



Victim-Centered Safety Planning: Key Considerations for Professionals Working with Older Survivors of Abuse

What is Safety Planning?

Safety planning is a process where a worker and a victim jointly create a plan to enhance the individual's personal safety. The safety plan is victim driven and centered. It is based on the victim's goals, not the professional's opinions and recommendations.

Remember that a safety plan, regardless of how well thought out, is not a guarantee of safety.

Who Can Benefit from Safety Planning?

Safety planning can benefit a victim who is living in fear or being physically or sexually abused. Some victims who are being financially exploited or neglected may find safety planning useful while others may need other case management remedies to address their situation. The process can provide useful strategies for victims who choose to maintain relationships with abusers; those who leave and return to abusers; or those who end the relationship permanently.

Guiding Principles

- Respect the integrity and authority of victims to make their own life choices.
- Hold perpetrators, not victims, accountable for the abuse and for stopping their behavior. Avoid victim blaming questions and statements.
- Take into consideration victims' concepts of what safety and quality of life mean.

- Recognize resilience and honor the strategies that victims have used in the past to protect themselves.
- Redefine success—success is defined by the victim; not what professionals think is right or safe.

Evaluating Risks

When safety planning with survivors of abuse, consider both batterers generated risks and life generated. These forms of risk will impact the choices survivors will feel are available to them.

- Batterer generated risks are the tactics abusive individuals use to control victims. Batterer-generated risks may include: 1) physical injury; 2) psychological harm; 3) health risks; 4) financial harm; 5) risk to or about family and friends; 6) loss of relationship; and 7) risks involving arrest or legal status.
- Life-generated risks are aspects of a victim's life that a person may have little control over. "These can include financial, home location, physical and mental health, inadequate responses by major social institutions, and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or other bias."

For more information about evaluating risks and how to create safety plans based on this type of risk assessment, see "Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices" by Jill Davies, Eleanor Lyon and Diane Monti-Cantania (1998).

Increased Danger for Victims Who End Relationships

Ending a relationship or leaving an abuser can increase the possibility of serious injury due to retaliation or death. Indicators of potential danger may include weapons in the home, a history of or escalation of violence, or suicidal comments by abuser. Offenders who fear they are losing control over their victims' lives and resources may become more dangerous.

Additional Considerations

General Issues

- Ask if the victim has any needs to be met or responsibility for caretaking.
- Determine if culture, language, religion, sexual orientation, or legal status is preventing the victim from accepting help or accessing resources.
- Ask if the individual resides in congregate living. If yes, are staff a resource or source of potential retaliation?
- Is the victim willing to consider staying at a domestic violence shelter? Are the domestic violence shelters accessible? Are they willing to accept victims who do not have children, or may be parenting grandchildren rather than birth children? Can they accommodate persons with medical needs or with a caregiver?

**Assistance
must not and
cannot be
forced upon an
individual.**

Cultural Considerations

Cultural values impact safety planning. Learn about cultural norms in various communities to work effectively with older adults who will bring their own perspective to the safety planning process.

A cultural guide may be a helpful way to learn more about cultures in your community. Try to find someone who is from the community is willing to assist the victim in the process, understands the dynamics of abuse and is aware of the importance of the confidentiality. Using a friend or family member can be dangerous, as they may, whether intentional or not, pass information on to the abusive individual.

Victim Mobility

Victims with mobility issues may need to discuss additional accommodations when safety planning. Some issues to consider:

- Consider how the abuser may use a person's physical limitations against him or her as an abusive tactic.
- Can the victim carry a cell phone at all times to call 911 in an emergency? Does the DV program offer free 911 phones?
- What accommodations and medical/assistive equipment will the victim need if not living at home?
- Consider adaptations to the individual's home that might make it safer and easier to escape from in a dangerous incident.
- Keep in mind issues such as spare batteries and backup assistive devices and food for service animals will need to be considered for some victims.

Key Messages for Victims

- **No one deserves to be abused.**
- **I am concerned about you.**
- **You are not alone.**
- **Help is available.**

For more information about safety planning visit NCALL's website www.ncall.us. Also visit the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence website for "[*Model Protocol on Safety Planning for Domestic Violence Victims with Disabilities*](#)" at www.wscadv.org.

Victim Capacity

During the intake and safety planning process, consider the victim's capacity to create and follow the steps of a safety plan. The worker should presume capacity, but if it seems possible that the older adult may not be able to track information, contact health care providers who may be able to assist with a capacity assessment. When working with persons who have capacity limitations to create a safety plan, consider the following:

- Follow the victim's wishes as much as possible.
- Consider if the victim can follow a simplified plan with one or two steps such as "If I am afraid, I will call my sister Sara at _____"
- Consider whether the victim has a support network of family, friends, or paid staff who can assist with developing and implementing the safety plan.
- Consider whether a written plan or one with pictures is more effective.
- If offering a cell phone, be sure the person knows how to charge and use the phone. Consider having the phone programmed to 911.
- Safety planning may take more time with a person with cognitive limitations. A person's ability to track the plan may change over time and may need frequent updating.

For more information, see "*Safety Planning: How You Can Help*" at www.ncall.us

Technology and Safety Planning

Technology can be a useful tool for survivors of domestic & sexual violence; however, it is important to consider how technology might be misused. If an abusive individual seems to know too many details regarding the victim's whereabouts, it is possible that phone, computer, email, or other activities are being monitored.

- Work with survivors on how to use technology safely.

- Have emergency cell phones available for survivors to use in case of emergency and make sure an older victim is comfortable using a cell phone.
- Consider preprogramming the cell phone to call 911.
- Assure the cell phone works in the area where the victim lives.

For more information regarding technology and safety planning, see the publication from the National Network to End Domestic Violence, "[Technology Safety Planning with Survivors](https://nnedv.org/mdocs-posts/technology-safety-planing-with-survivors/)" available on their website at: <https://nnedv.org/mdocs-posts/technology-safety-planing-with-survivors/>.

Worker Issues

- Be aware, alert, and wary. Plan for your own safety when you enter someone's home.
- Be sure other staff knows your location. Keep your cell phone handy.
- If you are concerned about your personal safety, contact law enforcement to accompany you on the home visit.
- Avoid colluding with charming or sympathetic abusers. Focus on victim safety.

Success is:

- **listening and having the speaker feel heard**
- **offering non-judgmental support and information**
- **providing resources to enhance a sustainable safety net**
- **seeing victims find their way so they trust and use their abilities to build peaceful lives**