Seeking Help Online: Safety and Privacy Considerations for Women Experiencing Violence

It can be difficult and even paralysing for women who are experiencing violence to sort out where and how to seek help. When in-person support services are not an available option, it is important to know there are additional ways to access resources and support. Crisis lines (phone/ text,) or chat and virtual counselling support are available for women experiencing violence. While these various options can make it easier to access support, safety and security must be part of that critical access.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE USING TECHNOLOGY TO GET HELP

The information below will help assess the available platforms and devices and the way to communicate safely with an anti-violence agency.

What if it is not safe for a woman to talk aloud on the phone?

Many helplines and services offer multiple ways to connect, including text messaging or online chat functions for more discreet conversations. You can also use technology strategically to get help or connect with people you trust. For instance, you may be able to use an unassuming app (one the abusive person may not monitor or look through), like a game that has a chat feature, to reach out to trusted friends. Consider what may be a safe option for you. Do you want to be able to call for help quickly? Or do you want a safe way to get a supportive ear when you need someone to talk to?

Could someone see my conversations if I use a text line?

Depending on the way the text line is set-up, the thread of the conversation may be saved to your device. Consider deleting the text threads once you are done to minimize risks of someone else seeing it. You may also want to check to see if your text messages are backed up to the cloud. If your phone is set up to back up text messages, consider disabling this feature if there is a chance the abuser has access to the cloud account.

What if I use a chat line? Are there safety considerations?

Chat messages are typically not saved to your device and the content of the messages usually delete after closing the browser window. However, a record of what website you visited could be listed in your browser history. If safe to do so, go to your web browser settings and delete the browsing history you

do not want someone else to see. Deleting the entire history may look suspicious if the person regularly monitors the browser activity so only delete these specific visits to remove the digital trail.

What if someone is monitoring my device activity? How do I look for support services?

There are various ways someone could monitor a device and each have different implications. If your partner has physical access to your device and they likely know your password or account information, they may be able to gain access to information you share. This could include the thread of a text line or call logs.

If someone has installed stalkerware/spyware on your device, they will have access to anything that happens on the device, including websites visited, call logs, texts, and any information being backed up to your cloud-based storage.

If this is the case, it may be helpful to think of an alternative way to communicate. Consider connecting with friends or family via a code word or phrase to indicate that you need help. Remember to let your friends or family know what this means and what to do if you should you use that strategy. You may also consider getting a cheap pay-as-you-go phone or a donated phone to have another device to make emergency calls.

Where can I get help?

Anti-violence programs offer a variety of programs in communities.

In British Columbia contact VictimLink BC at 1-800-563-0808 or VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca

For a list of crisis lines across Canada, see Shelter Safe

For a list of women's shelters across Canada, see https://www.sheltersafe.ca/

For more information on technology, privacy, and safety, please review the resources in our Technology Safety & Privacy Toolkit

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