

Guide to Risk Assessment and Safety Planning for Victims of Family
Violence

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Victims of Family Violence



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Note: While both men and women can be victims and perpetrators of family violence, it is recognized that those most severely impacted by family violence are women. Family violence in this guide refers to intimate partner violence.

The information contained in this Guide is to help social workers support victims of family violence. Nevertheless, it can be used by any frontline worker helping victimized women. In communities without shelters or in cases where the local shelter is full or is an unsafe option the local Health and Social Services Authority can provide financial assistance to victims of family violence to travel with their dependants to the nearest place of safety. Return travel to their home community is guaranteed and women may return to their home community at any time. The risk assessment and safety planning tools in this Guide are intended to help social workers decide when a victim needs to be moved, to understand the risk she may face if she stays in her community, and to plan for her ongoing safety. They can also help with case planning and with after care when she returns from her stay at a shelter.

In your work with women who have been victims of violence please remember to:

- Never minimize a woman's safety situation
- Be aware of resources for women in your own community
- Make contact and develop cooperative relationships with other women's advocates in your community
- Respect a woman's choice – by being abused she has lost power and control, you can help her regain her own "empowerment" by respecting her choices
- Listen for all of the ways she resists the violence and tries to protect herself and her children
- Respect and support women who may leave a relationship many times before they are out of the relationship permanently

What is Family Violence?

Family violence is an abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency. Family violence includes many different forms of abuse, mistreatment or neglect that adults or children may experience in their intimate, kinship or dependent relationships.



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Family Violence is:

- **Deliberate:** How we behave is a choice. Persons who choose to use violence do so on purpose and are in control of their behaviour. Abuse is not an 'accident' and abuse cannot be blamed on things like alcohol or anger. People who use violence expect their victims to resist and take steps to counter this resistance.
- **Unilateral:** The abuser is the only one committing abuse; the victim has no control over the abuser's behaviour. Abuse is not an 'argument' or "fight" where both people are equally responsible. Abuse involves the actions of one person against the will and well-being of another.
- **Resisted:** The victim always resists violence, whether through thoughts, plans, words or actions. Often it is not safe for victims to overtly resist so they often disguise their resistance. Regardless of whether the resistance is successful in reducing, preventing or stopping the abuse/violence victims are always resisting.

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What causes Family Violence?

Violence is a learned behaviour; abusers use violence because they have learned that it is an effective means to get what they want. Family violence is not caused by anger, addiction, past victimization, losing one's culture or family breakdown.

Many abusers will blame others for their violent behaviour, even the victim. Some common excuses for using violence are:

- She/he made me do it
- I just blew up, I was out of control
- I was drunk, I just blacked out
- I was angry

None of these are the true reason behind family violence. Abusers make the choice to be violent, often long before an actual incident of abuse. Alcohol and drugs do not cause violence. People are ultimately responsible for their own use of abuse and violence. Although alcohol and drugs may

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make the situation worse or reduce inhibitions, they are not the root cause of family violence. Evidence shows that even people who use violence are also able to choose non-violence in many aspects of their lives. This is good news because if people can choose to be violent then they can also choose to be non-violent.

Victims Resist Violence

Whenever people are treated badly they resist (Wade, 1997). When people are being abused, they use a variety of strategies to try to reduce, prevent or stop the abuse and to maintain their dignity and their self-respect. Crying, trying to stop or prevent violence, feeling shame, disrespect, or oppression and going somewhere in their minds are just a few of the strategies that victims have used to resist violence perpetrated against them. These acts of resistance may not be obvious or understood by people around the victim, the ways that a woman chooses to resist violence may not decrease the incidence of violence or be moral or legal. Resistance methods are different for every victim and often very creative; they are acts that are meant to restore the victim's dignity and control in an abusive relationship. We also now know that abusers expect and predict the victim's resistance, and that they will try to prevent the victim from resisting or prevent future resistance to further control them.



Screening for Family Violence

In order to intervene or assist in any manner, you must first be aware that spousal assault is an issue. At this point in time it is important to note that anyone can be a victim of spousal violence, so it is sometimes not possible to know if abuse is present simply by looking at a person. A quick and simple tool is the **SAFE** tool¹:

S: How would she describe her spousal/intimate relationship?

A: What happens when she and her partner argue?

F: Do fights result in her being hit, shoved or hurt?

E: Does she have an emergency plan?

This tool can be quickly memorized and utilized. The exact wording of the questions is not important as long as there are questions asked that bring about the same information, in the same order as presented. This tool can be easily worked into a general conversation with women. If there is no abuse or concerning behavior disclosed during the first three questions, there is no need to ask the final question. **It is important to never ask these questions unless the woman is alone with you.** If her partner refuses to let her see you alone, consider that a warning sign that abuse might be present. You can get creative in finding a way to speak to her alone.

It might be necessary to use this tool with the same woman on more than one occasion, before she discloses abuse. Women have many reasons to not disclose, with fear being a prominent reason. Some may not be aware of the support systems and resources that are available to help them, or if they are aware, may not trust in their effectiveness. Many may hope their partner will change. If you suspect abuse is present, but the woman does not trust you enough to disclose, it is important to let them know that you are there for them whenever they are ready to talk.

Risk Assessment

The goal of **risk assessment** with victims of family violence is to help them accurately view their situation so they are in a position to make informed decisions about what sort of actions they need to take to increase their level of safety and that of any children they may have.

It is important to note that even the best ways of doing risk assessments have limitations. There is no sort of risk assessment method that can predict if/when the next violent incident will occur or what sort of harm will happen as a result of that incident. That is because risk assessment tools are not designed to predict this sort of specific information. There is no way to predict exactly when a client will be harmed again or how she will be harmed. ALL violence is dangerous and a low score for risk of homicide should not necessarily mean that a woman will be denied travel support to the nearest shelter. The usefulness of doing a risk assessment lies in its ability to inform the safety planning that you do with your client and in communicating with other agencies to help clients

¹ Created by the Lakeshore Area Multi-Service Project (LAMP) and Woman's Habitat with funding from the Ontario Ministry of Health

access the services they need.

How to do a Risk Assessment

Once you have some indication that the person you are working with is being abused by her partner, you can move on to talk to her about her level of risk. As you do this it is important to realize that there really are no magic wands or magical tools that will help you predict whether or not a person will be abused again by their partner or if she will be murdered. All risk assessment tools are limited in their ability to predict what will happen because human behaviour is often too complicated and unpredictable to be captured by any sort of questionnaire.

Each man, woman and relationship is unique, so in order to do the best risk assessment you can do it is important to include three things in your assessment:

- 1) The client's own assessment of her level of risk that is based on her experiences in her relationship.
- 2) Your completion of a structured risk assessment tool that is based on questions that come from research on the factors that are related to level of risk in family violence.
- 3) Your own intuition and assessment of the client's situation that is based on all the information she has shared with you about herself and her partner, and your experience with clients in similar situations.

The Client's Own Assessment of Risk

Generally speaking, victims of violence can more accurately predict whether or not they will be abused again by their partner or if they have reason to fear for their lives. However, in order for them to tell you about what they perceive as their level of risk, they must first trust the relationship they have formed with you and that you will not use that information against them in any way.

Prior to doing your own formal assessment of risk, you should always explain what risk assessment is to a client in a way that they can understand and ask them what they think their level of risk is. To do this you might say something like:

“A part of the way we can support you is by helping you find ways to increase your level of safety when you are in your own home or with your partner. A big part of knowing how to increase your safety is to first figure out whether or not you are at risk of being abused again or of being seriously harmed by your partner. Are you interested in talking about this with me?”

If so, you could then go on to ask the following sort of questions to help a client talk about what her level of risk is:

“What was the first, worst, and most recent incident of abuse?”

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“Are there any warning signs that you watch for that will let you know he is going to be abusive? If so, what are they?”

“How often is he abusive to you?”

“Has he ever promised to stop abusing you in the past, but then doesn’t keep this promise?”

The reason for asking these sorts of questions is to help your client move past any minimization she may do of the abuse she is experiencing, which would negatively impact her ability to accurately predict her level of risk.

Then you could ask the following more direct questions of what she thinks her level of risk is:

“Do you think that if you returned to him right now, he would abuse you again in the future? Why or why not?”

“Do you think that he would ever kill you? Why or why not?”

Your client’s answers to these questions are very important. Even if she is not correct about her level of risk, having this sort of discussion with her will give you important information that you need in order to do your own risk assessment. This discussion will also alert you to the need to have more discussion and get more information about her situation if she is indicating that she is at a high risk of harm but your assessment gives you different results. If your assessment of risk and her assessment differs greatly, there is probably a good chance that there is some information that you do not have. You should always trust your client’s intuition about her level of risk – especially if she indicates that she is at a high risk. Victims of family violence are more likely to underestimate their risk than to overestimate when it comes to being seriously harmed by their partners. It is also useful to know how she views her level of risk so that you can anticipate the type of reaction she may have to your assessment of her level of risk.

Structured Risk Assessment

There are a number of structured risk assessment tools that are used by different professionals such as social workers, RCMP members, and shelter workers in order to assess the level of risk for each client. Different risk assessment tools measure different things so it is very important that you really understand whatever risk assessment tool it is that you are using before you use it with any clients. Many of these tools require that the person who is using them is specially trained to both use the tool and interpret the results. Most of the tools have questions that require you to ‘score’ the answers so that any person doing the risk assessment would end up with the same result. This takes some of the ‘guess-work’ out of doing a risk assessment and makes it so that it does not matter what other training the professional may have. As long as they are trained to use the risk assessment tool, all professionals should be able to come up with the same level of risk if they were working with the same client and situation.

Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA)

The Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA)² is an **actuarial risk assessment** that calculates whether a man who assaulted his female partner, will assault her again in the future and how the man's risk compares with that of other known wife assaulters. This is calculated based on 13 items:

1. Prior domestic incident
2. Prior non-domestic incident
3. Prior prison sentence of 30 days or more
4. Breach of a conditional release
5. Threat to harm or kill
6. Confinement
7. Victim concern
8. More than one child
9. Victim has a child from previous partner
10. Violence against others
11. Substance abuse
12. Assault when victim is pregnant
13. Barriers to victim support

An actuarial risk assessment is a decision making tool that allows us to minimize the degree to which we make decisions based solely on intuition or opinion. Instead, this type of tool allows us to make decisions based on verifiable facts. This means that in the development of the ODARA researchers only added items (predictors) to the risk assessment tool when they were tested and proven to improve the prediction. For example, there has been long held belief amongst frontline workers that unemployment and threats of suicide by the abuser increase a women's risk. However, when the developers of the ODARA added these predictors to the risk assessment the improvements to prediction were not statistically significant meaning that they did not improve the tool's ability to accurately make a prediction.

The ODARA is very simple to use and can be used by a wide range of service providers including: shelter workers, victim services workers, RCMP officers, crown attorneys, health care professionals and social workers. The ODARA can be used in safety planning with women **and** can be used during bail hearings and court process to help inform decisions. The use of such a tool allows service providers from a wide variety of backgrounds to share a common language when talking about risk.

In 2009-2010 the Yellowknife Interagency Family Violence Protocol Committee began working towards the implementation of this tool. The RCMP 'G' Division who is a member of the Protocol

² Hilton, N.Z., Harris, G.T., & Rice, M.E. (2010). Risk assessment for domestically violent men: Tools for criminal justice, offender intervention, and victim services. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Committee agreed to implement the use of this tool not only in Yellowknife but in all NWT detachments. It is hoped that such a tool will help all service providers to make more consistent and informed decisions about the level of intervention necessary.

ODARA Training

If you are interested in accessing more information about the ODARA or how to access training on how to use the ODARA please contact the Department of Health and Social Services Family Violence Consultant by emailing fvp@gov.nt.ca

Your Own Intuition and Experience

The final piece of the risk assessment to consider is your own personal experiences, beliefs and attitudes as well as your professional judgement of the client's situation. While our own intuition is important and very useful we need to be careful in how they determine our assessment of risk. For example our attitudes, experiences and beliefs can sometimes cloud our judgement.

Similarly, a client may minimize the abuse they are experiencing or may not have information about her partner's criminal record. That is why using a verifiable tool can help guide our assessments and standardize our response to risk.

Communicating Risk

Once you have completed your risk assessment which considers all three of the above components, it is important to communicate about risk with your client. This conversation might be difficult to have, especially if you think she is at a greater risk of being seriously harmed than she thinks she is. Whenever you are talking to her about how her level of risk it is important to be clear about the following points:

- Nobody, including her, can predict exactly what will happen in the future.
- It is not possible to know what the abusive person will do or when he will do it.
- A risk assessment tool is based on research that is done in other relationships that may be more or less similar to her relationship.
- Whenever a woman has been a victim of violence at the hands of her abusive partner she is at a greater risk of experiencing violence again in the future.
- Risk *does not* mean 'will happen' – risk means that it could happen. Higher risk means something is more likely to happen, whereas lower risk means it is less likely to happen.
- Her level of risk is also indicative of her children's level of risk – if she is at a high risk of being harmed, her children are at a high risk of being exposed to the violence and being harmed as well. For more information see Module 9.1 of the Supporting Northern Women – A Northwest Territories Family Violence Shelter Worker Training Program for more information:

http://www.hlthss.gov.nt.ca/pdf/manuals/2010/supporting_northern_women_a_nwt_family_violence_shelter_worker_training_program.pdf.

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- Even if she scores a low score on the ODARA, it does not mean that she should not worry about her safety.
- Even if she decides to leave the relationship it does not mean that she does not need to worry about her safety.

Sometimes the results of a structured risk assessment tool can be helpful in getting women connected to the appropriate services. Using the same risk assessment tool within a community helps build understanding about risk, coordinate responses and allocate scarce resources to those at greatest risk of harm. Although you should never discuss the risk level of a client with anyone without her permission to do so, it is possible that having her permission to share her level of risk might make it easier for her to access certain services. Whenever you do have her permission to discuss her level of risk with other service providers, it is important that you are also clear about what type of risk you are discussing and the implications of 'risk' as pointed out above because the other service provider may have a limited knowledge of what risk assessment actually means.

There may also be times when you do not have the time to complete an entire risk assessment that is based on the three components discussed here. This could be because the client is only at the shelter for a short time or because you are trying to help her access travel to the shelter and you need 'proof' that she is at a high risk of being seriously harmed. In situations like this it is okay for you to use a structured assessment tool such as the ODARA. However, you need to remember that this assessment is only looking at the risk of physical re-assault and is one piece of a larger concept of risk assessment.

Whenever you complete any risk assessment, you must clearly document this assessment in your client's file. In addition to recording that the risk assessment has been completed you should document:

- The reasons why you assessed her to be at a certain level of risk
- The type of risk you assessed (such as future abuse, homicide, etc.)
- The discussion you had with her about her level of risk

Tips For Safety Planning

- **Risk Assessments can help inform the development of Safety Plans.**
- **Safety Plans do not make the violence stop.**
- **Victims always resist.**

Victims are not responsible for their abusive partners' behaviour, he makes his own decisions about how to behave, and only he is responsible for his violence/abusive behaviour.

There are number of different things you can discuss with women whenever you are helping them improve their plans for trying to stay as safe as possible. While there are some potential topics listed here for you to review, it is important to make sure that the safety planning you do with clients is based on a discussion and **not** on completing a checklist of any type. What this means is that you need to listen carefully to what a client is telling you in order to figure out how she can best

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improve her level of safety. Women living with abusive partners do many things on a daily basis to keep themselves and/or their children as safe as possible. Engaging them in a discussion about the ways that they are already resisting the violence can be a great place to start discussions about safety planning. Any forms or checklists about safety planning that you use should only be used to guide your discussion.

It is important that any safety planning you do is based on a discussion and not the completion of a check list.

- *REALLY listen to what she is saying*
- *If you focus on what you 'should' cover the strategies are not likely to be effective and the client is less likely to feel like it is her plan.*

'Predicting' Violence

One way that women protect themselves is by learning to watch their partner's behaviour for signs that he will behave violently. Helping her identify some of these signs is a good place to start when planning for safety.

Potential Questions:

- What are his signs that he is going to choose to abuse you?
- How does his body language let you sense danger?
- Is there anything he always says or does before he chooses to hurt you?
- When you sense that he is going to be violent, do you think you would usually have enough time to leave and go to a safe place? Or is his behaviour too unpredictable?
- When you sense he is going to be violent, what do you think is the safest thing for you to do?

Safety Planning

The tools and strategies that are the most helpful to each client will depend on the type of abuse she experiences. Many women will not refer to the things they do to keep herself safe as a safety plan. Instead, ask her about what she does to keep herself and her children safe. Help her build on the things she is already doing, she is an expert about her own situation and will know what strategies will work best for her.

Some areas that might be important to cover with your clients that will encourage them to think about strategies that might be helpful are:

- **What sorts of things do you do right now when you are being abused? Where do you go? What do you say to yourself? What do you say to him?
What exactly do you do when he ...?**
- **Have you ever tried to do something to protect yourself, but you found that the violence was worse when you did this? What was it? Why do you think this happened?**

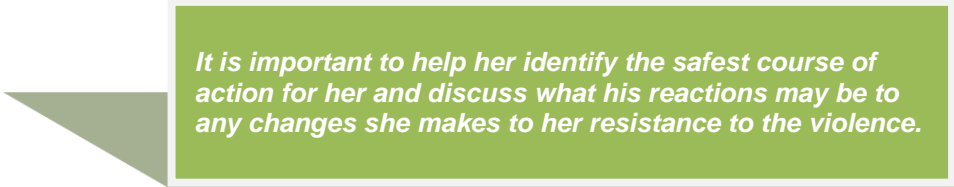
- **How easy is it for you to leave your house quickly at this time? What gets in your way when you try to leave?**
- **Is there anything you can do that will make it easier for you if you have to leave the house quickly?**
- **Are there areas in your home that are safer than others (for instance, rooms with exit doors, windows, or a phone to call for help)? Can you get to these areas quickly if you need to?**
- **When he is physically abusing you, what parts of your body are most important to protect? How can you try to protect these parts?**
- **Are there times when you know he is going to be away from the home or too busy to notice if you leave the home to find safety somewhere else?**
- **Is there a safe place in the community where you could go if you wanted to?**
- **Is there something you could do or say to your children so they would know to get to a safe place as soon as possible?**
- **Is there something you could do or say to someone else that you trust to let them know you need help?** For instance, if she is being abused and her friend calls she could say something like “I have to spend the whole day doing laundry” to let her friend know that she needs help. This is something that the abuser would probably not think of as being a cry for help.
- **How could you and your children practice the things you do to improve your safety so that you don’t even need to think about what you are going to do?**
- **Who can be a part of your safety plan so that they can try to get help for you if you are ever in a situation where you cannot ask for help for yourself.** For example, in one situation a woman involved the school in her safety plan because the children were rarely absent, unless her abuser prevented her and the children from leaving. Whenever the children were absent, they would call her to ask about the absence and if there was any indication that he was in the house they would then call the police.
- **What role do you think we (professional support) can play in your safety plan?**
- **Is it possible for you to keep some extra cash hidden somewhere so that you would always have some money if you needed to suddenly leave your home?**

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- **Do you think you will ever be interested in involving the police to charge him for abusing you? If so, is it possible to keep track of the violence to make it easier to charge him?**

Whenever you are helping her find things to do to improve her safety you should ask the following sort of question to help you both assess whether or not that specific strategy would be effective for her:

“If you what do you think his reaction would be?”



It is important to help her identify the safest course of action for her and discuss what his reactions may be to any changes she makes to her resistance to the violence.

Please refer to the document entitled Information on ***Safety Planning FOR WOMEN*** for a “hand-out” that can be used with clients as a draft guide. It is important to emphasize that she **does not** have control over her partner’s violence. She does, however, have choices about **how** to respond and how she may get herself and her children to safety.

Contact information for the NWT Family Violence Shelters

Hay River Family Support Centre

1-867-874-6626 (collect)

Sutherland House – Fort Smith

Toll Free: 1-877-872-5925

Inuvik Transition House

1-867-777-3877 (collect)

Aimayunga Women and Emergency Foster Care Shelter - Tuktoyaktuk

1-867-977-2000 (collect)

Alison McAteer House – Yellowknife

Toll Free: 1-866-223-7775

Phone: 867-873-8257

Alison McAteer House also provides assistance for victims who want to apply for an Emergency Protection Order (EPO).

Emergency Protection Orders

24 hour access to an emergency order that will help keep you and your family safe from an abuser. Toll Free: 1-866-223-7775

Phone: 867-873-8257 or call your local RCMP detachment

Legal Aid

Visit the Department of Justice website for a list of lawyers who provide Legal Aid services to the public:

http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/legalaid/LegalAid_lawyers.shtml

Victim Services

Visit the Department of Justice website for victim services contact information in your region.

http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/VictimServices/VictimServices_Contact.shtml

NWT Help Line

The NWT Help Line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

1-800-661-0844