

Help is out there

STEP BY STEP: *Advocates encourage domestic violence victims to investigate their options, make a plan.*

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While the decision to get out of an abusive relationship is a complicated one, once someone has made that decision, there are resources.

Each of the advocates interviewed for this story emphasized the importance of a plan and of being aware of what's available before victims take that step to leave.

"The risk of lethality doing this without a safety plan or support ... the risk is significant," said Mary Brennan-Taylor, vice president of programs at YWCA of Niagara. According to the YWCA, 83 percent of domestic violence homicides occur when an abuse victim is in the process of leaving that relationship, something with which Susan LaRose of the Niagara County Sheriff's Department domestic violence intervention program concurred.

"That's when most victims are killed, when leaving the relationship, or they've made a mention of it," she said. "You need a plan. You can't just get out without a plan. It looks so easy to the outside, but it's a process."

The YWCA's domestic violence hotline (433-6716) can be reached 24 hours a day, seven

days a week, and doesn't commit the caller to any particular course of action, Brennan-Taylor said. There's no charge.

"The first step might just be making that first call," she said. "But they have to seek us out. They have to take the first step."

The YWCA of Niagara and YWCA of the Tonawandas offer services including counseling, advocacy, a safe house, transitional housing, support groups for adults and children, outreach and supervised visitation and offender accountability programs.

"Many times the victim is isolated so much, she doesn't even know services are out there," said Karrie Gebhardt, director of the Passage program for Family and Children's Service of Niagara.

The Passage program, part of Family and Children's Service of Niagara, has been helping domestic violence victims and survivors for more than 30 years. It has offices in Niagara Falls and Lockport and provides another free 24/7 hotline (285-6984). Its 15-bed shelter, located in a confidential location, is fully staffed at all times. It also provides counseling and advocacy, as well as support groups for women and children.

Gebhardt noted that she also works with men who are victims of domestic violence, and those in same-sex relationships (who might face threats of being outed to their friends and family in addition to other abuse).

"What we're doing is empowering victims as survivors," Gebhardt said. "Not all victims view themselves as survivors yet. We truly

meet them where they're at."

LaRose said the Niagara County Sheriff's Department program, which marked its 20th anniversary this year, is an early invention program. It started in 1994, when there were seven domestic violence homicides in the county.

While that number is down (there were two domestic violence homicides in 2013), the number of overall domestic violence reports has stayed around the same from 1999 to 2013 (3,116 to 3,169, with ups and downs throughout the years) — and other factors have been getting worse.

"We have seen an increase not in overall numbers, but in the severity of the reports, especially in Niagara Falls," LaRose said. "Things have been escalating in Niagara Falls."

The intervention program has access to domestic violence police reports and can refer cases to the district attorney's office. LaRose said cases are flagged for signs of lethality, including weapons in the home, stalking, abuse of pets and mental illness. The program can make referrals to services such as those offered by the YWCA and Family and Children's Service of Niagara.

"Not one agency in the county can provide all these services," she said. "We need each other to provide the best quality services to a victim."

People can reach the domestic violence intervention program at the Niagara County Sheriff's Department at 438-3301, and Niagara County victim assistance unit at the Sheriff's Department at 438-3306.



JOED VIERA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The administrative offices of the YWCA of Niagara are shown in Lockport. The organization also provides a safe house and transitional housing for domestic violence survivors in a different location.

#WhyIStayed

A selection of tweets sent over the past few months with the **#WhyIStayed** hashtag:

- Because he made me feel like my worth was based on his thoughts of me. **#WhyIStayed**
- Because he made me believe no one else would understand. **#WhyIStayed**
- **#WhyIStayed:** because my word was the only evidence.
- **#WhyIStayed** b/c he never hit me and I didn't think verbal abuse and emotional manipulation was considered an abusive relationship.

- I kept hoping it was a phase and that things would get better. **#WhyIStayed**
- Like husband like father. Like mother like daughter. I thought it was meant that way. **#WhyIStayed**
- Because he called me and told me that he had a gun to his head **#WhyIStayed**
- Because I no longer knew who I was **#WhyIStayed**
- I was told marriage is forever. I didn't want to be a failure **#WhyIStayed**
- **#WhyIStayed** Because I wanted my son to have a father. **#WhyILeft** because I wanted my son to have a mother.

LEAVE ...

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and tweets from survivors sharing their stories.

To mark October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month, this is an examination of why it's not that simple to "just leave," in the words of local advocates — and three of those who've survived.

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The domestic violence survivor whose words opened this story, and the others whose words accompany it, have lived what it's like to leave a bad situation and know firsthand the inner turmoil and paralyzing fear and, yes, even the memory of better times it can stir up.

It's much more difficult for those on the outside to understand, local women's advocates said — which leads to that frequent question: "Why doesn't she just leave?"

"To begin with, it's victim-blaming. It continues to make you realize how little people understand the dynamics of domestic violence," said Mary Brennan-Taylor, vice president of programs at YWCA of Niagara.

"There are so many reasons, starting with the obvious, which would be financial. Certainly a concern about housing stability. 'How am I going to manage?' ... 'How am I going to afford rent?' All those things, the living expenses."

And many times, she said, the abuse victim still loves the abuser, despite everything.

"Which is the part no one ever gets," added Kathy Jackson, manager of the YWCA safe house and transitional housing. "It's easy to say '(just leave)' when you're not in that position."

Victims can love the abuser and not the abuse, falling into what Brennan-Taylor called the "If I just ..." mentality: "They just want it to go away. If they just do what the abuser wants ... prepare better meals, keep the house cleaner ...

"They assume whatever keeps him mad is their fault. If they could just focus on the fact that abuse is a choice your partner is making."

Karrie Gebhardt, director of the Passage program for Family and Children's Service of Niagara, said many of the reasons come down to fear — not only of their abuser, but of the loss of what they consider "a normal life."

"I always say, the relationships don't start with a black eye. Even these relationships start out with passion and promise," Gebhardt said. "She's remembering at the beginning of the cycle of abuse, (thinking) that's not the real him, the real him is the one who's apologizing afterward."

She described the cycle of violence, with the "honeymoon" phase when everything seems good, the tension-building phase described as "walking on eggshells" or "waiting for the other shoe to drop" — "Then something abusive happens, verbal to emotional to physical ... then you start with that honeymoon phase again."

Abuse can be normalized for some people, Gebhardt said.

"Sometimes we talk to victims who don't know what a healthy relationship is," she said. "Maybe they grew up that way. ... Sometimes he's convinced her this is normal."

Of course, the threat of escalating violence all on its own is a major factor, said Susan LaRose, domestic violence intervention coordinator for the Niagara County Sheriff's Department.

"It's a lethality issue in that people first off think, 'He told me he's going to kill me. He might kill me. This is what he says and he may actually do that. So I'm going to stay,'" she said. "They've been controlled for so long, socially isolated, that they believe everything their partner tells them."

Even once the decision to leave has been made, Brennan-Taylor said, it's not a simple thing. According to the YWCA, on average, domestic violence victims attempt to leave their situation seven times before they actually manage to get out.

"So to judge someone, saying 'Oh my god, why doesn't she just leave?' ... that's inappropriate," she said. "Only someone who's walked in their shoes can fully understand the complexity."

Gebhardt agreed.

"I have friends who've asked me those questions," she said. "It's about education. It's about awareness. Domestic Violence Awareness month is there for a reason."

"It's society's view ... and you hear it all over the place. But it's time we all take a stand and educate people on this. And not just the victim. ... we're all teaching one another what this is, what it's truly all about, what's out there."



ASSOCIATED PRESS

In this Aug. 18, 2010, file photo, a victim of domestic violence, who calls herself, "Sierra" sits at a safe house in Nevada County, Calif. The dramatic decrease in domestic violence committed by intimate partners from 1995 through 2004 has largely stalled, with the numbers stabilizing at a level that appalls people in the prevention field. The latest federal figures for "serious" intimate partner violence, sexual assault or aggravated physical assault, showed 360,820 such incidents in 2013, or roughly 1,000 per day.

WORDS ...

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she knew she only had one choice, to get out before he killed her. She gathered up her courage, packed up some things and called a shelter for help.

"Even as I was on the phone with the shelter, I was still questioning myself if it was the right thing to do," she said. "My mind is telling me 'Go! Get outta here while you can!' And my heart is telling me 'Stay and stick with it. He can change' and 'How are my kids going to be affected?' 'But I love him!' 'How am I going to support my kids? I have no money.'"

She went with her mind, although she was sick to her stomach and shaking as she drove to the shelter. Even weeks later, she said, "my heart still tries to convince my mind that maybe, since I left, he has changed."

"It's hard to walk away from something you put everything in to," she said. "My heart is saying 'Stay. I love him.' My mind is saying 'Go.'"

"I'm still questioning myself. ... Then I have to go back and recall what made me make the decision to leave."

Asked why she stayed for the time she did, Sally paused.

"It is simple. I stayed because I loved him," she said, softly. "I loved him. It is hard for you to walk away from someone you love."

When you leave an abusive relationship, she said, "You lose a part of

who you grew into. Now I'm finding out who I am again."

Sally — who wore a shirt with the words "I made my own luck" emblazoned on it to the interview — said she's learning that. And she wants others in her situation to know there is help out there.

"Domestic violence is real," she said. "It happens everywhere. And it happens to everybody."

'He sold me a dream, and I took it'

NJR remembers vividly her shock when, six months into her first relationship, her boyfriend slapped her.

"Of course, he made it seem it was my fault ... that should have been a red flag right there," she said. "I stayed with him. I still don't know why."

She was away from her family and friends, without a support system. The incidents got more frequent. He would apologize afterward, telling her she should know not to do things that angered him. She thought it was going to get better.

It got worse.

She remembers him dragging her by the hair out of the apartment and leaving her there, with nowhere to go. She was so shocked that she just stayed curled up against the door.

A miscarriage — although they believed neither of them could have children — followed one incident. They decided to try to have a family. She thought that when that happened, things

would really get better.

Again, they got worse.

"Everything was my fault," she recalled. "This was three years in. I felt backed against a wall. Pregnant, no family. I couldn't just leave."

After the baby was born, she said, he wanted nothing to do with their son. He didn't want her to work, and found ways to control her every movement. He "flipped out" whenever she bought something for the baby. She found a way to get a prepaid phone to reach out for help, and started packing. It wasn't that easy. And the support system she thought was there for her wasn't what she thought it was.

"He sold me a dream, and I took it. I was still trying to make it real," she recalled. "Two months later, it was back to the same old, same old."

"I don't know why I did that. Well ... I loved him."

In all, it took eight times for her to successfully leave. Today, she's finally in her own, safe place with her son, making a life for herself.

This, she said, is the last time.

'I didn't love myself enough'

When she went through her divorce, **Stanzi** told herself that it was never going to happen again.

"I was going to do anything and everything to make my second family work," she said. "Guilt. I definitely felt like I was wearing my scarlet letter."

But her next relationship turned into a cycle

of good times and physical abuse. Her daughter's health problems and the loss of her job resulted in her abuser's increased financial control. Addiction issues didn't help. And life in a small town, where her abuser knew everyone and she didn't, made things even worse. People would turn a blind eye to "a chipped tooth, a black eye, a cracked back," she said.

She did manage to leave. He begged for another chance, saying things would be different. She believed him.

"Of course, in the back of my mind, I still wanted my second family to work ... because I'd already failed," she said. But it didn't take long before the abuse started again.

Eventually, she got out. But then the cycle started again in her next relationship.

What finally made a difference, she said, is that she asked herself what she'd tell her friends, or her children, if they were in such a position. "I'd say, 'What are you doing with this clown?'"

She stayed for so long, she said, "because I had a sick idea what home was. I was sick. I didn't love myself enough to believe I was worth it."

And why did she leave?

Stanzi was quiet for a moment. Then she lifted her chin and smiled a little.

"If I'm going to fail in a relationship, I might as well fail on my own," she said. "At least I'm on my own. I'm not going to be anybody's victim."

Signs of abuse

- Does your partner:
- Hit, punch, slap or bite you?
 - Threaten to hurt you or your children?
 - Have sudden outbursts of anger?
 - Become jealous without reason?
 - Prevent you from seeing friends and family?
 - Prevent you from going where you want, when you want?
 - Force you to have sex?
 - Humiliate you in front of others?
 - Abuse or threaten to abuse pets?
 - Deny you access to family assets (bank accounts, credit cards or a car)?
 - Destroy personal property or sentimental items?
 - Prevent you from working or attending school?

— Provided by the YWCA of Niagara