



## **TECHNOLOGY SAFETY FOR VIRTUAL CONFERENCES AND SERVICES**

**A TOOLKIT FOR SURVIVORS OF  
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

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## Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the landscape of community services in many ways. Many agencies and people have had to adapt to using technology to ensure the continuity of services, including counselling sessions, lawyer's appointments, and court appearances.

The Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, and other agencies providing services to survivors of violence, quickly adapted to the realities of COVID-19. Many family courts in Ontario have offered litigants the option to use technology to have their case heard by a judge. While some family courts are slowly reopening to in-person appearances, other courts remain closed or exclusively conduct proceedings virtually. Considering the increased use of technology involved in the delivery of essential support services such as court proceedings, we developed this toolkit for survivors of gender-based violence as a guide to the safe use of technology. The tips we have here are useful for overall technology use, and we have also included some additional resources.

**If you would like to support the Clinic as we continue to provide marginalized and racialized populations women who experience gender-based violence with modified services throughout COVID-19, please consider donating at [www.schliferclinic.com/donate-now](http://www.schliferclinic.com/donate-now).**

## 1. General Guidelines for Technology Safety

### 1.1 Considerations When Navigating Technology Use:

Preparing and participating in a virtual conference call may mean you are using technology more than before. Here are some general considerations around technology safety:

#### *Password Safety:*

- Do not tell anyone the passwords to any of your devices. For example, avoid entering your device passwords in front of anyone else to keep your password safe.
- Log off when leaving your device or account unattended. It only takes a few moments for someone to access it and steal or change your password. Once they have your password, they can go back later to check your activity.
- Use different passwords for each of your online accounts and devices. If one account gets compromised, it does not immediately put your other accounts at risk.
- Do not leave your passwords lying around on a post-it note or a notebook that others can access. To remember your passwords, use security software, such as LastPass, to save and keep your passwords safe.
- Change your passwords regularly. Avoid reusing a password you have used before, for at least one year.
- Create and use **strong** passwords. A strong password is easy to remember but hard to guess. Use at least eight characters that include a mix of lowercase and uppercase letters, numbers, and symbols. The more, the merrier!

*In case you are living with the abuser, avoid saving your passwords on any apps or websites that you often navigate. If you have your password saved, then even logging out of an app or website does not delete your saved password. It can be especially concerning if it is a banking app or social media app where you have pictures or personal information stored that the abuser could access.*

#### *Digital Footprint and Geolocation*

Your digital footprint is the trail of data you create when you use the Internet. It shows all the websites you visit, the emails you send, your social media, and much more. Your digital footprint includes "active" and "passive" activities.

Your "passive" digital footprint is the data trail you unintentionally leave online. For example, when you visit a website, the web server may log your Internet Protocol (IP) address, which identifies your Internet service provider and your approximate location. Even though your IP address does not include any personal information, it is still considered part of your digital footprint. It also includes your search history, which is saved by some search engines while you are logged in. Your "active" digital footprint is more intentional – it is the emails you send and receive, your social media posts, even the content on someone else's social media post that you "like" or "comment" on.

Everyone who uses the Internet has a digital footprint; however, it is advisable to think about the trail of data one leaves behind. If you put a picture or something in writing on the Internet, it is there forever. Always think twice about your online activity before you hit "send".

### *Cyber Abuse, Digital Stalking and Surveillance*

Cyber abuse is behaviour that uses technology to threaten, intimidate, harass, or humiliate another person. It can occur in many forms and through many platforms, such as social media, online chat and messaging services, text messages, and online message boards/forums. Examples of cyber abuse include encouraging destructive behaviour such as self-harm or suicide, repeatedly sending abusive messages to a person or their family, threatening violence to the person or others, posting personal information or intimate images without consent, or stalking a person online and hacking into their accounts.

An essential part of Internet and technology safety is being aware of the surveillance and other risks that arise when you do things online. Abusers, stalkers, and harassers now have an additional way to harm others. Fortunately, there are precautions you can take to protect yourself from harm. For example, you can prevent an abusive current or former partner from accessing your email or other online accounts by creating new accounts and/or frequently changing your passwords. If you have children, encourage them to do the same with their accounts. If you have social media accounts, adjust your privacy settings to make sure your content is only visible to people you want to see it.

Another thing to be aware of is "spyware." Spyware is a computer software program or hardware device that lets someone (such as an abuser) secretly monitor and gather information about your technology use. There are safety measures you can take if you are concerned that an abuser may use spyware to track your online activity:

- Install and enable a firewall,
- Install anti-virus protection and scan your computer regularly,
- Install anti-spyware programs.

If you suspect someone has already installed spyware to track you, the safest bet may be to get a new device altogether, if that option is available to you.

*What to do if you think you are being targeted by cyber abuse?*

- 1) **Resist the urge to respond:** Although easier said than done, do not retaliate to cyber abuse. The perpetrator may be trying to get a reaction, so you should not start a back and forth conversation.
- 2) **Save evidence:** Before deleting any offensive posts or messages, save screenshots or take pictures and keep a log of the abuse.
- 3) **Consider blocking and reporting:** If you feel safe doing this, you can block or report the abuser's behaviour on some social media platforms. You can also report the abusive behaviour to the police. If you think reporting to the police may escalate the situation, you should make sure that you mention your safety concerns to them.
- 4) **Seek help:** Being targeted, even virtually, can be a stressful and scary experience. Be sure to seek out supports. Tell someone and ask for help. Going to the police might be something you want to do, but there are also lots of other people you can talk to who can help.

### *Resources for Online Safety*

You can find more resources and detailed information at the links below:

- [How to Disable Geolocation in Browsers](#)
- [How to Clear your Browser History](#)
- [How to Create a Strong Password](#)
- [Cyber-safety Web Module](#)
- [Cybersecurity Resources by Age Group](#)
- [Spyware, Surveillance, and Safety for Survivors](#)
- [Digital Stalking: A Guide to Technology Risks for Victims](#)
- [Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic – Online Safety](#)

### 1.2 "Netiquette"<sup>1</sup> while attending virtual meetings

You may need to attend a virtual meeting with your lawyer or other associated individuals related to your case. Below are some general rules for respectful online behaviour, or "netiquette" (online etiquette).

**Consider your location:** An ideal location has good lighting, a stable desk-height surface, minimal background noise, and access to device charging. Avoid having a messy bed, open closet, piles of paper, or anything inappropriate in the background. Be mindful of what is visible, and if using Zoom video conferencing software, consider using a different, virtual background for your video call.

**Reduce background noise:** Close windows, turn off or mute electronics including cell phones, relocate pets, set boundaries with others who share the space with you, and avoid typing on your keyboard during meetings. You may also want to put yourself on mute when you are not speaking.

**Improve your lighting:** Improve video quality by ensuring there is a light source illuminating your face, and this is the brightest light source in the room. Try to avoid having a bright light or window behind you or consider closing the curtains.

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<sup>1</sup> This section was adapted from the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses – "10 tips for Virtual Meeting Etiquette" infographic published March 31, 2010, see <https://www.oaith.ca/news-media/covid-19.html>.

**Paying attention:** Most people are more productive when focused on one task. For professional video meetings, look and behave as you would for an in-person meeting. Arrive on time, make eye contact, do not distract from others who are speaking, and avoid eating. Also, be mindful of your body language. Even when you are not speaking, your body language can communicate inattentiveness or a lack of interest. Once you have joined with audio and video, it is polite to say hello to the other participants. If you must leave early, inform the others at the start of the meeting.

**Speak clearly and slowly:** When using a phone or microphone built into your laptop, computer, or phone, you do not need to speak louder than your average speaking volume. Slow down and say your words clearly to make sure everyone can hear you.

**Do not speak over other participants:** Remember, other participants can hear only one person at a time – this is especially true for virtual communication. If you want to say something, give the others a signal, such as the "raise hand" prompt, or quickly ask, "can I say something?" and wait for others to stop talking before you start.

**Do not rely on "mute " or turning your camera off:** When you connect, join with both video and audio on. Mute yourself if you have unavoidable background noises, if there are a lot of participants, or if you hear feedback when you are not speaking. Overuse of the muting and video off functions can convey a less authentic connection between participants or lead to the temptation to multitask. If you must be on mute or turn your camera off, most conference call platforms have a chat function where you can send a question or statement to everyone or to the host privately.

**Be prepared:** It is a good idea to test your camera, audio, and Internet connection as well as any meeting software/applications, before the meeting. You likely will not be able to *choose* the platform for your video call, so navigating it in advance to ensure you understand how to use it is helpful.

## 2. Guidelines for Virtual Family Court Appearances

Court appearances can be stressful and overwhelming, especially using technology. It is crucial to prepare in advance. Please see some tips/ guidelines below that can help prepare you for your virtual court appearances. All the tips listed above still apply, and here are some more, especially for a virtual Family Court proceeding.



Please note that you are not required to have a lawyer to bring a family case in the Ontario Court of Justice. However, you may find it helpful to get legal advice. The Ontario Court of Justice, created this resource if you want legal advice or to hire a lawyer and don't know how to find one, <https://www.ontariocourts.ca/ocj/covid-19/sfl-guide-family/>

## 2.1 Preparation before and after proceedings

Preparation before court appearances is essential. For virtual court appearances, it includes testing your technology, having a plan in case your Internet connection is disrupted, checking noise level, and background.

Have a plan for how you and your lawyer will communicate during the video proceedings. Will you have a signal for your lawyer if you want to stop the proceeding and tell them something? Keep in mind that some online platforms, like zoom links for a meeting, allow all parties to have access to the chats. These are essential questions to ask your lawyer before the actual court meeting starts.

When it comes to your virtual court appearances, preparation is key to fair outcomes. Keep in mind the following:

- **Videoconference or teleconference:** You might have the option to decide the type of virtual court appearance, either by video (videoconference) or only audio (teleconference). Most courts and judges will be respectful if a litigant wants to do a teleconference instead of a videoconference. Litigants may even be asked their preference for an upcoming court appearance. You might discuss with your lawyer the pros and cons of each option.
- **Review all relevant court documents:** The judge and opposite party will have access to all your documents filed in the court. It is important to review all documents before the appearance.
- **Discuss with your lawyer what issues the court will be dealing with:** Many virtual court proceedings are trying to focus on a limited number of issues. Discuss in detail with your lawyer the issues that will be discussed in your court appearance. Discuss what the other party will be saying, and outline for your lawyer what you are hoping the court will decide. You should also ask what your part in the proceeding will be. This preliminary discussion will help you know what to expect.
- **No breaks or time to consult with your lawyer during live virtual court appearances:** You might not have time to consult with your lawyer during a live virtual court appearance. Discuss potential scenarios and court outcomes with your lawyer in advance. Let them

know what you feel comfortable with and the situations you would not be willing to agree to, so they know how to react in case any of these unacceptable outcomes are proposed by the opposite party.

**Specific Courts and Judges may have specific rules.** Ask your lawyer, your Family Court Support Worker or the court staff who arrange your virtual court appearance if there are special rules for your proceeding.

## 2.2 Navigating interruptions from family or children

It can be unnerving to have an important video call take place in your home. If you have worked to make this a safe place physically and emotionally for yourself, having a court video proceeding there can be stressful and upsetting. Consider having a designated area for your virtual court appearance call, preferably where you can easily disconnect from possible moments of distress. Practice grounding techniques that will remind you how to stay calm. Remember that after the call, you can reclaim ownership of your space.

Have a plan for your children while attending the virtual court appearance. Children are not allowed in court because it can cause situations of emotional and psychological distress for them. Therefore, children should not be around you or hear your virtual court proceedings. Ideally, have a friend or a family member look after them, or arrange for them to watch their favorite movie, games, or do planned activities while you are on your call. At a minimum, they should be in a different room and know not to interrupt until your call is over. Prepare the children in advance by reassuring them with consistent messages leading up to the day of your virtual court appearance.

## 2.3 Family Court Support Program and Language Interpreters

It is essential to know that when navigating your virtual court appearance, you are not alone. In addition to your lawyer, you can also have access to Clinic supports to help you through the process.

The [Family Court Support Worker](#) (FCSW) program at the Clinic provides direct assistance to survivors of gender-based violence who are participating in court processes. They can help provide information about the court process, help with preparation, assist with safety planning, and even accompany you to the court proceeding where appropriate. For virtual or in-person court accompaniment, you must inform your lawyer and court staff so proper arrangements can be made. In the case of an in-person court appearance, keep in mind that due to Covid-19 circumstances, each courthouse (and courtroom) has limited capacity. The courts will try to

ensure they are scheduling the matter at a time when there is enough capacity for a support person to attend. If you need a court support worker to attend the matter with you, you must communicate this to the court in advance.

The Family court support program is a province-wide service to survivors of violence, and in case your court appearance is not in Toronto, other agencies can also help you with [Family Court Support in your region](#).

If English is not your first language, and you feel you may require support to understand what is happening, the Clinic can provide you with free spoken [language interpretation or sign language interpretation](#). The interpreters are professionally trained and have specialized knowledge of violence against women issues, making them well-equipped to support you through the process.

## 2.4 Self-Care Before and After Virtual Court Appearances

Even if you do your best to prepare, the unexpected can happen. A court appearance can be stressful and affect your well-being, so it is crucial to have a before and after self-care plan. Your Family Court Support Worker can also help with this.

Self-care strategies can make a big difference in how you feel. Getting a good night's sleep before the appearance, making sure you are eating properly, and taking breaks while preparing for your appearance can help you cope in advance. Your plan can include anything healthy that will make you feel stronger and achieve the mindset needed to participate well in the court appearance.

Coping strategies immediately following the appearance could include talking to someone about how it went, meditating, taking a walk, or making yourself a nice meal.<sup>2</sup> Self-care is highly individualized, so what works for someone else may not work for you.

**You can find more resources about self-care in the links below:**

- [Self-care wheel](#)
- [29 Self-care techniques](#)
- [RAIN: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture](#)

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<sup>2</sup> See this resource from Homewood Health for more about how to develop a self-care plan:  
<https://www.undp.org/content/dam/unct/yemen/docs/unct-ye-dss-doc-building-self-care-toolkit-en.pdf>.

**Covid-19 Self-care resources:**

- [Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty](#)
- [Tolerance for Uncertainty: A COVID- 19 Workbook A guide to accept your feelings, tolerate distress and thrive](#)

## 2.5 Safety Planning

A safety plan is a practical plan that can help you avoid dangerous situations. A safety plan typically include detailed steps about how to keep safe. You may need a safety plan to use technology, to go to work, or for an access exchange visit. Safety plans are personalized according to your current situation, whether you are living with an abusive partner or not. Keep in mind that you might need to change, adapt, or create a new safety plan after a family court order or agreement. If you have immediate concerns for your safety, call 911 or the [Assaulted Women's Helpline](#). If you are concerned for your safety or your children's safety, consult your lawyer about options for protection orders and appropriate access orders. If you need assistance creating a safety plan, contact the [Barbra Schlifer Clinic](#).

**You can also find below safety-planning resources links:**

- [My plan - Canada](#)
- [Creating a Safety Plan \(BG Government\)](#)
- [Safety Planning and Domestic Violence](#)
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline – Path to Safety](#)
- [Creating a Safely Plan \(Peel Region in 13 different Languages\)](#)