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A DV Holiday Safety Plan

This month, Cynthia Amodeo, Coordinator of "Generations of Freedom" the family services department at Barrier Free Living's Freedom House Emergency Shelter, looks at the importance of safety planning during the holiday season.

Holidays can traditionally be a time of family gatherings and celebrations. For individuals and families at Freedom House who have left an abusive situation, maintaining their new path to safety is crucial, especially during the sometimes emotionally volatile holiday season.

At Freedom House, we have come up with a roster of safety tips to help keep the holiday season safe.

Don't avoid planning for the Holidays

It may seem easier to ignore a holiday because the traditional activities and visits are not possible. This is an approach that can lead to misery for mothers and children. Be proactive in making plans to start new traditions.

Start a new holiday routine

Try not to follow a traditional holiday routine. For example, if you go to your grandmothers every Christmas don't go this year. This is the first place your abuser may look for you. Instead, go to a family or friend's home that you normally do not visit on the holiday that is in a safe neighborhood. If there are no safe alternatives, begin to establish "a family of choice." We can't choose our biological families, but we can choose to celebrate family events with others whose biological families are not available, dangerous or destructive. Some of our Freedom House families have developed strong ties with each other as they share the shelter experience. That connection continues after leaving Freedom House.

Go to Safe Neighborhoods

Stay away from neighborhoods and shops that will increase the chances of seeing your abuser or someone he or she may know. For example, if you are from Brooklyn, do not go back to Brooklyn as you increase the risk of seeing your abuser. Instead, explore new shopping areas and stores. Visit friends and family that do not live in areas that you will likely be seen.

Meet close family and friends in new locations

Since it is unsafe to visit certain family and friends, have them meet you in safe locations. For example, if you are very close with your mother who lives in Brooklyn; have her meet you in Queens.

Holiday Parades and Events

There are certain parades and events in New York City that draw people from all boroughs and even out of state. Be extra cautious at large gatherings because you never know who you may run into. If you regularly go to a parade, you may not want to go this year because it is expected for you to be there. Instead, watch the parade on TV.

Holiday's can be difficult - talk to someone

Not being with your family and friends can bring up a lot of feelings including sadness, frustration, and anger. Talk to your friends and family. Reach out for extra support from counselors, advocates, and help lines.

National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1-800-799-SAFE

Life Net – 1-800- LIFENET

Safe Horizon – 1-800-621-HOPE

In general, always have emergency numbers and if applicable, an order of protection handy. If at anytime you feel unsafe call 911, stop a police officer in the street, or go to the nearest police station.

Survivor Story

Ms. E and her 2 children came to Freedom House, a domestic violence shelter the beginning of November 2009 – just in time for the holidays.

Ms. E and her children were very upset when they found out that they could not spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with family. Ms. E knew, however, that her abuser would look for her at her mother's home making it an unsafe place.

We worked together to develop a holiday plan for Ms. E and her children. The weekend before Christmas she went to a family member's home that she rarely frequented. It was there that her family gathered for an early Christmas party.

The day of Christmas she spent at Freedom House with other residents who also could not be with their families. The residents gathered that day bringing food and music and sharing in a new found strength and resilience. It may not have been the traditional holiday celebration but it was a way to celebrate in a new, safe way.

Ms. E and her children missed their family but were grateful to be safe.

Cynthia Amodeo, LMHC is the Coordinator of "Generations of Freedom" the family services department at Barrier Free Living's Freedom House Emergency Shelter. She graduated Teacher's College, Columbia University with her Master of Education and Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology. Prior to Freedom House she worked with children and families impacted by the World Trade Center attack and children infected and affected with HIV/AIDS.

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