

# INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: JOURNEYS TO SAFETY

A Synthesis of Qualitative Research



GENDER, TRAUMA & VIOLENCE  
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This document is to help health and social service providers, and other allies, understand women's experiences, decision-making processes, and actions in the context of an abusive relationship. Taking a trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC) approach, it draws on research with, and lived experience of, women experiencing IPV; we need more evidence regarding men's experiences, and those who identify their gender in other ways.

### The key messages to take away from this document are:

1. Becoming aware that you are in an abusive relationship is a complex and difficult process, and knowing what to do to ensure your own safety, and that of any children, requires weighing many factors, especially various risks, including immediate danger. Each woman and situation is unique and there's no "one-size-fits-all" approach.
2. Women's experiences of partner violence occur in the broader context of societal norms, beliefs and expectations that position them and their experiences in certain ways, and also shape the choices available to them. Women from equity-denied groups, i.e., who are racialized, Indigenous, have disabilities, are older, are lesbian, trans, queer, non-binary or Two-Spirit, and/or live in poverty, face additional forms of systemic and structural violence, including discrimination and stigma in healthcare, social services, and criminal justice, education and child welfare systems. Previous experiences of poor care and lack of useful support in formal services may mean that some women rightly anticipate that engaging with services might do them, and their children, more harm than good. It is the responsibility of systems, organizations and individual service providers to ensure that women and children are and feel safe and welcome in their care, and are offered feasible options, including referrals, tailored to their needs and situation.
3. Abusive relationships are complex and traumatizing. Providers need to take a TVIC approach and understand that women can still be committed to the relationship and love their partner – they want the abuse to end, but might not want the relationship to end.
4. Even once an abusive relationship "ends" (i.e., someone "leaves"), the abuse often continues and can even escalate. "Leaving" should not be positioned as the only or primary goal; providers are encouraged to refrain from thinking or asking "why doesn't she just leave?" or judging women who choose not to do so.

**The role of formal and informal allies is to develop a rapport with the woman such that the care encounter is seen as a safe place to discuss options, if she wishes to do so.**

**Focus on interpersonal, structural and systemic violence, including actively countering stigma and discrimination that pose barriers to women accessing services and basic needs.**

1 Understand trauma, violence and its impacts on people's lives and behavior

2 Create emotionally, culturally, and physically safe spaces and interactions for all participants

3 Foster opportunities for choice, collaboration and connection

4 Use a strengths-based and capacity-building approach

## Principles of Trauma- and Violence-Informed Care



*'Is this  
abuse?'*

### Recognizing abuse

- Many women experiencing violence from a partner don't see the relationship as violent or abusive, especially when the abuse isn't physical. We know that emotional and sexual abuse, and coercive control including financial abuse, harassment, isolation and gaslighting can cause similar levels of harm as physical violence.
- It can take a critical, severe incident, or a conversation with a professional, a friend or co-worker to "get there."
- During the early stages of abuse, women may feel confused and stressed while at the same time be committed to their relationship, which they view overall as positive.
- Women may excuse their partner's behaviours, accept blame for the abuse, see the partner's control and jealousy as signs of 'love,' and view the abuse as temporary.
- Realizing that a relationship is violent or abusive can be a difficult process.
- Social and cultural norms also shape how women, and their allies, define what is and is not abusive, and whether these things are even talked about.
- Until recently, men controlling and punishing their wives was considered something normal that was not discussed outside the home. This kind of violence outside of traditional marriages between men and women was not even considered. This is still true for many people.

*'Things aren't so bad...  
what can I do to fix this?'*

## Decisions to make

- Making the decision to “do something” is a process, and there may be starts and stops.
- Key factors that motivate a woman to change her situation are:
  1. the need to protect others, especially children and pets, from the abuse;
  2. the violence becoming more severe;
  3. she becomes more aware of the options available to her;
  4. she is exhausted and recognizes that her partner will not change.
- When women think about getting help, they worry about being judged, including by health and social care providers. Will people believe them? This is especially true for women from equity-denied groups.

*‘This can’t go on. He’s going to kill me or hurt the kids...’*

## INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: JOURNEYS TO SAFETY

- They also worry about what might happen to their kids (if they have any) – will they be taken away?
- And they worry about what the abuser might do if they tell anyone, or try to leave – they know, and statistics support, that **taking steps to end the relationship can lead to more severe violence and even death.**
- To make matters worse, many women who report violence are not believed, or are even blamed for it. Few get justice and many experience further harm from the abusive partner and/or the systems intended to help. Again, this is especially true for women from equity-denied groups.

## Ready for help

- When women are ready to get help, they often don’t know where to turn.
- They may need various kinds of support, from immediate safety, to help for their physical and/or mental health, income support, housing, legal or immigration help or a new school for their children.
- Imagine having to navigate that many systems, most of which aren’t well-designed to serve women experiencing violence. If you were in this situation, would you know where to go for help?

*‘What do I do now?  
Who is it safe to  
talk to?’*

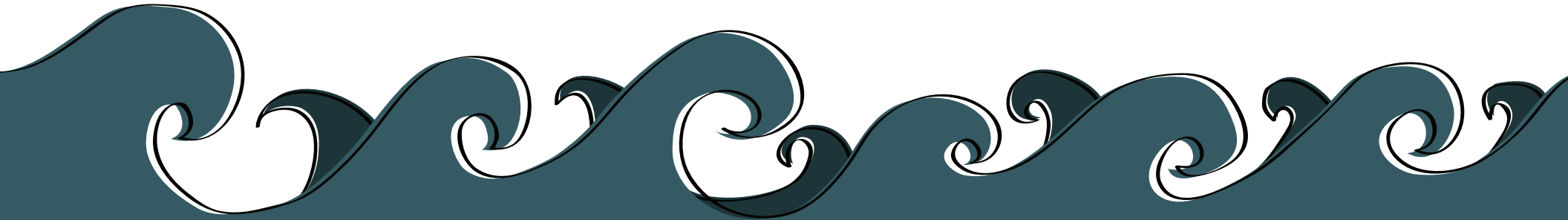
## Seeking safety

- Imagine what it's like to have to leave your home – maybe in the middle of the night, with barely enough time to grab the kids and your wallet. Imagine leaving your pet(s) behind. Or, imagine staying in your home, facing ongoing threats from your partner, and trying to sleep with that worry.
- Most women do not use shelters and see them as a 'last resort' and 'just a bed'. Shelters are often full or may not exist (especially in rural or remote communities).
- So, where do women go? Maybe to family or friends, or a hotel, if they can afford it. Imagine arriving at your sister's at 2 am, with three kids in tow, and asking if you can stay, maybe for "a while".
- What if you had to worry about whether your family or friends would believe you, or sent you back home to stay quiet and deal with it?

*'I don't want to leave my home,  
but it's not safe to stay.'*

*'People either ask me why I've  
stayed this long without saying  
anything, or why I'm suddenly  
breaking up a 30 year marriage.'*

- Imagine having to get up and go to work after another sleepless night, and say nothing to co-workers, or risk losing your job.
- Leaving is a process, and sometimes women leave and return multiple times; sometimes, they don't leave at all. Whether they can leave depends on having a safe, non-judgmental place to go.
- Even for women who have left their partner, harassment and abuse can continue, along with the fear and worry. Leaving can often increase danger for women.
- These are just a few scenarios – for many women, "doing something" may look very different. Every woman's journey will be unique in its details, but they'll all be difficult and most will bring new risks and harms.



## Disclosing the abuse

- Telling people about abuse is very hard. What assumptions will the person make? Is the woman seen to be a failure as a partner and mother? Will they be thinking: “what did she do to deserve it” and “why doesn’t she just leave”? These fears aren’t irrational – many people do judge women in these ways, and stigma is a big barrier to help-seeking.
- Disclosing – telling someone this most personal of things – is incredibly brave, but also risky. Even beyond the potential for judgement, there are other possible harms and costs, such as revenge by the abuser and fear of having one’s children taken away.
- Imagine being in that moment when a doctor, nurse or another formal or informal helper asks about violence – how would you want to be treated? If you chose not to tell (this time), would that be ok? Imagine the trust you would need in that person to share this with them.

*‘The nurse has just asked  
if I’m safe at home.  
What do I say?’*

- Deciding to disclose and seek help always involves weighing potential benefits and harms. It’s important to respect that process and wait for women to be ready.
- While women sometimes underestimate their danger, they rarely, if ever, over-estimate it: if she’s worried or scared, trust her.

*‘I can’t believe I’m going to say  
these words out loud...’*

## How to help

- The first priorities in providing support to a woman experiencing IPV are establishing a caring relationship with her and addressing issues of safety – physical, cultural, and emotional. This means establishing rapport by not judging, and avoiding assumptions. Remember that a core feature of abuse is coercive control – you don't want to replicate this pattern by telling her what to do, or demanding, for example, that to receive help, she must leave the relationship.
- Express empathy and respect by listening to her story, her worries and her preferences – this will set the stage for trust. Make sure the interaction is private and safe, and, ideally, in a quiet place where you have time for a discussion.
- Educate yourself about local resources and services, even going to them yourself so you can tell her about them, and make “warm referrals” to staff at these services. At the very least, a card with local information can be useful, but make sure it's safe for her to take home. In Canada, this bilingual app can help: <https://iHEALapp.ca>
- Expect that she might change her mind – her priority is her safety and that of her children, not your frustration for her lack of “compliance” with your recommendations. Remember that this is a complex, often dangerous, process.



**Safely supporting women experiencing intimate partner violence is something we can all do. It starts with listening, respect, understanding, compassion and trust.**

### RESOURCES

- For professionals: <http://vaw.dveducation.ca/>
- For those experiencing violence, and their allies: [www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca](http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca)
- Online health and safety tool for women: <https://ihealapp.ca>
- For advice on integrating trauma- and violence-informed care in the context of IPV: *Trauma- and Violence-Informed Care: Prioritizing Safety for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence*, <https://gtvincubator.uwo.ca/resources/>

## Planning for a safe future

- Help women to anticipate that in many cases, even if they leave the partner, the abuse may not end, especially in the first year. Help her to expect the unexpected – the partner may react differently, and more violently, than she thinks.
- Women who have children with the partner are especially tied to that person; help her to make plans for safe communication and care for the children.
- Help women plan for worst case scenarios, for example, if the abuser is likely to stalk her, or try to control her finances, talk about setting up her own banking, getting a new cell number, and keeping all information confidential. If this is not possible for you to do with her, refer her to local agencies that support women experiencing violence.
- If she is open to the idea, connect her to more specialized services that can help her deal with legal, safety, custody, immigration, health, or other issues.

*‘It’s not easy but now I have a plan in place. I feel more prepared and maybe even hopeful...’*

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