

PREVENTION

Module 11: Safety planning

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Safety planning for older persons at risk of violence

Safety planning is important for an older person who has experienced violence or who is likely to experience violence. Safety planning is a process in which an older person and a trusted helper work together to ensure the older person's safety. It is recommended even if the person has sought some form of protection through the justice system.

In this module we look at ways to help an older person be safer and prepare in advance for the possibility of (further) violence. We provide a Safety Planning Tool to be filled out by the older person and kept in a safe place. We conclude with suggestions for how helpers can protect themselves in situations of risk or danger.

Five strategies for safety planning

Perpetrators often isolate their victims and do not allow them to make their own decisions. Safety planning restores power and control to older persons as they make decisions about how to enhance their own safety. A good safety planning process for older persons provides them with information and an array of options to choose from.

Know the status of the relationship between the older person and the person who is causing harm or making threats. The older person may:

- Want to stay with the other person;
- Be in the process of leaving or going back to the other person; and,
- Have already ended the relationship.

In each of the previous situations, the following five strategies for safety planning are crucial: prevention, protection, notification, referral and emotional support.

Strategy	Description	Examples
1. Prevention	Preventing future violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to a shelter. • Moving to another residence. • Getting a peace bond. • Hiding or disarming weapons. • Changing schedules and routes to avoid being found.
2. Protection	Looking at ways older persons can protect themselves during a violent incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having an escape route. • Having the older person seek shelter in a room where a door can be locked from inside, with a working phone available.
3. Notification	Arranging ways to get help in a crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cell phone. • Emergency numbers on hand. • Life-lines (personal security devices). • Security system.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waving a towel in a window. • Having secret code words with trusted family, neighbours or friends.
4. Referral	Finding services that can help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Health Authority. • Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre. • Mental Health Crisis Line. • Justice system. • Victim Services. • Transition houses/shelters. • Faith or spiritual community.
5. Emotional support	Finding emotional support and ways to become less isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise/yoga group. • Hobby, art, music classes. • Trusted friends and family. • Peer support; support groups. • Seniors centre. • Community groups.

What you can do as a helper

A good safety plan is victim-driven and victim-centered. It is based on the older person's goals, and not the helper's opinions. As a helper, you can:

- Build rapport and help the older person feel safe by active listening.
- Learn about what the older person fears about the perpetrator and what might happen if harmful actions or threats are carried out.
- Ask what the older person wants to do and why. Learning about the motivation behind the older person's decisions can help you understand her or his goals. You may be able to suggest other options for reaching the same goal.
- Brainstorm creative options and ideas together.

What NOT to do as a helper

- Tell the older person what to do (“I think you should live with your son.”)
- Simply refer the older person to local agencies (“Here’s a list of agencies you can call. Let me know how it goes.”)
- Impose your cultural, spiritual or generational values that may impact the older person’s choices. (“I think your only choice is to divorce him.”)
- Talk to the perpetrator on your own.
- Recommend strategies that could increase risk for the older person (such as recommending the purchase of a gun or other weapon; attending couples counselling; saying “just stand up to him”.)
- Blame the older person if she or he does not follow the safety plan and experiences further violence.

Checklist for creating safety plans

Safety planning involves problem-solving in advance. This helps an older person know what to do, both during and after a crisis situation. Below is a list of questions to consider and discuss with the older person when preparing a safety plan.⁴⁰

- What experience has the older person had with safety planning and protection strategies? If so, which strategies worked? Which were ineffective?
- How has the perpetrator behaved in the past? Is the perpetrator likely to re-offend?
- Does the perpetrator have access to weapons? Have weapons been used in the past?
- Is there a peace bond or protection order in effect? If so, what is the status?
- Where does the older person keep important phone numbers, personal documents, photographs, bank books?
- What/who are the older person’s community supports?

⁴⁰ Adapted in part from Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. (no date). *Harm Free Tools Guide*. Retrieved from: <http://www.onpea.org/english/download.php?name=FreeFromHarmTools.pdf>.

- Does the older person have information on counselling and other therapeutic or support services?
- Is there a process to review and update the safety plan on a regular basis?
- Has the older person practiced giving precise information on where she or he is and if there is danger?
- What are the older person's cultural or religious values about independence and the right to unrestricted movement?
- Is the older person willing to move to a safe place (shelter or transition house)?
- What are the older person's experiences with the justice system and other service providers?
- What is the older person's first language and country of origin? Is language a potential barrier to getting help?
- What is the older person's legal status (refugee, landed immigrant)?
- What is the older person's physical and health status?
- If the older person is living with a disability, are there physical barriers in the person's environment that may prevent a safe exit or access to safety?
- What challenges might affect the older person's safety or ability to follow through with a safety plan? This could include things such as substance abuse, mental health issues, or dementia.
- Is the older person comfortable with the safety plan and willing to live life within its constraints, at least in the short term?
- Is the older person aware of other potential risks, such as:
 - Cyber-stalking on the internet?
 - Identity theft (credit cards, passport, other ID)?
 - Seeking help from people or organizations that have little experience with violence against older persons?

Some suggestions for advance safety planning

- Do not discuss any part of your safety plan with the perpetrator.
- Avoid areas where weapons are in easy reach, such as in the kitchen or garage.

- Pack a change of clothes, house and car keys, money and important papers. Hide them in a safe place that is easily accessed (for example, in a grocery bag near the front door, or with a neighbour or friend).
- Open a savings or chequing account in your own name to increase your independence. If possible, open your account at a different bank than the one used by the perpetrator.
- Keep a two-to-three-day supply of medication on hand at all times.

SAFETY PLANNING TOOL: My Personal Safety Plan

Instructions: Complete the following chart with information to help you stay safe. Also see Module 16, Helpful resources, for a chart to fill out with emergency and other phone numbers. Keep copies of both documents in a safe place.

The following steps are my plan for preparing to protect myself in case of further violence. I do not have control over the other person's violence. I do have a choice as to how I respond and get to safety. I will decide for myself if and when I tell others that I have been harmed, or am still at risk. Friends, family and other helpers can help protect me, if they know what is happening and what to do.

I will leave money, a change of clothes, important papers, and an extra set of keys with this person (<i>enter name and phone number</i>):

I will keep my purse or wallet, emergency cash and medications hidden in this safe place so that I can leave quickly:

I will keep my cell phone, phone calling card or coins for pay phones with me at all times. I will call any of the following people for help if I sense I am in danger (*enter names and phone numbers below*):

- Police: 911 or
- Friend:
- Relative:
- Neighbour:
- Co-worker:
- Therapist/counsellor:
- Shelter:
- Other:

I realize that if I use my cell phone, and the bill goes to my home, it will show the phone numbers I called after I left. To keep my calls confidential, I may purchase and use a telephone calling card instead of my cell phone.

If I sense danger, I will use the following “code word” or signal (flashing porch light, knocking on wall of apartment) to tell my family, helpers or friends to call the police:

When I sense a fight coming on, I will avoid areas such as the kitchen or garage where weapons are within reach. I will try to move to the following place:

If I sense danger, I will grab the travel bag I prepared, if it is safe enough to do so. I will leave at once, and go to (for example: a friend, neighbour or the lobby of the apartment building):

I will use my judgment and intuition. If the situation is very serious, I can give the perpetrator what she or he wants. I have to protect myself until I am out of danger.

If I decide to leave, I have a plan. I will practice getting out safely. If possible, I will move to a room with an exit. I can use the following doors, windows, elevators, stairwells or fire escapes to get out quickly and safely:

If I have a disability, and my abuser is also my caregiver, I will set up an emergency care plan. I will contact the following people to plan for an emergency care provider or a shelter that can accommodate my disability:

Emergency care provider:

Accessible shelter:

When I have to talk in person with the perpetrator who has hurt me, I can:

When I talk on the phone to the person who has hurt me, I can:

When leaving work/volunteer site/social activities, I can:

If problems occur when walking, riding or driving home, I can:

I feel safe telling these people about my situation:
I can take part in workshops or a support group for older victims of violence. In my community, these are the resources that are available and their phone numbers:
If I have pets and have to leave quickly, I can leave my pet(s) at this place, at least for the short term (<i>name, phone number</i>):
I will sit down and review this plan every [<i>week/month/year</i>] in order to plan the safest way to leave. This person (<i>name, phone number</i>) has agreed to help me review this plan:
In an emergency, I will ask trusted friends/family members to call 911 or police at the following number:

Important items to keep in a safe place for use if the need to leave arises:

- Bank books;
- Bank cards (credit cards, debit cards);
- Cheque books;
- Credit card numbers;
- Birth certificate;
- Passport;
- Driver's license and car registration;
- Social Insurance Number;
- Health card;

- Medications;
- List of medications;
- Medical records;
- Lease/mortgage documents/house deed;
- House insurance;
- Keys to house, car, office;
- Keys to mail box and safety deposit boxes;
- Immigration papers;
- Landed immigrant documents including work permits;
- Divorce documents;
- Personal address book; and,
- Items of special or sentimental value.

Planning for your own safety if you work with or care for an older person

Everyone who cares for older people has the right to feel and be safe. However, your safety may be at risk in the presence of:

- People with a history of violent or unpredictable behaviour;
- Firearms or other weapons; and,
- Dangerous animals such as guard dogs.

The guidelines below may help in making decisions about visiting the older person at home.

Ahead of time:

- Call ahead to assess the situation. Do not enter the home if you suspect or sense danger, either objectively (you receive a report of violence, or hear or witness it occurring) or intuitively (you “just have a feeling”);
- Have a cell phone with you, especially if the older person has no phone;
- Let someone know where you will be. You may want that person to call you and confirm your safety while you are at the person’s home;
- Ask a friend or colleague to go with you on the visit;

- Bring essential phone numbers such as local police and emergency services;
- Know the area and region before your visit. Bring a street map or have a GPS (Global Positioning System) tool with you; and,
- Carry only what you need (briefcase or notebook). Lock your purse or wallet out of sight in your car. Keep your keys on you at all time.

During the home visit:

- Do not enter a home if your instinct tells you not to go in;
- If you arrived by taxi, ask the driver to wait outside. Tell him or her which apartment you are going to. If you are not out in a given time, ask the driver to call your cell phone;
- When going into a home, note the location of the phone. Try to stay near an exit door at all times. Avoid being cornered or turning your back to anyone;
- Note any obstacles that may hinder a fast exit. Think up a quick exit plan;
- Be aware of household objects that could potentially be used as weapons against you. Even a crutch or hot coffee can be used as weapons.
- Do not stay if you are being threatened. Leave immediately.
- If you need help immediately, and others may hear you, try shouting “Fire!”

STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

Sandra

Sandra, 79, lives with her husband Gerard, also 79. They have been married for 55 years. Gerard is an alcoholic. He has been emotionally and physically abusive for many years. Sandra would like to leave Gerard. She worries whether she will be able to manage on her own because she cannot read or write.

Matthew

Matthew, 65, has a developmental delay. He lived with his mother until she died last year. He then lived on his own in the family home with the help of neighbours. Recently, his younger brother Phil was released from jail and moved in with him. Phil has a drug problem. Phil has been taking all of Matthew's money. He has been physically and emotionally abusive. Matthew now wanders the streets asking for money and food. The neighbours do not come by anymore because they are afraid of Phil.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Select one of the stories above. Imagine you are working with either Sandra or Matthew to develop a safety plan. How would you engage Sandra or Matthew to talk about the importance of safety planning? What would you include in the safety plan? What special considerations would you need to take into account? How would you develop a safety plan for someone who cannot read?
2. Have you ever been concerned for your own safety? Describe the situation. What was the outcome? Given what you have learned in this module, what might you have done differently to be safe? (Remember not to blame yourself for any harm that might have occurred – it was not your fault. No one has the right to harm another person!)
3. Have you ever been in a situation where you had a sense that someone was growing agitated or violent? What clues gave you this feeling? What did you do? What was the outcome?