

Staying Safe During COVID-19ⁱ

Avoiding public spaces and working remotely can help to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but for many survivors, staying home may not be the safest option. We know that any external factors that add stress and financial strain can negatively impact survivors and create circumstances where their safety is further compromised.

Abuse is about power and control. When survivors are forced to stay in the home or in close proximity to their abuser more frequently, an abuser can use any tool to exert control over their victim, including a national health concern such as COVID-19. In a time where companies may be encouraging that their employees work remotely, and the CDC is encouraging “social distancing,” an abuser may take advantage of an already stressful situation to gain more control.

Here’s how COVID-19 could uniquely impact intimate partner violence survivors:

- Abusive partners may withhold necessary items, such as hand sanitizer or disinfectants.
- Abusive partners may 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 insurance cards, threaten to cancel insurance, or prevent survivors from seeking medical attention if they need it.
- Programs that serve survivors may be significantly impacted — shelters may be full or may even stop intakes altogether. Survivors may also fear entering shelter because of being in close quarters with groups of people.
- Survivors who are older or have chronic heart or lung conditions may be at increased risk in public places where they would typically get support, like shelters, counseling centers, or courthouses.
- Travel restrictions may impact a survivor’s escape or safety plan – it may not be safe for them to use public transportation or to fly.
- An abusive partner may feel more justified and escalate their isolation tactics.

Here’s what our Advocates have heard from some survivors reaching out:

- *“A chatter mentioned that the abuser was using the virus as a scare tactic to keep the survivor away from their kids.”*
- *“A chatter said the abuser was using COVID-19 as a scare tactic so that they would not visit family.”*

- *“A health professional still living with their abuser called and said they were physically abused that night because their abuser was sure they were trying to infect them with COVID-19.”*

If any of the above sound like they may be happening to you or someone you love, here are a few suggestions for survivors that may make this uncertain time feel a little bit safer:

Create a safety plan.

A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan that includes ways to remain safe while in a relationship, planning to leave, or after you leave. Here at The Hotline, we safety plan with victims, friends, family members, and anyone who is concerned about their own safety or the safety of someone else.

You and your partner may be told by either or both of your employers to work remotely to limit social interaction. Having a safety plan laid out can help you to protect yourself during this stressful time. You can learn more about safety plans here, and you can find an interactive guide to safety planning¹ in the reference below.

Because there may be limited shelter availability due to COVID-19, consider alternatives such as staying with family or friends, staying in motels, or sleeping in your vehicle. Be extra mindful of good hygiene practices if you’re leaving as well – wash your hands regularly, avoid touching your face, minimize contact with surfaces that other people have had contact with, etc.

Practice self-care.

COVID-19 is causing uncertainty for many people, but getting through this time while experiencing abuse can feel really overwhelming. Taking time for your health and wellness can make a big difference in how you feel.

If you’re a friend or family member of someone experiencing abuse, you may not be able to visit them in person if you live in an area where there are COVID-19 cases. Seeing someone you care about being hurt is stressful. Remind yourself that you can’t make decisions for someone else, but you can encourage your loved one to think about their wellbeing, safety plan and practice self-care while they are in their home.

¹ Interactive Guide to Safety Planning, <https://www.thehotline.org/>

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Reach out for help.

While people are encouraged to stay at home, you may feel isolated from your friends and family. Even if you are isolated, try to maintain social connections online or over the phone, if it is safe to do so, and try to stick to your daily routines as much as possible.

For any victims and survivors who need support, we are here for you, 24/7. Call 1-800-799-7233 or 1-800-787-3224 for TTY, or if you're unable to speak safely, you can log onto thehotline.org or text LOVEIS to 22522.

You are not alone.

ⁱ National Domestic Violence Hotline, Abuse, Domestic Violence. March 13, 2020. Staying Safe During COVID-19. Accessed August 15, 2020 from <https://www.thehotline.org/>