



Safety Planning with Survivors of Domestic Violence

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Your role as a chemical dependency (CD) or mental health (MH) professional is to **assist survivors with their immediate safety planning needs and to help them connect to domestic violence (DV) advocacy organizations for further safety planning support.** Let survivors know that you are concerned for their safety and that DV can be very dangerous – emotionally, physically and sexually. Tell them you can help them assess their safety risks and resources and strategize for how they can respond.

Keep in mind:

- **Safety planning must be an active process and an ongoing discussion, not just a checklist or a form.** Since a survivor's circumstances, risks and resources can change over time, it is important to periodically check back in with survivors about their plans for safety.
- **Leaving an abuser can result in an escalation of violence.** Abusers may try to coerce their partners into reconciliation or retaliate against them for the perceived rejection, abandonment or injustice. While research indicates that ultimately survivors can best achieve safety and freedom apart from their abusive partners, leaving is not always going to be a survivor's goal or the safest option in the short-term.
- As with other decision-making processes, **safety planning should utilize the survivor's knowledge of her situation and prioritize her self-determination and autonomy.**

Safety planning is about three easy-to-remember "Rs": **Assessing RISKS, Identifying RESOURCES and Strategizing RESPONSES:**

Assessing RISKS

You can help survivors assess their risks by asking questions about what has happened to them and what they think might happen to them in the immediate future, such as:

- What do you need now to be safe?
- Have you ever left or defied your partner before? What happened?
- How do you know when your situation is becoming more dangerous?
- How would your partner react if you...?
- Does your extended family know about the violence? What has been their response?
- What factors, other than your partner, contribute to the abuse in your relationship or make it hard for you to stay emotionally, physically or sexually safe?
- What pressures are you under to stay in the relationship?

Do not jump to conclusions about what particular behaviors might mean. Ask survivors what the behaviors mean to them. Something that sounds inconsequential to you might be a huge red flag to the survivor.

Identifying RESOURCES

After you have discussed risks faced by survivors, it can be helpful to assess their available resources and to focus on their strengths. Ask the following questions to identify potential strengths and resources available to the survivor:

- Who in your life is an ally to you?
- What support is available to you?
- What has worked to keep you safe in the past?
- What have you tried/what has worked in the past to protect you and your children?
- Have the police ever been called? Did that help?
- Have you ever used a DV services program? What happened?
- What resources do you have (economically, culturally, spiritually, etc.) that can enhance your emotional, physical and sexual safety?
- Do you feel that a _____ (e.g., shelter, protection order, etc.) would be helpful to you and your children?
 - *If yes, ask, "Do you want to use these options now?"*
 - *If no, ask, "What other ideas do you have about ways to keep you and your children safe?" (For example, can they stay temporarily with relatives or friends?)*

You may also be able to share information about community resources of which you are aware that might address needs of the survivor.

Strategizing RESPONSES

Account for the fact that levels of danger may increase in the future if the abuse in the relationship escalates. If they have concerns for their safety in the future, *would they*:

- *Call 911?*
- *Call a DV helpline?*
- *Try to leave?*
- *Seek help from friends, family, neighbors, spiritual leaders, etc.?*

Remember that survivors may be facing risks in multiple places or life spheres. A set of safety strategies that might work well in a home environment may need to be modified at the survivor's workplace or school, for example. The more comprehensive and tailored a safety plan, the better a survivor will be able to respond to danger.

For survivors of DV with MH and/or CD concerns, safety planning should include considerations for the escalation of MH symptoms, CD relapse prevention or other scenarios where their MH or CD concerns might affect their safety or vice versa.

Remember that, in addition to referring the survivor to a DV agency for further resources, **you** can also call to get safety planning ideas, consultation and support. Call the Washington State DV Hotline at 800-799-7233 or, better yet, establish a relationship with your local DV agency.