

ROADMAP

for the way out

Even if you know you are in an abusive relationship and need to get out, actually leaving may seem impossible — especially if there are children to consider, if you have limited financial resources or you fear for your safety and that of your loved ones.

The best place to start with any major life change is with preparation. If you're contemplating an escape, here is a roadmap to help guide you:

WAYPOINT 1

CALL IT WHAT IT IS.

There are several types of abuse, including mental, emotional, physical and financial, but all are about exerting power and control. Identify the abusive behaviors you have been subjected to — which can include everything from demeaning or belittling you to physical violence — and no longer make excuses for them. Abuse is never normal or OK.

WAYPOINT 2

STOP BLAMING YOURSELF.

Chances are your abuser has made you believe that you are all or partly at fault for the mistreatment you've endured. Before you can move on successfully, you must recognize that there is nothing you could have done differently to get a better outcome and you are not to blame. The problem lies with the abuser, not you, and you are not alone.

WAYPOINT 3

CONFIDE IN PEOPLE YOU TRUST.

To break free of your abuser, you will need plenty of support. If you have been suffering in silence, assess who you feel comfortable talking to, whether that's close loved ones or a professional counselor, and apprise them of the situation so they can offer help and guidance. Be careful about only telling people who will not betray your confidence.

WAYPOINT 4

ASSESS YOUR NEEDS AND YOUR RESOURCES.

On the Coast, there are several organizations, including the Gulf Coast Center for Nonviolence and I am Knowledge, that domestic violence victims can turn to for support and aid. If you need assistance with money, housing or childcare upon leaving, determine who can help you and for how long. Also, take advantage of online resources. If you fear that you will be caught conducting internet research, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the GCCFN website and many others have a safety exit that lets you hide your browsing.

WAYPOINT 5

CREATE A PERSONALIZED SAFETY PLAN.

While you can't control what your abuser does, you can plan how you will respond to future incidents and how you will get to safety if necessary. Some questions for consideration include, "When I have to talk to the abuser, I can _____," and, "When I feel a fight coming on, I will try to move to a place that is lowest risk for getting hurt, such as _____." You also can create a codeword to alert friends, family, co-workers, counselors or others to call for help on your behalf.

WAYPOINT 6

DON'T TURN BACK.

There may be "good" times when your abuser is kind to you; patterns of mistreatment typically are followed by loving gestures to "make it up to you." Recognize that serious mental or emotional problems usually underlie the abuse, and it is not your responsibility to "fix" your abuser or convince him to get help. Your greatest duty is to the welfare and safety of yourself, your children and anyone else endangered by the abusive relationship.

WHATEVER YOU NEED, help is available

FROM THE GULF COAST CENTER FOR NONVIOLENCE

If you are in an abusive relationship, do not let your fear about finances, shelter, childcare and other basic needs stop you from leaving and getting to safety. Here are some programs and services that can help:

FEDERAL FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) is the federally funded program that provides financial payments for families with children under 18 experiencing financial crisis. The TANF Work Program also can assist with job training, childcare and transportation to prepare for employment: (601) 359-4500.

FOOD ASSISTANCE

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides monthly benefits to assist in purchasing healthy food for families in financial crisis: (601) 359-4500.

HOUSING ASSISTANCE

Emergency shelter and housing assistance for victims of domestic violence and their children is available through the Gulf Coast Center for Nonviolence (800-800-1396). Individuals and families who experience homelessness due to domestic violence also may receive assistance with deposits and/or rental assistance through other homeless prevention and rapid rehousing programs. The Open Doors Homeless Coalition can help determine

eligibility and provide case management: (228) 604-2048.

CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE

Parents in financial need may receive vouchers to help pay for childcare while they're working through the Child Care Payment Program (CCPP), administered by the Mississippi Department of Human Services: (601) 359-4500.

ADDRESS CONFIDENTIALITY PROGRAM

For individuals who relocate due to domestic violence, sexual abuse or stalking, the Address Confidentiality Program can help keep their new address confidential. The ACP allows a person to receive mail at a secure substitute address and then forwards the mail to their actual address. This substitute address also can be used in place of a real address for things like applying for a driver's license, enrolling children in school or registering to vote: (800) 829-6766.

EVICTON PROTECTION

The Violence Against

Women Act provides some restrictions against eviction for victims of domestic violence. Any federally funded housing program or landlord accepting Section 8 vouchers cannot deny admission to anyone based on status as a victim of domestic violence, dating violence or stalking. These landlords also may not evict victims because of actual or threatened violence that occurred on their property: <https://nhlp.org/files/VAWA-2013-Packet.pdf>.

VICTIM'S COMPENSATION PROGRAM

Victims of violent crime (like domestic violence) may apply to receive reimbursement for certain expenses, such as medical bills, transportation to get medical or mental health care, counseling, lost wages, tuition loss, relocation, temporary housing, repairs or loss of support: (800) 829-6766.

FREE LEGAL SERVICES

Northcutt Legal Clinic is a traditional law office that provides pro bono civil legal services for victims of domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking. Northcutt represents victims

free of charge in their legal battles for protection, divorce, child custody and support: (228) 864-7144.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND IMMIGRATION HELP

Individuals struggling with issues regarding immigration, fair housing or civil rights violations may contact the Mississippi Center for Justice for guidance and possible pro bono legal assistance: (228) 435-7284.

Medical Care: Coastal Family Health Center provides comprehensive medical and mental health care, as well as dental care, optometry, women's health, laboratory, radiology, and pharmacy services to the community regardless of economic status. 228-374-2713

MEDICATION ASSISTANCE

St. Vincent de Paul Community Pharmacy can provide free non-controlled prescription medication for those in need who are otherwise unable to afford their medications. 228-374-9097.

Don't suffer in silence

- HELP IS AVAILABLE



BY KELLY HAWKINS

In addition to emergency shelter, survivors need support services to help them through their recovery and regaining their independence and autonomy.

One in four women and one in seven men have been victims of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which is staggering. Domestic violence often is stigmatized and misunderstood, resulting in fear of coming forward for those affected and in most need of help from community programs and services.

By raising awareness and providing education across demographics in diverse communities, lives can be saved — and future violence can be prevented.

The Gulf Coast Center for Nonviolence is doing just that and has been providing comprehensive services and programs for individuals, families and children for 44 years. The Center started as a simple, volunteer-run domestic violence shelter operating out of the back of a church in Biloxi and has grown over the past four decades into the largest organization of its kind in Mississippi, serving victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, homicide and human trafficking.

The Center is intimately acquainted with the challenges and barriers victims face as they seek safety, stability and justice, which is why the programs available on

the Gulf Coast use a comprehensive approach in addressing not only a family's immediate safety through shelter, but also their financial literacy, housing options, access to legal services, access to medical care and essential mental health services.

The Center operates two emergency domestic violence shelters in south Mississippi — one in Biloxi, and one in Pascagoula. The agency's Pascagoula shelter is called Adrienne's House, and it has been in operation since 2011; we're proud to be celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

In addition to emergency shelter, survivors need support services to help them through their recovery and regaining their independence and autonomy. That's why the Center offers case management services; individual and group counseling; a children's program that features a therapeutic preschool; a legal clinic offering free civil legal services; rapid rehousing, transitional, and transitional to permanent housing programs; life skills classes; parenting classes; nonresidential services; sexual assault program services, including hospital response and crisis intervention; survivors of homicide program services; and human trafficking program services.

The Center also offers an outreach education program that provides violence prevention education, as well as interpersonal violence dynamics awareness trainings to community members, specialized professionals, children, teenagers and young adults.

During the time the Center has been operating on the Gulf Coast, we've seen that this comprehensive approach to providing necessary services is essential for our clients to not only succeed in leaving a violent relationship, but to thrive in a violence-free life after re-establishing their independence and empowering themselves to meet any challenge they may find in the future.

If you or someone you know is in or has been in an abusive relationship, has experienced sexual assault or lost a loved one to homicide, please call the Gulf Coast Center for Nonviolence at (800) 800-1396. You are not alone. It's not your fault. And we are here to help.

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