

## **Domestic Violence Information and Resources**

With more Americans forced to stay home as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, there have been many reports of an increase in domestic abuse cases. If you're reading this article because you're worried about your own safety, please know that you are not alone and that there are resources available to help you.

If you are experiencing domestic abuse, it is not your fault. Enforced isolation, such as the lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19, means that people are more likely to be trapped in abusive situations. However, while some instances may be part of a long-standing pattern of controlling and coercive behavior, others may be experiencing abuse at the hands of a partner, family member, or cohabiter for the first time. The pressures of sheltering at home do not excuse an abuser's behavior.

If you do not feel safe in your own home and need immediate help, call 911 or the local police. In addition, the **National Domestic Violence Hotline is available** 24/7 at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). A text-based chat option is available through the website. Access the website through your smartphone browser and tap the "Chat Now" button. (The website also provides privacy directions concerning your browsing history.)

If you do not feel there is an immediate threat to your safety, there are still services in place to help you. Many domestic violence agencies offer more than just shelter. It can be helpful to talk about your situation with an advocate and discover what helps and supports may be available to you.

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If you want to leave an abusive relationship during the pandemic, consider taking these steps.

### **What to do if you want to leave your home**

While the government wants everyone to stay home during the pandemic, remember that this does not apply if you are trying to leave an unsafe relationship. The goal is to be safer at home; if you are not safe at home, it is appropriate to seek safer shelter elsewhere.

If there is a chance that you will need to leave your home to protect your safety at any time during the lockdown, it is important to make a plan about how you will do that. Make sure you have thought about the following:

**Prepare a small bag with all your essential items.** This should include identification and important papers (birth certificates, passports, lease or homeowner papers, marriage license, divorce papers), health insurance cards, Social Security numbers, cash, important phone numbers, a list of any shared financial account numbers, a spare set of house and car keys, medicines, toiletries, clothes for a few days, a few of your children's favorite toys, and any evidence of the abuse. If you cannot safely store the bag in your home or vehicle, have a friend keep it for you to pick up or be able to bring it to you when needed.

**Arrange housing before you leave.** You can find a shelter by city or Zip code at [DomesticShelters.org](https://www.DomesticShelters.org) or by contacting the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Look into the intake process with the shelter(s) in your area ahead of time. Shelters may require that you surrender your cellphone at intake; this is due to tracker apps and spying software abusers install on the phones of their victims. If a friend or relative is able and willing to allow you to shelter in their home, that is still an option, even during pandemic restrictions.

## What to do if you want to stay in your home

If you want to stay in your home here are some steps to help ensure your well-being.

**Strengthen your personal support network.** Stay in contact with supportive family and friends. Work out a code phrase or text message to use if you need a support person to call emergency services for you because you do not feel safe doing so with the abuser in the home.

**If it's safe to do so, keep a journal.** This will help you to offload some of the emotions you are experiencing and will also provide vital evidence of the abuse if you seek legal protection in the future.

**You may benefit from counseling.** During the pandemic, the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](https://www.NationalDomesticViolenceHotline.org) and many other services continue to be available online.

**Even if you wish to stay, it is still worth making a plan to leave** just in case the abuse suddenly escalates to level where you feel unsafe. Remember, 911 is always available.

## Seeking legal advice

Regardless of whether you want to leave or stay in your home, you will probably need legal help. Gather information about legal help on restraining orders and child custody. Contact the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](https://www.NationalDomesticViolenceHotline.org) to be connected with resources or [WomensLaw.org](https://www.WomensLaw.org) to search by state for information. Do seek legal advice before taking any action so you fully understand your legal rights. Do not assume the legal process works the way your abuser has told you it will.

## Dealing with finances

If your partner has interfered with your money or if economic resources are limiting your choices, consider the following:

**Gather your documents.** Make sure you have as much information as possible about any assets such as a property, car or savings, any debts, the nature of your living arrangements, who is responsible for bills, and any bank accounts.

Try to take the following with you:

- your passport
- your driver's license
- your birth certificate and Social Security card
- bank statements
- documents related to home ownership or rental agreement
- utility bills
- details of any credit cards, especially those in joint names
- your payslips
- your partner's social security number (if you have any shared accounts, property titled or leased in both your names, or you have children together)
- children's birth certificates and Social Security cards
- details for your children's accounts
- copy of the previous year's tax return (if filed jointly)

If you can't take originals, try to write down important information or scan copies. Rather than saving any images or screenshots to your device, send to a trusted friend and delete or use a disposable camera.

**Once you've left, contact your landlord or mortgage provider, utility providers, your lender for any vehicle loans you are making payments on.** This way you can challenge any future utility charges, clarify current housing situation and payment concerns, and continue to have access to your vehicle.

**Open a new bank account.** Freeze joint accounts, change your PINs, and remove your partner if they are named on your credit card or hold a second card.

**Financial help is available.** Local community or faith organizations may be able to provide support. **2-1-1** can be another good resource for finding emergency financial assistance programs, food shelves, and other supports in your community. Advocates with domestic violence agencies can also advise you of financial assistance and re-housing programs.

It may feel especially difficult to leave an unsafe relationship given the current COVID-19 pandemic, however support and resources are available to you. Be assured that you do not need to stay with an abuser, and you can leave.