

Approximately 75% of domestic homicides occur while the victim is trying to leave their abuser or has just left the relationship.²

For this reason, whenever possible, a woman should go to a place of safety outside of her immediate area. If the couple has children in common, do not recommend leaving the state because the father has a legal right to see his children. Even if she is fleeing for her safety, she may be considered a kidnapper if she leaves the state with her children.

She may initially need to go to a shelter for abused women for her safety until she can make arrangements to go elsewhere. A shelter will provide immediate safety and security for her and her children from the abuser (Prov. 22:3). In addition, many shelters offer access to medical care and free legal counsel. It will be helpful for her to have her go-bag with her, especially since it will contain vital papers to help her navigate the legal system. This is the benefit of putting this together ahead of time and storing it until needed.

Women's shelters are experts at helping women obtain an order of protection and other needed services in the early days after she leaves an abusive situation. These shelters also provide counseling for women and children. While the advice offered is secular in nature, it may benefit her and the children to be educated on domestic violence.

Get Legal Help

The wife may need to obtain legal counsel after separating from the violent abuser and arriving at a place of safety (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 20:18; 24:6). In addition, she may need to file for a legal separation, an order of protection, child support if required, and any necessary public assistance. She may or may not need legal representation for these actions. It varies from state to state.

Without a legal separation, making her the home resident, in some states, the wife has no legal right to keep her abuser off the property and protect herself and the children from any further abuse. Also, legal separation and protection orders may allow her to change the locks on the doors to prevent his entry at will, provide child support funds for the children, and include a temporary custody and visitation schedule for the children. In addition, the order may stipulate other actions the husband must take to provide for the welfare of the children.

Many states participate in the "Safe at Home" program, in which victims of domestic violence and other crimes can conceal their new addresses.

The program allows domestic abuse victims to establish a post office box (usually in her state's capital city). All her mail will be received there and forwarded to her actual address. In addition, victims of domestic violence should take advantage of the wide range of free services that are offered. These services are also available to those who do not stay in a shelter.

Plan for the Immediate Future

If a long-term separation is necessary, once the immediate needs of safety and shelter have been addressed, the woman will need to find suitable long-term housing, transportation, employment, and possibly childcare. This may be challenging if the woman has no marketable skills to provide enough income to be self-supporting. Therefore, the church may need to financially support the woman in part or total as she gets her life together. Church members can help by providing a car for her to use, free or low-cost housing, furnishings, and essentials for her new home and childcare as she enters the workforce.

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RESPONDING TO PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Helping the Victim

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² Justin Holcomb, & Lindsay Holcomb, *Is It My Fault?* 65.

Responding to Physical Violence

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Medical Care

The initial steps for helping a person impacted by domestic violence are very practical. First, we must make sure that she and any children are safe from harm and in a living situation that will be stable enough for her to participate in the biblical counseling process (Prov. 22:3, 24:11; Ps. 82:4).

Therefore, physical separation, sometimes long-term, often becomes necessary.

To mandate that a woman remains in the home with her abusive husband allows him to continue to sin against her, perpetuating the abuse. In addition, his presence in the home enables his sinful heart attitudes to continue to be acted out on his wife.

If a separation is needed for safety, then strongly reinforce to the abused spouse that she should expect intense pressure to return home (anger, shaming, promises, and so on). The question ‘How can we work on the marriage if they are not in the same home?’ is manipulative. It dodges the fact that the primary problem is abuse.

Those who have experienced domestic violence are likely to experience a wide range of health problems. For this reason, it is always wise to recommend they get a medical exam and begin treatment for any physical complications brought on by physical or emotional abuse.

There may be resistance to involving medical personnel because of what may be revealed through an examination. Abused women are fearful and suspicious, and many have been conditioned to be that way by their spouses. There may be concern over being diagnosed with a “mental illness” that could affect her ability to maintain custody of the children.

Physical Safety

Because physical domestic violence can be a life-or-death matter, the counselor must do everything in their power to ensure the safety of a woman and any children. While she is in the office, we must learn when her husband last assaulted or battered her.

When physical abuse has occurred, it is wise to encourage her to document present and future events with pictures, recordings, dates, and times he has exhibited abusive behaviors.

A good rule to remember is, “if it is not documented, it does not exist.” This creates a paper trail and a record of escalation and pattern of abusive behavior. It will be helpful should her husband minimize or deny his mistreatment of her. She should not keep this documentation on her phone or computer but forward it to a safekeeping person. She should then delete it from her devices and empty the “trash” so he cannot find it if he searches her phone or emails.

Abused wives typically know their abusers’ patterns and often can (but not always) predict when they will be volatile. If her husband is not presently acting out in violence, she may think it is safe to remain in the home. While you cannot recommend she return or live in a home where physical abuse has taken place, you can trust her judgment to be there just long enough to put pieces in place to make it easier for her to flee when it is time.

Pryde and Needham say,

Many abused wives have realized, in retrospect, that in each of these cycles of abuse, there was a gradual buildup of tension before the next explosion occurred. They couldn't always put their finger on it, but they often sensed when a violent outburst was coming and felt powerless to do anything about it.

Domestic Violence is a Crime

When a husband uses physical force against his wife, that is a crime and should be reported to the police. It is the first step in helping her husband (Gal. 6:1-2; Heb. 10:24). It is a loving act intended to bring her husband to repentance and address his sinful behavior (Gal. 6:1; Jas. 5:19-20).

Some counselors and pastors are mandated reporters, so it is wise to determine if this is the law in your area ahead of time. We can only urge reporting; we cannot force her to do it unless children or the elderly are abused. When children or the elderly are being abused, the law mandates this gets reported to the authorities (Rom. 13:1-7).

Create a Safety Plan

When there is potential for violence, or if the counselee believes she may have to flee, help her create a safety plan while in the office. Many items on the safety plan do not need to be completed for short-term separation or in cases where violence has not occurred. The wife should be aware of all of these recommendations and have a general idea of how, if necessary, to quickly complete a safety plan.

The counseling team should advise the victim on the appropriate course of action based on her situation (Ps. 82:1-8; Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6). The safety plan contains specific tasks for the wife to accomplish before leaving her home. These tasks need to be completed while her husband is away, and she is confident he will not come home and catch her preparing to flee. If there is ongoing physical abuse taking place in the home, do not recommend that she return to the house alone. If an escort is needed, have her use your office phone to call the police non-emergency number to get a police escort. The police will stay with her as she packs up the items she will need after leaving home.

Secure Weapons

To ensure all parties’ safety, determine if the abuser has any firearms or other weapons that could be used for deadly force and secure those weapons outside of the home, if possible.

Prepare to Flee: Pack a “Go-Bag.”

One of the safety plan tasks is to pack a “go-bag” with enough clothes, medications, and personal items for herself and her children to last several days. Then, she should put it in a safe place that she is confident her abuser will not discover.

The complete list of items she should have in the go-bag is in the safety plan. The sooner the woman can begin to gather these items, the better. Some of the more critical things to get together are essential documents that she will need to provide identification or get assistance.

Only originals will do for some documents, such as Social Security cards, passports, birth certificates, driver’s license, and immigration papers. She should have a clear idea of where these documents are kept so she can grab them quickly. Other documents such as vehicle information, mortgage papers, medication, immunization records, and other things on the list can be photocopied ahead of time and kept in the go-bag in a Ziploc baggie to protect them from accidental water damage.

Financial Needs

She will need cash and not credit cards when she flees. Credit cards provide a paper trail of her actions and location. It is unwise to use them when escaping an abusive partner. Be cautious when converting cash to prepaid cash cards (Visa, MasterCard) because some of these cards carry hefty transaction or user fees when you use them, and some of them even expire!

If she can’t open her own bank account or does not have access to the family bank account, the wife should attempt to set money aside so that her husband will not miss it. The money should be kept in the go-bag. If her husband keeps all the cash on lockdown, she may have to depend on her church or friends to give her money until she can get to safety and get on her feet financially. The church should create an emergency fund specifically for this purpose (Isa. 25:4; 1 Jn. 3:17-18).

Secure Transportation

The church may need to provide her with a vehicle to access in a hurry. But, be advised, taking the family car allows him to trace her by reporting it stolen, especially if her name is not on the title.

Change Phones

As she prepares to flee, advise caution when making phone calls on a cell phone. She will want to leave no hint or trace of her activity, and many people forget that every phone call is listed on the monthly cell phone bill. If she is making calls to domestic violence shelters or doing other preparatory work, it is wise to borrow a phone or use a public landline.

When it is time to run, it is vital that she turn off the locator on her cell phone and other electronic devices she carries on her person. If turning off the location device would arouse suspicion, she should leave the locator turned on and leave the phone at home when she flees.

Recommend she obtain a “burner phone” from a big box store to contact those she needs to speak with and personal safety. Very few people should have this phone number. Also, suggest using the*67 feature to block caller ID when making a phone call to anyone except the one or two people who will know her whereabouts. Finally, if the phone has internet capability, be sure that no location devices are enabled for text messaging, phone calls, or email.

Find Shelter

When there is physical violence in the home, the woman may need to find a place to hide from her abusive husband. Well-meaning family and friends can offer her and her children a place to stay, but this is not always a wise decision as he may stop at nothing to find her and bring her home. If her place of shelter is known to her abuser, it is almost certain that he will look for her there, and it may put not only her but the individual sheltering her in a great deal of physical harm. When an abuser is denied access to his victim, he may become more dangerous.

¹ Debi Pryde, & Robert Needham. *A Biblical Perspective of What to do When You Are Abused by Your Husband*, 24.