



SAFE HARBOR

What to Expect: A Guide for Survivors

This guide was created for survivors seeking clarity about what happens when reaching out for help. Each section explains what you may experience in common support situations, written in a trauma-informed, empowering, and compassionate way.

What to Expect: A Guide for Survivors

A. Calling a Domestic Violence Hotline

When calling a hotline, an advocate will answer and provide confidential, non-judgmental support. They may ask questions about your immediate safety, current situation, and whether you are in a safe place to talk. You never have to give your real name or location unless you choose. The advocate can help you safety-plan, explain available resources, and connect you to shelters or local services.

B. Arriving at a Shelter

Upon arriving at a shelter, staff typically greet you privately and guide you through a short intake process. You may be asked basic questions about your safety needs, health concerns, and whether you have children with you. Shelters usually provide essentials—bedding, toiletries, food—and review house guidelines. You will never be forced to share details of your abuse, and your stay remains confidential.

C. Meeting with an Advocate

An advocate can help with safety planning, emotional support, and connecting you to legal, medical, or housing resources. Your appointment may begin with reviewing your immediate safety needs. Advocates do not pressure you and respect your pace. They can help identify options, accompany you to appointments, and provide crisis counseling.

D. Going to Counseling or Therapy

During your first session, the therapist may ask what brings you there and what you hope to work on. Trauma-informed therapists avoid pushing for details before you're ready. They may teach grounding techniques, explain how trauma affects the body, and help you process emotions safely at your own pace.

E. Medical Exam After Abuse

A medical exam focuses on your safety and well-being. Providers can document injuries, treat wounds, and offer testing if needed. They may ask how injuries occurred to document them accurately. Certain providers are mandated reporters, meaning they must report situations where children or vulnerable adults are at risk. You can ask what will and will not be reported before sharing details.

F. Talking to Police

Police may ask questions about what happened, whether you feel safe, and whether the abuser has access to weapons. You can request a female officer if available. You are not required to sign anything you do not understand. You may also ask for an advocate to be present. If you fear retaliation, tell the officer so they can help create a safety plan.

G. Filing for a Protective Order

You may fill out paperwork describing why you need protection, though you do not have to disclose every detail. Advocates can help you complete the forms and accompany you to court. A judge may grant a temporary order the same day. A follow-up hearing is often scheduled within 10–14 days, where both parties may appear.

H. Going to Court

Courtrooms can feel intimidating, but advocates can stay with you throughout the process. You may wait in a separate area from the abuser. The judge will review your petition, ask clarifying questions, and determine whether to extend the protective order. You can bring notes or support letters if helpful.

I. Talking to a Trusted Friend or Family Member

It can be hard to share your experience. Choose someone who has previously been supportive. You might start with statements like, “I need to talk about something difficult, and I need you to listen.” People sometimes react with fear or confusion—this does not mean they do not care. You can set boundaries and let them know what type of support you need.

J. Working with Legal Aid or a Lawyer

Legal professionals can explain your rights, help with protective orders, housing issues, custody concerns, and represent you in court. They may ask for documents related to your situation, but you never have to provide anything you are not comfortable sharing. Many offer free or sliding-scale services for survivors.