

Staying Safe in Intimate Relationships During COVID-19

The global public health crisis caused by COVID-19 has led to government directives on individual self-isolation and limited business operations, inadvertently creating a unique and dangerous situation for individuals in abusive relationships. While the majority of students are no longer on campus, Skidmore resources and support services remain available to all students to help navigate these particularly difficult situations. This resource compiles content from a variety of external sources to provide information and help specifically within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but may also be relevant under other IPV-based circumstances.

What is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines IPV as “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner.”ⁱ

These types of behavior can happen concurrently, vary in frequency and severity, and range in lasting impact.

IPV is often used interchangeably with domestic violence and understood as a strategy to maintain power and control over another individual.^{ii, iii} At a time when society at large is experiencing stress and uncertainty, abusive partners may take advantage of measures that are intended to protect public health and safety to exert more control over their partner.^{iv} With social distancing practices, stay-at-home orders, and limited access to public spaces, victims/survivors may be left in close proximity to their abusive partners for extended amounts of time.

Under these circumstances, IPV might look like:^v

- Withholding necessary items like hand sanitizer or disinfectants;
- Sharing misinformation about COVID-19 to incite fear or gain control;
- Preventing access to medical services;
- Withholding health insurance cards or threatening to cancel health insurance,

Victims/survivors may also be fearful of seeking services at a shelter, counseling program, or court due to the increased health risks associated with being in public spaces.^{vi} Additionally, public transportation and travel risks may prevent victims/survivors from implementing an escape plan or accessing services. In many areas, in-person access to these resources may even be restricted.

Seeking Safety

If you or someone you love is experiencing IPV, creating a sense of safety may make the added stresses caused by COVID-19 feel more manageable. The suggestions below can be done alone or with a friend, family member, counselor, or advocate. Please remember, if you or a loved one is in immediate danger, call 911.

Safety Planning

“A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan that includes ways to remain safe while in a relationship, planning to leave, or after you leave.”^{vii} Safety plans address an individual’s unique needs in their current situation and can provide guidance and clarity during times of distress.^{viii} It is important to keep in mind that programs and services such as shelters may be restricted or full to capacity at this time, so alternative options may need to be included in safety planning.

Some suggestions for protecting physical safety:^{ix}

- Identify areas of the home that don't have weapons and/or that you can quickly exit from. If an argument starts, try moving to those areas.
- Create a plan with loved ones to signal when you need help.
- If possible, have a phone accessible at all times or identify the closest place you can go to access a phone. Memorize the phone numbers to call for help.

Some suggestions for protecting emotional safety:^x

- Reach out to your support network for care and to help you think through your situation and potential options.
- Create a peaceful space for yourself, if possible. Designate an area where you feel safe to work through difficult emotions and decisions.
- Identify and work towards achievable goals that you feel comfortable and ready for, like calling a hotline or identifying available local services. You can start small and work towards larger goals as needed.

Protecting technological safety can also help reduce the risk of an abusive partner accessing and monitoring a victim/survivor's information and whereabouts. For a comprehensive resource on strategies and tips for technology use, see "[Technology Safety & Privacy: A Toolkit for Survivors](#)."^{xi}

Self-Care and Community Care

It is particularly important during this time that we take care of ourselves and each other. Victims/survivors of IPV may feel that self-care is undeserved, useless, or selfish, but it can be critical to coping, healing, and maintaining health and well-being.^{xii} Self-care can start by ensuring basic needs are met. Try paying attention to your sleeping patterns, eating habits, physical activity, and hygiene practices – if you're feeling like one (or more) of these areas need some help, what are some changes you can safely work towards to better meet that need? If you're set with basic needs, what are other activities or practices that can create a sense of calm, grounding, or pleasure? This will vary from person to person depending on interests, abilities, etc. Since privacy may be more limited at this time, it's recommended that activities like journaling be completed only if you have a safe space and your work is inaccessible to an abusive partner.

Community care is rooted in connection to others, and can mirror and extend the benefits we gain from self-care. While many of us are self-isolating or even quarantined, community care can help mitigate the negative impact of being withdrawn from other people. If you're able to, check in with loved ones – can you be a support for them, much as they are a support for you? Are there virtual communities you can join to connect with others who have similar interests as you? Can the social circles you created on campus be maintained remotely? As always, you can reach out to trusted faculty and staff for support.

For Skidmore College resources, visit <https://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/contacts.php>.

Off-campus Resources

Wellspring: call 24/7 hotline at 518-584-8188 or call the office during business hours at 518-583-0280.

Planned Parenthood of Greater New York: visit <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-greater-new-york> to access information, available services, and contact information for area health centers.

Saratoga Springs Police Department: call 518-584-1800

National Domestic Violence Hotline: call 1-800-799-7233, text LOVEIS to 22522, or visit <https://www.thehotline.org/>

Domestic Shelters: Visit www.domesticshelters.org to search local services by zip code.

References

ⁱ Matthew J. Breiding, et al. "Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommended Data Elements, Version 2.0," (Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Lorien Castelle, Jennifer Obinna, and Elizabeth Bliss. "Strategic Directions for the Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence in New York State," (Albany, NY: The New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ "What is DV?" National Network to End Domestic Violence, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://nnedv.org/about-dv/what-is-dv/>.

^{iv} "Staying Safe During COVID-19." National Domestic Violence Hotline. March 13, 2020. <https://www.thehotline.org/2020/03/13/staying-safe-during-covid-19/>.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} "Path to Safety." National Domestic Violence Hotline, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.thehotline.org/help/path-to-safety/>.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} "Technology Safety & Privacy: A Toolkit for Survivors." National Network to End Domestic Violence, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.techsafety.org/resources-survivors>.

^{xii} "The Importance of Self-Care." National Domestic Violence Hotline. August 8, 2014. <https://www.thehotline.org/2014/08/08/the-importance-of-self-care/>.