

Coping with the Isolation Associated with an Abusive Relationship

Objective

To identify ways to cope with the isolation associated with your involvement in an abusive relationship.

What to Know

In abusive relationships, one of the most common manipulative tactics is isolation—where you are separated from friends, family, your community, and even professional support like medical appointments. Your partner may want you to be entirely dependent on them, making it harder for you to leave, and more difficult to talk about the abuse with others. Manipulation to control and isolate you can happen in several ways:

- **Guilt and disapproval.** Your partner may discourage you from spending time with others—and try to make you feel guilty if you do. They may express disapproval about your family and friends, saying things like, “I just don’t like your friends,” or, “I don’t like the person you become when you’re with your family.”
- **Paranoia and accusations.** Your partner may insist that you spend time only with them because time spent with others makes them paranoid you will cheat or leave them. This does not necessarily stem from your partner’s insecurity—it is a common control tactic used by abusers whether they believe their own accusations or not.
- **Messages of unworthiness.** Your partner has probably strategically broken down your self-image and confidence to convince you no one else wants you, and that you should not bother trying to connect with others. This can result in low self-esteem and hopelessness—making you less likely to reach out to others.
- **Financial constraints.** Perhaps there are measures in place to ensure your partner is the sole breadwinner so you have no income, or they might insist on managing the finances.
- **Deliberately creating problems with friends and family.** Whether your partner is dishonest, disrespectful, or creates problems at family functions, they may try to damage your relationships with loved ones.
- **Using threats, coercion, or intimidation.** Your partner may make unreasonable demands or try to intimidate you so you will not see anyone without their permission. There may be threats if you fail to comply, such as giving you the “silent treatment,” withholding money, or even resorting to physical violence.

This isolation can result in a real loss of connections and support networks. Once you are isolated, it is easy to believe your partner’s negative, damaging messages. But maintaining healthy relationships, even amid abuse, can remind you of your strengths, values, and positive qualities. After you leave an abusive relationship, it can seem hard to rebuild your social network. Here are some suggestions about coping with isolation, to maintain relationships you are in danger of losing or repairing/replacing ones you have lost.

Always prioritize your safety—for some people, following these suggestions might put them in danger.

1. Make a list of all the people in your life that support you. Reflect on whether your partner has done anything to damage these relationships. If you can, have a conversation with each person about the situation and identify ways you can repair the relationship, if applicable. Keep the lines of communication open.
2. Create a safety plan, if you have not done so.
3. Connect with a counselor, therapist, and/or a support group to talk about the isolation and abuse in a safe space with people who understand.
4. Volunteer with a local organization.
5. Connect or reconnect with a spiritual or faith-based community.
6. Take classes or join clubs in your community.
7. Use a free social connection website like meetup.com that allow you to search for groups that meet based on common shared interests.
8. Get involved with community or senior citizens centers.

What else can you do to reduce your feelings of isolation?

Please note: If your partner threatens harm, call 911, report them to the police, or do what you need to do to be safe. You can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

What to Do

Describe the ways your partner has isolated you.

Make a list of all the people in your life who have been supportive.

Are there relationships that need to be repaired? If so, what can you do? Be specific.

Have you created a safety plan? If not, why not?

For the next month, every week do at least one activity to cope with isolation. Note the date, what you did, who was involved, and the outcome.

Date	Activity	Who was involved?	Outcome

Did this activity help you cope with the isolation associated with your involvement in an abusive relationship?

What else can you do to cope?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
