

# Getting Free From Abuse

## A Guide for Women with Disabilities

Found at <http://www.dvrcv.org.au/>

### What is abuse?

**Abuse in the home is also called domestic or family violence. It's when someone is hurting you or treating you badly.** The person hurting you could be your husband or partner, your parent or child or another family member. The abuser could also be your carer or someone who shares your house. Any woman, at any age, can experience abuse.

Abuse is not always physical. You may be hurt in other ways. There are different forms of abuse:

Emotional abuse can hurt your mind and your feelings.

It includes when someone:

- constantly tells you that you can't do anything right, that you are stupid
- tells you no one else in world could love you.
- tells you that no one will let you keep your children if you leave

*At first he cooked and pretended that he was being nice. Eventually though I believed that I couldn't cook for myself because I would "stuff it up"...read more from "A story about ME"*

*He made me feel without my name on the house title I was a boarder, our son was a boarder. We weren't allowed to do what we wanted. We weren't allowed to have cushions on the couch we had to ask permission..read more from [Molly's story](#)*

Social abuse can hurt all your relationships

It can include when someone:

- stops you from seeing your friends, family and support workers
- makes you feel guilty about going to work or joining a club

- demands to know where you are all the time

*When we were together he was very strict about who I went with. I couldn't easily go out with other people, girls or guys, I had no life. I felt I was a prisoner in my own home...read more from [Isabella's story](#)*

Social abuse can also include making it difficult for you to talk to other people.

*'We have had TTY at home for 10 years but it has never been hooked up. My carers don't have the necessary communication skills - they can't sign. My husband wants to be the only one who can communicate with the carers'...read more from [Mary's story](#)*

Financial abuse is when someone takes control of your money when you don't want them to, or stops you from having any money.

*'My husband looks after me. He takes all the money, he controls the money. I worry about him being in control of the money'...read [Mary's story](#)*

*'My husband owns his own home. It's in his name only. He wants it that way so he has control'...read [Molly's story](#)*

Sexual abuse is when someone makes you do sexual things that you don't want to do.  
**Forcing you to have sex is a crime, even if you are married.**

*My husband's only focus was on sex and this was a big issue for me. I would be asleep and he would just jump on top of me. I could never have talked to him about how I felt, he would just start abusing me, he would put me down. Back then I was very quiet, I wouldn't have said 'Boo' to a goose, I was his puppet'...read [My journey](#)*

Physical abuse includes pushing, hitting, throwing things, or threatening to hurt you, your children, family, pets or guide dog.

*'My husband was physically violent towards the dog which hurt me because I love animals more than most humans I think'...read [Molly's story](#)*

*'He threatened me with a gun but the last straw was when he held me by my throat'...read [My journey](#)*

## **Am I being abused? WARNING SIGNS QUIZ**

Can this be happening to me? This is a question many women ask themselves.

It can be difficult sometimes to let yourself believe you are being abused. It can be hard to admit you are being abused because the person hurting you doesn't always act this way - sometimes they may be loving and kind.

It can be difficult to admit you are being abused because you love or depend on the person and maybe you are scared about what life will be like without them.

But if you often feel afraid of upsetting this person, and you change what you do to make sure they don't get angry with you, then this is a sign that you are being abused.

## WARNING SIGNS OF ABUSE QUIZ

Are you feeling worried about your relationship but not sure if there is abuse involved? Take a few minutes to fill in the WARNING SIGNS QUIZ below.

Does your partner, your boyfriend or girlfriend, your friend, your carer, or a family member:

- make you feel uncomfortable or afraid?
- often put you down, make fun of you, or make you feel worthless?
- always check up on what you're doing or where you are going?
- try to stop you from seeing your own friends or family?
- make you feel that no one will believe you if you say you are unhappy?
- stop you from having any money yourself or tell you what you can and can't spend money on?
- refuse to help with your personal support needs when you ask?
- make you feel afraid to disagree or say 'no' to them?
- tell other people you make things up and easily get confused?
- scare or hurt you by being violent (eg. hitting, choking, smashing things, breaking or removing disability aids, locking you in, driving dangerously to frighten you)?
- pressure, force or trick you into doing sexual things that you don't want to do?
- insist in always going in to see the doctor with you?
- threaten you with losing your children?
- threaten you that you will have no one to help you if you leave the relationship?
- threaten you that will be placed in an residential accommodation service?
- threaten to hurt you if you say you want to end the relationship?
- have your children heard or seen these things or been hurt themselves?

If you have answered 'yes' to any of these, then there are signs that you are not being treated right, or that you are being abused. If you don't feel safe, respected and cared for, then something isn't right.

Remember, if you are being abused, it's not your fault. Just because someone has treated you badly, it doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. They are the one who has done the wrong thing. **You are not to blame for the abuse.**

You have the right to feel safe and to live a life free from fear.

## How is Abuse Affecting Me?

All forms of abuse can affect how you feel about yourself. Your children can also be affected.

In some cases, abuse can cause an injury or a disability, or it can contribute to the impact of a disability (read [Anj's story](#) or [Katerina's Story](#) for more about this).

If you have been in an abusive relationship you may feel:

- afraid to tell anyone
- worried that it's your fault
- depressed and alone
- confused
- afraid of having no one to help you if you leave the relationship
- afraid that no one will believe you
- afraid of losing your children
- afraid you will be placed in an residential accommodation service .

It's understandable to feel afraid, worried and confused.

**\*\* If you have been abused, how has it affected you – your feelings, your relationships, your life? How might it be affecting your children?**

**Read here for ideas on what you can do about abuse and how you can protect yourself.**

### Feeling better about yourself

If someone is treating you badly, it can wear down your confidence. You might start to think you deserve abuse or that you are a bad person. But remember, they are the one who has done something wrong, not you.

And even though your disability may mean you do things differently or communicate differently to other people, you still have the same rights as anyone else.

As one woman said: *'You need to put new positive stuff in your head because the abuse is so negative – you need to get good stuff in your life'....read more from ['My journey'](#)*

It can help to think about:

- What are some good qualities I have?
- What are some things I am proud of?
- What are some things I have achieved in my life?
- What do I want from my life?
- What do I want to do in the future?

## What Can I Do?

You don't have to go through this alone. Talking to someone can help you decide what to do. Talk to a trusted relative, friend, neighbour or support worker about how unhappy you are at home.

Family and friends can be supportive, but they, like you, may not know what to do. So contact a family violence service or use websites like this one to get information and think about what you can do. If your abuser makes it difficult for you to use the phone you may have to ask a trusted person to get the information for you.

### What Other Women with Disabilities Want You to Know:

- It's not your fault
- You have a right to feel safe
- You have a right to be safe
- Talk to someone
- Get help
- Believe in yourself

*My advice to other women is turn to family and friends. If you don't have family you can rely on, find someone you trust to talk to. Go to a women's service - they understand and are there to help you.*

*While I was in hospital I developed a strong trusting relationship with a social worker. It was in talking to her over many hours that I very gradually began to see how controlling this man was and that perhaps I deserved not to be treated this way ...read more from ['Isabella'](#)*

### \*\*READ MORE

- [Advice](#) from other women - how they coped, how the situation changed, helpful ideas
- [Women's stories](#)

## How Can I Protect Myself?

## **YOUR SAFETY IS IMPORTANT.**

**You have a right to feel safe, and to be safe.**

If there is abuse in your home it is important to think carefully about your safety. You need to prepare yourself in case you or your children are placed in physical danger.

***If you are in immediate danger***, or if you have been physically or sexually assaulted or threatened you can call the police - Phone 000.

***If you want help to think about how you can improve your safety***, contact a Domestic Violence Outreach Worker (see [Services](#)). If you cannot or do not want to leave the relationship at the moment, there are some ways you can increase your safety. Domestic Violence Outreach Workers can offer you support and give you information that can help you to be safe from any more abuse.

*I went to a service and they gave me a pamphlet about the local domestic violence outreach service. It was helpful to have information. I discussed with my family the information I found in the pamphlet, then with their support I decided to ring the number for the domestic violence outreach service that was on it. Speaking to the staff at the outreach service was most helpful. They gave me good advice and I wouldn't have been able to go through all of this without them. ...read more from ['Isabella's story'](#)*

***If you need to stay somewhere safe***, contact your local domestic / family violence service to find out about women's refuges. If it's an emergency contact the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service (see [Services](#)). Women's refuges are safe places where you and your children can stay for a few days, weeks or months, depending on the refuge. They will offer you support and help with financial and legal advice.

If you are part of a non-English speaking community you may be worried that the local family violence service won't understand what it is like for someone from your community to talk about abuse in the family. Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service is a specialist state wide service that works with women and children from different cultural backgrounds who experience family violence....see [Services](#).

*I knew I couldn't continue to live like this. I rang a couple of places. They gave me information and said 'When you are ready.' I said 'I'm ready right now. If I don't do it now I will never do it.' ...read more from ['My journey'](#)*

Not all refuges are disability accessible so depending on your disability it may take time to find a vacancy but remember many women with disabilities have been supported by refuge services.

*Thinking about going to refuge I thought I would cope but I wasn't sure about my son. So hearing that I could go to refuge with just me and my son was wonderful. It was been great I wish I done this before hand. I didn't realise they had a house for disability and they do...read more from ['Molly's Story'](#)*

## Where Can I Get Help?

Taking that first step and making contact with a family violence service can be difficult but remember that the workers are there to support you with your decisions.

*I began to contemplate a life outside of this marriage. It would take many conversations and much agony for me to make the final decision to leave, as my fear of not being able to take care of our 3-year-old son was huge. It had been beaten into me verbally that I wasn't capable of caring for our son, and I believed it. Most of the conversations I had about leaving were with a domestic violence help line or with the social worker from the hospital. ...read more from 'A story about Me'*

### When You Contact a Family Violence Service, You Can Expect:

- To be believed
- To be treated with respect
- To be listened to
- That the abuse will be taken seriously
- Your choices respected, including whether you decide to leave or stay with your abuser

*I never got to thank the women who were on the other end of the domestic violence help line, but if I could I would now. I remember crying over the phone many times and asking 'why am I too weak to leave?' ...read more from 'A story about Me'*

**\*\*Think if there are any steps you can take to get free from the abuse. Is there someone you can talk to? Do you need help to protect yourself?**

## Advice from Other Women

The following information is based on interviews with women with disabilities who have experienced abuse. They told us about [how they coped](#) with abuse; what they did to [change the situation](#), and how [services and professionals](#) helped. They also had some [helpful messages](#) for other women who experience abuse. They shared their experiences in the hope that it would help others who are being abused.

What you can do about abuse will depend on your own circumstances. This information may give you some ideas about what you might do.

### Coping with Abuse

We all find our own way of coping with the things that are happening in our life. The women with disabilities we spoke to shared with us how they coped while living in an abusive relationship. Living with abuse is not easy. Maybe your way of coping is like the women we spoke to or you may have your own way of managing.

*When things got pretty bad I managed and coped day by day by trying to ignore him. I would do my own thing at home, trying to ignore him. If he started nagging at me or whatever I would get in my car and go for a drive or go visit mum's place or friends, just to get away from him ...read more from ['Isabella's story'](#)*

*What helped me cope while I was living was my husband was being aware; being three steps ahead of him...If I could keep our son happy and occupied, that helped a lot with my husband's moods ...read more from ['Molly's story'](#)*

*I coped with the abuse by avoiding the relationship. I would stay up all night. ...read more from ['My Journey'](#)*

*Having a friend, you have to have some friends.*

*I kept on going because of my children. I learnt to speak up and question the treatment I was receiving...read more from ['Rose Lillian's Story'](#)*

*I have written my life story as a way of getting my thoughts out of my head and onto paper. It is a way of communicating my thoughts about what had happened and getting things into perspective. It was a way of getting out of the head going crazy, the heart going crazy...read more from ['Rose Lillian's story'](#)*

*I coped by going out and having a cappuccino. Oh that was wonderful having a cappuccino. Oh God! That was good. Cake and cream is what I would want if I had a bad day ...read more from ['Molly's Story'](#)*

**\*\* Think about what you have done to cope with the abuse so far. Remind yourself you have already been strong to survive the abuse.**

### **Changing the Situation**

The women we spoke to had all been able to survive the abuse and to eventually make changes to their situation. Some had met a counsellor or a support worker, or had spoken to or a friend or a family member, and this had helped them to understand that what was happening to them was not okay. Others had started studying or had found a job. This gave them some independence and the time to think about what they wanted out of life.

Making changes is not easy, because you may feel frightened or worn down by abuse. Here are some things the women we spoke to were able to do.

*What changed for me in the relationship was I found myself. I gained my independence. I wanted to learn to drive and be able to drive myself places. I got a job. I thought this is great I can go to work, come home, I can meet people socially and I can have a life for*

*ME. Even though I was developing some independence, he was still trying to squash me...read more from [‘My journey’](#)*

*I began seeing a psychologist in year 11 and his support had a big impact on me...read more from [‘Ani’s story’](#)*

*What helped me decide to leave and start again is having a friend to talk to, a friend who will support you...read more from [‘Molly’s Story’](#)*

*Child Protection asked me what I was going to do about my husband’s treatment of our son. I said that I was trying to leave and they said that was a good idea. So they said they would back off from removing my son from my care if I left his father...read more from [‘Molly’s Story’](#)*

**\*\*Think about what you can do to change the situation – even taking a small step can help. Is there anyone you can talk to? Can you contact a service for help?**

#### **How Services, Carers, Police and Others Helped**

Some women had good experiences when they talked to carers, support services, domestic violence services, or other professionals. Here’s some of what they said.

*I have one carer who is a very good support to me. I feel safe with her. It helps to have someone you can rely on and feel safe with. I trust her to talk to about my problems with my husband...read more from [‘Mary’s story’](#)*

*Getting help and being supported. Being given time to think about what to do next. A good support worker sees the problem through the woman’s eyes. Having someone to take the kids off your hands for a while giving you space to think...read more from [‘Molly’s Story’](#)*

*From refuge I went to a supported women’s accommodation service. This is where I got my first real help. There is this feeling of acceptance. There is a strong sense of being a women’s space. As a foster child I had had male workers - I had no choice. I really appreciated the opportunity to be supported by a women’s service and connect as a woman...read more from [‘My journey’](#)*

*Using my Crimes Compensation money to see a private psychologist was a great help. My psychologist was my life line. I know my psychiatrist played his role because I needed medication but now I would always prefer a psychologist over a psychiatrist...read more from [‘My journey’](#)*

*With the help of the family violence outreach service I got an Intervention Order and asked my husband to move out. The situation has changed for me now it’s great, it’s fantastic, I feel as if I’ve got freedom. I can go out and enjoy myself then go home to a peaceful house...read more from [‘Isabella’s story’](#)*

**\*\*Think about what might help you to deal with the abuse. There are services available that can help, or you could apply for an Intervention Order from a court. See this page to find out more**

**What Other Women with Disabilities Want You To Remember:**

The women we spoke to had messages for other women experiencing abuse:

- *Believe in yourself*
- *It's important to be listened to*
- *You need to put new positive stuff in your head because the abuse is so negative you need to get good stuff in your life.*
- *If you are in an abusive relationship realise it's not worth it, no matter what happiness he may bring on a good day.*
- *Honour yourself because you have been hammered by the domestic violence.*
- *Recovery from abuse is a journey that's never over.*
- *Find someone to talk to. If you are not happy with what you hear, then go get a second or third opinion.*
- *If you have children, you might think you are doing the right thing by keeping them there - but actually if they are going through hell too then it's not fair on them either. If you are at peace, the children are going to be more at ease because they will find Mum at ease, and they will think: 'we don't have to protect Mum'.*
- *There has to be hope because sometimes that is all you have to hang on to, there has to be a better tomorrow.*