

# Safety plan for leaving a violent relationship

## A faith leaders' guide

### First and foremost

A domestic violence survivor will mostly likely have lost self-confidence, blamed herself, been deeply traumatised, and be conflicted between continuing to love her partner and feeling betrayed, terrified and broken.\* She may have lost her faith in God to protect her and her children, or believe God is punishing her or expects her to persevere as an act of faith. She may be struggling with depression and suppressed (or expressed) anger.

### Abuse is not love

Emphasise that the survivor doesn't deserve to be intimidated, threatened or harmed emotionally, physically or spiritually.

### Safety when staying

It can take time for a survivor to feel ready to leave her life partner. Devise a system of supporting the survivor. Plan that you or a female member of your congregation checks in with the survivor daily on the phone, via WhatsApp or by passing by her house. You can include a code such as a specific word on the phone, or hanging something visible in the garden or windows to show if she needs assistance. Advise her that she can do this with their neighbours too. As a faith leader you can also develop a hand signal as a code if she attends faith functions with her abusive partner – the signals can indicate if she needs urgent assistance or if she is ready to leave.

If the survivor agrees, she can also take out a Protection Order, even if she is still staying with the abuser. (See below 'Staying Safe'.) When applying for the Protection Order, she can also request a Safety Monitoring Order, and the court will send an order to the local SAPS Station Commander to ensure a police officer visits at the residence or makes contact with the applicant – and the officer must file a report to show this has been done daily. (The

abuser does not need to be informed that this is happening as it could aggravate the situation.)

### Reach out

As well as supporting her yourself, encourage the survivor to speak to someone she trusts like a family member, friend, church member, colleague or someone from an NGO who can listen and help her make a safety plan. Find out if any GBV Support Groups exist in the area to refer her to.

Here are some useful numbers:

GBV Hotline: 0800 428 428  
LifeLine Domestic Violence Helpline: 0800 150 150  
National Shelter Movement: 0800 001 005  
SA Depression and Anxiety Group: 0800 567 567  
FAMSA (Family and Marriage Society of South Africa): 010 590 5920

To help survivors access professional support locally, create a referral list of all service providers in your/their local area, and make sure you have a specific name for her to meet when she goes there. If you have time, offer to go with her as it can be very scary.



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### Keep evidence of abuse

Advise the survivor to keep photos of physical harm, screenshots of texts and WhatsApps, and police reports. Note dates, times and locations. It is best to have someone else keep this for the survivor, whether this is you or someone else she trusts.

### Erase the digital footprint

Once messages for use as evidence have been sent, the survivor needs to delete all her messages that she doesn't want the abuser to see. The survivor must also clear her internet history.

### Connect

Offer to connect the survivor with a prayer group or the gender arm of your faith institution.

### Spiritual support

If the survivor requests it, you may want to pray or do rituals for or with her which is complementary to the practical support.

Do not go too quickly to offering to pray, but let it be the last thing you talk about when you have helped her make practical plans and you can see she trusts you and considers you a safe space. Prayer complements but cannot replace the essential practical support needed. Be sensitive not to pressurise a person who is not of your faith. The most powerful witness in a time of crisis is the compassionate presence of a faith leader.

### Deciding to leave

For a domestic violence survivor to get to the point of leaving means she has experienced much trauma. It takes enormous courage to leave a partner, and it can feel like staying is a safer option (however traumatic) than leaving without knowing what the future holds. When planning to leave, it is important to continue to support the survivor.

### Pack a bag

Advise the survivor to pack some clothes, toiletries, medication, money, identification, and children's important documents like birth certificates. They must put this bag somewhere where it cannot be easily seen but is easily accessible.



### Leaving home

The survivor needs to know ahead of time where she will go – family, friend, shelter. Then help her determine the best time to leave. This will vary depending on each situation but could be when the abuser is at work or asleep. Otherwise, the survivor can create a reason for going out such as going to the shops or pretending that a family member needs her help.

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### Stay safe

Advise the survivor to get a Protection Order if she doesn't already have one. They are issued by the Magistrate's Court, not the police. If you have time, go along with her, or you can connect her to a local NGO to assist her. If she wants to lay a charge, this must be done at a police station. Try to go along with her and ensure she is treated with respect, and she must get a case number. The most dangerous time in an abusive relationship is when a woman decides to leave her partner, or shortly after she has left. Advise her never to threaten to leave or to tell him when she has decided to go.



If the survivor has stayed in their home and the abuser has left:

- Change the locks.
- Consider upgrading the security system if possible.
- Tell neighbours that the abuser doesn't live with her anymore and ask them to call the police if they observe the abuser near the home.

### What about the partner?

The partner may react badly. He may blame you for 'stealing his wife' or may beg you to bring her back or suddenly seem very sorry and ask you to reassure his wife that he has changed. Do not fall for any manipulation or gaslighting.

Never bring couples together for counselling if you know there is violence and a high degree of inequality. It may cause the perpetrator to 'punish' the survivor later and make things worse.

Of course, you can be available if he is willing to be honest and talk, but it would be best to refer him to a professional counsellor or NGO to help him heal.

Sadly, there is a big gap in expertise to offer counselling for perpetrators, to help them rehabilitate and heal. This may be an area where your church can gain the expertise from other professionals and offer this as a contribution to restorative justice in your community.

If the survivor has left the relationship, she should:

- Change her cell number.
- Change her routine.
- Alert the children's schools of the situation and to pay attention to possible changes in the child's behaviour. If possible, give the school a list of who can collect the children from school.
- Make sure her work knows what to do if something happens, like the abuser calls or comes to her workplace.

### Raise awareness

Make it known to members of your faith institution that there is zero tolerance for domestic violence. You can do this in services, at different faith gatherings, in your faith newsletter or on social media. Let women know they can approach you as a faith leader for support. You can also consider setting up a team of women who will give this support.



Faith **ACTION**  
to end Gender-Based Violence

**WE WILL  
SPEAK OUT**  **SA**  
FAITH COMMUNITIES ENDING SEXUAL AND  
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



In partnership with  
**Canada**



government  
communications  
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Government Communication and Information System  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



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### Be proactive

Many faith leaders are wary to preach about gender-based violence and domestic violence. Instead of focusing on the negatives, try preaching about what makes a healthy relationship based on respect and mutuality. Consider preaching about examples of transformative men in your sacred texts (eg Jesus or Joseph, the father of Jesus, in the New Testament Bible). Use calendar days or church seasons to integrate a gender-justice perspective in your sermon.

Start to DO CHURCH DIFFERENTLY!

Prevention is much better than trying to fix broken relationships when usually too much damage has already taken place.



Interfaith Online Platform:



WWSOSA:



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\* We acknowledge that most victims and survivors of domestic violence are women, but there are instances of heterosexual men and members of the LGBTQIA+ community experiencing domestic violence.

