

Recovery After an Abusive Relationship

Evidence-based steps for healing and rebuilding your life

Recovery after abuse is not a straight line but a journey with many overlapping threads. This handout shares research and strategies that have helped others move forward in healing.

Safety and Survival – The Foundation

Why it matters:

Safety is the first and most important step for recovery. Without a secure place of living, stable income, and protection from ongoing harassment, other aspects of healing remain limited. Concerns around finances, legal battles, or shared custody can compromise safety for years as abusers continue coercive control through courts, money, or parenting arrangements. Establishing safety allows energy to be redirected toward physical and emotional healing and setting future goals.

Practical steps:

- Secure safe housing away from the abuser, even if short-term at first.
- Reach out to your local support services as they will often be able to assist with risk management and funding for improved safety.
- Apply for Centrelink, legal aid, or community supports.
- Keep records of ongoing harassment or coercive behaviour. Seek an Intervention Order if threats persist.
- Install safety features at home (e.g. cameras, electronic locks) and check for tracking devices (e.g. air tags hidden in your car or devices installed under children's car seats). Change all your passwords.
- Get legal advice early on long-term financial and custody arrangements.

Knowledge and Understanding

Why it matters:

Understanding abuse patterns helps make sense of confusing experiences and validates what you have endured. Knowledge of coercive control, trauma responses, and cycles of abuse give clarity and reduce self-blame. Having someone else confirm your emotional reality can often be pivotal. Education can be your “greatest tool” for recovery - not only for yourself but also for family and friends, who need to understand how to support you.

Practical steps:

- Read well-regarded books and resources on coercive control, emotional abuse and Domestic Violence.
- Listen to podcasts or watch Youtube videos about abusive dynamics.
- Share educational resources with supportive family or friends.
- Join a support group where information is shared and normalised.
- Reflect on past experiences with new knowledge to combat self-blame and self-doubt. This may include revisiting journals and records you may have kept during the relationship.

Rebuilding Identity and Self-Worth

Why it matters:

Abuse erodes confidence, convincing you that you have no right to needs or desires. Rebuilding identity involves reconnecting with the “old self” while also creating a new identity that reflects freedom and resilience. A key part of recovery is rejecting the abuser’s version of events and reclaiming your own story. Over time, your aim will be less to please others and more about expecting reciprocity as a baseline in relationships.

Practical steps:

- Write down the qualities and strengths you value in yourself.
- Revisit hobbies, work, or creative outlets that reflect who you are.
- Explore new paths through study, volunteering, or travel.
- Practice self-encouraging statements such as “**My needs matter**” or “**I am in control now**”.
- Reframe your story to highlight endurance and resilience.

Gaining Freedom and Control

Why it matters:

Freedom goes beyond physical distance and includes the emotional freedom from fear, shame, grief, and the abuser’s influence. Fear is particularly toxic, preventing joy and forward movement. Freedom also means reclaiming everyday choices: laughing, crying, expressing any feeling without retribution, spending money, or making plans without fear of punishment. Creating distance through time, space, and reflection opens up possibilities for a new life.

Practical steps:

- Set strong boundaries in communication with your ex-partner.
- Start setting boundaries in your relationships with others.
- Notice and exercise the small freedoms in daily life now – choosing what to watch, how to make up your bed, what you can have for dinner. Keep making choices.
- Use reflective practices (journaling, walking, spending time in nature and alone) to create perspective.

Healing Mind and Body

Why it matters:

The toll of abuse is both physical and emotional. Early recovery is marked by exhaustion, confusion, and a harsh inner critical voice. Later stages involve ongoing struggles with grief, anger, and guilt. Some emotions, like anger, will need to be reframed as useful motivators for independence. Healing is not only about reducing symptoms but about regaining vitality, balance, and strength to manage emotions without being consumed by them.

Practical steps:

- Book overdue medical appointments and attend to health needs.
- Prioritise rest, nutritious food, and movement (walking, yoga, stretching, martial arts, boxing).
- Practice grounding strategies (e.g. deep breathing, mindfulness).
- Allow emotions to surface without judgment; use anger to fuel change.
- Seek trauma-informed therapy to manage triggers and flashbacks (e.g. EMDR therapy).
- Join trauma-informed groups or classes that reconnect you with your body.

Acceptance and Self-Compassion

Why it matters:

Letting go of attempts to change the past can be liberating. Many years have been spent trying to fix the abuser or blaming yourself for what is happening. Recovery requires acknowledging painful emotions but refusing to carry shame or guilt. Over time, the healing process leads to a shift: from self-neglect to recognising needs as valid, from self-blame to self-compassion, from pleasing others to expecting reciprocity.

Practical steps:

- Practice self-kindness with affirmations like “I did what I needed to survive.”
- Withdraw from unhealthy, one-sided relationships.
- Seek supportive connections where care is mutual.
- Journal about emotions like grief or anger to validate them.
- Give yourself permission to let go of guilt and shame.

Moving On and Reframing the Story

Why it matters:

Moving on is not about erasing the past but about creating new meaning. It is a recognition that grief and relief can co-exist, and progress means reclaiming lost parts of life: confidence, joy, perspective, and hope. A powerful aspect of moving on is rejecting the abuser’s narrative and asserting your own story. Being heard and validated by others reinforced this process. Reframing recovery as resilience — seeing strength rather than weakness — provides hope and direction.

Practical steps:

- Write your own account of what happened, focusing on resilience.
- Share your story in supportive spaces or with trusted people to counter shame.
- Create short- and long-term goals for yourself and your family.
- Consciously redirect energy from the past toward present needs and happiness.
- Engage in activities that symbolise reclaiming your story (art, writing, ritual).

Considering Intimacy and Relationships

Why it matters:

Intimacy and trust are among the hardest areas of recovery. Many survivors become cautious and highly selective about friendships and partnerships. Guardedness replaces earlier openness, and suspicion often lingers. Some choose to remain single; others approach relationships carefully, watching for red flags. Sexual intimacy can also be challenging and ambivalence is common.

Practical steps:

- Delay or avoid new relationships until you feel truly ready.
- Define what healthy intimacy and respect look like for you now.
- Set non-negotiables for safety, empathy, and reciprocity.
- Be alert for familiar red flags and trust your instincts.
- Allow yourself to remain single without guilt — it is a valid, empowering choice.

Building Positive Support

Why it matters:

Rebuilding support requires being selective and pragmatic - choosing people who can listen, validate, and tolerate pain without minimising it. Over time, building trust with empathic, reliable people will create a foundation for belonging, safety, and growth.

Practical steps:

- Choose relationships where empathy and validation are present.
- Step back from people who minimise or dismiss your experiences.
- Invest time and effort to strengthen connections with safe family, friends, and colleagues.

Social Contact as Growth

Why it matters:

Social contact beyond the abusive relationship is crucial. Parenting groups, coffee mornings, work, or travel offer opportunities to relate differently, gain confidence, and learn who you are apart from the abuser.

Practical steps:

- Join community groups or low-stakes social activities.
- Confide in safe people who can confirm and validate your experiences.
- Experiment with new social roles through volunteering or work.
- Surround yourself with people who support your growth.

Validation and Being Heard

Why it matters:

Being believed and having experiences validated is vital for recovery. Survivors consistently report that without validation, their shame and confusion increase. Hearing others' stories can also provide strength and connection.

Practical steps:

- Share your story in supportive groups or trusted friendships.
- Seek out spaces where you feel heard and respected.
- Listen to others' stories to gain strength and perspective.
- Avoid people who deny, minimise, or question your reality.
- Use writing or art as a way to voice your experience.

Helping Others

Why it matters:

Turning painful experiences into advocacy, mentoring, or peer support provides meaning and reinforces resilience. Many can find new purpose in using their voice to help others.

Practical steps:

- Volunteer with local community or family violence services.
- Informally mentor or support others who are leaving.
- Advocate for awareness in your workplace or community.

Recognising the Transition Phases

Why it matters:

Recovery comes in phases. At first, shame, confusion, and grief feel overwhelming, and you may need a lot of support and reassurance from others. Over time, distress eases and stability grows. Anger, guilt, and grief may remain, but anger can also become a source of strength. These phases aren't fixed - people often move back and forth between them.

Practical steps:

- From the early stages, surround yourself with validating, supportive people.
- Allow grief and loss to be felt and named.
- In later stages, create structured goals (daily, monthly, yearly).
- Use anger as motivation to pursue independence and safety.
- Recognise progress even when setbacks occur.

Acknowledging the Long-Term Journey and Building a Future

Why it matters:

Recovery can be lifelong. Triggers, grief, or shame may resurface unexpectedly, but over time your ability to manage them with balance and distance will grow. Thriving is not about the absence of pain but about living with greater independence, joy, and satisfaction alongside grief. The goal is liberation in being able to make decisions freely, enjoy peace, and experience fun and creativity again.

Practical steps:

- Expect ups and downs as part of the journey.
- Celebrate milestones, no matter how small.
- Create daily routines that bring peace and joy.
- Focus on meaning and independence rather than perfection.
- Set clear goals for your personal and professional future.
- Take pride in your independence and decision-making.
- Strengthen meaningful relationships that bring joy.
- Allow yourself to celebrate thriving even while grief remains.

References:

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