

# COVID-19: GUIDANCE FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING ABUSE

People surviving abuse in their relationships and families may be experiencing increased isolation and danger caused by physical distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survivors of family abuse often have specific needs around safety, health and confidentiality. During this time, people who are already more vulnerable to economic and health insecurity are facing additional challenges.

Emergency shelters and transition houses are open during the COVID-19 pandemic to protect family members and children fleeing abuse. Community resources and supports are available to provide advice and safety planning without moving into a shelter, such as the [Assaulted Women's Helpline](#) or [Victim Services of York Region](#)

If you or someone you know needs help or wants to speak to a shelter worker, visit [york.ca](#) for a [list of emergency and transitional housing](#) in York Region.

## TYPES OF ABUSE

Abusers typically use various forms of abuse on their loved ones. Abuse can begin subtly and progress to be more obvious; for example, behaviours that may initially seem loving may become controlling. Shifts in decision making and power imbalance within a relationship is another concerning development. For additional examples of characteristics in a relationship that may be worrisome, refer to York Region Public Health's [healthy relationships poster](#).

- **Digital abuse** is the use of technology to bully, harass, stalk or intimidate. This includes one partner controlling the other's friends on social media, writing degrading messages about them online and having control of passwords. The abuser may also control or monitor who their partner is texting, calling and/or their online activity. Blackmail using photos or videos is also a form of digital abuse
- **Emotional abuse** is the never-ending experience of criticism, name-calling and put downs either alone or in public. It can also include blaming, false accusations about their partners' loyalties and asserting control over how they spend their time. Gaslighting is another form of emotional abuse and refers to when someone is being manipulated into questioning their own sanity
- **Financial abuse** means that one partner has limited or no access to the family's money. This leads to having no control over what is spent or saved and no access to money that comes into the family
- **Physical abuse** can include but is not limited to slapping, punching, kicking and choking. It can also include, for example, being slammed against a wall or being injured with a weapon or object
- **Psychological abuse** is when one partner lives with the constant fear of threats of violence against themselves and/or their children, friends, relatives and pets. Examples can include: when one partner is harassed at work by the other calling repeatedly or by showing up

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unannounced, having items of value destroyed, or being threatened to have children removed or visitation blocked because of the COVID-19 virus

- **Sexual abuse or marital rape** is when one partner is being forced against their will to perform sexual acts and/or hurt (pain/injury) inflicted during intercourse. Consent is required for every sexual act in all relationships including marriages
- **Spiritual abuse** is when someone's spiritual beliefs are mocked or religious beliefs are used as justification for abuse

## HOW COVID-19 COULD UNIQUELY IMPACT SURVIVORS OF ABUSE:

- Necessary items may be withheld, such as hand sanitizer or disinfectants
- Abusive partners may withhold information or share misinformation about the pandemic to control or frighten survivors or to prevent them from seeking appropriate medical attention if they have symptoms
- Abusive partners may withhold OHIP and/or benefit cards, threaten to cancel benefits or prevent survivors from seeking medical attention when needed
- Programs for survivors may be significantly impacted – shelters may be at capacity and stretched to support new intakes. Survivors may fear entering shelters due to the risk of the spread of COVID-19 in close living arrangements with others
- Older survivors with underlying health conditions may be at even higher risk for COVID-19 in settings where they would typically get support, like shelters, counseling centers, or courthouses. Older individuals experiencing family abuse can call the Senior Safety Line at 1-866-299-1011 for support
- Abusive partners may use COVID-19 to justify and escalate their isolation tactics

## HELPING LOVED ONES DURING COVID-19

Survivors of abuse who are being asked to stay at home may feel isolated from their friends and family. Friends and family can:

- Encourage them to try to maintain social connections online or over the phone, if it is safe to do so, and try to stick to their daily routines as much as possible
- Call 911 if they or someone they know is in immediate danger. Emergency services will respond even if you are COVID-19 positive, are in self-isolation or quarantine and experiencing symptoms

## STAYING SAFE USING TECHNOLOGY DURING COVID-19

The following strategies can be used to seek help using technology if necessary.

### ***When it is unsafe to talk on the phone***

- Many helplines and services provide different ways to connect, including text messaging
- If you need to be discreet in communicating with others, use technology strategically to get help or connect with people you trust
- Consider what you want and need to communicate and use an app that best meets those needs. Do you need one which will allow you to call for help quickly? One that will provide a safe way to get a supportive ear when needed? Do you need both?
  - Try using chat features on games or other unassuming apps to reach out to trusted friends
  - Download personal safety apps which allow you to quickly contact a trusted contact or 911 by pressing a button on the phone or in the app

### ***Recording conversation histories with texting***

Depending on the way the text line is set-up, the thread of the conversation may be saved to your device. Consider deleting the text threads once you are done to minimize the risk of someone else seeing it.

### ***Safety considerations when using online chat groups***

Chat messages are typically not saved to your device and the content of the messages usually delete after closing the browser window. However, a record of what website you visited could be listed in your browser history. If safe to do so, go to your web browser settings and delete the browsing history you don't want someone else to see.

Deleting the entire history may look suspicious if the person regularly monitors the browser activity. Consider deleting specific parts of conversations instead of entire conversations.

### ***How to safely communicate if devices are monitored***

There are various ways someone could monitor a device. If your partner has physical access to your device and they know your password or account information, they may be able to gain access to information you share and search through it. This could include the thread of a text line or call logs.

If someone has installed stalkerware/spyware on your device, they will have access to anything that happens on the device, including websites visited, call logs, texts, and any information being backed up to your cloud-based storage. If this is the case, it may be helpful to think of a different way to communicate.

Consider connecting with friends or family via a code word or phrase to indicate that you need help but would not flag anything to your partner. Remember to let your friends or family know what this code word or phrase means and what to do if you should use that strategy. You may also consider getting a low cost pay-as-you-go phone or a donated phone as an alternate device to make emergency calls.

For more information on how to stay safe while using technology in the context of intimate partner abuse, sexual assault and family abuse, visit [Technology Safety](#).

## SAFETY PLANNING DURING COVID-19

As everyone is self-isolating and practicing social distancing and remaining home, survivors of abuse may be forced to endure a dangerous situation. The following strategies can help you prepare yourself and/or your loved ones until it is possible to escape.

### Planning for safety

- Identify your partner's form of abuse, frequency and level of force so that you can assess the risk of physical danger to you and your children before it occurs
- Identify a safe area(s) of the house where there is an escape route and no weapons. If arguments occur, try to move to those areas
- If violence is unavoidable, make yourself a small target. Dive into a corner and curl up into a ball with your face protected and arms around each side of your head, fingers entwined
- If possible, have a phone accessible at all times and know what numbers to call for help
  - Know the phone number to your [local shelter](#)
  - If your life is in danger, call 911
- Let trusted friends and neighbors know of your situation and develop a plan with a visual and/or phone signal to notify them when you need help
- Plan for what you will do if your children tell your partner of your plan or if your partner finds out about your plan
- Keep weapons like guns and knives locked away and as inaccessible as possible. Know where they are kept for your own awareness of what is around you
- Make a habit of backing the car into the driveway and keeping it fueled
  - Keep the driver's door unlocked and others locked — for a quick escape
  - Know where the keys are kept
  - Keep a spare key with you
- Try not to wear scarves or long jewelry that could be used to strangle or hurt you
- Create several plausible reasons for leaving the house at different times of the day or night. When in isolation think of reasons which would be realistic for you to go out, such as grocery shopping, walking a dog or getting medication
- Be aware of any technology and devices you use which your partner has access to or you know they search through

### Supporting Children

- Avoid running to where the children are, as your partner may hurt them as well
- Teach your children how to get help:
  - Instruct them not to get involved in the violence between you and your partner
  - Plan a code word to signal to them to get help or leave the house
- Tell your children that violence is never right, even when someone they love is being violent
- Reassure children that they are not at fault or the cause of the violence, and when anyone is being violent, it is important to stay safe
- Practice how to leave safely. Practice with your children or talk it through with them if you don't have the ability to practice with them

## PREPARING TO LEAVE AN ABUSIVE SITUATION

If you need to leave an unsafe environment, get the following items organized. These items should be kept in a safe place until you are ready to leave or in case you need to leave suddenly. If you have children, take them if you can and, if possible, take your pets, too.

### **Copies of Important Papers:**

Make photocopies or take pictures of the following items and store them in a safe place, away from the originals.

- Marriage certificate
- Divorce papers
- Custody orders
- Legal protection or protective orders
- Health plan papers and medical cards
- Medical records for all family members
- Children's school records
- Investment papers/records and account numbers
- Work permits
- Immigration papers
- Rental agreement/lease or house deed
- Car title, registration and insurance information
- Records of police reports you have filed or other evidence of abuse

### **Keep Cards or Copies of Cards in Your Wallet:**

- Bank cards
- Birth certificates
- Social Insurance Number (SIN) cards (or numbers written on paper if you cannot find the cards)
- Driver's license
- Photo identification or passport
- Permanent resident card

### **Try to Keep your Wallet and an Emergency Bag Handy with the Following Items:**

- Keys for home, car and mailbox
- Cell phone
- A month supply of medications and dosages
- Emergency contact lists
- Income source - money, credit cards and items you can sell if needed

### **Other Items to Keep Handy and Access Quickly:**

- Emergency bag packed with immediate needs
- Special toys or items of comfort for yourself and/or children
- Jewelry or sentimental items
- List of items you would like to take if there is an opportunity to return to collect belongings at a later date

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [York Support Services Centre](#): 24/7 Crisis line 1-855-310-COPE
- [Sandgate Women's Shelter](#): 24/7 Crisis line: 1-800-661-8294, [Facebook page](#)
- [Yellow Brick House](#): 24/7 Crisis line 1-800-263-3247, [Facebook page](#)
- [Ontario 211](#): Community and Social Services Help Line
- [York Region Centre for Community Safety](#): 905-836-7601 ext. 100

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