# Leaving a relationship due to violence

The decision to leave a relationship because of violence or abuse is often a difficult one. Living with domestic violence can take a toll on a person’s self-esteem and self-confidence.

How often do we hear, why doesn’t she just leave? Unfortunately, some people think it should be easy for a woman to leave a relationship where domestic violence is happening, and they can feel confused and even annoyed that she doesn’t do this. This simplistic thinking doesn’t consider the complexities of the situation – for most women, it is often much harder for them to leave a relationship where there is abuse as opposed to one where there isn’t. Some women may also decide not to leave the relationship when there is abuse as they believe the safest option is to stay. Other women may leave and return several times before they are able to leave permanently.

The challenges for someone who leaves may be experienced as overwhelming and frightening, and it can take some time to feel positive and hopeful for the future. We know that for many women, they do not leave without their ex-partner trying to punish them in some way. However, it can be helpful for women to know that many, many women have been able to leave their partner who used violence and abuse, and been able to have safe, healthy, happy, fulfilling lives for themselves and their children.

We also know that leaving a relationship does not always mean the end of the abuse. In reality, leaving may escalate the violence and place women and children at an increased risk of further violence and harm.

When there are children involved, women may need to continue to be in some type of contact with their ex-partner over childcare arrangements and some need to see their ex-partner during child access and handovers. These opportunities for access can self-permit the ex-partner to continue the violence and abuse.

The **Post Separation Power and Control Wheel** can be helpful for women to identify and recognise the tactics their ex-partner may use to try and maintain power and control after separation.

Let’s look at some types of tactics or behaviours and I’ll give some examples for each. Keep in mind there will be others that I may not say but also could be included. Also keep in mind that the types of violence are often used together to form a **pattern of violence** against the other. The pattern may be new due to the impending or actual separation.

**Using harassment and intimidation** can include destroying things belonging or related to the woman or the children. The ex-partner may use the children to justify breaking no-contact orders, threaten and stalk, or make their presence known while staying conspicuously outside protection order boundaries. They may also abuse family pets and use third parties to harass, threaten, or coerce the woman.

**Undermining their ability to parent** can include behaviours that intentionally disrupt the children’s sleep or feeding patterns, withhold information about the children’s social, emotional or physical needs, contradict the other parent’s rules for the children, or demand visitation schedules that do not consider the child’s needs or wants.

**Discrediting her as a mother** can be used by the ex-partner, for example using her status against her, such as her sexual identity, immigration, race, religion, education, or income. Contacting systems with false accusations and claims of bad parenting, cheating, using drugs, or being “crazy” may be used along with other ways to try and isolate the woman from family, friends, practitioners, and other supporters. Further ways may involve the ex-partner trying to gain sympathy from others as a way of forming ‘allies’ against her.

**Withholding financial support** is another way the ex-partner can try to gain control. This can include withholding child support, insurance, medical, or basic expense payments. The ex-partner may use court action to try and take the woman’s money or resources, interfere with her ability to work, or block her access to money after the separation.

**Endangering the children** can occur when they are neglected while in the care of the ex-partner. They may also place the children in age-inappropriate emotional or physical situations and/or use violence in front of them.

**Disregarding the children** can include the ex-partner ignoring school schedules and homework, ridiculing the children’s needs, wants, fears, aspirations, or identities. The ex-partner may coerce or force family members or a new partner to do their parenting work. The ex-partner may treat the children as younger or older than they actually are or enforce unrealistic or strict gender roles.

**Disrupting relationships with the children** can include the ex-partner trying to disrupt the mother’s relationship with her children. This can be done by coercing the children to be their ally and putting down their mother, and/or using the children as messengers and spies. The ex-partner may try and isolate the children and may even keep the children instead of returning them as agreed or legally required.

**Using physical and sexual violence against the mother and children** is another type of abuse and can include threatening to kill or kidnap the children, to physically abuse their mother, and/or to abuse the children physically, sexually, or emotionally. The ex-partner may threaten to kill himself and/or use sex as a condition for keeping the children safe or allowing her to see them. The children may also be exposed to pornography.

If you or someone you know needs help and lives in the Gold Coast or Beenleigh region, contact the Domestic Violence Prevention Centre on (07) 5532 9000 or visit domesticviolence.com.au.

For all other areas, call 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) or visit 1800respect.org.au to chat online or find services in your area.

*Transcript from video: Leaving a relationship due to violence
©2022 Domestic Violence Prevention Centre Gold Coast Inc*