

# Preparing to Leave: A Practical Checklist

## Introduction

Leaving an abusive situation can feel overwhelming, but with careful planning, you can prioritize your safety and build a path toward freedom. This 4-page worksheet provides a detailed, step-by-step checklist to help you prepare to leave an abusive relationship, focusing on essentials, documents, contacts, and advance planning. Your safety is the most important priority—do not take risks if gathering items or making plans could endanger you. Keep this checklist in a secure, confidential location (e.g., with a trusted friend, in a safe deposit box, or in a password-protected digital file) where your abuser cannot access it. Update your plan regularly as your situation changes. If you're in immediate danger, call 911 or a crisis hotline before proceeding (see resources at the end). Use this tool personally or with a domestic violence advocate to ensure a safer exit.

## Section 1: If You Must Leave Quickly

When you need to leave abruptly, having a pre-packed essentials bag ensures you have critical items for immediate safety and survival. This section helps you prepare for a sudden departure.

### Small Essentials Bag

This bag should be small, portable, and stored in a safe, discreet location your abuser cannot access (e.g., with a trusted friend, in a locked car trunk, or at a shelter).

- **Prompt:** List 5-10 items to include in your small essentials bag. Describe where you'll keep it and how you'll access it quickly and safely.
  - **Items to Include:**
    - Essential clothing for a few days (e.g., 2-3 outfits, underwear, socks).
    - Medications (e.g., prescription drugs, over-the-counter basics for a week).
    - Copies of important documents (e.g., ID, insurance cards, children's birth certificates—see Section 2).
    - Spare phone and charger (e.g., a prepaid or basic phone your abuser doesn't know about, with emergency contacts pre-loaded).
    - Small amount of cash or a prepaid credit card (e.g., \$200-500, if possible, stored discreetly).
  - **Location and Access:**
    - **Example:** "I'll keep the bag in a locked box at my trusted friend Maria's house (555-123-4567), accessible by calling her discreetly or visiting during the day when my abuser is at work."

- **Tool:** Use a checklist to ensure all items are current and functional. Test packing and unpacking the bag monthly to confirm accessibility and update essentials (e.g., medications, clothing sizes). Label the bag discreetly (e.g., “Gym Bag”) to avoid suspicion.

Write down your essentials bag contents, including any additional items specific to your needs (e.g., hygiene products, children’s comfort items, pet supplies if applicable). Note any barriers (e.g., limited funds, access) and how you’ll overcome them (e.g., “Save \$20 weekly in cash for the bag”).

## Section 2: Gather Important Documents

Having access to key documents ensures you can prove your identity, access services, or manage finances if you need to leave quickly. This section guides you to collect and secure these items safely.

- **Prompt:** List 5-10 essential documents you’ll need in an emergency. Include their locations, whether you’ve made copies, and where you’ll store them securely.
  - **Documents to Include:**
    - IDs for yourself and your children (e.g., driver’s license, passport, birth certificates).
    - Financial records (e.g., bank statements, tax documents, pay stubs).
    - Insurance (e.g., health, vehicle, property).
    - Legal papers (e.g., restraining order, custody agreements, lease/mortgage).
    - Sentimental items (e.g., photos, children’s drawings)—only if safe to gather.
  - **Example:**
    - **Document:** Driver’s License
      - **Location:** Wallet (original), safe deposit box (copy)
      - **Secure Storage:** Password-protected USB drive with a trusted friend, or scanned PDF in a secure email draft.
    - **Document:** Children’s Birth Certificates
      - **Location:** Home filing cabinet (original), shelter safe (copy)
      - **Secure Storage:** Encrypted digital copy on a prepaid phone or with a domestic violence advocate.
  - **Tool:** Use a document checklist to track each item’s status (e.g., “Copied? Stored? Accessible?”). Create digital scans (encrypted) and physical copies, storing them in separate secure locations (e.g., with a friend, in a safety deposit box). Avoid storing originals or copies where your abuser can find them.

Write down your document list, noting any missing items and a plan to obtain or replace them safely (e.g., “Request a new passport through a government office, using a shelter’s address for mailing”). Regularly update this list as your needs or circumstances change.

## Section 3: Important Phone Numbers

Having a list of critical contacts ensures you can reach help quickly, especially if you can't access your phone safely. This section helps you identify and secure these numbers.

- **Prompt:** List 5-10 important phone numbers you'll need in an emergency. Include their names, roles, and why they're essential. Describe how you'll memorize or store them securely.
  - **Numbers to Include:**
    - Domestic violence hotlines (e.g., National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233; Canadian Women's Foundation: 1-866-863-0511).
    - Family and trusted friends (e.g., Maria, 555-123-4567—can offer shelter).
    - Lawyer (if applicable, e.g., Jane Smith, 555-456-7890—handles custody issues).
    - Doctor/Therapist (e.g., Dr. Emily Carter, 555-789-0123—manages your health needs).
    - Local shelter (e.g., Anytown Domestic Violence Shelter, 1-800-555-1234—offers safety and support).
  - **Example:**
    - **Name:** National Domestic Violence Hotline
      - **Role:** Crisis support
      - **Phone:** 1-800-799-7233
      - **Why Essential:** Provides 24/7 safety planning and referrals.
      - **Storage:** Memorized, written on a small card in my shoe (discreet), and pre-loaded on my spare phone.
  - **Tool:** Create a contact card or digital list on a secure device (e.g., a prepaid phone with a passcode). Program numbers for speed dial and memorize 2-3 key numbers (e.g., hotlines, trusted friend). Test calling during a non-emergency to ensure readiness.

Write down your important numbers, including any additional contacts specific to your needs (e.g., children's school, pet sitter). Note any barriers (e.g., limited phone access) and how you'll overcome them (e.g., "Use a public phone or library computer"). Update this list quarterly or after major changes.

## Section 4: Steps to Take in Advance

Proactive preparation can make leaving safer and smoother. This section outlines critical steps to take discreetly and safely before you leave.

- **Prompt:** Outline 3-5 steps to prepare in advance, addressing financial, technological, and logistical needs. Note any challenges and how you'll address them safely.
  - **Steps to Include:**
    - **Secure bank account:** If possible, open a separate account your abuser is unaware of, depositing small amounts discreetly (e.g., \$20/week in cash).
      - **Challenge:** Limited funds—solve by saving incrementally or seeking financial aid from a shelter.
      - **Tool:** Use a financial safety tracker (e.g., spreadsheet) to log deposits, account details (encrypted), and progress. Consult a domestic violence advocate for confidential advice.

- **Spare phone:** Consider a basic, prepaid phone your abuser doesn't know about, pre-loaded with emergency contacts and apps.
  - **Challenge:** Cost—solve by requesting a free or discounted phone from a shelter or hotline.
  - **Tool:** Use a tech safety checklist (e.g., disable GPS, use a new number) with help from an advocate or tech support.
- **Memorize key numbers:** In case you can't take your phone, memorize 2-3 critical numbers (e.g., hotline, trusted friend).
  - **Challenge:** Memory issues—solve by repeating numbers daily or writing them on a discreet item (e.g., clothing tag).
  - **Tool:** Practice reciting numbers aloud or associating them with a mnemonic (e.g., "800-799-7233 = Help Now").
- **Plan for pets:** Determine if pets can go with you or need temporary care arrangements (e.g., with a trusted friend, shelter).
  - **Challenge:** Abuser's control—solve by coordinating with a shelter or advocate for pet foster programs.
  - **Tool:** Use a pet safety plan template (available on shelter websites) to outline care, costs, and contacts.
- **Technology safety:** If possible, enlist trusted help (e.g., advocate, tech expert) to check your devices for tracking software or monitor your online activity.
  - **Challenge:** Limited access to help—solve by contacting a hotline for tech safety tips or using public computers.
  - **Tool:** Use free tools like Avast or Malwarebytes to scan devices, and follow shelter guidance on securing digital privacy.

Write down your advance steps, including a timeline (e.g., "Open a bank account within 2 weeks") and resources for support (e.g., local banks, hotlines). Reflect on any barriers (e.g., fear, access) and how you can overcome them safely.

## Section 5: If You Have Children

If children are involved, their safety and well-being are priorities. This section helps you prepare their essentials and documents for a safe exit.

- **Prompt:** Develop a plan for your children's needs, including 3-5 steps to ensure their safety and comfort if you leave. Include their essentials, records, and custody considerations.
  - **Steps to Include:**
    - **Their Essentials Bag:** Pack a small bag with comfort items (e.g., favorite toy, blanket), clothing for a few days, medications, and copies of important documents (e.g., birth certificates).
      - **Example:** "I'll include my son's teddy bear, 2 outfits, and his asthma inhaler in a backpack stored at Maria's house."
      - **Tool:** Use a children's essentials checklist to ensure all items are current and functional. Label the bag discreetly (e.g., "Play Bag") and store it safely.
    - **School Records:** Obtain copies of school records (e.g., transcripts, immunization records) if possible, storing them with your documents.

- **Challenge:** Access issues—solve by requesting records through the school discreetly or with an advocate’s help.
- **Tool:** Use a school records tracker to log requests, copies, and secure storage locations.
- **Custody Papers:** Keep custody agreements or legal documents with your important documents, ensuring they’re accessible and secure.
  - **Challenge:** Abuser’s access—solve by storing copies with a lawyer, advocate, or trusted friend.
  - **Tool:** Work with a domestic violence advocate or lawyer to understand custody rights and safety plans.
- **Additional Steps:**
  - Teach children a safety plan (e.g., where to go, who to call) in a non-threatening way (e.g., role-play during a game).
  - Coordinate with their school or daycare for discreet communication (e.g., notify staff of potential risks).

Write down your children’s plan, ensuring it’s age-appropriate and rehearsed regularly. Note any additional supports (e.g., pediatricians, counselors) and how they can assist. Update this plan as your situation evolves.

## Important Reminders

- **Create a Safety Plan:** Develop or update a safety plan, even if you don’t plan to leave immediately (see “Creating Your Safety Plan” worksheet for guidance). Prioritize safety over gathering items if it risks harm.
- **Seek Support:** Contact a domestic violence hotline or advocate to discuss your specific situation and get personalized advice. You are not alone—help is available.
- **Customization:** Adapt this checklist to fit your unique needs, circumstances, and risks. Focus on what’s most critical for your safety.
- **Logistics:** Plan where you’ll stay after leaving (e.g., shelter, friend’s house, hotel) and how you’ll get there (e.g., trusted friend, taxi, public transit). Ensure your route is safe and discreet.

## Additional Notes

- **Safety First:** Do not gather items or take steps if doing so puts you at risk—prioritize your safety over possessions. Work with a hotline or advocate to mitigate risks.
- **Confidentiality:** Keep this checklist and related plans in a secure location your abuser cannot access (e.g., password-protected file, with a trusted friend, in a safe deposit box).
- **Self-Care:** Leaving an abusive situation is emotionally and physically taxing—prioritize rest, therapy, and support to maintain your well-being during this process.

## Further Resources

- **National Resources (Canada):**
  - ShelterSafe.ca – A website to find the nearest women’s shelter or transition house in Canada (<https://www.sheltersafe.ca/>)

- Canadian Women’s Foundation – Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-866-863-0511, <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence/services.html>
- National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence – Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419, for Indigenous individuals.
- **Local Resources:** Check your province or territory for domestic violence shelters or crisis centers (e.g., BC Society of Transition Houses, Alberta Family Violence Info Line: 310-1818). Use ShelterSafe.ca to locate nearby options.
- **Books:**
  - *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft – Insights on abusive behaviors and leaving safely.
  - *Safety Planning with Battered Women* by Jill Davies – Practical strategies for escaping abuse.
- **Online:**
  - National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) – <https://ncadv.org/> – U.S.-based resources adaptable for Canada.
  - Ending Violence Association of Canada – <https://endingviolencecanada.org/> – Canadian resources and support for domestic violence.
- **Apps:**
  - *Aspire News* – A safety app with panic buttons, resource tracking, and safety planning tools.
  - *SafeJourney* – Tools for mapping safe routes, storing emergency contacts, and planning exits.

## Final Thoughts

Preparing to leave an abusive situation is a brave and complex process, but with this checklist, you can take practical, safe steps toward freedom. This worksheet equips you with the tools, resources, and confidence to prioritize your safety, gather essentials, and plan your exit strategically. You deserve safety, peace, and a healthy future—start today by completing this checklist, seeking support, or updating your safety plan. If you’re in immediate danger, call 911 or a crisis hotline now—your safety is the priority.