

Safety Planning

Guidelines for Clergy helping battered women

A safety plan is a course of action designed to keep a woman and her children as safe as possible. It is important to remember that she cannot control her partner's violence; she can only decide how she will react to it. While a safety plan may seem to include common sense actions, it is a complex process tailored to the individual needs of the woman. Creating and carrying out a safety plan is more than just keeping a packed suitcase nearby or hiding a second set of car keys. The needs of each survivor and the options available to her will vary from person to person.

The steps below are designed to provide food for thought as you help people who are abused by their partners. While you may be the first or only person a battered woman has spoken to, there are supports for you, too. Domestic Violence Programs can complete an in-depth safety plan with the woman or offer you help as the helper whether or not the woman is interested in going to a shelter or seeking their other services. If you have further questions regarding safety planning, contact your local Domestic Violence Program or the Virginia Family Violence & Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-838-8238 (v/tty).

The following are safety factors to discuss with someone who is experiencing abuse in a relationship. Note all the places for which safety must be considered, and try to have a back-up plan in every case. One set of options may not be enough.

Step 1: Safety during a violent incident

It is not always possible to avoid a violent incident, but to increase safety a battered woman may use a variety of strategies.

- When an argument is expected, can she move to a "low risk" room (one away from potential or real weapons - kitchen, bathroom, garage, room with guns or knives - or a room with an outside door)?
- Can she develop a code word with her children or neighbors so they can call for help?
- What route will she use if she decides to leave the house (doors, windows, elevators, fire escapes, etc.)? Has she practiced this route?
- She needs to trust her judgment and intuition. In a very serious situation, she can give her abuser what s/he needs to calm him/her. Protecting herself until danger has passed is valid and important.

Step 2: Safety when preparing to leave

For women who choose to leave a residence they share with their batterer, attention must be given to their plan to leave. Statistics show us that the most dangerous time for a battered woman is the 72 hours after she has left her abuser. This is when batterers feel they are losing their control and fight to regain it.

- Where can she leave extra clothes, keys, copies of important documents, and extra money?
- What emergency phone numbers will she write down and where will she keep them?
- Who can she check with (family, friends, co-workers) to see if they can let her stay with them or lend her some money?
- Has she been in touch with her local domestic violence program regarding the option of shelter?

Step 3: Safety in the residence

If the abuser does not live with the woman, or if she has made alternative living arrangements, there are steps she can take toward feeling safer in her own residence.

- Can she install new door and/or window locks?
- Can she install an outside lighting system that lights up when a person is near her home?
- Can she teach her children how to make a collect call to her and a friend, minister/rabbi, etc. in the event that her partner takes them from her?

- Can she tell people who take care of her children (teachers, babysitters, daycare providers, etc.) which people have her permission to pick up her children and that her partner is not permitted to do so?
- What neighbors or friends can she inform that she and her partner no longer live together and they should call the police if he is observed near her residence?

Step 4: Safety and using the court

A person who has been abused or stalked can petition for a Protective Order. Victims who are seeking assistance from the courts can contact their local domestic violence program and request that a court advocate accompany them through this process. An Order of Protection is a piece of paper that requires the stalker or abusing partner to stay away from the petitioner. Some abusers/stalkers obey protective orders; some do not. There may be times when the victim needs to seek the assistance of police or the courts to enforce the protective order. In any case, she should keep the order with her at all times and, if possible, inform her neighbors and employers that it is in effect.

Step 5: Safety on the job and in public

It is each woman's choice to decide who she will tell that her partner has battered her and that she may be at continued risk. Family, friends and co-workers can help to protect her, but she must decide who she is comfortable telling.

- Can she tell her boss or security supervisor at work (in case her partner shows up to harass her)?
- Can a co-worker help screen telephone calls at work?
- Can she use different grocery stores, shopping malls, etc. than the ones she used while with her abuser?
- How can she feel safer when using public transportation or when leaving work?

Step 6: Safety and drug or alcohol use

Many people in our culture use legal and illegal drugs - alcohol included. It is not uncommon for mood-altering substances to be used as an escape from the reality of abuse. Drug/alcohol use, however, and especially illegal drug use, can reduce a woman's awareness and ability to act quickly to protect herself from a battering partner. The legal outcomes of using illegal drugs can be very hard on a battered woman, may hurt her relationships with her children, and may put her at a disadvantage in other legal actions with her battering partner. Drug/alcohol use by the batterer also increases the woman's risk of abuse and her need for safety. Often batterers will blame their violence on the drugs/alcohol; therefore, specific steps towards safety may be needed if drugs/alcohol are used by either partner.

Step 7: Safety and emotional health

The experience of being battered and verbally degraded is exhausting and emotionally draining. The process of building a new life and reclaiming self-esteem takes courage and incredible energy. What are some things a woman can do for herself to begin this process?

- What can she do when she feels down and ready to return to a potentially abusive situation?
- Who can she call for support?
- What can she do to help herself feel stronger?
- What support groups or programs are offered at the shelter or in the community?

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