



Podcast Transcript **March 2024: Coping in Communal Living Environment**

Presented by Aspen, Survivor Advocate and Juno, Shelter Manager

ASPEN: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's CONVO, a podcast hub that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members and service providers alike, formerly known as Wednesday Workshop. CONVO stands for Creating Opportunities for Non-Violent Outcomes, and we invite you to learn more about this initiative on Instagram at [@convo_twc](https://www.instagram.com/convo_twc).

The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on a healing topic.

Today, our topic is Coping In Communal Living Environments. We are your hosts: my name is Aspen, and I am a Survivor Advocate here with The Women's Center.

JUNO: My name is Juno, and my pronouns are they/them/theirs. I'm the Shelter Manager at TWC. In starting this conversation, we wanted to go over some quick reminders. Each communal living setting—whether it's a shelter, transitional living, dorms, or even living with family members or roommates—is going to be different, and we understand that we can't speak to every single dynamic that may take place in your housing journey. We will be speaking about our shelter environment and program expectations.

You know your situation best, and if any of our suggestions do not fall in line with your housing's policies or rules or don't feel right, don't try them. If it is safe to do so, talk to the staff in your program, or those you are staying with about safe options to reduce stress within your housing. You are always welcome to contact our hotline as well to discuss strategies that fit your situation. It's important that you know that you deserve to feel supported and safe in your living environment.

ASPEN: Absolutely true. Let's get started with defining what communal living is, and how we support survivors who are navigating leaving their homes. Communal living is a type of housing environment where individuals and families may live together, temporarily or permanently, with possible shared amenities such as living areas and food. Like Juno mentioned, this could look like shelters, group homes, rooming houses, residential treatment, dorms, or even staying with family or friends.

At The Women's Center, our mission here is Safety, Shelter, Support. We immediately provide crisis intervention, help determine a plan for safety, and ensure that all basic needs are met when somebody first walks into our doors seeking help. We know that survivors often need so much more than just a physically safe place to stay and that they also need to work through some of the harmful effects of the relationship they are leaving—whether it be domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, or child abuse.

For individuals and families who have an urgent safety concern because of domestic abuse, SV or HT and are in need of emergency housing, our shelter provides safe, short-term housing, and support. While in our shelter, we continue to support survivors through whatever their next steps may look like, including finding housing, navigating the legal system, and job searching, to give a few examples. Our shelter is set up to be a shared living space. This includes bedrooms, bathroom, kitchen, and living room space. There is always a chance when coming into our shelter that survivors will be sharing their bedroom with other residents; however, families are always in the same room. Caregivers are never separated from their children. Each bathroom is shared by two bedrooms, which means that while not private for every individual, residents are only sharing that space with a handful of other residents, not the entire shelter.

Examples of ways we try to make it easier while staying in shelter are that all of your basic needs are provided, there is someone to talk to 24 hours a day, and there are Advocates trained to support you and your children in lots of different ways. We are here to make it easier to leave a really hard or unsafe situation.

It can feel really intimidating to move into a communal living environment, whether it's your first time or if you've had prior experience in these types of settings. It's an unfamiliar environment; you're meeting new people, and ultimately, you are carrying out your daily tasks and coping with all of this change while also in crisis and needing to plan for the next steps for yourself or your family. Please keep in mind/ remember that our Advocates are here to support you and help navigate these transitions. It can be a lot; if you're in a situation like this, give yourself some credit. You are doing so much and doing your best to make it through.

Regardless of your situation, if you are going through some of these things and there isn't a safe person to talk to about all of this in your space, our Hotline is available 24/7 at 262.542.3828.

JUNO: If you have made the decision to leave your current home due to safety concerns and the safest option now involves communal living, one thing to be aware of is the difference between house rules and family rules. There may be pre-established rules in your new communal living setting that might differ from your previous home. You may be in a living environment that doesn't always allow for all of the routines and schedules that you're used to. Talk with the program Advocates or those you're staying with to brainstorm ways to get your needs met within the established guidelines of the program.

For example, if you're used to having Family Movie Night, and you're used to watching movies till 10 pm but the TV area closes at 8:30, you could talk to the staff to see if there is the possibility of an exception/time extension or if you could use that space at a different time so your family can still have that routine without conflicting with the program rules.

Each living environment is different and may not be exactly what you are used to or would choose, that is okay. You are doing your best to keep yourself and your family safe. Remember that you are prioritizing you and your families safety and that you are doing hard things while healing!

ASPEN: Supports can also be a huge part of goal-setting. When you're just starting out, it is more than okay to start small. This may look like setting one goal a day—whether that's enrolling your children in a nearby school, calling one landlord about an application, filling out one job application. The Advocates you are working with can help you make a plan that is realistic and break those big things down into smaller steps. Give yourself credit for all of the things you are already doing, like starting the conversation about your situation, even getting out of bed when it feels really hard, These can be huge steps that take a lot of courage, and that is something to be proud of.

As you start to get into that routine of small, sustainable goals and feeling a bit more comfortable with it, you can start setting some long-term goals. Getting into the habit of goal setting can help support your future. Something that we really like to talk about here is the acronym “SMART” goals, which stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. We will include a resource on SMART goals and some templates for you to start some of your own.

So, an example of this is in six months, we have X amount of money saved. (Now, of course, insert X with the amount of money that you would like to have saved in that six-month period.) That's quite specific. You're able to measure it since you have that amount of money, you know you've achieved that goal. You have selected an amount that feels attainable for you, it's relevant to the things you need, and it's time-bound as it's within those six months.

It's also important to do check-ins with yourself to identify what you've done to work towards those goals and what you might still need to do to accomplish them. It is more than okay to reassess goals and reframe them; it's something we all do all the time, it's completely normal, and you haven't failed by having to adjust that goal. We don't always have control over every single circumstance that may affect us in achieving our goals. For example, we can't control loss of childcare, being laid off from work, apartments not being available for your budget, facing discrimination or other systemic barriers, and so on. So yes, all of this is to say that our goals can be fluid, but once we start identifying them, we have that framework to work towards what we need for the future.

JUNO: This time of transition can also be an opportunity for us to note some positives, that we are setting new goals for ourselves, for our families and for the future. Rather than thinking of it as “I have so many things to do and so many things to accomplish,” try reframing it as that you have the time to accomplish these things, and the supportive systems around you can help you reach these goals.

Take the time to honor the change. You know, if your housing situation changed, if you're going from independent living to living with others, that's a huge shift, especially if you have children with you. Take time to honor those feelings and be gentle with yourself, and know that you are still doing the best you can. It's important when this happens to reflect on the situation and find ways, big or small, to move forward. For example, see what kind of schedule and routine you can create to give yourself and your family a sense of normalcy. It can start super small as setting times to eat meals or setting an alarm for waking up in the morning, and having a consistent bedtime. Even if you're not sure what each day is going to bring, doing this sets the framework so that the rest of your day can fall into place. Routine can also look like allowing for extra downtime to recharge and take care of your emotional needs, trying not to overload your schedule with filling out applications every single day, and doing all of these things and trying to get it all done at once. This can get overwhelming fast, and that's not sustainable for a regular routine and schedule. By creating a routine when you're in a different living environment, you're creating stability for yourself and your family.

Surviving abuse means that you've survived somebody else trying to take power away from you. Again, creating routines is an easy way to gain back some sense of control and normalcy and making decisions, and to help yourself feel empowered by your choices. It may feel daunting at first, but reaching out to resources and getting support is important; that's your first step in healing.

ASPEN: All this is to say, make time for that self-care. It's okay if it looks different from what you would normally do while in your own independent living, but utilizing the resources that you do have access to is key. This might look like journaling, creating art, or reading books and articles that are available to you. This might look like participating

in house meetings and groups to connect with others and break out from the past isolation that you may have experienced. This might also look like taking a walk to get some fresh air and practicing grounding.

I want to provide the reminder that self-care doesn't have to be this lavish, luxurious thing, and it's important to consider things like drinking water, getting out of bed, and having a good cry as self-care; those things that help us function.

Self-care is not just a one-size-fits-all; each situation is going to be different, and something that worked for you before may not bring you the same joy or help you relax as much as it did before. Finding that thing that helps you stay in the moment and stay grounded is important to look for. It's okay to try different things out even if you don't think it'll work, as you may be surprised by the outcome. It's also important to talk to somebody—whether it's a housemate, an advocate, or a friend—because they may have some more helpful ideas too that you may not have thought of.

JUNO: Along that vein, it is so important to recognize the strength that it took you to leave the abuse and seek shelter was tremendous. I think when you're coming out of an abusive situation, it's understandable that you might be overwhelmed by many things, but try to put some focus on the strength that you have and be proud of yourself and how you have made hard decisions and done really challenging things. By doing this, you have started to undo the cycle of abuse. You're also recognizing your own need for safety and support. Also, if you have kids, you are showing your children that they deserve to be safe.

While your time in communal living is temporary, you'll have acquired tools that can help you in the future. It is not a failure if you need to return to a shelter or communal housing; you have learned about the resources that can help you and how to advocate for your needs. Even after your time within a program has ended, many programs (like ours) will offer continued support to help you with your goals. You don't have to do this alone.

I think that is one of the biggest points to highlight here is that you do not have to do this alone. There are people who believe in you and want to support and help you. You are breaking the cycle of abuse, you are recognizing your needs and acting on them, and that is such an important thing, and that is a huge positive.

ASPEN: Thank you so much for joining us on this episode. Stay tuned to our website for future episodes, and feel free to take a look at our past episodes, too. The Women's Center focuses our work on partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth.

We believe that it is important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we are also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we are not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement; we all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org, and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking Resources, then Podcasts on our website.

If you're in the Greater Milwaukee area, we also host an in-person Wednesday Workshop on the second and fourth Wednesdays of every month. That is by pre-registration only, so please call the Hotline and ask to speak with one of us for more information.

Thank you again for listening, and be well.