



How to Develop a Safety Plan for Domestic Violence

BY BRAD HAMBRICK | SEP 28, 2016 | COUNSELING REFLECTION | 0

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This post is an excerpt from the study guide which accompanies the “Overcoming Codependency” seminar. This portion is an excerpt from “Appendix A.” To RSVP for this and other Summit counseling seminars visit bradhambrick.com/events.

If you need a safety plan, do not feel guilty about developing one. Even if you never use it, having a plan that you can enact will help you remain calmer (i.e., think clearer) in moments when conflicts are escalating.

“The best way to get an instant grip on your emotions in those situations is to be prepared for them (p. 62).” Robert Meyers and Brenda Wolfe in *Get Your Loved One Sober*

Often, as Christians who place a high value on marriage, forgiveness, and unity, we feel inherently guilty for leaving in a dangerous domestic situation. While we want to affirm these values, consider it this way: *the best way to honor someone you love but acts with volatility is to remove the opportunity for them to do greater damage with their anger*. Your self-protection is not selfish; it is actually the most loving thing you can do.

“If there is anything you take away from this book, we hope this is it: God knows and sees you in your experience of violence and abuse, He loves you through it all, and He greatly desires your safety and protection. God has not forgotten you. He grieves with you. And we hope that knowing this will embolden you to be honest with both Him and others, and know that it is courageous – not shameful – to reach out for support (p. 179).” Justin and Lindsey Holcomb in *Is It My Fault?*

However, it is vital to realize that the initial act of leaving for safety is not a complete plan. Taking the initial step of leaving, which may or may not result in a prolonged

separation, without knowing what you intend to do next (and why) can actually increase your danger.

“Domestic violence does not end immediately with separation from the abuser... It is also dangerous. Over 75% of separated women suffer post-separation abuse (p. 64).” Justin and Lindsey Holcomb in *Is It My Fault?*

The purpose of this appendix is to help you think through whether separation is needed, and if so, how to wisely walk through the process of separating for safety.

However, if your situation requires more immediate help than walking through this material allows, please call one of these emergency organizations.

- National Domestic Violence Hotline 1.800.799.7233
- National Sexual Assault Hotline 1.800.656.4673
- National Child Abuse Hotline 1.800.222.4453

Three Types of Separation

It is important to know what type of separation you would be enacting with your safety plan. It can be helpful to think in terms of three types of separation; two of which are potentially productive, the third being common, but unproductive.

1. Separation for Cool Down

For this separation, you plan to be gone for a few hours up to a night or two. The purpose of this separation is to prevent a combustible argument from escalating or removing children from being exposed to an irrational display (either intoxicated or emotional).

This type of separation is usually best communicated about directly by stating the reason for and desire to resolve the matter later.

“Honey, I love you. This situation is spiraling and I don’t want it to harm our marriage further. I am going with the kids to [location] and we can talk about this more when we’ve both had chance to calm down.”

After a statement like this, no further explanation or defense should be given, but you should begin to enact the safety plan you develop below. This approach should not be used more than once or twice or it will be perceived as a manipulative tactic. If it is frequently needed, a separation-for-change may be advisable if counseling will not be engaged.

2. Separation for Change

When the destructive behavior is frequent, the cooperation towards change is low, and there is probable danger to you (or your children), then separation-for-change is

warranted. In this approach, you make arrangements to remain separated until acknowledgement of the problem is made and key markers of change achieved.

The indefinite duration of this separation means that more preparation is needed. Because this separation is enacted after resistance to acknowledging the problem has been established, the separation is not disclosed until after it has occurred. The potentially longer duration of separation means you need to have adequately planned for where you will be able to live. If these arrangements have not been made, then the domestic violence hotline can connect you with local safe homes.

After relocating to a safe place you would communicate the “markers for change” that would need to be met in order for returning home to be considered. In any conversation about returning home these same points should be repeated each time. While there may be secondary changes each of you are tempted to discuss (i.e., spending more time with the children, being more helpful around the house, spending more time as a couple), separation means there are safety-level concerns and these need to be at the forefront of any conversation about returning home.

Standard markers for change would include:

- Meeting with a counselor experienced in the area of struggle (i.e., domestic violence, addiction, etc...)
- Describing the life struggle to the counselor without minimizing or blame-shifting
- Signing a release of information to allow you to be a guest at your spouse's counseling to share your perspective on the history of the relationship
- Confirmation from the counselor that the two accounts reasonably reconcile with one another (to verify the absence of minimization or blame-shifting)
- Initial steps towards change complete (as defined by the counselor)
- Mutually agreeable accountability pursued within the your shared network of natural relationships
- Commitment to continue in counseling process after you return home; stated to counselor and accountability relationships
- *Short Summary of Markers:* Being honest with a counselor and trusted friends about the real history of our relationship, tangible evidences of change, and a commitment to continued marital restoration.

A separation-for-change is a declaration that the relationship has deteriorated to such a degree that non-intensive measures will not be sufficient for restoration. It can be hard to know that the marriage is in this condition. That is why making this assessment in concert with your pastor and/or counselor is advised. This social support will be beneficial in following through on your commitments if there is not early cooperation (i.e., crying-pleading phone calls, rants to friends, lies to children, etc.).

3. Separation as Expletive

This may be the most frequent and is definitely the least effective form of separation. In this case, separation is used as a behavioral demonstration of exasperation. The intended (misguided) intent is usually to shock or scare your spouse into changing. The hostility in the moment of leaving (unlike separation-as-cool-down) and the lack of any follow through (unlike separation-for-change) result in the event being seen as a "stunt" that will require a larger demonstration of exasperation next time to coerce comparable change; making the relationship more volatile.

Making Your Safety Plan

Making a safety plan requires taking steps that may seem awkward in a moment when there is not active conflict or intoxication. However, the preparation you put in during safe times will ensure that you have options if unsafe times arise again.

Pack a bag with all of the supplies you would need to be away from your home for at least two to three nights (i.e., clothes, medication, cash, important documents, extra set of keys, etc...). Keep this bag either in your vehicle or at the residence where you would stay if it were needed.

Inform key people that would need to cooperate with your safety plan and secure their commitment to be cooperative. This would include the person with whom you planned to stay and, if you do not desire this location to be known by your abuser, informing anyone who knows where you would be staying that you desire this information to remain private.

Plan your exit. Mentally walk through the steps you would need to take. The following points are meant to help you walk through this planning process.

- I can keep a bag ready and put it [blank] so I can leave quickly.
- I can avoid [blank] places when conflict is possible so I am not trapped without access to an exit.
- I will abstain from retaliating verbally or physically to prevent the situation from escalating further.
- I can tell [blank] about the violence and have them call the police when violence erupts.
- I can teach my children to use the telephone to call the police and the fire department.
- I will use this code word “[blank]” for my children, friends, or family to call for help.
- I will be aware that my partner may have access to my cell phone record and use prepaid phone cards or a pay-as-you-go mobile phone if needed.
- If I have to leave my home, I will go [blank].
- I can teach these strategies to my children.

- When an argument erupts, I will move to a safer room such as [blank].
- I will leave money and an extra set of keys with [blank].
- I will keep important documents and keys at [blank].
- I will check with [blank] to know who will let me stay with them.
- I will review my safety plan every (time frame) with [blank].
- I will rehearse the escape plan and practice it with my children.
- I will consult with a family advocate to ensure I am not breaking any custody laws during the separation.
- If I need to return home for belongings and feel unsafe, I am aware I can ask for a police escort.

A separation may result in your being in the home and the abusive/addicted person leaving, or you renting your own place to stay because of the lack of cooperation and need for a mid-term living environment for you and your children. If a lack of cooperation resulted in a prolonged separation, this would require additional considerations.

- I can change the locks on my doors and windows as soon as possible.
- I can install a security system
- I can install an outside lighting system that lights up when someone approaches my home.
- I will teach my children how to use the phone to make collect calls to me and to (friend, family, minister) if my partner tried to take them.
- I will tell the people who care for my children who has permission to pick up my children. My partner is not allowed to. Inform the following people (school, day care, babysitter, church leaders, etc...)
- I can tell the following people that my partner no longer lives with me and that they should call the police if he is near my residence (neighbors, church leaders, friends, etc...)

If the degree of threat escalated during the separation or was predatory prior to the separation, then a protection order may be warranted. When considering a protection order, it is wise to:

1. Speak with the police department in the city or county in which you hold residence.
2. Ask them to explain the process and evidence necessary to secure a protection order.
3. Clarify what actions on your part would nullify the restraining order.
4. Write down the name of the preferred individual/office to notify if the restraining order is violated.

It is important to understand the precise legal protections provided and limitations created by a restraining order. If you choose to get a protection order, then it is wise to consider.

- I will keep the protection order here (*location*). Always keep it with you.
- I will give a copy of my protection order to police departments in the areas that I visit my friends, family, where I live, and where I work.
- I will tell my employer, church leader, friends, family and others that I have a protection order.
- If my protection order gets destroyed, I can go to the County Courthouse and get another copy.
- If my partner violates the protection order, I will call the police and report it. I will call my lawyer, advocate, counselor, and/ or tell the courts about the violation.

Note: A more extensive safety plan template can be found in Appendix 2 of Justin and Lindsey Holcomb's book *Is It My Fault?* (pages 187-197) if needed.

If this post was beneficial for you, then considering reading other blogs from my "[Favorite Posts on Codependency](#)" post which address other facets of this subject.

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