

# **Empowerment Through Safety Planning<sup>1</sup>**

Breaking down the barriers faced by domestic violence victims

## **What is Domestic Violence?**

As defined by the Family Violence Prevention Fund, domestic or intimate partner violence is a pattern of purposeful coercive behaviors that may include:

- inflicted physical injury
- psychological abuse
- sexual assault
- progressive social isolation
- stalking
- deprivation
- intimidation and threats

These behaviors are perpetrated by someone who is, was or wishes to be involved in an intimate or dating relationship with an adult or adolescent victim and are aimed at establishing control of one partner over the other. Domestic violence does not discriminate with regard to age, gender, race, income, or sexual orientation.

## **What is the Empowerment Model?**

The empowerment model is based on the simple idea that people are capable of making the best decisions for their life and will learn their own strength given the option to do so. It is used by most domestic violence advocates and emphasizes the following:

- Respect for victims/survivors
- Active listening and validation
- Informed decision-making and goal-setting
- High involvement in cases
- Self-sufficiency, self-discovery and self-worth

It is not:

- Dictating to the client what is in their best interests
- Doing a client's work for them

**Point to ponder:** *Why is this approach important to a survivor of domestic violence?*

**[Possible Answer:** As mentioned above, a survivor of domestic violence is often severely restricted from the ability to run their own life. The empowerment model simply facilitates this missing ownership of one's decisions and self-worth, and helps to bring real lasting change and safety to survivors and their children.]

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<sup>1</sup> From Jill Davies' 'Safety Planning With Battered Women' and a training by Kathy Jones of A Safe Place, in NH.

## **What is Safety Planning and how do we use the Empowerment model with it?**

Safety Planning is basically any effort made by or with a survivor of domestic violence to reduce or eliminate risk to danger.

Much like empowerment, safety planning:

- Is an ongoing and fluid process, not a single event.
- Has a goal is to provide the opportunity to live a life free from abuse.
- Strives to understand and incorporate the victim's perspective and responses to their partner's coercive control.
- Involves a constant assessment of risks and barriers presented to the victim and seeks to reduce or eliminate them.
- Positively affects and ensures safety not only for the victim, but for people involved in their life as well (**Safety for non-offending parent = safety for children, relatives, pets etc.**)

*Since anyone can be a victim of domestic violence, a victim's experience of abuse is as variable as individual people are! This makes the empowerment model's approach crucial for the process of safety planning.*

### **Understanding a Survivor's Perspective**

Understanding a survivor's perspective is the first step towards safety. The process therefore cannot stop at the question, "Should I stay or should I go?" because *leaving does not necessarily reduce any threat to the victim, nor does staying necessarily mean an acceptance of the violence.* If a woman does want to 'leave' the relationship, this is a process, not an event. Staying in a relationship is also a process. The reason why some victims may remain in an abusive relationship will be unique to each woman. In general, victims remain if leaving will make their lives or their children's lives worse, if they have no real option or resources to leave, or if there are enough positives in the relationship to make it worth putting up with some level of violence and control.

Safety planning strives to *understand, analyze, and strategize* around the risks involved in every decision. This quickly transforms a survivor's question of "Why do I stay?" to questions like:

- "Should I leave and risk losing my children in a custody fight?"
- "If I stay, will he start to hit the children?"
- "If I get out, will he find me and fulfill his threat to kill me?"
- "Should I leave and risk living with my children in poverty?"

*These questions demonstrate how complex a seemingly simple decision can become. Understanding that these are real risks for real people is necessary to effectively safety plan!*

## **Batterer-Generated Risks vs Life-Generated Risks**

A safety plan always involves a risk-analysis. A domestic violence survivor’s safety plan can classify these risks into what Jill Davies calls Batterer-Generated and Life-Generated Risks.

### ❖ Batterer-Generated Risks

These dangers result from the batterer’s coercive control of their partner. The batterer-generated risks do not necessarily end if a woman leaves a batterer. These risks include:

- Risk of physical injury
- Risk of psychological harm
- Child-related risks
- Financial risks
- Risks to family and friends
- Risks involving arrest and legal status

### ❖ Life-Generated Risks

There are also life-generated risks over which someone usually has no control. These risks are often pointed out by batterers to dissuade women from leaving. These risks include:

- Financial limitations
- Home location
- Physical and mental health
- Inadequate responses by major social institutions
- Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other bias.

<b>Possible risks if she stays in the relationship</b>	<b>Possible risks if she leaves the relationship</b>
<u>Physical Injury:</u> He can continue to hit her and injure her.	<u>Physical Injury:</u> He may continue to hit and injure her. Some studies have shown he may be more likely to hurt her after she has left.
<u>Death:</u> He may kill her.	<u>Death:</u> Leaving does not ensure that he will not pursue her and it may increase the chance she will be killed.
<u>Psychological harm:</u> His use of violence to keep control will continue to affect her and he can continue to attach her verbally and emotionally.	<u>Psychological harm:</u> He may continue to have access to her, particularly if they have children in common and there is ongoing contact due to court ordered visitation.
<u>Physical injury or psychological harm to children:</u> Children can witness the violence against their mother, be the object of physical violence or psychological attack, can be hurt while trying to protect their mother.	<u>Physical injury or psychological harm to children:</u> Children can witness violence against their mother or a next-partner, be the object of physical or psychological attack, may be hurt trying to protect their mother or a next-partner, may be at greater risk while on visitation without mother present to monitor or intervene; not having visitation may also harm the child.
<u>Standard of living:</u> He may control the money and give her little money to live on, he could lose or quit his job, he could make her lose or quit her job.	<u>Standard of living:</u> She may live solely on her income, he may lose or quit his job to avoid paying child support, she may have to move out of her home and neighborhood, he could make her lose her job.
<u>Threat of injury to family or friends:</u> They may be at risk, especially if they try to intervene.	<u>Threat of injury to family or friends:</u> They may be at risk, especially if they try to intervene. or provide her with housing. Risk may escalate if she is not accessible to him: ‘If I don’t know where you are, I’ll get your family.’”

## **Building Safety Plans**

Building a safety plan is as much a complex science as it is an art and success depends on uncovering and understanding the victim's detailed situation. The following includes the necessary elements of a safety plan.

### **Gather Information**

- Learn victim's perspective
  - Create a safe and private place to discuss issues
  - Listen effectively; Let them talk first, then communicate simply and effectively
  - Discuss in what way information gathered will be documented, with you and others
  - Don't limit discussion to physical violence. Consider additional q's such as:
    - "What are you worried about right now? We've talked about [fill in the blank]. Are there other things you're concerned about?"
    - If you stay with your partner, do you think that would make things better or worse for you? How?
    - If you left or tried to leave do you think that would make things better or worse for you?
- When available, information from police reports, hospital records, drug/alcohol counselors, etc. all help in understanding the victim's world and moving towards safety.

### **Determine Client's Goals and Identify Available and Relevant Options**

- a. What are the client's largest concerns? What would the client like to do and to see happen in regards to these concerns?
- b. Provide as much information as you possibly can on every relevant option available.

### **Assess Risks and Create Safety Strategies**

- a. Assess dangers presented to victim (Use "Batterer Lethality Indicator List" handout or "Are you in an Abusive Relationship?" handout to assess immediate danger to victim.
- b. Explore and analyze the previously discussed options for their potential consequences
  - i. Will the options made available further the safety plan or make things worse? Will it create additional risks?
- c. Create Protection Strategies (which seek to respond to physical violence)
  - i. Determine the immediate protection the victim has (such as fleeing, self-defense, or asking third parties like the police and courts to intervene)
- d. If applicable, create Staying Strategies (which respond to the range of batterer-generated and life-generated risk while remaining in relationship.)
  - a. These might be short-term or long-term, depending on goals and risk analysis.
- e. If applicable, create Leaving Strategies (which respond to the range of batterer-generated and life-generated risks someone faces as they leave or after they leave the relationship.)
  - a. Might be short-term or long-term, depending on goals and risk analysis

## Helpful Suggestions:

- Respect the individual's experience
  - Remember that everybody's experience of domestic violence can be different.
  - Know that what worked for someone else in a similar situation might not necessarily work for the next person.
  - Remember that you are highly educated about many things you might discuss with the client. This might be the FIRST TIME in the survivor's life they have experienced these things or are given the opportunity to really talk about it.
- Begin with what has worked for that individual before.
  - A survivor of domestic violence is called this because they have *survived* previous assaults or coercive behavior. This means they very likely *already* have a strategy for protection, though it might not be called a "safety plan". Find out what has worked in the past and build on these strengths!
- Be sure to clarify what actions victims will take in their plan and what actions (if any) the advocate will take.
  - Try not to just talk about 'contacting the DAs office to clarify charges.' Make sure to clarify expectations on who will do that, and how to go about it.
- Understand that a survivor's perspective will change over time
  - Again, safety planning is an ongoing and fluid process, not a single event. Life circumstances don't stand still, so neither will a victim's analysis of the immediate danger.
  - It is therefore crucial to assess the risks of decisions through these new conditions and perceptions
- "A safety plan works until it doesn't." – David Mandel, Non-Violence Alliance
  - What this quote basically means is that the batterer's response to the safety plan is also fluid. When the safety plan breaks down, it is time to construct a new one.
    - Don't be afraid to get creative in doing this!
- It's OK to express your concern for the victim's risk-analysis or safety plan if you feel it is inaccurate or incomplete, but ultimately it is up to her to choose what she thinks is best.
  - Tell her about your concern, explain why are concerned, and ask what she thinks about that new information.
  - The advocate can't have all the answers! This is ok, the advocate doesn't need to have all the answers.
- Advocates develop expertise in their craft and do help women stay safer, however...  
The success of our work is **not** based on *outcomes*, but on *process*.