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Life After Abuse:

A Guide for Aboriginal Women Moving to the City

This service provided by:

The National Association of Friendship Centres

Toll free: 877-563-4844

Fax: 613-594-3428

For more information please visit us at:

www.NewJourneys.ca

newjourneys@nafcc.ca

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About this Guide

Historically, domestic abuse was not common in Aboriginal communities. Traditionally, our women were respected and valued as caretakers and givers of life, and were often knowledge holders and decision makers. Unfortunately, our communities have become fractured as a result of ongoing colonial processes, including the imposition of the *Indian Act* and the forced placement of children into residential schools. These policies and others have had a detrimental effect on our people and, in particular, our women. As our traditional structures and values diminished, they were replaced by colonial structures and values where men were dominant and women and children were often seen as property. Today we strive to recover our traditional ways of being; however, many of our women remain vulnerable. This is evident in the fact that Aboriginal women face abuse at a much higher rate than other female populations in Canada.

Every day, women across our Nations have to end relationships that are abusive. For many of us, this is a difficult decision, especially if ending the relationship also means leaving our home community and those that we love behind. But for many, leaving is necessary to ensure safety for ourselves and our children. As resources in small communities can be limited, some women choose to relocate to urban centres. If you are one of these women, this guide is for you. It provides answers to several frequently asked questions about domestic abuse and provides general tips on how to make a safe and successful transition to city life. It is intended to be used along with the service directories that are also located on this site. These directories provide contact information for many of the programs and services that can assist you in making your transition to the city.

It should be noted that this guide provides general information only and may not provide all of the information that you need, and that some of the information here may not be applicable in all situations. You are strongly encouraged to seek support from sources that you trust including friends, family, police, social services or a women's organization or shelter. If you are currently in danger, call the emergency number in your area and go to a safe place immediately.

What is Domestic Abuse?

Domestic abuse is not just physical violence. Abuse can be any number of tactics that are used to gain and maintain power or control over another individual. The extent of abuse cannot be measured by the severity of the physical injury. In fact, it can often be the emotional, psychological and spiritual scars that take the longest to heal. The definitions below describe different types of abuse.

Physical Abuse: Physical abuse includes any physical contact that is intended to cause discomfort, pain or injury. Examples of physical abuse include, but are not limited to, grabbing, spitting, pinching, pushing, shoving, biting, slapping, punching,

hair pulling, scratching or tripping. An abuser may use objects to throw or hit, or they may use weapons such as guns and knives. It is important to remember that physical violence is severe even if it does not result in physical injury.

Sexual Abuse: Abusers often use sex as a way of controlling a relationship. This may include forcing a person to perform sexual acts against their will and/or treating them as a sex object. Healthy sexual relationships are mutual commitments based on respect. You have the right to choose if, when and how you engage in sexual behaviour, even when you are in an intimate relationship.

Intimidation: Any type of behaviour intended to scare you can be considered intimidation. Such behaviours can include yelling and making unwanted gestures. It may also include stalking, the abuse of pets and destruction of property such as throwing or smashing personal belongings.

Threats: Abusers will often use threats as a way of maintaining control in a relationship. Types of threats include, but are not limited to, threatening to harm children, family or friends, threatening to take children or call child welfare or threatening to harm oneself or commit suicide if a partner leaves or does not comply with their wishes.

Isolation: Abusers will often attempt to isolate their victims as a way of maintaining power and control over the relationship. Types of isolating behaviour include controlling who a partner talks to and when or preventing a partner from seeking emotional support. An abuser may make it difficult for a partner to develop or maintain relationships, or may create an environment where others begin to avoid them.

Emotional Abuse: Any type of mistreatment that causes a woman to feel helpless or bad about herself is emotional abuse, beyond making an occasional mean comment in the heat of the moment. Abusers make comments or do things to intentionally make their partners feel sick, dumb, ugly or emotionally unstable. Emotional abuse also includes making accusations, of promiscuity for example, or attempting to control what a woman wears or how she behaves. Emotional abuse is often very subtle.

Involving Children: Children are often the invisible victims of abusive domestic relationships and are sometimes even used as pawns by the abuser. An abuser may attempt to make a mother feel guilty about wanting to end a relationship by insisting that the children need their father, or he may tell her that he will refuse to see the children if she ends the relationship. The abuser may also use children to deliver messages on their behalf or may use visitation as a way of harassing a mother after separation.

Use of Male Privilege: Relationships are equal partnerships based on love and respect. Some abusers seek power and control by suggesting that they are more entitled or superior because they are men. They may insist that you wait on them or make household decisions without your input.

Economic Abuse: Preventing a woman from working, taking her money or making her ask for money is considered economic abuse. Refusing to give a woman access to family income and financial information or refusing to pay child support are also forms of economic abuse.

Cultural and Spiritual Abuse: Our culture and spirituality are at the core of who we are as Aboriginal peoples. Unfortunately, some abusers choose to manipulate a woman's cultural and spiritual practices to maintain control over her. Suggesting that he is culturally more superior to his partner, or that she is less Aboriginal because of her status or lack of status under the *Indian Act* are forms of cultural abuse. Using prayers or "bad medicine" against a woman, suggesting that God or the Creator will punish her if she ends the relationship, preventing her from speaking to an Elder or attending ceremonies are all examples of spiritual abuse.

There is no excuse for abuse. Saying that you made him do it, being drunk or having been abused as a child are not acceptable. He is responsible for his behaviour.

I'm in an Abusive Relationship. What should I do?

If you are in an abusive relationship, your first priority is to ensure physical safety for you and your children. If you are in immediate danger and are able to leave, do so now. Seek out a safe place through a trusted friend, family member, social service provider or go to a shelter if there is one near you. Consider calling the police if you can. If you are injured seek medical attention.

Once you are in a safe place you will have to decide if you are going to remain in the relationship or if you will leave. This is your decision, but know that abuse usually escalates over time and it will not stop until your partner gets help. It is not your responsibility to help your partner overcome their abusive behaviour. This is something they must be motivated to do on their own.

I am not Ready or am Unable to Leave

If you have decided that you are not ready to leave your abuser for whatever reason, or are unable to leave at this time, it is important that you take steps to ensure safety for you and your children while you are still in the home. Below are some helpful suggestions from the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres' Kanawayhiton project that may help you protect yourself while living with an abuser:

- Tell someone you trust about the abuse.
- Think about your partner's past use and level of force. This will help you predict what type of danger you and your children are facing and when to leave.
- Tell your children that abuse is never right, even when someone they love is being abusive. Tell them the abuse isn't your fault or theirs, that they did not cause it, and neither did you. Teach them it is important to be safe when there is abuse.
- Plan where to go in an emergency. Teach your children how to get help. Tell them not to go between you and your partner if there is violence. Plan a code word to signal they should go for help or leave.
- Don't run to a place where the children are as your partner may hurt them as well.
- Create a plan to get out of your home safely and practice it with your children.
- Ask your neighbours, friends and family to call the police if they hear sounds of abuse, and to look after your children in case of emergency.
- If an argument is developing, move to a space where you can get outside easily. Don't go to a room where there is access to potential weapons (e.g. bathroom, kitchen or workshop).
- If you are being hurt, protect your face with your arms around each side of your head, with your fingers locked together. Don't wear scarves or long jewelry.
- Park your car by backing it into the driveway and keep it fuelled.
- Hide your keys, cellphone and some money near your escape route.
- Have a list of phone numbers to call for help. Call the police if it is an emergency. Your local shelter or police may be able to equip you with a panic button/cellphone.
- Make sure all weapons and ammunition are hidden or removed from the house.

Other things to consider:

- Clear the call history from your phone after making or receiving calls to or from shelters, the police, crisis centres and anyone who may be providing you support.
- If you are searching the Internet for information or resources about abusive relationships, make sure to clear the Internet history before logging off. If your abuser has access to your email or social media accounts such as Facebook, consider changing the passwords or refrain from speaking about your plans in emails or instant messages.
- Document your abuse by taking notes or pictures of your injuries. Do not store this information in your home.
- If you can, store a few changes of clothing for you and your children with someone that you trust.

I Have Decided to End my Relationship but have been told that am I not Entitled to Stay in our Home

If you have decided to end your relationship, you may have considered asking your partner to leave the family home. Under provincial law, the courts have the authority to decide who will remain in the matrimonial home, and in cases where children are involved the courts often award possession of the home to the parent with primary custody. Unfortunately, provincial laws do not apply to on-reserve communities. In 2013, however, the *Family Homes on Reserves and the Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act* was created and came into full effect on December 16, 2014. The *Act* will provide on-reserve individuals with some of the same legal protections afforded to those living off-reserve.

Prior to the *Act*, many reserves did not have rules governing who is allowed to remain in a matrimonial home when a relationship ends and instead the individual with the certificate of possession retains the home. Now that the *Act* is in place, if a woman is in a violent or abusive relationship a court will be able to order one spouse or common-law partner to leave the home, regardless of certificate of possession, while taking into account the best outcome for any children a couple may have.

I Have Decided to Leave my Partner but Where Will I Live?

Now that you have made the decision to leave your abuser, you are faced with the question of where to go. If you hope to stay in your community, you may choose to stay with family or friends or ask your Band about the availability of housing on-reserve. When considering these options, it is important to determine whether or not you will be safe if you remain in the community. If you do decide to stay with family or friends, or have been provided housing by your Band, consider identifying an alternative place where you can go if your abuser attempts to harm you or make unwanted contact. Remember that abuse can escalate after a relationship ends, even though you are no longer living in the same home.

If you are concerned about ongoing abuse you can go to a shelter, at least temporarily. A shelter is a safe place to stay where staff can offer you emotional support, as well as support in accessing resources such as housing and financial aid. As many reserve communities do not have shelters, your only option may be to move to a shelter on a neighbouring reserve or to a mainstream shelter off-reserve. If you have already made the decision to leave the reserve permanently, you may choose to stay with family or friends in another community until you are safe and able to find your own housing. Again, it is important to consider whether this is a safe option for you and your children.

Preparing to Leave

If you are still living in the home and are preparing to leave, it is important to keep yourself and your children safe until you depart. Refer to the section above *I am not Ready or am Unable to Leave* for tips on how to stay safe while living with an abuser. Do not inform your partner of your intention to end the relationship while you are still living in the home as it may cause the abuse to escalate. When you leave, leave quickly. Take your children with you if you intend to seek custody. If possible, you should seek a police escort, or assistance from family or friends, to ensure that you and your children are able to leave safely.

While you are still in the home, gather important documents (or copies) and personal belongings for you and your children. You may want to remove items slowly from the house and store them with someone you trust. If you are concerned that removing a certain item from the home may cause your partner to suspect your plans then leave it behind. You can go back later with police to retrieve items. Remember that most things, including identification, can be replaced and nothing is so valuable that it is worth risking your safety or your children's safety. If you have already left the home and were unable to gather your personal belongings, seek assistance from the police who can escort you to the home and wait with you while you pack.

Items you should consider taking with you when you leave:

- Identification including status cards, driver's licenses, birth certificates, provincial health insurance cards, passports and social insurance cards.
- Immunization records for your children.
- School records, such as your children's most recent report cards.
- Financial information such as bankcards, cheque books, credit cards and investment portfolios.
- Legal documents such as restraining orders, peace bonds and custody papers.
- Any medications that you or your children take.
- Family photographs, including at least one recent photo of your abuser.
- Jewelry and other valuables.
- Some of your children's favourite personal belongings, such as toys or a blanket.
- Items of sentimental value.
- House and car keys.
- A list of important phone numbers and addresses.
- Clothing.

Starting Over in the City

Once you have left the home and are in a safe place, it is time to begin planning for your future. The remainder of this guide will provide you with some of the

information you will need to start over. For information about specific programs and services in your new city, refer to the program and service directories on this website.

Developing a Healing Plan: Now that you are safe, it is time to come to terms with the abuse that you have endured. You are likely to experience a range of emotions including trauma, anger, loneliness, loss, sadness, depression and perhaps even a sense of regret about having ended the relationship. All of these emotions are completely normal and with the proper support you will be able to overcome these feelings so that you can move forward in a healthy way. Many cities offer services such as support groups and counseling for women who have faced abuse. Some even provide culturally specific programs and supports, including opportunities to meet with Elders and participate in traditional healing practices and ceremonies. For more information about culturally specific programs, contact your local Friendship Centre. Remember that abuse can affect you long after the physical scars have healed, and although recovering from trauma takes time, it is possible. You have shown your strength by surviving and ending an abusive relationship. You can now draw upon this same strength as you heal and move forward.

Supporting Your Children: Even if your children have not experienced abuse directly or witnessed your abuse, they may experience emotional trauma. It is important that you support your children as they deal with their emotions about what has happened. Seek professional help on their behalf if needed.

Some tips for supporting your children as they heal:

- Take time to talk with and listen to your children about their feelings. Never dismiss their feelings.
- Talk to them about why you have left home, and if they are unable to visit or speak to their father, even if just for now, explain why.
- Reassure them that you love them and that what has happened is not their fault.
- Have fun with your children. Take time to explore your new surroundings.
- If you have more than one child, make sure that you set aside one-on-one time for each of them.
- Be aware of any signs indicating that your children have been traumatized, such as overly clingy behavior, unwillingness to show affection, angry or violent outbursts, a loss of interest in their favourite activities, nightmares, emotional meltdowns or a fear of leaving the home. If your children exhibit any of these behaviours, it is important to deal with them immediately. Don't expect that they will resolve the issues on their own.

If you are unable to address these behaviours on your own, it may be necessary to seek professional support for your children. Some places where you can get support for your children are school councilors, specialized programs for children who have lived in abusive homes, and upon referral from a doctor. Remember that children

are very resilient and adaptable, and that with love and support they too will heal over time.

Legal Issues: Whether you were legally married to your partner or not, there are often legal issues surrounding the dissolution of a partnership and, in most cases, you will require legal representation. If you are unable to afford a lawyer you may be eligible to receive legal services through legal aid, duty council available at most courthouses, or through a community legal services organization. Legal issues you might face include:

- Obtaining legal custody of your children. It is advisable that you begin this process as soon as possible after leaving your abuser.
- Separation and/or divorce proceedings.
- The division of assets.
- Obtaining child and/or spousal support.
- Obtaining a restraining order or peace bond to ensure ongoing safety for you and your children. A peace bond or restraining order does not guarantee your safety; it is only effective if your abuser obeys the order. It does, however, ensure that he will face consequences through the court system if he does not obey the order. For more information about obtaining a peace bond or restraining order, contact a lawyer, your local police department or courthouse. Although you do not require a lawyer to obtain a restraining order or a peace bond, it is advisable to have one.

Finances:

Once you have settled in, your first priority may be to obtain financial assistance. The process for applying for assistance varies from province to province. Information on how to apply can be found on the municipal website of your city. If you are currently staying in a shelter, staff will be able to assist you with your application. When applying for financial assistance you may be asked to provide some of the following documents:

- Identification such as birth certificates and status cards for you and your children.
- Banking information including account balances.
- Proof of any assets.
- Custody documents including any child support orders.
- Separation agreements including any spousal support orders.
- Proof of address.
- Proof that your children are registered in school.

You should apply as soon as possible even if you don't have all of the required documentation. Your case worker might be able to assist you in obtaining the information that is missing, as well as assist you with:

- Obtaining additional funds if you or your children have special dietary needs.
- Obtaining identification or other legal documentation.
- Obtaining funds to cover moving and storage costs.

- Obtaining basic furniture such as beds, dressers, and cribs.
- Transportation assistance so that you can attend important appointments or search for a job.

Finding a Home:

Searching for a new home in an unfamiliar city can be an overwhelming process. Here are some tips to help you find the right home for you and your children:

- Apply for subsidized housing as soon as possible. Wait lists can be long, but in some cities women and children living in shelters and families who are currently under-housed are given priority.
- If you are unsure of what neighbourhood is most suitable, ask around. Shelter workers, family, friends, resource workers or your local Friendship Centre may be able assist you.
- Try to find a place that is close to schools, community centres and shopping. This will cut down on transportation costs and will provide opportunities for socialization.
- If you are concerned about your safety consider living in an apartment building with a secured entrance and video monitoring.

Employment, Training, and Education:

If you have decided to go to work, or if financial assistance requires that you seek employment, there are several resources available to help you:

- Your financial assistance case worker, who may be able to assist you with job placement.
- Local job banks.
- Online job banks such as the Job Bank (www.jobbank.gc.ca).
- Your local Friendship Centre, where staff might know of jobs available in the urban Aboriginal community.
- The local organization that delivers Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) programming. ASETS may be able to assist you with wage subsidies, childcare, resume writing and skills development.
- Employment agencies, which have listings for both temporary and permanent employment.
- The program and service directory for your city located on this website, which lists more employment resources.

If you lack work experience or would like to change your career path, you could consider volunteering with a local organization such as a Friendship Centre or Head Start program. Volunteering is a great way to develop or practice job skills and meet new people. Another way to develop job skills is through education or training. If you would like to explore opportunities for training or furthering your education consider the following:

- Your financial assistance case worker may be able to assist you with the costs of training or upgrading, such as supplies and transportation.

- If you have not completed high school and want to do so, contact your local school board. Many school boards offer adult education programs.
- Contact the local organization that delivers Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) programming. ASETS may be able to assist with childcare, costs associated with apprenticeships and accessing skills training.
- Contact local career colleges or vocational schools. Some of the programs offered by these institutions include bookkeeping, office administration, computer technology and hairdressing.
- Many cities have community colleges and universities if you want to get a degree or diploma. Even if there isn't a college or university in your city, you may be able to earn credits towards a degree or diploma online. For more information about post-secondary education, consult the *Quick Guide for First Nations Post-Secondary Students Moving to the City* located on this website.
- For more education and training resources, consult the program and service directory for your city located on this website.

Your Children and School:

If you have school-age children, register them as soon as possible. Attending school will help them settle into a new routine and make new friends. Most school boards require that your child attend school in the area of the city that you live in.

However, in certain circumstances some school boards may allow you to register your children in a school that is outside of the area that you are living. For example, if you are temporarily living in a shelter, or with family or friends, the school board may allow you to register your children in the area that you intend to move to. Also, if your children have special needs that cannot be met in the school in your area, arrangements can be made for them to attend a school elsewhere in the city.

You may want to inform school officials of your situation when registering your children. This will ensure that teachers and staff can provide your children with any extra support they require. You should also inform school officials if you are concerned that your abuser may attempt to visit your children at school or pick them up from school without your permission. Bring a photograph of your abuser and ask officials to keep it on file so that they can quickly identify him and help keep your children safe.

Childcare:

If you are seeking employment or have decided to return to school, you will need to find appropriate childcare. Here are some things to consider:

- Have trusted friends, family or neighbours care for your children.
- Put your children in private in-home daycare or daycare centres. Some cities offer daycare subsidies but there is often a wait list. You should apply even if you currently have no plans to work or go to school because your plans may change in the future.

- Enroll your children in Aboriginal Head Start programs. Head start programs offer your preschool children the opportunity to learn and socialize in a culturally appropriate environment. Head start programs are often family-centred and connected to the broader urban Aboriginal community and, as a result, your whole family can benefit from being involved.

Your Health:

Regular visits to a primary healthcare provider is an essential part of maintaining your health and wellness:

- Find a family doctor. This may be difficult in some cities where there are shortages. Your provincial Ministry of Health or college of physicians may be able to provide you with contact information for doctors in your area who are accepting new patients.
- If you or your children are sick and you do not have a family doctor, go to an urgent care centre or walk-in clinic. If it is an emergency, call 911 or go to the emergency room at your nearest hospital.
- Visit a doctor or healthcare provider regularly, especially if you or your children suffer from a chronic condition such as diabetes.
- Call your local Friendship Centre or Aboriginal service organization if you are looking for traditional forms of healing. They may know of Elders and traditional healers living in your area.
- Participate in local wellness programming. Many Friendship Centres and Aboriginal service organizations offer programming that focuses on health and wellness.
- Remember that health is about more than just physical well-being. Take time to look after your and your children's emotional, spiritual and psychological well-being.

Culture in the City:

Living on-reserve or in a Métis or Inuit community provides a strong cultural foundation for many Aboriginal people where a connectedness to land, language and spirituality may be part of day-to-day life. You may be concerned that by leaving your reserve you will lose this connectedness. Be assured that this need not be the case. Many Aboriginal service organizations, including Friendship Centres, provide cultural programs to support you in maintaining your Indigenous identity. Some opportunities that may be available through these programs include:

- Elder support and teachings.
- Participation in ceremonies such as sweat lodges.
- Community feasts.
- Traditional craft classes and circles.
- Pow wows and other cultural events.

Final Thoughts

The last few weeks, months or perhaps even years may have been very challenging for you and your children. Hopefully moving to the city means that these challenges are behind you, but it may also mean that some new challenges will arise. Suddenly, you may find yourself in an unfamiliar fast-paced environment with people who have different values and beliefs. This can be overwhelming, especially if you are not familiar with your surroundings or if you do not know anyone. These feelings are usually temporary and in time you will adapt.

Be patient with yourself and your children. Remember that change takes time and that living in a new environment doesn't mean that you will lose the values and beliefs that are part of who you are as an Aboriginal person. It just means that you will be applying those values and beliefs to new situations. Think positively about the opportunities and experiences that are ahead of you and remember that the same strength that has aided you in overcoming past challenges will guide you through the future.