

MY LIFE, MY CHOICE

Pathway Project

How to move on from an
abusive relationship



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SECTION 1

HOW DID I GET HERE?

Because you are reading this booklet I would assume that you have an interest in abusive relationships. This may be because you are suffering or recovering from abuse, or someone you are close to is in that situation. Alternatively, you may be a professional, looking for a deeper understanding of the way that abuse works, and the impact that it has on victims.

So, if you have suffered abuse, what has happened that has made you look for help? How many of the following statements apply to you?

'I am suffering abuse – I want it to stop'

'I want to find answers to my problems'

'I want to understand what has happened to me and why'

'I want to someone to understand'

'I need help'

'I am hurting and I can't cope any longer'

'I don't know who to trust'

'I need help'

If any of them apply to you, or to someone you know, please read on. I would like to help. One of the big problems with domestic violence is that only sufferers really understand what it is like to be in that situation. As a survivor, and working with many other survivors, I hope that I can give you some practical ways of overcoming your abuse. Many of these will have originated in our self help groups. These are not just my feelings and experiences but those of many survivors I have worked with.

WHAT DO WE HAVE IN COMMON?

Abused people share many experiences and many resulting problems of the abuse. The abused person is often trained in being passive and accepting the abuse. We all come to a point where we are no longer willing to put up with the abuse, and begin to plan to escape, or to fight back.

The main legacies of abuse lie in our feelings towards ourselves – we lose self esteem, self confidence and self respect. We often feel guilt and self hate because we have 'let ourselves get into this situation'. We recognise that many of our children have been affected in some way, and we also carry the guilt for not protecting them adequately. All of these feelings are confirmed and reinforced by our partners. We are constantly told that we are useless, we can't do anything, we are bad parents, and we have 'let ourselves go' – we just don't measure up.

Since many abused people are very isolated there is no-one to tell us that these feelings are not true. We feel alone and we blame ourselves for the abuse. The fact is that as many as 1.2 million women and 800,000 men are going through the same experiences. Many who attend our self-help group are shocked to see so many others who are feeling the same way.

When we begin discussing what has happened to us, we are amazed to find how similar the experiences are. We could almost be discussing the same partner! You leave the group believing that somewhere out there is a secret book on 'how to abuse your partner', and all of the people whose partners are attending the group, have read and worked to it.

We also have in common a web of secrecy. When we first feel doubts about being controlled we don't talk about it. We refuse to listen to our own misgivings and we make excuses for what is happening. We are confused, scared of not being believed, and we feel embarrassed. As the abuse progresses we are warned that there will be severe consequences to telling anyone about what is happening. These often include threats to beat, hurt, kill or take the children away. The fear of not being believed is also played on, and the longer you leave it the less likely it is, in your mind, that anyone will believe you. You feel that they will question why you did not speak out when it started. You become trapped, like a fly in a web, and you feel totally helpless and unable to escape. Many people can only see two ways that the relationship will end:

- They will die – murdered by their partners, or they will commit suicide
- Their partners will die – either naturally, or they will snap and kill them

HOW DO I COPE?

Sometimes the feelings that you have about what is happening now, or has happened in the past, are really overwhelming. You need to find a way to survive, an hour at a time if necessary. There are two ways of doing this and you will find that each will work at different times. There is a point where you will find great support from talking about what has happened. This may be to a friend, a GP, a health visitor, or to a counsellor.

You need to offload some of the rubbish that is cluttering up your head and your life. Talking about what has happened is a great comfort and people vary in how they do this. Some people find it easier to talk to someone they know well, whilst for others it is easier to talk to a stranger who can be more objective, and who you will never have to see again when you are feeling stronger. What is important is that you talk to someone and break the web of silence.

Some people find self-help groups a really good way to deal with the abuse. Some of the people who attend our own groups are still with abusive partners, some have recently left, and others are still trying to deal with feelings from the abuse in their pasts. Being able to share experiences with others who really understand can be really powerful.

It is best to limit your talking times. Once you begin you may find it difficult to stop, but talking to everyone constantly will wear out yourself and everyone else. Set a time with friends when you can talk about your problems, and then move on to more general chat. An hour at a time is usually a helpful guideline, any longer than that and you can find yourselves going round in circles. Nothing gets resolved and you get more and more distressed.

Talking can be a great healer – but at times your head will spin with what has happened to you, the memories, conversations you have had, and even imagining future conversations or situations. You sometimes need to switch off. The things going around in your head take over your life. You cannot get to sleep, you find it difficult to concentrate on other things and you get snappy and irritable. You need a break from the constant negativity that's going on in your head. This is the time to distract you.

Here are some ideas for healthy ways that you can do this:

- Listen to loud music, and sing at the top of your voice. It's almost like controlled screaming.
- Imagine yourself parcelling up your feelings and putting them somewhere safe until you are ready to deal with them.
- Do an activity which is physical. This has a number of bonuses. You will keep fit, you will increase your self esteem (this has been proven scientifically), and you will get your anger out of your system. Do something like walking, swimming, going to the gym, housework, running, cycling or weight lifting. You will feel better, and you will also look and feel fitter.
- Do something that takes you away from all the problems, like reading a novel, or watching a film. While you are relating to what's happening to one of the characters you are forgetting your own troubles for a while.
- Do something that engages your mind – play a computer game, or play chess or patience. You could even try doing some studying.
- Do something creative. You can express many emotions through painting or drawing, or do some sewing or pottery. There are lots of classes, or you could just do this by yourself.
- Do something to improve your surroundings – woodwork or DIY are good examples. You can get rid of a lot of anger with a hammer and a piece of wood! Decorating will make you feel better about your home and yourself.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

It's far too easy to put yourself down and be really hard on yourself. You've been so used to hearing all the negative things about yourself that you just accept them. If you want to really make changes to your life you need to start NOW. Here are some things you can tell yourself that will help you to cope:

I have been hurt. It doesn't need to show – it was hurtful and important to me.

My feelings are justified and deserve to be recognised.

I can postpone my feelings for a while if it helps.

The pain will not go on forever – it will pass.

SECTION 2

WHAT HAS ABUSE DONE TO ME?

Abuse comes in many forms. In this section I will explore the types of abuse, and the effect they have on women. The effects do not have to be all negative. It is possible to learn from what has happened, and to become a stronger person.

To simplify what abuse is can take away the seriousness of it. All abuse is damaging. All abuse has a long term impact. You cannot measure one type of abuse against another. Many women in our Intensive Support Centres say that they feel they shouldn't be taking up a room, since X's situation is much worse than theirs. You cannot possibly measure abuse, and if it is too much for you then it is too much.

Abuse can be categorised in the following ways:

Physical abuse – This is the abuse that most people think of when domestic violence is mentioned. It is often more visible than other types of abuse. It can range from pushing, poking, hair pulling, through to burning, strangling and kicking, and ultimately to murder. Many people suffer bruises, hair pulled out, teeth knocked out or broken, cuts, broken bones and internal injuries. Persistent blows to the head can lead to permanent brain damage and conditions such as epilepsy.

Emotional abuse - Most survivors will say that this is the most damaging aspect of abuse. It often accompanies every other type of abuse. It can take the form of verbal abuse, threats, intimidation and control, the abuse of power in a relationship, belittling, minimising and putting down. Whereas other types of abuse can be spasmodic, emotional abuse is often the dripping tap, which happens constantly, day and night.

Sexual abuse - This has many ways of presenting itself. It can be abuse or threats of abuse to the children, infidelity, sexual assaults and rape. It can include forcing another to have sex with friends or even strangers, and it can include forced penetration with objects. It may be being 'persuaded' to carry out the partner's sexual fantasies.

Financial abuse - The use of the families' finances is strictly controlled by the abuser. This may mean severe deprivation, not being allowed food, not being able to leave the house because of having no clothes, no money for travelling, and perhaps not being allowed to have keys to the home. The abuser may gamble, spend excessive amounts of money on alcohol, drugs or pornography. The family may suffer services being cut off, such as gas, electricity or water. They may suffer bailiffs calling, and threats because of the debts. They also may be forced into prostitution in order to make money for their partners.

Social abuse - This is the most difficult form of abuse to define. It can include being kept isolated, maybe literally being locked in the home and not being allowed out, or not being allowed to visit friends and family, or have visitors. It can also mean being humiliated in front of others, and made to feel worthless in comparison.

So what signs do you expect to see in an abusive person? Mainly this revolves around the power and control in a relationship. If one partner is dominant, controls decisions for the family and insists on their own way in everything, then he/she is abusive.

However the control can be much more subtle – for instance:

‘Are you wearing that shirt/blouse? You look better in the other one’

‘Do you think that make-up/tie is the right colour for you?’

‘Have you put weight on? Perhaps you should go on a diet.’

None of these is particularly forceful, but comments like this, made regularly, are undermining and will significantly lower a person’s self-confidence. Any relationship with an imbalance of power needs to be carefully considered. Abuse often does not begin with serious assaults. It often begins with little comments, and gradually increases.

In order to survive these types of abuse you will have developed coping mechanisms. These will have carried you through the worst times, and may have been healthy ways of coping, or may have helped temporarily but then have long term unhealthy effects.

Let’s consider first the unhealthy coping strategies which many people use:

- Drugs or alcohol which helps to blot out the worst of the abuse. They will turn life into a blurred haze which is easier to cope with.
- Smoking heavily. This relieves stress but can have a devastating effect on health.
- Food. Some people ‘comfort eat’ and others control their eating to the point of anorexia or bulimia, in an attempt to have control over something in their life. Either of these is extreme, and will have consequences on long term health.
- Promiscuity. People need love, and where this is not provided by the partner, some will seek love elsewhere. Unfortunately, they do not realise their value when they do this, and will accept sex as a sign of love. There is no shortage of unscrupulous people who are willing to take advantage of this need and will promise the earth to a vulnerable person. This way of life can have long term effects on health, and immediate effects on safety.

All of these coping mechanisms are helpful in the short term, but will have a long term impact and can add to the problems.

Healthy coping mechanisms can include the following:

- Learning to relieve stress with a wide range of techniques can help women to cope on a day to day basis.
- Exercise leads not only to healthier bodies, but is also proven to increase self-esteem.
- Inner strength can be gained as survivors begin to plan for their future, and this is an important step in coping with the abuse.
- Many people find ways of temporarily reducing tensions in the relationship. This gives them time to remove the children from the situation, or to escape, or to get help. They use communication and people skills in order to protect themselves.

You may have recognised yourself using some of these strategies. You will have developed intuitive 'gut feelings' which measure the tension, the level of danger, and the likelihood of a physical assault. You may have manipulated an argument at this stage in order to have some control over the time and place of an incident. This is often the only control that you can have.

Survivors often want answers to the questions – 'why did she/he behave in this way?', 'what made him/her abusive?' There are no easy answers, but we will be exploring some possible reasons in a later section.

At this stage it is important to recognise our own emotions about the abuse. Most survivors feel responsible for the relationship not working. Many carry guilt for not being able to protect themselves or their children. Many feel ashamed and will hide the abuse for as long as possible. When abuse is so obviously the responsibility of the abuser, why do the abused often feel this way?

It is important to recognise the part that society plays in this. In the case of women, they have often been trained from the cradle that they are the home makers, the child bearers, the people who take responsibility for the family and the relationships. Men are often trained to be the strong partner, the breadwinner, the defender of the family. This places much of the strength and control with the man, but much of the responsibility with the woman. In either case, a woman who is being abused may feel that they are responsible for holding the family together and a man who is being abused may feel that he has been a failure in protecting them.

Despite vast moves forward in this field over the last 25 years, the people who attend our self-help groups invariably feel that they should feel ashamed of what has happened, and feel guilty that they 'have allowed this to happen'. This is a very difficult and painful emotion to live with.

As the self help group progresses and members find themselves supporting each other, they become very affirming of each other. They do not accept that the others in the group have 'deserved', 'earned', or 'caused' the abuse. This in turn makes them question their own feelings of guilt.

It is very powerful to sit in a group of people who have all experienced the same types of abuse. It is always easier to see that they are not guilty, and to be objective about how they could have changed their situations. They have not been allowed any control, and this has not been their fault.

HOW DO YOU REGAIN CONTROL?

The answer to this is different for people still with abusive partners, for those who are in the process of leaving, and for those who have already left their partners.

I would not suggest fighting back when you are with an abusive partner. You need to be realistic about the level of danger you are in. Approximately 100,000 individuals are currently at high risk of serious harm or murder as a result of domestic abuse. Very few of them will have realised the risk that they faced. Statistics prove that they have been most at risk at the point of leaving, or in the first few days after leaving.

In order to take control, you need to begin to make decisions for yourself. You can practise this in small ways to begin with – deciding what to eat, what to wear, where to go, what to do. You will reach a point where you feel strong enough to move on to bigger, life changing decisions. It is very hard to make decisions when you have been controlled. Taking the control back is very scary at first, and to have some support will really help. It is ultimately very liberating to regain control of your life.

If you have already left your partner you can practise regaining control in every aspect of your life. If you can surround yourself with support this will really help – people like your friends, family, Intensive Support Centre workers, support and self help groups, are really important at this stage. You will need all the encouragement you can get.

Decide some goals for your life – things that you want for your future. Have some long term goals, such as training, taking up a career, or going on a family holiday, but also make some short term goals like attending a group, having your hair restyled, or painting your kitchen.

Imagine yourself achieving all of these goals, think of yourself in your newly painted kitchen, or with your family on holiday. The likelihood of achieving your goals is greater if you write them down, and greater still if you can stick pictures that relate to your goals somewhere that you will see them daily.

Make your goals specific – wanting to be happy is a common choice, but how will you know when you have achieved it? How will you measure it? Instead, think of the things that will make you happy, and make those your goals – for instance losing weight, or learning a new skill. These can be easily measured, and may well be part of making you happy.

Do not choose things which are clearly not achievable. You will be setting yourself up to fail and will then feel worse about yourself. You will also be confirming all the negatives that your partner has said to you. Be realistic – you will probably never be the Prime Minister, but there is a good chance you could stand for your local council. Set a time when you think you can achieve your goals. If necessary these can be moved to fit in with circumstances.

You are now deciding your future. It feels good doesn't it? It may be scary now, but your confidence will grow and you will begin to find your inner potential.

SECTION 3

WHY IS MY PARTNER ABUSIVE?

This is the six million dollar question, and if I had a simple answer I would possibly be a very rich woman! In truth there doesn't appear to be one simple answer, and many factors seem to contribute.

Perhaps an even more important question is – are people in control of their actions when they are violent? If you examine this carefully the answer is almost always yes.

Think of the last incident of abuse you suffered – whether emotional, physical or sexual. If you analyse what happened to you, you will probably see that at every point this person was making choices. At any point she/he could have turned around and walked away. Their anger was their own choice; their response to it was their own choice.

Maybe you find that difficult to believe but let's look at this from another perspective. Are they ever abusive to you when someone else, at work or out socialising, has upset them? Why didn't they take their anger out on them? If they are 'out of control', how did they manage to keep things in check until they got home?

If your abuse often takes place when you are at home alone, why didn't they become abusive when you were out and he/she was obviously upset with you? Does a person who is out of control have the ability to wait for the 'right' moment to show their anger?

Many abusers who are violent are careful not to leave marks where they will show. Have they ever deliberately avoided hitting you in the face – choosing to hurt you where any marks will not show on your body? Is this an action of a person who is out of control?

If she/he is really out of control – why did they stop when they did? If she/he is really out of control how did they manage to stop before doing more damage? If he/she was really out of control, what stopped them when they *did* stop? Why did he/she not continue until they seriously injured or killed you? If they really were out of control, *could* they have chosen to stop?

This then leads to a much more straightforward answer to the question – whose responsibility is the abuse? **IT IS ALWAYS AND SOLELY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ABUSER.** There is nothing you can do that would justify your partners' actions, or that would make their choice of behaviour acceptable. **YOU ARE NOT TO BLAME.**

ABUSE CYCLE

One of the most frightening things about abuse is that there is a definite and identifiable pattern to how abuse works. You would almost think that there was a book which had been issued to all abusive people and which they followed religiously. When we run the self help groups many survivors have commented that their abusers could be the same person – the stories sound so familiar.

The next page shows the cycle of abuse. It is fairly shocking to many that they can easily identify their relationship form this pattern. It may vary in detail but in general terms there is a definite pattern and most relationships will follow something similar.

The starting point is an incidence of abuse. This will be followed by some response which may be leaving the abuser and staying with friends or family, or moving into an Intensive Support Centre or other temporary accommodation. When the initial shock wears off, most survivors become very anxious and concerned about their ability to cope alone. They worry about money, where to live, the children, and just generally feel overwhelmed by the enormity of what is happening to them.

Often at this time the partner is trying to make contact, and will send gifts, letters, text messages etc. promising to change, to seek help, to do anything that will put things right. This appears to be genuine, and at that point probably is. The problem is that the motivation for change is fairly short lived and has to be acted upon at this point. If the survivor returns there is no longer a motivation for change and it will just be shelved and then forgotten.

Survivors often feel very lonely and are missing their partner by this stage. It is very easy to believe the things that you are hearing, because you may have waited for years to hear just these words. It is easier to believe it – you then don't have to cope with all of the claims for benefits, for re-housing etc. Life will revert to normal. Quite often the children will also want to return home to their friends, schools, and belongings. The pressure to return can be enormous and overwhelming.

At first everything will be wonderful, and there is a second honeymoon period. The children will be trying to behave well and not antagonise their abusive parent. The survivor will also be walking on eggshells, and the partner is trying to be patient and keep their temper under control.

Gradually this becomes more difficult to sustain and tension begins to take over. Eventually this will lead to the inevitable minor abuses, and eventually this will build up until there is another major incident.

Most survivors who have seen the abuse cycle can easily recognise their own situation, and will see how they have been drawn into this circle which they find it very difficult to break out of.

WHAT DO ABUSERS GAIN FROM THEIR ABUSE?

An abusive person would give a whole host of reasons for their abuse. Top of the list is generally that the abuse is the fault of the other partner: They have provoked the abuse, and it is for their own good – to help them to be better wives/husbands and mothers/fathers.

People in the self-help groups always find it easy to compile a long list of excuses that they have used for their partners. These often include stress, drugs, alcohol, or because they have been witnesses or victims of abuse in their own childhoods.

There are definitely factors which make abuse more likely, and these are genuinely some of the factors. Unfortunately this does *not* negate the action. They still have choices, and there are many abusers who have suffered abuse as children, have had horrendous childhoods and have had a lot of problems to contend with throughout their lives, but who do not choose to abuse their partners. This is always an element of choice.

There are no research papers which prove that there is a reason for abuse. There are however some similarities in the personalities of male abusers, which stand out from people's stories.

- Many abusers are very controlling. They have strict ways of running their lives, and feel the need for their partners to conform totally. This may include the way they dress, the people they associate with, and the places they go.
- Large proportions of people are quite insecure in their relationships. They convince themselves that they are at risk of losing their partners.
- Alcohol and drug problems do not cause violence and abuse, but do have an effect on the inhibitions. People who have a tendency towards abuse will use it more frequently when under the influence of certain substances.
- Having witnessed or been victims to abuse can 'normalise' that pattern of behaviour, and make it easier to try to justify choosing to continue the cycle in their own relationships.
- Our own perception is that there is a need for power and control in the relationship. There are a fairly high proportion of people in uniform amongst the abusers of survivors we have supported. The rigid structure and power of a job such as working in the armed forces, or the police or prison service, can be a factor.
- Stress is often cited as a cause of abuse. It can be the element which pushes the situation over the line, and into abuse.

None of the above are valid reasons for a person choosing to abuse their partner. They are still excuses, and many people cope with the above conditions *without* having to resort to violence or abuse. Therefore I would have to say again that there is NO valid reason for choosing this behaviour.

GUILT

Most people who have suffered abuse will consider that they have failed to make the relationship work. They feel responsible for the relationship, for the family, and for anything that has caused problems. IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT. There is nothing that you could do which would make this behaviour just or acceptable.

Think of all the negative thoughts about yourself that go round and round in your head. If you concentrate on the thoughts that constantly go around in your brain you will see that there is a pattern of negativity – almost like a tape playing over and over. The messages will be those that you have heard constantly – 'you can't do that', 'you're stupid', 'you will make a fool of yourself', 'you always mess it up'. Some of these will have been reinforced from childhood. They are deeply embedded.

Try to recognise the ones that 'play' over and over again. Ask a trusted friend if they are true. Overwhelmingly you will find that they are not. Think of what you would say to your best friend if someone was saying all of those things to him/her. Then comfort yourself with those same words. You can re-write those tapes but it will take time and effort. You can be your own best friend or your own worst enemy. Right now you could do with the friend.

SECTION 4

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO LEAVE?

Given all of the pain, guilt, shame and anger that being abused causes, many people find it odd that so many survivors choose to stay for so long.

Let me try to simplify the answer. Imagine you spend all your savings and much of your income on the car of your dreams. You are going to be paying for the car for some years to come, but it's worth it. It's what you've always wanted.

For the first three months it runs like a dream and then the exhaust starts blowing. It costs you your whole free income from a months' salary to repair it, but then it runs like a dream again and you soon forget the hassle you have had with it.

After about four and a half months your MOT is due. There are problems that you weren't aware of and the bill for repairs is going to be in excess of £500. You can't sell the car, and anyway when this work is done everything will be fine. You struggle, but then you get it fixed.

Another three months pass, and then your engine blows up! What a mess! The problem is that you are not able to sell the car because you have a loan which you can't cover by the sale price. You can't hand it back because you haven't paid enough back to cover the cost. You need your car, and if you have it repaired there can't be much else that can go wrong can there? You also love the car, and want to see it working again. You have invested so much money and time into it that you feel you need to carry on.

I believe that all of this is the same in a relationship. You make sacrifices; you put your resources, time, energy and money into making things work. The more you invest in a relationship the harder it is to walk away from.

If you try to think of reasons that you have found for staying you may recognise some of the following that have come out of our self help groups:

- There is nowhere for you to go. You have no-one you can safely stay with.
- You are financially dependant on this person.
- You struggle with the children. Your partner is better able to control their behaviour.
- You feel you won't be able to cope with being alone. You know you will feel really lonely.
- You are sure that no-one else would ever want to be with you.
- You have made vows according to your faith.
- You fear that your partner is right and you have mental health problems.
- You are afraid that if you leave he/she will take away your children or tell Social Services that you are an unfit mother/father.

These and many other factors prevent people from leaving their abusive partners for a long time. You already feel guilty and ashamed, and when and if you leave others will know what you have 'let them do to you'. They will either blame you or think you are stupid for putting up with it.

For each of these obstacles there **is** an answer if you want to take it. Let's have a look at them:

- Having a home is important. You feel safe there, you need to have a base, and you need to have somewhere for your children. There are safe, comfortable, supportive places that you can stay. Women's/Men's Intensive Support Centres offer a safe haven, and are really important in the process of leaving.
- You can claim benefits if you have no income or a very low income. This will not be a huge amount of money, but it will be yours and it will be enough to survive on.
- You will probably find lots of people will want to help you. You can surround yourself with a supportive network of people. Your children may become much more settled when they are feeling safe. Their behaviour may become easier, you will begin to feel stronger, and you will be able to find help and support for you and your children.
- You will be able to make new friends. Many survivors become isolated as their partners are not happy with their friendships. You can build up a whole new life.
- You will find that you will begin to feel better about yourself. This has a way of attracting others to you. You have been told so many lies. Now is the time to discover the real truth.
- God did not create people to be abused. He would not want you to live with abuse, and in fact will probably be opening doors for you to escape through.
- There are thousands of survivors in therapy, because of their partner's mental health problem. You may well be distressed, and could be suffering from Traumatic Stress Disorder. You are not mad.
- Your children will be safer away from this relationship. It is unlikely that your partner would have the time, resources or inclination to want the full time care of your children. The abuser knows that this is the 'big issue' and they are using it to scare you. Social Services would applaud your efforts to take your children away from an abusive relationship. They will be safer and so will you.

There are many groups like Pathway Project, who would be ready to support you, to find you somewhere safe to stay, and to be there with you throughout this difficult time.

If you would like to access their help you can ring Pathway on 01543 676800 or e-mail on talktoeve.pathway@virgin.net. We will help you ourselves, or point you to people who can. We have the following services available for you to use:

- Safe accommodation while we help you to find a permanent new home.
- A 24 hour helpline that will allow you to get support and help at any time of the day or night.
- Self help groups to enable you to move on in life.
- Life skills training to give you support in all areas of your life.
- Support group where you can mix with others in the same situation, have fun and learn new skills, crafts and beauty treatment.
- Parenting sessions where women share their experiences and ideas.
- Children's services offering therapeutic help to children who have suffered or witnessed abuse.
- Outreach and resettlement support – to help those who don't need to come into the Intensive Support Centre, or are still with abusive partners. Also survivors who are moving out of the Intensive Support Centre, as they build new lives in the community.
- Counselling to help you to make a long term difference in your life.
- Advocacy, a friendly face as you go to appointments with housing departments, solicitors etc. Someone to speak on your behalf.

We can't promise to be with you 24 hours a day, in person. We are at the end of a telephone line at your lowest moments and you are welcome to call as often as you need to talk – whatever the time.

EMOTIONAL FIRST AID KITS

We recommend to self help group participants that they make themselves an emotional first aid kit. You need a shoe box, covered in bright coloured wrapping paper (or a pattern or design that makes you happy). Inside it you could keep all the things that make you feel better when you are feeling low. For example:

- Photos that bring back happy memories
- A favourite DVD
- A favourite book/magazine/comic
- Action figure/soft toy/model plane
- A PS3/Wii/Computer game
- Aromatherapy oils/Bubble bath
- A smooth stone/marble
- Anything else that makes you feel better

When you feel low, you can dip into this emotional first aid kit and make yourself feel better.

You are probably feeling a great deal of pain and anxiety, but there is a positive side to this. The Chinese symbols for opportunity and threat are the same. You are well aware of the threat of your situation. Now you need to consider the opportunity. You have been given a blank piece of paper on which to reinvent your life. When people go into an Intensive Support Centre it's always reminded me of the saying, 'stop the world I want to get off'. That's what it's really doing for you. No-one can reach you unless you decide they can. You are safe and you have breathing space. Take some time to think about how you want your life to be. You may never get this chance again.

PANIC ATTACKS

You may find that your anxiety can take the form of panic attacks – you break out in a sweat, you hyperventilate, your heart feels it's going to burst out of your chest, and you feel like you're going to die. This is extremely frightening and you feel that the end is nigh! The good news is that no-one ever died of a panic attack. The bad news is that it feels awful.

There are ways that you can help yourself to come out of the worst symptoms quicker. If you can recognise the physical changes that take place in your body as this process starts you may be able to stop it. If the first sign is sweating hands – run them under the cold water tap. If your breathing becomes very shallow and fast you may be hyperventilating. Breathe in and out of a paper bag. If you can stop the process starting with the first symptom this could prevent it from going through the other stages.

There are other things that you can do to bring your feelings under control:

- Drink ice cold water or suck an ice cube.
- Scream out loud or sing very loudly to your favourite CD.
- Punch a cushion or pillow to get rid of some of your aggression.

Panic attacks do end. They will not go on forever. You will not be permanently damaged. You will not die. Reach for your emotional first aid kit as soon as your mood starts to go down. You may also find that if you take practical steps to deal with some of your problems they start to feel less threatening.

Lots of people have survived what you are going through and you will too!

SESSION 5

HOW TO AVOID ABUSE IN THE FUTURE

No-one wants to go through the trauma of domestic violence. Having survived it, people are desperate never to find themselves in that situation again. Unfortunately, many are very quickly sucked into another abusive relationship and often without much time to recover from the first. What is it that leads to this further cycle? How do we prevent it from happening? And most importantly of all, if it has happened to you, how do you find the resources to cope a second time. This section is all about protecting yourself. It is different for people in different situations, and so I will try to provide an answer for the most common scenarios.

IF YOU ARE STILL WITH YOUR ABUSER

It has been identified that in this situation a process is often followed. This begins when you identify that you are being treated badly. You will often begin the process by trying to deal with this by yourself. You don't want anyone to know, and you don't want the relationship to end – just the abuse. Many survivors try to find a way of making the relationship better – by doing whatever their partner wants, or alternatively by standing up for themselves, or by being out of their way as much as possible. Unfortunately none of these strategies will work for very long.

The next stage of the process is often to talk to someone you trust – a friend, a minister, or your family. Again, the aim is to stop the abuse, not to end the relationship. This time someone else knows about the abuse, but is usually told not to tell anyone, and not to tell the abuser that they know. This puts them in a difficult position, and they are effectively prevented from doing anything to help. They can prove to be very effective sources of support, however.

When nothing else has worked, and the situation becomes even worse, the survivor will seek the help of someone more formal. She/he will try to find out how they could deal with the situation more formally. It is usually at this stage that we meet the people who are looking for help. The abuse has usually accelerated and she/he is concerned for their safety and sanity by this stage.

Maybe you can identify with this process. You want to stop the abuse but you long for the person you fell in love with to come back to you. You cannot face the thought of your relationship ending, and facing life alone. You may have held on in this situation long past the point where you felt safe, hoping that things will get better at some point.

You probably feel that there is a way out. That you are going to be in this situation until you die, or you end up in a straight jacket. This is where you need to think realistically about what is happening. This will be painful, but you will feel better when you begin to take control of your own life. These are the facts:

- Abusers rarely stop abusing unless forced to. It is unlikely that you will wake up one morning with the person you want back. The reality is that abuse often gets worse and more frequent as time goes on. Can you live as you are now for the rest of your life? This is the reality.
- A person dies at the hands of their abuser every three days in this country. None of them have expected the situation to escalate to this level. In the worst instance this could happen to *any* person suffering domestic violence.

- Abuse leads to long term health problems, both physical and emotional, if nothing is done to address the problem.
- Children in abusive relationships suffer as a result. They are rarely oblivious, and will have often witnessed or experienced abuse themselves. The links between domestic violence and child abuse are *very strong*.

These are shocking facts, but they are facts and need to be taken seriously. You have to decide when 'enough is enough'. You need to identify a line that would trigger a firm response. Would you leave if she/he left bruises on your face? Would you leave if she/he hit your children? Would you leave if she/he flaunted another partner in your face? Only you can decide what would be your final straw. You need to decide what it is, and you need to act on it when it happens. Abuse happens slowly and without recognition. It sneaks in and becomes acceptable without you realising what is happening. Is it safe to wait until what is unacceptable today becomes acceptable tomorrow?

IF YOU ARE THINKING OF RETURNING TO A PARTNER

Leaving is not an easy choice. For some, being alone is more difficult and frightening than being with the abuser. The cycle of abuse leads you to doubt your own abilities, and to want the security of knowing what's going to happen – however awful that is. At the point of self doubt the abusive partner will often be promising the world. They will say that they will see someone to get help and will do anything that you want to make the relationship work. This is what you have longed to hear.

You need to ask yourself some questions – look at the promises he/she has made you. Have they made them before? Can you trust their word? Do they ever lie to you? Could they be lying now?

There are some indicators which can help you to measure commitment, such as: Have they actually told you that the abuse is their fault? Have they told anyone else what they have done, and taken responsibility for it? Are they willing to have counselling before you go back? Do not rely solely on these, as the abuser could be playing some very clever mind games!

If you decide that you want to go back, then you need to protect yourself as much as possible. You need to have very clear boundaries, and you need to ensure that you act on any breaches of these. If, after a time, you realise that nothing has really changed – what will you do? When would you say 'enough is enough'? What will you do? Where would you go? We always advise survivors to leave their options open. Don't tell them where the Intensive Support Centre is. You can always return there if they don't know.

Before you return, think about the many times you've forgiven them. Think about the times you've made excuses for them. Think about all the times you've given them another chance. How many times can you keep giving more chances, making more excuses? Something has to give.

IF YOU ARE RE-HOUSED

If you get to the stage where you have drawn a line under the relationship, what can you do to keep yourself safe and secure? There are steps you can take, and they vary according to your level of risk.

IF YOU THINK YOUR PARTNER IS STILL TRYING TO FIND YOU:

- You could consider changing your name, which will slow them down, or stop them in their tracks.
- You need to be careful who you give your address and telephone number to. Most people who pass on information do it with the best of intentions.

- You can borrow a mobile phone from the police, which will only dial 999. This will enable you to get help in an emergency.
- The police are also able to provide an alarm in your home, a push button which relays a message direct to the police. This will safeguard you at home.
- A personal attack alarm will help you to feel safe. They are now so small that they can go on your key ring.
- Look at your surroundings. Do you have overgrown bushes or trees in your garden that someone could hide behind?
- Fit simple devices like a door chain and viewer.
- If you get to know your neighbours and feel comfortable with them, you could ask them to ring the police if you bang on the walls or make some other signal, or if they hear shouts or screams.

Don't turn yourself into a prisoner. There is a balance between keeping yourself safe and being paranoid.

IF YOU MEET SOMEONE ELSE

Decide before you look for another relationship, what you would want from it. Don't compromise on your basic beliefs. You won't get Mr/Ms Perfect, but you need to identify what you would accept and what you wouldn't. You are worth the best. Don't sell yourself short.

What sort of signs would you look for in a new relationship that would ring warning bells in your head?

- Any signs of control – what you should eat, what you should wear, who you should speak to. It may begin very subtly.
- Outbursts of unprovoked anger, at you or anyone else.
- Refusal to take responsibility for their own actions. This may again be quite subtle. They may always blame others for everything in their life that goes wrong.

Again there is a fine line. You don't want to ruin a potentially good relationship by scrutinising every word or action. However, listen to your gut instinct. If you have any doubt – there is no doubt.

Make a safety plan. Think about ways you could deal with a situation in the future. If you are with an abusive partner, would you keep some vital paperwork and emergency clothes in a bag, so that you could grab them very quickly if you needed to. Could you keep some money safely tucked away for an emergency? Could you keep spare keys hidden somewhere?

Plan where you would go. Memorise a number for a helpline, or for a friend who would help. Plan what you would do. How could you escape from the house? Where would you go? In an emergency head for a public place that is open 24 hours a day, or for a police station.

Finally, friendships are very important. They can be your lifeline. However, there are healthy and unhealthy friendships too. Decide what you want from other people and how you can get it. Beware of being pulled into another abusive relationship of any sort. Don't let anyone control you in the future. Be your own person. You want friends who will be mutually supportive in an equal relationship. Don't expect anything less.

SECTION 6

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

And finally – as they say on all of the best TV news programmes – what now?

Think of what you want for your future – in a year, in 5 years and in 15 years. If you don't have a plan how do you know where you're going, and how will you know when you've got there?

Begin with the next year. Think of the most immediate issues. Do you want to stay with your partner, or do you want to move on and find somewhere else to live. How do you think you could achieve either goal? What decisions would you have to make in order to reach your goal? Who could offer you the support in your chosen situation? How will you get the information you need to make a decision?

For example:

If you decide you want to stay with your partner, but you want things in the relationship to change:-

- What can you do to promote that change (always taking care not to put yourself at further risk)?
- Would you want to involve other people like Relate or your GP?
- How would you present your ideas for change to your partner, and sell them to him as being a good idea?
- Who would support you through the process?
- Where would you find out what help is available?

Do this for every issue you face in the next year, about where you will live, retraining, claiming benefits, looking for work, accessing counselling. Your plan needs to be realistic. Plan to make a start on things in the first year. You have a whole lifetime to see them through to the end.

Do the same thing for your 5 year plan and 15 year plan. You will probably need to leave these things for a later date. You may have difficulty in seeing that far forward from where you are now.

Think about the support that you will need. Where can you find it? Do you need it from friends and family, or you would you like to talk to someone about your situation, who is not involved?

You already have a support network. Think about the people you already talk to and begin to build a map about your network, i.e.



You can then begin to extend this where you feel you most need support. If you have lots of friends helping you may feel that someone who is a specialist in domestic violence could help you more, and vice versa. There are lots of people around you who would probably love to help you.

You may reach a point where you feel that you need to do something which marks the end of your relationship. You are bereaved but there is no visible symbol to grieve about. Think about how you could mark the end of your relationship.

Some people like to fill a box with things from the relationship and either to bury it or burn it. For others it is more symbolic. Write down your feelings, or a letter saying why you are ending the relationship. You can then scrunch it, tear it, burn it or shred it. It's a symbol for you.

If you were grieving for a dead partner you would expect people to understand your pain. You may need to explain that this is still how you are feeling, to your friends and family.

You are very welcome to contact Pathway at any time, and to use the many services that we offer. These are:

Outreach and Resettlement work

Counselling

Self help group

Support group

Life skills training

Children's work

Parenting courses

24 hour telephone helpline

Specialist Support

Parenting Support

For any of these services you can ring our helpline on **01543 676 800** or

e-mail us at **talktoeve.pathway@virgin.net**.

We will be very happy to talk to you about how we can become part of your support network.

