

3 Things to Keep in Mind to Help Women Who are Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Public health rules for a pandemic like social and physical distancing are meant to keep you safe, but they may also increase the risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). For some women, that could mean being stuck in an unsafe space, maybe for the first time. For other women, the fact they have to stay in one location could make it easier for their separated partner to find them and hurt them. They may even be killed.

Due to COVID-19, helping women who experience IPV stay safe means we have to help in ways we already know how. We also need to help in ways that are specific to women's individual situations.

Here are three things you need to know about helping women experiencing IPV during COVID-19:

1. Safety does not look the same for all women

We must remember that what might help one woman stay safe could be dangerous for another.

Consider that:

- Even though we should not contact other people to help stop the spread of COVID-19, some older women, and women living with disabilities, might need help from others to stay in their homes and keep their independence.
- Hiding weapons (e.g. guns, knives) might help some women stay safe, but for other women it could lead to other forms of violence (e.g. strangulation, physical assault) and increase their risk of experiencing IPV.
- Reducing visits to stores (e.g. grocery) during COVID-19 may be harmful for women experiencing IPV, because they have no one to talk to about their abuse outside of their home.

To help women stay safe, we must listen to their suggestions and look into different options or choices. We must remember that what each woman needs may be different, depending on their social situations (e.g. age, race, geographical location, class, ability).

To learn more on safety planning with different groups, read this Brief on [*Creating Safety Plans with Vulnerable Populations to Reduce the Risk of Repeated Violence and Domestic Homicide.*](#)

2. Women need many plans to stay safe during a pandemic

The ways women stay safe may be harder because of social distancing and services closing or operating at a limited capacity. It is very important to let everyone know that women's shelters are open and continue to offer supports and places to stay for women and children experiencing violence. Changing the ways we help shelters can keep women and children safe even more than they already do. For instance:

- Since everyone is spending more time at home, it may not be possible for women to share with others what is happening in their home. As a safe way to communicate, a woman may create a secret signal with a trusted friend, co-worker, or neighbour to let others know she is in danger and needs help (e.g. wearing a specific piece of jewellery, asking an agreed-upon question). If you know someone in this situation, try to come up with a secret signal with them.
- Since we can't meet with people in person as often as we used to, we must talk to and support each other online instead. However, we must remember that technology can be dangerous because harmful individuals can use technology to further control and harm their partner. Learn more about online safety in these resources: [Technology, Safety & Privacy: A Toolkit for Survivors](#) and [Best Practices When Using Mobile Devices for Service Delivery](#).
- Since circumstances for individuals are changing very quickly during this time (e.g. job loss, financial insecurity, mental health challenges), some women may face more abuse and, for a smaller group of women, [intimate femicide](#). We must frequently assess risk and plan for safety.

More ways to help are becoming available as service providers work with women to keep them safe. Follow the work of women's shelters, anti-violence groups, and survivors to stay up-to-date on [strategies and supports](#).

3. Structural barriers to safety may be worse due to the pandemic

Barriers to healthcare and support services – such as lack of [accessible](#) and [gender-affirming](#) services, discrimination, and racism, as well as a fear of deportation – will continue during this time. These barriers may even be worse because many services are limited. Some communities may also face increased discrimination that is specific to COVID-19. Here are some examples:

- Increased xenophobia (fear or dislike of people from other countries) and racism against East Asian community members. View this campaign by the [Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice](#) to see what they are doing to help.
- Marginalized groups, including racialized and Indigenous groups, may be watched more closely and punished more than other groups if they do not follow social or physical distancing. This may also happen to low-income communities and individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Individuals who have contracted COVID-19 or who work in a setting where others have

contracted COVID-19 may be shamed or stigmatized. To learn how to help, read this [guide on addressing social stigma associated with COVID-19](#).

It is important to remember that even more barriers to safety specific to the pandemic may occur. For instance, there may be messages that say individuals need to “sacrifice” their needs to reduce the burden on emergency services (e.g. hospital, police). Such messages may keep women from seeking assistance. Violence against women might not be taken seriously, because people wrongfully believe that it comes from “stress” related to the pandemic.

Discrimination and exclusion create re-victimization, health problems, financial problems, and traumatic stress. To support women experiencing IPV and to respond to COVID-19, we need to be aware of these barriers and work with marginalized communities to address discrimination. [Trauma-informed approaches](#) are very helpful for supporting women who are experiencing violence and oppression.

It does not work to approach intimate partner violence (IPV) in the same way for every situation. During this time of crisis, we need to strengthen and build on our efforts to work together *with* women and communities to increase their safety.

The [Learning Network](#) at the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children produced this resource in collaboration with the following organizations: [Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters](#), [BC Society of Transition Houses](#), [Manitoba Association of Women’s Shelters](#), [Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses](#), [PEI Family Violence Prevention Services](#), [Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan](#), and [Women’s Shelters Canada](#).

This resource was adapted for plain language by [Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia \(ISANS\)](#).