

Domestic Violence Safety Plan

Assessing risk in the moment

In relationships where there has been abuse or violence, risk and danger levels can change depending on the day and the circumstances. The first part of a safety plan is figuring out how you know when the risk is going up or down. You might be surprised to realize how much you've been assessing risk in your everyday life. Remember, you know your situation and partner/ex-partner best. Try to give yourself permission to trust your gut instincts.

Here are some indicators that many survivors notice:

1. Have you noticed any patterns in your partner/ex-partner's behaviour related to dates and times? (E.g. days of the week, time of day, payday, certain holidays or seasons?)
2. Have you noticed that your partner/ex-partner escalates after spending time with any specific individuals or groups?
3. Have you noticed that your partner/ex-partner escalates after *you* spend time with any specific individuals or groups?
4. Have you noticed any patterns related to alcohol or drug use?
5. Is there a specific facial expression that tells you that your partner/ex-partner may be in a bad mood? What about body language (e.g. standing a particular way), tone of voice, or choice of words?
6. Have you ever noticed a particular "energy" that fills the room or comes from your partner/ex-partner before an assault? It may be difficult to put into words.
7. Is there a particular trigger that you've noticed, e.g. stress, children being loud, not getting his/her way, a certain topic of conversation, drinking alcohol, etc.?
8. Is there a particular sequence of events you've noticed? For example, violent incidents starting with a bad mood, then drinking, then pacing, then accusations of cheating, then yelling, then hitting.

How else do you know when tension is starting to rise?

How do you know when tension starts to turn into danger?

Factors connected to increased risk/danger overall

Here are some (but not all) of the other factors that research has shown influence risk and danger. Consider how these factors may be present in your situation. You may benefit from completing a formalized risk assessment by a trained domestic violence worker.

1. The most dangerous time for a woman in an abusive relationship is when she leaves or when the abusive partner finds out she is planning to leave.
2. Other dangerous times are when the abuser feels he/she is losing control, for example, if they do not get their way in family or criminal court, or if their attempts to win you back fail.
3. Gun ownership is connected to an increased risk of violence. Access to guns is not associated with an increased risk, but it is still important to know if he/she has access to guns.
4. Any history of strangulation by your partner/ex-partner is associated with increased danger.
5. Stalking is associated with increased danger.
6. Direct death threats and suicide threats are associated with increased danger.
7. Physical violence often starts during a first pregnancy.

What are you already doing to safety plan?

If you've ever experienced or feared violence in a relationship, then you have probably safety planned, whether you realized it or not. There is no right or wrong way to safety plan, and of course, if you have ever been assaulted it is **never** your fault, whether you safety planned or not.

The best way to come up with a formal safety plan is to look at what you already do instinctively. You may find that you judge yourself for strategies you have or haven't used. You've probably been judged by others for strategies you have or haven't used. Try to be gentle with yourself and remember that every strategy can be useful depending on the situation and that there is no right or wrong way to do this.

1. What do you do/have you done to try to **avoid or prevent** a situation from happening? For example, avoiding difficult conversations, walking on eggshells, appeasing (telling him what he wants to hear), giving in to a demand, bringing someone with you if you must see your abuser.
2. What do you do/have you done to **de-escalate** a situation? For example, appeasing, talking calmly, soothing, negotiating, getting the children out of the room, giving in to a demand.
3. What do you do/have you done to **escape** a situation? For example, making an excuse to leave the situation, getting yourself closer to an exit, running away, locking yourself into a room, hiding?
4. What do you do/have you done to **get help**? For example, talking loudly to get another person to notice and come over, calling a friend or family member, using code words, calling 911.
5. What do you do/have you done to **physically defend** yourself? For example, saying or mouthing words to break out of a strangle-hold, breaking out of a wrist grab, hitting or biting to get out of a strangle-hold, stomping on a foot to give you time to run away, covering certain parts of your body to protect them from assault?

Creating a Safety Plan

What are your scenarios?

Now that you know what you've been instinctively doing, you can use this information and add to it to create your safety plan. Safety plans look different for everyone and often need to shift as risk and danger levels shift. You'll probably find you need different plans for different situations. If it's too overwhelming to have multiple plans, try to focus on strategies that you can adapt to different situations. If there's something that you know you won't do (e.g. call 911) it's better not to add it to your plan.

It can help to start by considering the scenarios that may be riskiest and safety planning around those.

Some common higher-risk scenarios:

1. Breaking up with or leaving your partner.
2. Picking up belongings after a break-up.
3. Meeting to discuss your relationship, finances, child access etc.
4. Child (or pet) custody exchanges.
5. Court appearances.
6. Running into your abuser unexpectedly.
7. Ex-partner finding out you have a new partner.

It's also important to consider your worst-case scenario and safety plan for that, even if you're not sure it would ever happen. Sometimes just having a plan can reduce your fear, anxiety, and nightmares. If you have more than one worst-case scenario, it can help to start with the least overwhelming.

Some common worst-case scenarios:

1. What if he shows up at my house in a rage?
2. What if he shows up at my work in a rage?
3. What if he doesn't return the children or if he hurts the children?

Planning for the scenario/s:

When coming up with your safety plan, consider strategies to:

- avoid/prevent danger
- de-escalate
- escape
- get help
- verbally or physically defend yourself

You **do not** have to include strategies from all 5 categories in your safety plan. Even if you do, you don't have to start with prevention and work your way through each category. In some situations, it's safest to start with de-escalation, in others it's safest to start with escaping or defending yourself. Trust your gut!

Safety strategies that some women and survivors find helpful:

These are some common strategies that survivors of intimate partner/domestic violence have found helpful. You may notice that some strategies contradict each other – that’s because different strategies work in different situations. Choose only the ones that you think might be helpful in your situation and that you will feel comfortable using. Add your own strategies and ideas!

Avoid/Prevent

- Work on identifying how your body tells you a situation is unsafe (heightened awareness, tightness in chest, breathing changes, sweaty palms, feeling in stomach).
- Trust your gut, even if you can’t logically explain what you’re feeling.
- Keep doors and windows locked.
- Keep your address and whereabouts secret, if possible.
- Don’t allow your partner/ex-partner into your home if he shows up. Remember, he may show up crying to get in the door.
- Get a police or other escort to pick up your belongings.
- Use a neutral, safe third party for custody exchanges.
- Supervised visits may be an option, depending on the situation.
- Let a trusted neighbour know what is happening and what they should do if they see your partner/ex-partner.
- Tell the abuser what they want to hear.
- Give in if it feels safer/easier than resisting. (This is often used to blame women, e.g. why didn’t you just do x or y. It’s included here as an option, not to blame you if you resist).
- Respond only to text messages/emails/phone calls that are absolutely necessary (e.g. related to parenting).
- Respond to text messages/emails/phone calls using as few words as possible.
- Keep in touch via text message, email, or social media as a way to assess how your partner/ex-partner is feeling and whether they are agitated/likely to lash out. (This is another strategy that women are blamed for. Do what is right for you).
- Consider whether your partner/ex-partner has had access to your phone or other device and whether they could have installed spyware or stalker-ware. You may need help resetting your device to factory settings or getting a new phone.
- Be aware of what GPS functions your phone, other devices, and vehicles have, and if your partner/ex-partner could use them to stalk you.
- Be aware if your social media apps geo-tag pictures and posts.
- Consider whether your partner/ex-partner has passwords to your email, social media, bank, etc.
- Before you make changes (e.g. changing passwords or routines), consider that this could alert your partner/ex-partner that you’ve been safety planning and could increase danger. Trust your gut.

De-escalate

- Use words and body language to try to calm and de-escalate your abuser.
- Tell them what they want to hear. This can be emotionally exhausting, you may need to remind yourself that just because you’re saying it, doesn’t mean it’s true.
- Soothe him, try to help him feel heard and understood (even if you have to fake it).

- Humanize him and you. You might do this by appealing to what he sees as his strengths.
- Remind him that the children are in the house, appeal to his sense of fatherhood.

Escape

- Know your escape routes, including which rooms have exits (doors or windows).
- If possible, try to move yourself to an area of the home or location that allows for quick escape. You may have to be subtle about this. This can include moving away from dangerous locations like the top of the stairs, kitchen, or garage.
- Talk to your children about how they can escape if needed. It helps to have a place to meet up or a neighbour they can run to. If you're worried about talking to your children about what is happening, you can talk about how to escape and where to meet if the house is on fire.
- You may want to back into your driveway so you can more easily drive away. If you live with your abuser, this could backfire if he questions why you are changing how you park – trust your gut.
- You may want to park in your driveway so that the driver's entrance is closest to the house exit, so you don't have to run around your car. This could also backfire if you are changing the way you park.
- Consider making sure you have enough gas in your car to get away.
- If you're in a vehicle with your partner/ex-partner and you need to escape, you can consider excuses to have him pull over or stop somewhere (you have to pee, you're going to throw up etc.).
- Keep important documents (passport, citizenship papers, ID etc) in a safe spot, e.g. a trusted friend's home.

Get Help

- Keep your phone charged and with you at all times if possible.
- If your abuser broke your phone, or if you don't have one, a domestic violence centre may be able to get you one.
- Consider who you could call for help in different situations. It helps to talk to those people ahead of time and tell them what you want them to do. Sometimes having code words is helpful.
- Call 911. Have a sense ahead of time of what to expect, for example, they will start by asking if you need police, fire, or ambulance. They will ask for your address, then what is happening.
- Abusers often steal or break their partner's phones. Consider how you could get help if this happens. Consider yelling for help, yelling "fire", or stomping on walls/floors if there are others in the building.
- Talk to your children about how they can get help if they're scared. Make sure they know the names and phone numbers of important people in their life, including you and one or more support people.
- Teach your children how to call 911.
- If the battery in your phone is dead, you can make a fake call, sometimes this is enough to get your partner/ex-partner to leave.
- If you plan to use the alarm on your car fob (to set the car alarm off) consider who will hear it what they may do. Consider talking to your neighbours about what it means and what they should do if they hear it.
- Depending on where you live, you may be able to get an alarm with a GPS from your local police or victim services.

Physically Defend Yourself

- You may have to physically defend yourself, especially if you're being strangled. This can be a complicated and difficult option and can have legal ramifications. You may want to discuss this further with a trained domestic violence worker.
- The majority of women and girls who have successfully defended themselves had no self-defence or martial arts training at all. They made it up.
- Think about the weak spots on any attacker. Think eyes, nose, throat, collar bones, abdomen, genitals, knees, shins, instep of foot, and joints.
- Think about your strong body parts. Think about your fists, legs, and elbows.
- Think about how you could use your strong body parts or items in your home against an attacker's weak body parts.
- Consider the element of surprise. If someone is attacking you, they don't expect you to be able to defend yourself. You can use that to your advantage.
- The purpose of self-defence isn't to win a fight, it's just to cause a distraction or temporary immobility so you can run away and get help.
- If you can't imagine yourself ever using physical self defence, imagine you were protecting your child or another beloved person or pet. Try to tap into that energy for yourself.
- If you use physical self defence, you may be charged. Talk to a domestic violence worker or lawyer about your options. Remember, if you are afraid for your life, think about safety first and the legal system second.

What others can do:

- No one should have to be alone in their safety planning. Think about what trusted others could do to help, especially if they could be involved in one of your scenarios. Reach out and ask them what they think they can do to help. Think about:
 - Friends or family members (help with custody exchanges, code words, allowing you to stay with them, them staying with you, pets staying with them, etc.)
 - Teachers, clergy, or the principal at your children's school
 - Your employer (in Canada employers have an obligation to help you be safe at work)
 - Domestic violence or victim services centres (help with risk assessments, safety planning, staying in a shelter, etc).
 - Police (escorts, help accessing no-contact orders, give them copies of restraining orders)

What if I don't want or need to safety plan?

You may find yourself wondering whether you should even be making a safety plan.

- Maybe you feel guilty, like you're betraying your partner/ex-partner.
- Maybe you're sure that the violent situation was a one-time thing and will never happen again.
- Maybe you get flooded with memories of past abuse every time you think about it.
- Maybe you're too exhausted or overwhelmed or you feel hopeless, like no matter what you put on your safety plan, it won't work.

These are all common and valid ways to feel. If you're feeling any or all of the above, it can help to talk about this with someone who is trained in working with domestic violence.

My Safety Plan

Scenario:

What can I do to be as safe as possible in this situation?

What can others do to help me be as safe as possible in this situation?

Scenario:

What can I do to be as safe as possible in this situation?

What can others do to help me be as safe as possible in this situation?