

Breaking Free

A Woman's Guide to Understanding
Family Violence

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1. What is Family Violence?

Family violence is any form of abuse, mistreatment, or neglect that children or adults experience from another family member. **It is an issue of power and control in family relationships that directly violates an individual's safety or freedom.** It includes abuse of children and older adults within families, as well as violence between two adults in an intimate relationship (often called domestic violence). It can also occur between dating partners or after the relationship has ended.

Family violence is not just an individual or family problem. **Everyone in a community is affected by family violence.** This includes the victims, abusers, children, extended families, friends and neighbours. Family violence is often multi-generational; that is, a cycle of abuse that continues over several generations within a family. Children who grow up in a home where they are exposed to family violence are at a higher risk of being abused, or abusing others, in adulthood.



Common Forms of Family Violence

- **Physical Abuse**

Physical assault is the most visible form of abuse, and also the most deadly. **Physical abuse is any act of physical violence towards another person,** which can include: slapping; kicking; biting; hair-pulling; punching; burning; strangling; the use of weapons; physical restraint, etc. Assaults often start small, perhaps as a shove during an argument. Physical abuse usually becomes more frequent and severe over time, and can result in injury or death.

- **Verbal Abuse**

Verbal abuse undermines a woman's sense of self-worth by discounting and minimizing her ideas, opinions or beliefs. Although we often think of verbal abuse as yelling or name-calling, it actually comes in many forms. Verbal abuse can include: threatening family and friends; making sarcastic or humiliating comments about you publicly or privately; refusing to discuss issues or insisting on keeping you up all night to talk; leaving nasty or excessive phone/text messages; and blaming you for abusive behaviour.

- **Emotional/Psychological Abuse**

Although emotional abuse does not leave visible scars, its impact can be long-lasting. **Emotional abuse is used to wear a woman down and to undermine her sense of self** until she is willing to take responsibility for her abuser's behavior, or simply accept it. Two of the most common types of emotional and psychological abuse are the use of **threats** and **isolation**.

Threats can be as damaging as actual physical violence and are often part of ongoing emotional abuse. An abuser may threaten to 'disappear' with a woman's children, report her as an unfit mother, harm family members and/or pets, or threaten to commit suicide. Whether the

threats are of a physical, sexual or emotional nature, **they are all designed to further control a woman through fear and intimidation.**

Abusers are also able to increase their power over women by isolating them from others.

They do this by controlling who a woman sees, where she goes, and what she does. Common ways that abusers will try to isolate women include: checking up on you constantly; accusing you of unfaithfulness; leaving you without access to phone or transportation; finding fault with your friends and family; not allowing you to do anything without him, including going to work; and demanding information about all your actions, activities and conversations.

Many abusers justify this need for control by saying that it is “proof” of their love. In reality, **abusers need to isolate women to make themselves feel more secure;** they may see any other relationship that a woman has (e.g., with family, friends or co-workers) as a potential threat. The effect of this isolation is that women feel very alone, without anyone to offer them a ‘reality check,’ and they find themselves totally dependent on their abuser for all their social needs.

- **Sexual Abuse**

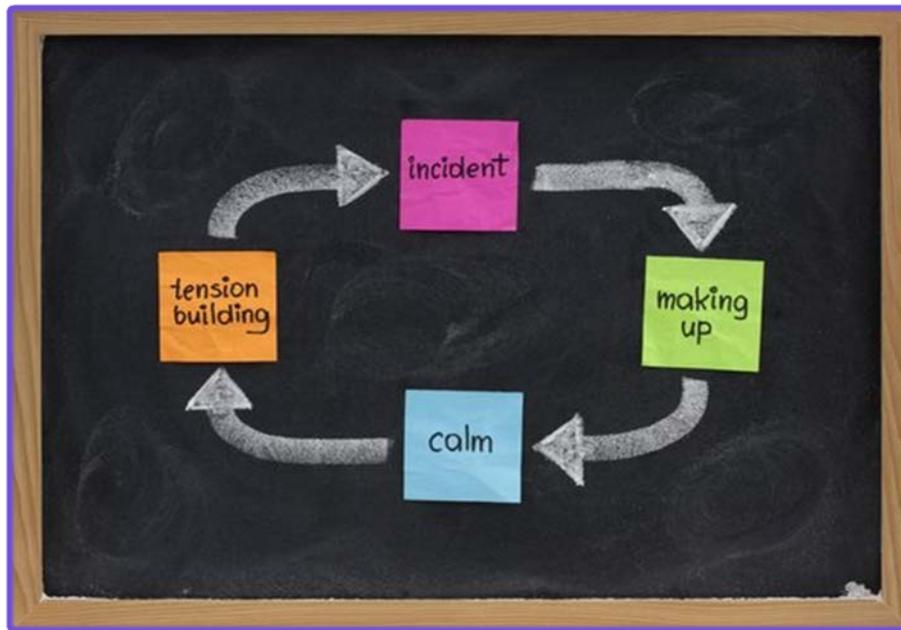
Sexual abuse is any form of sexual activity that happens without consent. An abuser may use violence to sexually assault his partner (this is common in physically abusive relationships) or he may use only enough force to control a woman’s movements. **Manipulation or threats may also be used, causing a woman to agree to unwanted sexual acts out of fear or guilt.** In addition to forcing unwanted sexual acts, sexual abuse can also include: criticizing you sexually; forcing you to strip; withholding sex and/or affection; minimizing your feelings about sexual preferences; taking unwanted sexual photos and sharing them without your consent; and forcing you into prostitution.

- **Financial Abuse**

Money often becomes a powerful tool by which an abuser can further control a woman and make it difficult for her to leave a relationship. Financial abuse can take many forms, including: denying you access to money or financial information; preventing you from getting or keeping a job; putting debt in your name; demanding that you account for every penny you spend; spending money for bills on himself; forcing you to beg or commit crimes for money; and not allowing you to spend money on yourself or your children.

- **Spiritual Abuse**

Spiritual abuse is a form of psychological manipulation. **It is the denial or use of spiritual, religious or cultural beliefs and practices to control and dominate a woman.** Spiritual abuse can isolate a woman and impact her self-esteem and confidence. Examples of spiritual abuse include: insulting your religious or spiritual beliefs; preventing you from practicing your beliefs (including traditional cultural practices and styles of dress); using spiritual beliefs to manipulate or shame you; using religious texts or beliefs to justify or minimize other behaviours (e.g., physical or sexual abuse).



1. **'Honeymoon' Stage**

During this stage, an abuser may: show extreme kindness; make apologies and promises that the abuse will never happen again; attempt to 'fix' things; and try to prevent a woman from leaving by being a 'changed man.'

2. **'Forgiveness or Reconciliation' Stage**

This can be a temporary time of peace. The woman is no longer receiving apologies or promises of change, but life seems 'normal' and things carry on as usual around the house.

3. **'Tension-Building' Stage**

During this stage, things are beginning to become more stressful and tension builds over common family issues like money, children or jobs. There are often words or acts of intimidation. There is stress and a struggle for power and control; women often try to manage the situation by pleasing the abuser, giving in, or avoiding the abuse.

4. **'Violent Incident' Stage**

When tensions peak, there is likely to be a violent incident. It could be any type of abuse and is usually triggered by an external event or by the abuser's emotional state— not by a woman's behavior. The timing of the 'violent incident' is usually unpredictable and often beyond a woman's control. There are also incidents where a woman will spark a 'violent incident' so as to control when it will happen (such as, when the children aren't present). This can cause a woman to blame herself; however, it should really be recognized as a survival tactic she uses to protect her children.

Women who have experienced abuse over a long period of time can begin to lose sight of themselves. They often feel a sense of helplessness and believe that nothing is going to change. At this point, the abuser has achieved total 'power and control.' The abuser may demonstrate the power and control they have established over their partner through intimidating gestures or looks, making threatening behaviours or statements, or with actual physical contact.

Often, women do not even realize that they are in a cycle of abuse, or they may even deny that it is happening. Meanwhile, **this process gives an abuser a growing sense of power, domination, and control.** The repetitive cycle typically speeds up and becomes more violent. It is a difficult cycle to break because of the constant return to the 'honeymoon' stage, which brings a renewed sense of hope that things will get better. As such, if there is no help or intervention, the abuse is likely to continue or may even become worse over time.

Power and Control Wheel



2. Is my relationship healthy, unhealthy, or abusive?

	Healthy	Unhealthy	Abusive
Sharing Feelings	You feel safe to tell your partner how you really feel.	You feel awkward telling your partner how you really feel.	You are afraid to tell your partner how you really feel because you fear getting made fun of or threatened.
Communicating	You respect and listen to each other even when you have different opinions.	Your partner ignores you and doesn't respect your opinion when you have different opinions.	Your partner treats you with disrespect and ignores or makes fun of your ideas and feelings.
Disagreements	You can have a disagreement and still talk respectfully to each other. You resolve your disagreements.	Your disagreements often turn into fights.	You are afraid to disagree because you do not want to unleash your partner's anger. A disagreement is often an excuse for abuse.
Intimacy and Sex	You can be honest about your feelings about physical affection and sex. You don't feel pressured to do anything.	You are embarrassed to say how you feel because you think your partner may not care. You "go along" with some things.	Your partner ignores your feelings and forces you into situations that make you feel uncomfortable, scared, or degraded.
Trust	You trust each other and are comfortable with your partner spending time with others.	You and/or your partner feel(s) jealous every time you and/or your partner talk(s) to others.	Your partner accuses you of flirting or having an affair; orders you not to talk to other men/women.
Alone Time	You can each spend time alone and consider this a healthy part of your relationship.	You are unsure if you should do things without your partner. Your partner tries to keep you to herself/himself.	Your partner does not allow you to spend time doing things on your own. Your partner sees this as a threat to your relationship.
Abuse	You and your partner avoid speaking harshly to each other. There is no physical violence in your relationship.	There have been a few incidents of potentially abusive or controlling behaviour. There is no pattern of physical abuse or violence.	There is a pattern of increasing and/or ongoing emotional or physical abuse in your relationship.

3. Why do women stay in abusive relationships?

It is common for people to ask why women often stay in abusive relationships. Women stay for many reasons and often face many barriers to leaving safely.

Fear

Fear of losing her belongings, her home, her social status, or her children.

Fear her children may be ordered to spend time with her partner unsupervised if she leaves.

Fear of more severe abuse by her partner if she reports his behaviour.

Fear that her partner will be arrested, imprisoned, unable to work, deported, etc.

Fear of being alone.

Fear of the unknown. What will happen to her and/or her children if she leaves?

Threats

It is very common for an abusive partner to threaten to hurt themselves (e.g., suicide) or others (e.g., children, family members, or pets) in an attempt to make a woman stay. Often, men may also threaten to take children away, to “out” their partner and the abuse to family, friends, or co-workers, or threaten to contact authorities regarding their partner’s immigration status.

Financial Needs

One of the most common reasons women feel trapped in an abusive relationship is because they are financially dependent on their partners. Separation from a partner may significantly change a woman’s lifestyle or standard of living. If she has been at home full-time with her children, she may have to return to work and make child care arrangements. She may also have to go on social assistance for the first time. When women have had no income of their own, or no access to the family’s money, the idea of being able to support themselves and their children can be overwhelming. Women may also feel a lot of guilt at the thought of taking their children from a comfortable home into poverty.

History of Abuse

Past experiences of abuse can lower a woman’s self-esteem and cause her to feel inferior to others.

These feelings make many women particularly vulnerable to remaining in an abusive relationship. The more abuse a woman experiences, the more her sense of self-worth and a belief in her own abilities are destroyed and the more hopeless or powerless she may feel. Often, women who do attempt to leave feel overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty; if options are limited, women may feel forced to return. If this happens, her inability to stay away from the abusive relationship further impacts her self-esteem and adds to her feeling of powerlessness.

Religious/Cultural Norms

Many women (particularly new immigrants and refugees) feel intense cultural pressure to stay with their partner, even if it is an unhappy or abusive relationship. Some women also have strongly-held religious beliefs about marriage and the traditional roles of men and women; in many cases, they do not believe leaving their relationships is an option.

Conflicted Feelings Towards Self

Women who have experienced abuse may feel that what they have experienced is their fault; this may lead to feelings of shame, guilt, helplessness and low self-esteem. Some women don't feel they deserve to be loved and don't know what love looks like in a healthy relationship.

Related to these feelings is how a woman may see her role and duties as a mother. Some women do not want to disrupt their children's lives by leaving an abusive relationship. Others fear they cannot provide for their children if they are on their own. Many women want to give their children a two-parent home and are concerned about what would happen if they were to go through a custody battle.

Conflicted Feelings Towards Her Partner

Women who have been in an abusive relationship often have conflicted feelings about their partner.

This is because their partner is not typically violent all the time; there may be periods of time where he is kind and loving. Many women hope and believe that he will change. Women can love their partner

and want to believe the promises they hear; they want the abuse to stop, but they don't want the relationship to end.

Other women feel genuine concern for their partner's well-being. They may be concerned about his substance abuse, his threats of self-harm, or his mental health. They worry what will happen to him if he goes to jail. They may also be worried about how others (e.g., family, friends, and co-workers) will view him if details of the abuse are made known. All these feelings are common and normal.



4. How experiences of family violence affect women

There are many '**survival**' skills that women learn when living in an abusive relationship. These may include:

Trust issues (may not trust themselves, or may trust the wrong people)

Difficulty recognizing or showing emotions (may find it difficult to share feelings or ask for help when needed)

A fear of making changes (a situation may feel 'safe' and 'familiar' when it is not)

Caring too much (helping others before helping themselves)

Negative coping mechanisms (may turn to alcohol, drugs, food, use of violence)

Low self-esteem (some women believe they deserve to be abused, especially if partners repeatedly tell them it's their fault)

Women who have experienced family violence do not fit any single 'profile,' however, they often share many common traits as a result of the abuse. A woman who has been living with abuse could seem, or be described in the following ways:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fearful - minimizes/excuses the abuse - feels a sense of helplessness and powerlessness - blames herself, feels guilty - feels she deserves the abuse - shame/embarrassment - passive - severe anxiety or nervousness - confused, unable to make decisions - lack of eye contact - hopes for change - 'masks' feelings with happiness - quick to anger - difficulty getting along with others - has defensive body language - defiant - fearful of people or places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - genuine feelings of love for partner - feels like a bad parent; feels obligated to "keep the family together" - socially isolated; no personal support network or connections to work, child care, or recreational activities - chronic complaints of poor health - making frequent visits to the doctor - may or may not hide physical injuries - may abuse drugs or alcohol to cope - eating disorders - suicidal thoughts or actions - sleep issues (e.g. insomnia, nightmares) - have blocked memories - have boundary issues - disconnect self from situation - have multiple abusive relationships - have sexual problems; multiple partners
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5. How Experiences of Family Violence Affect Children

Children who are exposed to family violence are impacted in a variety of ways. Children are very sensitive and aware of their environment. They know when violence is happening in the home, even if they do not witness it directly. The risk of child injury and/or abuse also greatly increases in situations of family violence. Despite this, not all children exposed to family violence present as having serious problems, or problems that one would connect to their home environment. This is because the impact of family violence typically depends on a child's age and stage.

Common traits of children who have witnessed family violence:

- Trouble sleeping
- Headaches, stomach aches
- Increased aggressive behaviour (bullying, fighting, swearing)
- Constantly worrying about danger and the safety of self and loved ones
- Emotional numbing



- Difficulty focusing on tasks
- Acting out violence while playing
- Avoiding people and violence
- Developing fears of being abandoned or of being hurt
- Becoming distrustful, insecure, etc.

Infant/Toddler

- Developmental delays; failure to thrive
- Listlessness
- Disrupted eating and sleeping routines
- Fear may slow a toddler's exploration and independent play
- Begin to imitate violence

Pre-Schooler (3-5 years old)

- Trouble at bedtime (unable to sleep, fear of the dark, bed-wetting)
- Aggressive behaviours
- Destruction of property (displaying anger in unhealthy ways)
- Excessive separation anxiety (difficulty separating from trusted caregiver)
- Whining and clingy behavior

School Age (6-12 years old)

- Difficulty expressing feelings
- Bullying; fighting; self-harm
- Signs of depression and anxiety; withdrawing from friends and family
- Feel insecure, especially if there are frequent parental separations; fear being abandoned; fear their own anger and that of others
- Learn to rationalize violence and abusive behaviours
- Start to display violent behaviour; disrespect for self and others

Adolescents (13 - 17 years old)

- Develop their own unhealthy relationships; teen dating violence
- Bullying; self-harm; suicidal ideation
- Skipping school or not going to school
- Threaten and display violence towards others; disrespect for self and others
- Substance use and abuse (alcohol, drugs, prescription medications, etc.)

Girls

Girls who have witnessed family violence tend to display higher levels of anxiety than boys. They are more likely to display physical symptoms of their emotional distress, such as: eating problems, stomach aches or headaches, and difficulty sleeping. They often miss time in school and struggle academically. They also tend to be 'loners' and have difficult developing relationships with their peers.

Boys

Boys who have witnessed family violence tend to be aggressive toward their peers and teachers. They

can also be disruptive and disobedient in the school setting. Boys, especially, tend to lack the communication skills needed to express their feelings in healthy ways and, instead, are more likely to be aggressive and destructive. Boys often take on an adult role in the family at an early age (such as being the support person for their mother) and often continue a pattern of violence in their own adult relationships.

Despite the challenges faced by children who have been exposed to family violence, there is hope! Positive influences can help a child overcome negative experiences. Children are extremely resilient and have many coping skills that will help them be healthy and thrive once free of violence. It is important to access resources to support children who have witnessed the abuse of others, or who have personally experienced any form of abuse or neglect.

6. Common characteristics of abusive men

The most common characteristic of abusive men is that they usually witnessed family violence, or experienced abuse themselves, as a child. Although not all boys who have been abused become abusive, almost all men who abuse were exposed to family violence because violence is a learned behaviour. These men often hold traditional or stereotypical views of men's and women's roles in relationships. Aside from these characteristics, there is no single 'type' of abusive man; men who use violence in their relationships come from all income and education levels, and all racial, age and cultural groups.

What they think and feel

- Have low self-esteem
- Need to maintain excessive control over everything in their lives
- Are very jealous and possessive of their partners
- Are highly emotionally dependent on their partner
- Tend to lack empathy for their partner's physical and emotional pain

How they act

- Can be very pleasant outside of the home and very unkind at home
- Put blame for their behaviours on others (women and children in their lives)
- Don't know how to express emotions; express all negative emotions as anger
- Have very poor impulse control
- Tend to minimize or deny the abuse when confronted about their behaviours
- Place expectations on their partners to help them feel good about themselves
- Get their needs met through control, violence, threats, and intimidation



Abusive men do not usually grow up wanting to hurt others. Rather, in most cases, something happened in their life that has affected the way they choose to behave as adults. **It is highly likely that**

an abuser has experienced family violence during childhood. As a result, **abusers tend to struggle with both their behaviour and their own histories.** Abusers have low self-esteem and a poor self-image. **They may see violence as a way to gain control over people, which will give them more respect and power.** Many times, abusers do not understand the kind of harm they are doing to their partners or family; to them, it may seem like 'normal' behaviour. Although there are reasons people do the things they do, and factors that make the use of violence more likely, **it is important to remember that abuse is never the victim's fault.** Using violence in a relationship is always a choice; it is not okay and nobody ever deserves to be abused.

7. A woman's path to leaving an abusive relationship

Leaving an abusive relationship isn't easy. It takes a lot of strength and courage to decide to leave. One of the main reasons women find it difficult to leave an abusive partner is because it means walking away - and staying away - from something they believed was love. Letting go of love is painful and can mean facing difficult feelings of heartbreak, loneliness, and shattered hopes and dreams.



The most important thing to understand about leaving an abusive relationship is that it is rarely a single event - rather, it is a process. It takes most women time to realize that they are in an abusive relationship. Then, even if women realize they are in an abusive relationship, they often want the abuse to stop but the relationship to continue; it can take time to figure out if that is possible. If there are children involved, the process can be even more complicated.

Although every woman's experience is unique, there are some common stages in recognizing an abusive relationship and beginning to do something about it. It is important to understand that a woman's journey through these stages is often not straightforward; many women go back and forth between the stages over time.

Stage 1: Denial of the Abuse and Self-Blame

"He just pushed me." "We were just arguing." "This is not domestic violence and I am not being abused." "The children did not see this." "It will not happen again."

These are all things that women often say to themselves in the early stages of experiencing family violence. However, keep in mind that not everyone defines family violence in the same way; as such, some women may genuinely not consider what they are experiencing to be family violence.

"If I had only done what he said." "If I had not done..." "Maybe he is right that my relationship with 'X' causes problems." "If I do 'X', this will not happen again."

In addition to being blamed by their partner, women often blame themselves for the abuse they experience. During this stage, women will try new techniques to please the abuser. She may try changing her behaviour over and over again, hoping that the abuse will end.

Stage 2: Coming to terms with the abuse and its impacts

In this stage, women are able to recognize that their partner's behaviour is abusive. They are no longer living in denial and are able to admit the impact of the abuse on themselves and their children. They are able to see the relationship for what it is, rather than what they wished it was. This is a critical stage for women; at this point, women typically begin preparing to leave (e.g., finding a place to go, secretly saving up money) and shift their focus from thinking about leaving an abusive relationship to actually doing something about it.

Stage 3: Seeking Help

Once a woman understands that she is in an abusive relationship and makes the decision to leave, she begins to seek help. Help and support look different for each woman in their own situation. Some women will start by seeking help by coming to a shelter or calling the police. More commonly, women will first seek help from a friend, relative, or minister. She may be less careful to hide the abuse. She may not try to hide her bruises. She may look for information about domestic violence. She may ask about a "friend" who is being abused instead of identifying herself as the victim. She may 'test' friends or family by what she is telling them about the abuse, studying their reaction carefully and deciding whether or not she trusts and/or can feel supported by them.

Stage 4: In and Out of the Relationship

In the early stages of leaving, women begin to disconnect emotionally from their relationships. They might start feeling less and less connected to their partner. They may begin to feel - at least sometimes - like they can live without him, and that they are worthy of being valued and respected. They often begin to see their partner through different eyes.

This stage is where a lot of women struggle and get a bit 'stuck,' going in and out of the relationship. When they leave, the good emotions they felt for their partner tend to come back and they have the normal human desire to be physically and emotionally connected to another. It is natural for women to want to hold on to what they had, which is what makes ending the relationship for good so difficult. Being and feeling alone can be frightening, prompting some women to minimize the abuse in hindsight.

Women can leave their abusive partner in an attempt to live without violence, but they will often return to the relationship at least initially. This is often when women become further isolated, as friends and family have trouble understanding why she doesn't leave for good. However, **going back to a relationship should not be seen as a failure**. Most women attempt to leave 6 to 8 times, and every time they leave they learn more about what it will take to leave for good.

Stage 5: Ending the relationship - Learning to live without violence

Leaving an abusive relationship for good looks different for everyone. Some women stay at a shelter temporarily; some women stay with friends or relatives; other women may move out and live by themselves. Regardless, **for most women, living a life free of abuse requires that their former partner be totally removed from their life, or has as little contact with them as possible**. The difficulty for many women is that - even when the relationship is over - continued contact with their abusive partner may be required. For example, mothers frequently find themselves tied to an abusive ex-partner through court-ordered child visitation or custody arrangements. In these cases, the potential for ongoing abuse remains, along with continued confusion over the abusive partner's role in the

woman's life.

The path to leaving an abusive relationship is complex and requires a lot more than just making a decision to leave. It is also not just about the woman. The words, decisions, and actions of abusive partners can greatly affect how a woman moves through these stages. In addition, children can play a powerful role in a woman's journey. They are usually a motivating influence in a woman's decision to leave, but they can be an equally powerful force pulling a woman back into a relationship.

8. After family violence: A journey to healing

To move on from experiences of family violence, **you need to take responsibility for your own healing**. The healing process may seem slow; it can take years to undo behaviours and beliefs you have known for so long. However, with time and practice you can learn to think differently and to cope with your feelings in positive ways.

1. The decision to heal. Healing requires an active commitment; it can only happen when you choose it for yourself and are willing to make changes.

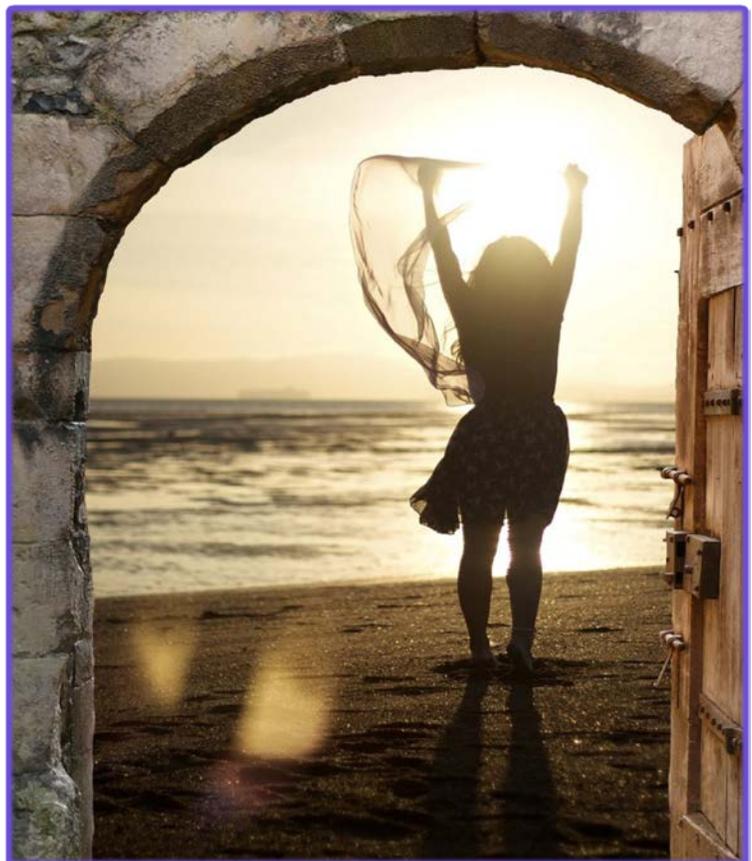
2. Remembering. To heal you need to remember memories and feelings that have been suppressed. It is a difficult stage that can trigger deep emotions.

3. Believing. It is necessary to believe that abuse happened and that the hurt and pain is real. You need to be able to break the silence and share the hurt with people you trust.

4. Understanding. It is important to understand that the abuse was not your fault. Women often carry this idea with them, sometimes from childhood into adulthood.

5. Grieving. Grieving allows you to honour the pain and let it go, in order to move forward. It is not forgetting, but acknowledging in a healthy manner.

6. Forgiveness. This stage is not about forgetting, but forgiveness allows you to move past feelings of resentment and anger. You can acknowledge and express your anger in a healthy way. Part of forgiveness is forgiving yourself.



7. Building. You begin to build yourself up and start to love yourself again.

8. Moving forward. While you will never erase your history, you will start to discover your strengths and good qualities, establish new belief systems, and make meaningful life changes.

A big part of any healing journey is making time for self-care: it is a commitment to taking care of yourself, recognizing your own needs, and getting to know who you are as a person. However, it is important to realize that **healing work is difficult to do alone**; most women require support in order to move through this process. Support might come from friends and family, but it may also come from health care providers, family violence outreach workers, or counselling professionals. So, when you are ready: seek support and safe spaces to tell your story; re-discover yourself, who you are and what you want your life to be; and develop new relationships and a life free of abuse. **You can do it and you are worth it!**