

# Disclaimer

This book should not be considered as clinical advice or to replace the advice given to any reader by a support agency , therapist or clinician. All readers should consider accessing professional medical help or other support agencies, if there is concern about personal welfare. All of the names and some of the case details used in this book, in relation to case examples, have been fictionalised to anonymise the individuals referred to.

**Emergency Exit Plan for those who need to leave quickly.**

For those of you who need an emergency exit strategy, please go straight to Chapter 7.

SAMPLE

Copyright 2022 © Craig Newman.

Version 1 Published XXXXXX, 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright holders.

SAMPLE

# 7. The Act of Leaving...

Even if you have left already, as many of us have, the ability to turn up for ourselves and to commit to staying away, learning to avoid abuse and finding true love is a shared difficulty. All these actions can be considered as 'leaving'; Leaving abuse, leaving cycles of abuse, leaving behind the identity of a victim and entering a new life stage of survivorship and recovery.

In this chapter, we will learn how we change when we experience abuse and how this disempowers us. Through this learning, we will realise that we have the opportunity to have power, choice and freedom. Leaving abuse is the first step towards achieving this.

Keep in mind as you read on, that humans are survivors. We escape wars, we escape disasters and we are often prepared to pay huge costs to protect ourselves and our children. You have this strength in you, we all do. It is not the lack of strength that holds us back, it is the effect of abuse that takes away our awareness, freedom and wish to meet our own needs. Once you activate our survival instinct, you will amaze yourself at the depths of strength you can access.

## **Learned Helplessness & Institutionalisation**

Let's begin by understanding some of the science and shared experiences that could explain how we experience a loss of our ability to choose freedom, when we see it and want it.

In the 1960s a researcher called Seligman showed that when dogs were put onto an electrified floor that they had no control over escaping, they simply gave up and lay down to endure the shocks. A cruel study by today's standards. His research showed that when there was no perceived escape, attempts to escape simply stopped. Most interestingly, Seligman found that if they introduced an escape route – these dogs would not take it even when threatened, rewarded or shown the route by another dog. The only way to get them on their feet and taking the route, was to repeatedly pick them up and move their feet – to retrain them through the actual experience of escaping. They called this effect, “learned helplessness”

It may seem a stretch to extend this study from dogs to the experience of humans, but I have witnessed human versions of this since a very young age. From the age of 11, I used to regularly visit a Psychiatric Hospital with my father who was in the League of Friends, offering company to patients who did not receive visitors. This was an Asylum, which no longer exists in the UK. A huge building that housed hundreds of adults for many years, deemed unable to live in society. I was so young, that I adapted quickly and didn't see ‘patients’ but people, who I met regularly and who had very strange lives that filled me with wonder.

One such person was an elderly lady called Hannah. I have no idea how old she was, but to the 11-year-old me she was ancient. She was frail and moved slowly through her ward. I connected with Hannah and she is the only name I remember from my years of visiting. Whenever she saw me, her face would glow and she'd always meet me with an embrace. She had an unending curiosity about my life and me as a boy and I loved to talk to her. One day, I asked my father, "Why is Hannah in here?". He replied, "She's been here all of her life, she was placed here at 16 because she had a baby outside of a marriage". I was shocked and appalled. My father went on, "It's why she likes you so much, I am told she hadn't seen a child for 60 years until you came in". Even as I write this now, I can feel the same pains of empathy for Hannah I felt back then.

My interest pricked, I asked more and more about Hannah both to others and her. I learned, over time, that she didn't want to leave the Asylum and the idea of her leaving was never hers. It was always an idea that people like me introduced. She had no memory of herself being free, no idea about the world with her in it and no network of people who were waiting for her to return. She was *institutionalised*.

Hannah's story, like so many others living in similar conditions, demonstrates how the mind can transform an awful separation from your entire life, society and even your own child into a state of being that feels permanent and acceptable. Hannah was not upset about being in an Asylum, she likely was in the early years,

but later she had adapted her beliefs and thinking to stay. The door could be wide open and she would not leave.

### **The door IS open**

I've suggested earlier in this book that many people who leave abusers do so after an event that forces them to both see reality and to make a choice. A serious injury, an arrest by the police, a harmed or threatened child, feeling unable to cope with life any longer, finding a new lover and more. It resonated with me when a client of mine, Adrian, told me, "it was leaving or it was suicide as I just couldn't cope any more, and I realised then that leaving was the better option."

In these stories of escape is a hidden truth, that for many of us the door is already open and we can walk through it. The real barrier is our disconnect with reality, dependence on our lover and loss of perceived power or commitment to walk out. When a sudden dose of reality is combined with a significant reason to act, many people find that they are able to claim their freedom and walk through the door.

If you have escaped, you likely have a similar waking up story. A signal event that pushed you over the top and out of the door.

These moments in which we feel the power to act, are often momentary. They are connected to events or an experience of mounting awareness, in the face of our experience of abuse that

pushes us to crave the cycle, to blot out reality and to serve our abuser's needs.

For those who think about leaving and don't, action is needed.

For those who have left but don't rise up to love themselves, action is needed.

### **Leaving is an act**

In my work, I've heard stories of planning to escape and escaping without a plan. There is a quality to both stories that is important to recognise – they represent actions and not ideas.

There are likely as many, if not more, stories of planning and fantasising about leaving that do not lead to the act of leaving. For any of us who have been in these relationships, we have fleeting and repetitive memories of thinking about leaving or planning to leave – that fade to nothing as the cycle of abuse spins. These represent the act of fleeting fantasy. Visualising our escape and eventual happiness and freedom can be a powerful aid and driver, but brief thoughts of escape that we don't hold on to can torment us or even swing back to create a sense of guilt for even considering leaving.

At whatever stage in our journey towards getting out and getting love, our commitment to freedom and self-love has to be a commitment to action. Planning can support us in getting out



and staying out – and wherever possible we should plan our exit. This much seems agreed on most domestic abuse websites I have seen. I propose a list of things we should consider planning for if we are escaping an abuser, at the end of this chapter.

With this said, planning can also be a barrier to our escape if we frame it incorrectly. Planning brings with it two risks:

1. ***Wanting the best plan is no plan:*** striving to cover all of our bases and refusing to act on the need to leave until we feel we have planned for all the challenges we will face. A ‘good enough’ plan is adequate (more on what is essential in your plan, below).
2. ***Fantatising is a form of living:*** when we repeatedly fantasise about leaving we actually experience it in a strange quasi fashion. We see ourselves walking out and being happy or being unhappy. Either way, we create a fantasy world where we are either distanced from abuse or threatened by the horrors of what we will face out there alone. This can reduce our drive to achieve  
Think about people you know who talk about getting fit / dieting over and over. They fantasise and don’t act. They even say it out loud. They celebrate the idea with friends, but in doing so deplete the internal drive to actually act.

It is important to recognise that it is extremely challenging to plan for a solution when we are full of self-doubt and have lost confidence in our ability to be alone. We are trying to plan for a

world we've lost the ability to visualise or actualise. It is like asking Hannah in the asylum, "what will you need if we let you out?" Of course, she would have no clue.

The goal of planning isn't to enable leaving, it is to enable staying away. When the act of trying to stay away gets in the way of trying to leave, it is a barrier not a route out. We can feel like we are planning, when we are instead using planning as a *distraction* from the need to walk out.

### **Trust that you are a survivor**

I have witnessed many stories of surviving that I've been able to draw on. I've worked with clients who had fled wars, famine and torture. People who have arrived in the UK as Asylum seekers – psychologically broken, often with children or sometimes separated from their precious families. I've met many inspirational people who have left everything they had, to try to better their life beyond surviving. In these stories, I have seen them build lives, recover their perspective and integrate into society and love. But never, in all of these stories did I meet anyone who wished they could go back to the life they'd had.

Life is uncertain and leaving is going to turn our world upside down. We currently don't have; access to what we need to stay away and recover, the confidence; the self-worth, a hold on our addiction and our mental health. But we do have our survival instinct, which we never lose.

Take what we can and commit to surviving. Once we leave, the door is behind us, see it as closed and locked – never as an option to return to – like a war zone we have fled. This mindset is critical as we are leaving and working towards breaking the pull back – not extending the reach of our relationship past the open door.

### **Pause and Process Your Story**

This chapter presents challenging ideas. The idea that, for many of us, leaving is always possible but outside of our perception of reality and own power. Whether we are still in the relationship or out of it, consider whether the need to leave abuse is seen in our actions or cycles as a thought or feeling.

How much are you planning to act at each stage in your journey?

- Plan to leave an abuser, and leave.
- Plan to leave the grips of addiction, and leave.
- Plan to leave the guilt and shame behind, and leave.
- Plan to leave the effects of trauma, and leave.
- Plan to leave the victim identity behind, and leave.
- Plan to leave a life where you serve others and not yourself, and leave.

Most of the people I've worked with have found themselves arriving and camping at one of these stages without realising it. Seeing that they left an abuser but failing to see that the cycle persists. Returning to their ex days, weeks or months later.

Replacing their ex with a new lover who brings the same cycles.  
Failing to find true love from others or themselves.

Spend some time thinking about how disempowered you have felt or feel now. How little you connect with what you need in a new life, where you love yourself. Realise both of these as needs you have and not weaknesses or prophets of doom. These are common in abuse victims. Trust me, when I say that we are capable of finding our power and our insight into what we need. You will be supported to achieve this, in ACT III.

It starts with realising that for many of us, we have learned otherwise.

### **Summary**

The idea of leaving, for many people, can feel totally alien or like a task completed. The task of leaving only starts when we walk out of the door. True leaving is achieved through the acts of breaking away, undoing the past effects on our mind and finding true love. This represents getting out of the cycles that take us into abuse.

Walking out of the door and being free of our abuse, to many, feels like the greatest challenge. For some it is tangibly so, their abuser truly holds them there through control, force, threat and real danger. For others, many others, we hold ourselves there through an inability to take the actual steps we fleetingly fantasise about

taking. The journey of leaving is long and is partnered with staying away. We will address this in the next chapter.

## **Additional Notes**

### **Acknowledging risk**

I need to address and validate the theme that most often raises in challenge to this narrative. This being situations where leaving is dangerous or leaving is impossible due to control. Let's not dodge this issue. In some cases, leaving is extremely dangerous. In the case of abused women who are murdered by their partner, 41% of these murders were after the woman had left<sup>1</sup>. We can find ourselves with a dangerous partner, with no money, with no network of support and in extreme danger. It is not wise for me to claim that everyone can leave without significant support. In the case of extreme risk to us or our children, contact with social services, the police, GPs and solicitors is likely needed. How this is done, in a situation that is controlled, is sometimes outside of possible.

This is a challenge for society rather than these truly trapped victims. I don't have the answer in these cases and so recognise that this book is not able to reach all people in need. This truly pains me.

---

<sup>1</sup> Femicide Census, 2020 (<https://www.femicidecensus.org/>)

## **When leaving is not an option**

I worked with a client, Steve, who had suffered an illness that left him with profound disability, total paralysis in fact. He was referred to me for health management support but revealed that he wanted help to commit suicide, which I am not legally able to support in the UK. In our conversations he revealed that his wife was abusive to him. She would withhold his food, leave him alone for days on end, call him names and cheat on him openly. He told me that I could not contact social services, else he would deny all of this disclosures and that I would make his life worse. He was openly fearful of his wife and also desperate to not be taken into a care home, where he was sure he would not receive visitors or see his children again and did not want strangers managing his personal care. He chose that he did not wish to leave her, rather than he'd prefer to die. He did not want his wife invited into any form of therapy.

An awful quandary for him and a seemingly helpless position for me, as his therapist. Little was done for Steve in respect of his relationship, beyond providing space to share and validate his feelings and to explore his thinking about alternative ways of living. Ultimately, he chose not to continue with therapy.

Steve's case, although extreme, is an example of being awake to reality and yet choosing to stay. It is also an example of a choice that has to be respected, for some people. I am sure there are

countless others who with open eyes make the same choice, for many reasons (older age, illness, valued culture etc).

For those of us who choose to stay, my call to escape may seem like a further kick or a lack of appreciation of difference. For you, I suggest you read on. Take what you can from the rest of this book, as there are lessons in self-love and personal need that may penetrate into your life and change your reality. I don't presume to prescribe what you should do with this learning, only that the learning is relevant for us all at every stage after realising we are experiencing abuse. My heart goes out to you, and in that, I hope there is some reassurance that you are not alone and your experience is shared on some level.

### **Emergency planning essentials for getting out**

It would be reckless of me to leave this chapter, suggesting that no plan is a good plan. My message is rather, the perfect plan does not exist and any exit will always be imperfect and uncertain.

Some considerations of things we can plan for and perhaps should include<sup>1</sup>:

- Support: someone to talk to ASAP (a GP appointment, a close friend, abuse service appointment, a counselling service, free 1-

---

<sup>1</sup> A more comprehensive guide on planning to leave, planning to leave in a crisis and what to pack is available for free on [www.getoutgetlove.com](http://www.getoutgetlove.com).

hour solicitor consultation etc). This is a **must** for everyone who is getting out, as I shall cover in the next chapter.

- Accommodation: a friend's floor, an abuse shelter or a family member etc.
- Finance: bank accounts, bank cards, family support, benefits etc.
- Legal materials will likely be needed later: passports, marriage certificate, insurance documents, leases, tenancy agreements, birth certificates, medical records etc.
- Medicines: medications we or our children need.
- Clothes: travel light, clothes are easy to access in the world.
- Mobile phone: take it and the charger. Consider changing the number as soon as possible via the service provider.
- Passwords: change all of passwords to all email, phone, bank accounts etc
- Children: if they are at risk, take them where possible.
- Evidence: any diaries, photos or recordings of the abuse experienced (check local laws on recording without consent).



- Hide your plan: a discovered plan is perhaps worse than no plan.

How much of this anyone can actually plan for is situation-specific and balanced against the risk of not leaving. We should never let the plan become the reason we don't exit. What someone needs to stay away is quite different from what we need to leave.

To leave we need shoes, a coat and a key to the door.

For those of us that can leave, I hope this helps. For those of us who feel we can't, I hope there is the opportunity to connect with supporters who can help.

### **Reflection Exercise**

Reflect on what this chapter stirs in respect to the idea of leaving versus staying away?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

SAMPLE

What behaviours, emotions or beliefs get in the way of getting out of these situations either now or in the past? Self-blame, lack of confidence, rationalising, fear of the future, lost sense of power....

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

SAM

SAMPLE