

SAFETY FIRST

INTRODUCTION

People can change only from a position of safety. If you don't feel safe, then you won't progress in your recovery. You want a strong foundation upon which to build your new self, and safety is the core of that foundation.

Safety is something that you want to incorporate seamlessly into your daily life, something you approach with the same dedication as you would a spiritual or moral practice. Safety is something that you must consider no matter where you are – at home, with friends and lovers, at work or play. Recovery entails facing horrible memories, painful feelings, powerful bodily sensations and potentially self-destructive impulses and behaviors. To withstand these reactions, you need to feel safe and strong as much of the time as possible.

There are several steps involved in evaluating your current level of safety before you proceed with creating a plan for your recovery.

Assessing and Facing Risks

Facing your abuse and your reactions to it brings with it risk: risk that you will feel overwhelmed, out of control, unable to make the right decision in any number of situations. You can't grow without taking risks, but you won't recover if you take risks that you are not prepared for. So, as part of approaching recovery from a position of safety and strength, you need to learn to distinguish between healthy and harmful risks.

Think of safety as an inverted U curve, with the left end of the inverted U representing total safety but no risk and the right end of the U representing no safety and total risk.

The optimum growth point is to the right of the middle of the curve – where high safety is combined with low risk. You always want to be conservative in balancing safety and risk because you want to avoid setbacks that may occur when the level of risk outweighs the level of safety you feel you need. Considering that many survivors have histories of self-sabotage or of being re-victimized as adults, SAFETY FIRST! means learning to take fewer risks while you create more safety for yourself.

Besides helping you to avoid setbacks, the idea of SAFETY FIRST! is to maximize your chances of success when you do decide to take appropriate risks, so that you begin to build success and mastery into your life. By mastering challenges that contain some risks, you will begin to develop confidence in yourself, which in turn will enhance your self-esteem. In other words, you want to be s t r e t c h e d by your recovery but never broken.

Timing is Everything

Recovery occurs in small, steady steps taken one after another. Each step you take needs to be reviewed, evaluated and experienced so that you can derive maximum benefit from your hard work. Try not to get ahead of yourself. Many survivors feel impatient with the pace of their recovery, especially if they have spent years feeling stuck. You may want to jump ahead and go for the "big success" out of a sense of wanting to finally put the past to rest. But remember, when you jump ahead before you are really ready, you sacrifice safety and risk a setback that can leave you feeling dispirited and hopeless. Try to reassure yourself that your abuse occurred over a long period of time - important formative years - and so full recovery is also likely to take time.

It is very important that YOU set the structure and pace of your recovery. Many survivors anxious to proceed with and "finish" their recovery often find themselves exploring recovery techniques that threaten them or make them

feel re-victimized and violated. Often these survivors had some sense that they were not yet ready to explore their abuse issues at that particular level, but failed to trust their intuition cautioning them to move slowly. Although it is difficult to resist a path that promises to lead to healing and recovery, we strongly encourage you to trust your own inner sense about your readiness. If you are not sure yourself whether you are ready to explore your abuse issues using particular techniques or at a different pace, see if you can get some help from a trusted friend or therapist. Ultimately, though, you must be the judge of whether you are ready for a certain recovery experience.

If you have a therapist, she or he may suggest certain techniques to help you in your recovery. If you have established a consistent level of trust with your therapist, you should be able to tell him or her that you do not feel ready to try a particular technique, or that you feel the therapy is moving too fast (or too slowly). An ethical therapist will never force you to do anything about which you are unsure, and will respect your sense of appropriate timing.

Assessing Your Current Safety Level

Before you move on to the next section of this chapter - Creating Your Plan for SAFETY FIRST! - we suggest that you take some time with the following two self-assessment scales: the Safety Checklist and the Suicide/Harmful Behavior Checklist. These will help you determine your current level of safety. After each checklist and the scoring information, there are some recommendations which are designed to help you determine whether you are ready to progress with a recovery program.

Safety Checklist

Check "Yes" or "No" to answer each question:

Do you have impulses to harm yourself? Yes No

Do you find yourself in unsafe situations? Yes No

Do you easily feel overwhelmed by feelings, thoughts, memories or bodily sensations? Yes No

Do you currently feel threatened by someone close to you? Yes No

Have you ever attempted suicide? Yes No

Have you ever "lost time" or lost sense of being yourself? Yes No

Do you use alcohol or drugs to excess? Yes No

Is there a firearm or other potentially dangerous weapon at your residence? Yes No

Have you been victimized by someone within the last three years? Yes No

Is someone close to you involved in illegal activities? Yes No

SCORING: If you checked "YES" to more than three questions, your current risk level is HIGH.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Let this checklist tell you what you must do to lower your risk level and create more safety in your life. Some of the situations, such as that posed in question eight, concerning firearms or dangerous weapons, can be resolved easily: remove the firearm or weapon from your residence. With other situations, such as past victimization (question nine), there is little you can do except to make every effort to prevent a recurrence. In most of the other questions, the issues are somewhat complicated but not unsolvable. You can (and should) seek professional help if you lose sense of time or of your self or have impulses to harm yourself. If you are being threatened or abused by someone close to you, you need to take steps to protect yourself and to make the threats or abuse stop - even if this means ending the relationship. If you are unsure as to how to address any of these questions, then you may need help to figure out how to create SAFETY FIRST!

Suicide/Harmful Behavior Checklist

Check "Yes" or "No" to answer each question:

Do you feel chronically depressed? Yes No

Do you have recurring thoughts of killing yourself? Yes No

Do you have a specific plan to kill yourself? Yes No

Have you acquired the means to kill yourself, such as a supply of pills or a gun? Yes No

Do you intend to carry out this plan to kill yourself within a specified time frame? Yes No

Do you have thoughts of actually killing or harming others? Yes No

If yes, have you made specific plans or arrangements for this to occur? Yes No

SCORING: If you answered "YES" to ANY of the above questions, your suicide/harmful behavior risk level is HIGH.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Get professional help IMMEDIATELY. If you do not have access to names of private therapists, you should call your county mental health services. You need to first lower your suicide/harmful behavior risk before attempting to initiate or continue recovery from your child abuse. The two are probably connected, but it is very important that you concentrate first on stabilizing yourself before delving deeper into your abuse issues. Discuss your answers to these questions with your therapist, so that he or she can make your personal safety and the safety of others the primary focus in your therapy until you have stabilized yourself and feel you are ready to commence or continue recovery efforts.

You should know that your therapist has certain legal and ethical obligations to warn potential victims and, in some cases, to notify the police if s/he reasonably believes that you are suicidal or homicidal, or likely to harm another person. Although this may mean breaking the confidential relationship between the two of you, your therapist is mandated by law to do this and cannot be sanctioned for doing so.

CREATING YOUR PLAN FOR SAFETY FIRST!

Awareness - Assessment - Action

Your SAFETY FIRST! plan starts with three parts - Awareness, Assessment and Action. Ensuring your safety first requires that you be Aware of situations that present danger or risk - both to yourself (in terms of the degree of risk you can tolerate) and to others (in the event that you have thoughts of killing or harming another person), and that you take appropriate steps to protect both yourself and others. Once you have identified dangers and risks and recognize the signals that your body and mind send out in response to these stimuli, you need to Assess why these signals are being triggered. What in your current environment is bringing these responses to the foreground? After connecting the cause (the triggering event, sign or behavior) with the effect (the signal or response), you will need to take Action in a way that restores a sense of safety both for you and for others around you.

Having this structure in mind and readily accessible as you live your daily life is essential to understanding and interrupting the destructive patterns of the past and replacing them with more healthy patterns. Remember that breaking the old habits based on unconscious scripts linked to your abuse means overcoming the tendency to do the same old (familiar) thing. At first it takes more energy to change, but it gets easier with practice and success.

Awareness

Write down as many physical, emotional or intuitive signs as you can that tell you that your safety might be in question. (For example, your heart beats faster or you sense a clutching sensation in the throat.)

If you need more space, use additional sheets of paper and keep them with your manual.

Assessment

Write down what you think might typically trigger these reactions to certain situations. For example, triggers can be either internal (for example, unconscious memories, dreams or fears) or external (for example, interactions with certain people or particular types of activities or experiences). Remember that EVERYONE has difficulty with certain kinds of situations, though the nature of the situations varies with each individual. If you can, you should try to focus on the types of situations that you perceive to be related to your abuse or abusers.

If you need more space, use additional sheets of paper and keep them with your manual.

Action

Write down all of the actions you can think of to help you restabilize yourself after feeling unsafe. Some of these actions will be obvious and practical, such as simply leaving the environment that is causing the danger. Other actions must be tailored to your unique needs, based on the type of abuse you suffered. Try to develop a range of options that will serve you in a variety of situations.

Building Your Support System

Many survivors feel that they have few people they can talk to or get support from regarding their recovery. It is important not to try to recover in a vacuum. You do need help from like-minded and empathetic survivors and trained professionals. This program encourages combined use of professional therapy and self-help for optimum recovery; we do not share the anti-professional stance of some self-help programs. Learning to trust others and to turn to them for support is a crucial step in recovery. Doing so challenges one of the basic notions that arises from a history of abuse: namely, that people are dangerous.

Identifying Your Support Network

In the space below, list everyone you can think of whom you can call for support during times of need.

Now take a thoughtful look at your list. Is it adequate for your everyday needs? Can you identify those people you could call for a routine check-in or cup of coffee and those you could rely on in an emergency situation? If you came up with only one or two names in all, then perhaps you need to expand your support system. If the only person you wrote down is your therapist, then consider getting more involved with BPDFamily.com or other survivor-oriented activities. Co-workers and fellow students may prove to be valuable allies in your recovery; just remember that, by their nature, work and school settings place more restraints on the type of contact you can have with others. If you have a particular interest, such as a sports activity, you may find kindred souls who can be of help in times of need.

Resolving Abusive Relationships First

Many adult survivors find themselves in relationships that in some way parallel or resemble their childhood abuse scenarios. In some cases, these relationships are actually abusive - if not physically or sexually, then emotionally. Spousal or partner abuse is another behavior linked to childhood abuse. The psychological or emotional impact of spousal abuse on the survivor can be every bit as devastating as the physical harm because it reinforces and reinstates the sense of fear, threat and personal devaluation that the childhood abuse originally created. Many survivors are inclined to deny the abusive nature of their adult relationships, much as they once denied their childhood abuse.

If you have never acknowledged or resolved your childhood abuse, you stand a surprisingly high chance of unconsciously repeating it - fully or partially - with a partner, spouse or friend. Research tells us that abuse survivors are subject to as much as five times the risk of future victimization as are persons who were not abused. In addition to creating problems in your current relationships, and even presenting the threat of physical harm, this denial can seriously undermine your recovery.

Part of your SAFETY FIRST! plan is to assess whether your current personal relationships are abusive. If you determine that your personal relationships are abusive, then you will need to resolve them before initiating your recovery. This issue can be very complicated because, in some cases, your expectations for relationships (which are shaped in part by your childhood abuse), can affect your perceptions of how people treat you. In other words, what you expect to happen to you in your relationships can play as important a part in your perceptions as what actually happens to you in your relationships. Depending on the specifics of your situation and personality, you may

need help in distinguishing what is really happening to you now and what is a perception based on your childhood experiences and memories.

Whatever the case, your interactions with others need to support your overall recovery goals, not to destroy your current efforts or reinforce past childhood abuse patterns. Remember that the whole idea behind SAFETY FIRST! is to be able to work on your recovery from a position of strength that results from having eliminated the fears associated with the abuse. Since recovery is a most challenging task, you need all the help and support you can get, and this includes making sure that your personal relationships do not replicate old abuse patterns.

Following is a Personal Relationships Checklist. Use it to assess the degree of support and safety provided by your personal relationships. You can also use the checklist for work relationships, although these tend not to have as much impact on your sense of safety, in part because of the more structured and (usually) restricted nature of the workplace.

Personal Relationships Checklist

Check "Yes" or "No" to each question that applies:

Does your partner or spouse ever hit you? Yes No

Does your partner ever force you to have sex? Yes No

Does your partner verbally abuse or disrespect you by calling you names, belittling you or threatening you? Yes No

Does your partner try to restrict whom you spend time with or limit other choices in your life? Yes No

Does your partner consistently assign unfounded malicious intent to your actions and opinions? Yes No

Do you find yourself afraid of disagreeing with or opposing your partner? Yes No

Does this relationship make you feel the way you did as a child? Yes No

Do you feel dominated or controlled by your partner? Yes No

SCORING: If you answered "YES" to any of the above questions, you will need to determine whether your childhood abuse history is shaping your perceptions of your current relationship(s) or whether the relationship is, in fact, abusive in some way.

RECOMMENDATIONS: If you are being hit, forced to have sex, or criticized or verbally abused, you must take steps to stop this very real and potentially dangerous pattern. If you are being dominated in one or more destructive ways, you should seek professional help to figure out how to rectify or leave the relationship or insist that your partner get help to eliminate the abusive behavior. In more subtle instances, where you are unclear as to whether your perceptions of abuse are based on the past or on the present, you may also need professional help to understand fully the interpersonal dynamics that are being played out in your relationship(s).

Stabilizing Your Life

Before recovery, many survivors live lives characterized by constant crisis. Job disappointments, relocations, failed relationships and financial setbacks are among the hallmarks that may result from unresolved childhood abuse issues. Of course, these things can be caused by other life stresses and problems as well. The reasons for this are complex, but for many survivors it comes down to an inability to build regularity, predictability and consistency into one's life because of the ongoing internal chaos associated with a history of abuse. Many survivors find themselves functioning in "crisis mode," responding with stopgap measures that do nothing to resolve the underlying issues. As a result, each new crisis consumes precious energy and attention, and the task of resolving the underlying issues is

ignored. Living life in "crisis mode" is truly exhausting and dispiriting. After years, it can lead to discouragement, helplessness and hopelessness.

Trying to initiate and proceed with recovery when your daily life is so unstable is a setup for failure. Recovery really is possible, but unlikely to occur until the various crises raging in your life have been settled. So, a key component of your SAFETY FIRST! plan will be to identify and start to stabilize the problem areas in your life before embarking on your recovery. It is not necessary to fully resolve these problems - that will come as you work through recovery - but successful recovery depends on your taking steps to bring some order to your life. In so doing, you will reduce the frequency of crises and thereby increase the amount of time and energy you can devote to your recovery. The following checklist will help you identify and rank the issues that may be diverting energy from your recovery efforts.

Crisis "Hot Spots" Checklist

Check "Yes" or "No" for each area of your life and then rate the level of the problem on a scale from one (not a problem) to ten (very much a problem) for any YES answers:

- Relationships Yes No Level: _____
- Finances Yes No Level: _____
- Parenting Yes No Level: _____
- Job Yes No Level: _____
- Housing Yes No Level: _____
- Psychological or Emotional State Yes No Level: _____
- Family Relations Yes No Level: _____
- Addictions Yes No Level: _____
- Health Problems Yes No Level: _____
- Legal Problems Yes No Level: _____

SCORING: Count the number of YES answers and then rank them from highest (most problematic) to lowest (least problematic) score.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Your long-term goal is to stabilize as many of your problem areas as you can, but you should start with the three highest-ranking problems on the checklist, or those you believe cause the greatest instability in your life. Focus on each one of these three key problem areas and try to determine how you might stabilize each over the long term. It may take some time and thought to come up with truly valuable ideas but, unless you start this process, you are likely to delay your recovery and continue to operate in "crisis mode."

Priority "Hot Spots" in My Life

- Hot Spot #1 _____
- Things I Can Try: _____

- Hot Spot #2: _____
- Things I Can Try: _____

Hot Spot #3: _____

Things I Can Try: _____

If you find that you have high scores in more than three problem areas, try to identify the "top three" and focus your efforts on these areas first. If you try to tackle them all at once, it is easy to get overwhelmed by the volume and scope of the problem areas. If you can isolate three key areas and focus on how to go about resolving them, you will gain a sense of accomplishment and mastery that will help you to identify the next group of "hot spots," and so on until you have been able to address all of the issues that are of concern to you.

If you can't do these exercises or find that you can't implement them in your life, then you need some help to focus your efforts. Think about seeing a therapist or talking to someone who you believe has resolved the issue(s) in her/his own life. Try to grasp what it is that holds you back from making the necessary changes to stabilize your life.

Self-Soothing Activities

One of the most important skills for survivors to learn is how to soothe themselves emotionally. Most survivors never learn to self-soothe in childhood because parents who abuse are also often poor at soothing themselves and, consequently, at teaching their children to self-soothe. However, it is essential to your recovery that you develop some capacity for self-soothing early on in your recovery journey. You will need this skill as you proceed through the various stages of recovery.

Soothing is what good parents do when their children are upset. It often involves soothing touch that is warm and comforting. It can involve words that are reassuring, empathic and hopeful. It may involve activities that are physically, intellectually or sensorially nourishing, such as taking a walk, reading a favorite book or sharing a special meal. It can also involve daily practices that are spiritually uplifting and inspiring, such as meditation. When you can perform this type of caring for yourself - whatever your chosen activities may be - then you have learned to self-soothe.

You probably have your own list of self-soothing strategies. Some may be healthier than others. You will need to evaluate how you soothe yourself, so you can retain the healthy practices and try to eliminate or control the less healthy ones. Then you will need to add some new strategies that can provide extra comfort during your most emotionally challenging times in recovery.

The Ways I Soothe Myself Today

New Ways I Might Soothe Myself

- Exercise
- Practice meditation, guided imagery or deep relaxation
- Write in my journal
- Do a spiritual practice
- Take a warm bath

LIVING SAFETY FIRST! — A FINAL NOTE

The goal of this paper is to encourage you to develop a daily practice of living SAFETY FIRST! In any situation, with any people, facing all kinds of choices or decisions, you always want to start with your SAFETY FIRST! plan, both to evaluate potential dangers and to identify useful and appropriate coping mechanisms for the situation. The more you can incorporate your SAFETY FIRST! plan into your life, the more you will eliminate the kinds of setbacks that plague so many survivors (and that probably plagued you as well). You can then focus your energy on creative recovery efforts and reduce self-sabotaging behavior. In so doing, you will begin to experience the stability that is so essential for healthy functioning.

Should you ever feel overwhelmed or triggered by what you read on-board, you will have a range of options at your disposal. Instead of listening to what is being said, you can direct your focus to your personal reaction and determine why you are having that particular reaction. If your feelings are overwhelming, you can always step away from your computer. You can contact a moderator to talk with you. You can decide not to read threads that make you feel especially vulnerable. Any or all of these strategies might be part of your SAFETY FIRST! plan, along with many other options you have identified for yourself.

Whatever your SAFETY FIRST! plan, it is important that you adopt it as part of your daily life. The more you do this, the more you will internalize a sense of safety that non-survivors take for granted. From this foundation of SAFETY FIRST!, your recovery can proceed, bringing with it the development of a new self capable of creating the kind of life that you long for.

ABOUT THE MORRIS CENTER

This document was adapted from “*Survivor to Thrive*” Manual and workbook for adult survivors of child abuse who want to move-on with life, produced by the Morris Center.

A non-profit 501(c)(3) public benefit corporation, THE MORRIS CENTER was founded in 1991 (as the Adult Survivors of Incest Foundation) to provide individual and group sliding scale psychotherapy and low-cost educational and self-help programs for adult survivors of sexual abuse. In November 1993 the name of the organization was changed to The Norma J. Morris Center for healing from child abuse. This change reflected the fact that its programs had expanded to serve survivors of physical and emotional, as well as sexual, abuse, and to honor the organization's co-founder and principal benefactor, Norma Morris.