bc.ca/>

Addictions/ Substance Use Services

Detox centres: Live-in facilities while you are withdrawing from drugs or substances. Health care provided daily. Your length of stay varies based on the substance you are withdrawing from. From here, you will usually go into a residential or outpatient program.

Residential Treatment Centres: Live-in facilities offering programming and support for your drug or alcohol use. Programs vary greatly around the province, and may also include individual and group counselling, education, and health care.

Outpatient Programs: Day programs offering support for your substance use. Programs vary greatly around the province and may also include individual and group counselling, education, and health care. Call **Addiction Services, 1-866-658-1221** to access a network of direct and contracted addiction services for substance use problems, including counselling, needle exchange, opiate replacement therapy, withdrawal management, and youth prevention. Or, go online:

<http://www.canadiandrugrehabcentres.com/>

Needle Exchange Services: Services providing injection drug users with clean needles, syringes, and other supplies for the safe injection of drugs. They also provide education and counselling. Some programs operate as fixed sites where clients can go to access services; other programs are run through community/street outreach. These exist mainly in urban centres, but an increasing number of smaller communities are implementing programs. Contact your local public health centre to find out if there is a program near you.

Health Clinic: Centres where you can see a nurse, family doctor, or a General Practitioner (GP) for your physical health needs and concerns. Some clinics are walk-in and do not require appointments; others, require appointments. Nurses and physicians at the Health Clinic can also make referrals to other services, such as Mental Health and Addictions.

Pregnancy Outreach Program (POPs): Provides prenatal and early parenting support to women who experience health or lifestyle challenges during pregnancy, birth, and the transition to parenting. They provide safe, non-judgmental, quality perinatal services. There are programs in both rural and urban communities, including on some Aboriginal communities on reserve. Go online: <http://www.bcapop.ca/programs.html>

Emergency Room/Hospital: At your local hospital. Simply walk in, if you are in need of health care. Go online:

<http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/socsec/pdf/hospitallist.pdf>

BC Nurses line/ Healthlink BC: Offers 24/7, toll free access to registered nurses trained to provide confidential health information and advice on the phone. Call **1-866-215-4700**, or **811**, or go online: <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/>

How to get help: Look up any of the above services in your local phone book, or on a computer if you have access. You can also call **411** and tell the operator what community and service you need the number for. You can also ask your family doctor, health care provider or service provider about any of these services. You may need a referral for the mental health and addictions services from your family doctor. If you don't have a family doctor, you can speak with a doctor at your local health centre or walk-in clinic about your needs, and they should be able to refer you.

What to expect when you call or drop in: The receptionist will ask you what kind of support you are looking for. If you do not know what your options are in terms of programs and services, ask her to explain a little bit about what they offer.

Housing

BC Housing: Supportive Housing Registration Service: Provides a single point of access for supportive housing units around the province. Most of these units are in Vancouver and a small number of communities outside the Lower Mainland. Call toll free, **1-800-257-7756**, or go online: http://www.bchousing.org/Options/Supportive_Housing

BC Housing: Subsidized Housing: Long term housing with your rent adjusted based on your income. Housing is available for single women, and for women with children. In most cases, there will be a waiting list of people wanting to move into subsidized housing. Call toll free **1-800-257-7756** or go online: http://www.bchousing.org/Options/Subsidized_Housing

Housing Co-ops: Provide good quality, affordable housing. Some units in every co-op are subsidized (the housing charge for these units is adjusted to the income of the household). Most co-ops have waiting lists of between three months and three years to move in, particularly for subsidized housing. Call toll-free (in BC), **1-866-879-5111**, or go online:

<http://www.chf.bc.ca/pages/directory.asp>

How to get help: Look up any of the above services in your local phone book, or on a computer if you have access. You can also call VictimLink at **1-800-563-0808** and ask them what is available in your community. You can self-refer to all of the above services, and most do not require an appointment to drop in and ask about their services.

What to expect when you call or drop in: The receptionist will ask you what kind of support you are looking for. If you do not know what your options are in terms of programs and services, ask her to explain a little bit about what they offer. Once you decide what kind of support you need, you will most likely be asked to make an appointment and to come back at that time. Often, programs will have a waiting list. You will get called back when a space opens up.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We hope that this workbook has helped you understand how your experiences of abuse are connected to your physical, mental and social health and well-being. We hope that the experiences of other women reflected here will help you see that the abuse is not your fault and that you are not alone. We also hope that the information in here helps you realize that you are not crazy, you are just navigating a ‘crazy-making’ relationship and doing the best that you can to cope. We know that living with an abusive partner or healing after leaving an abusive relationship is difficult and exhausting. Listen to your gut and lean on those who you trust, while you navigate the many different emotions and obstacles that have resulted from the abuse. You are strong and courageous and with the right support, you will get through it.

Best wishes,

Woman Abuse Response Program

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This workbook is intended to help women make sense of their experiences of abuse. How might experiences of abuse be connected to your physical and mental health? How might they be connected to your social and financial well-being? It is extremely isolating and “crazy-making” to live in an abusive relationship, even after leaving. We hope this workbook is helpful by offering a different perspective on your experiences of abuse, and that through other women’s stories you can find hope in your journey to achieve safety and well-being.

You are not to blame.

You are not crazy.

You are not alone.

