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## Safety Planning

by Jill Davies

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### What is a safety plan?

A safety plan is an individualized plan battered women<sup>1</sup> develop to reduce the risks they and their children face. These plans include strategies to reduce the risk of physical violence and other harm caused by a batterer and also include strategies to maintain basic human needs such as income, housing, health care, food, child care, and education for the children. The particulars of each plan vary depending on whether a woman has separated from the batterer, plans to leave, or decides to stay, as well as what resources are available to her.

Current interventions tend to focus on only one aspect of a safety plan, responding to the risk of a physical attack. These include such strategies as: changing the locks, removing firearms from the house, calling the police, running to a neighbor's house for help, and preparing to flee in an emergency. While important, and in some circumstances effective in reducing physical violence, they reflect only a small piece of the resources and options a battered woman must have in place to be free from an abusive partner's violence and control and to sustain herself and her children. To be effective, safety plans must be comprehensive, meeting basic human needs and providing a life plan, not just strategies to respond to physical violence.

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1. Because the overwhelming majority of family violence victims are women abused by a male partner, this paper uses "she" or "battered women" when referring to victims, and "he" when referring to "batterers." All victims deserve support and responsive advocacy, including victims in same sex relationships and male victims abused by female partners.

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Although accurate, this simple definition does not reflect the enormous complexity of the ongoing process of safety planning, including:

- I) understanding the risks to safety created by a battering partner,
- II) understanding how life-generated risks affect women's decision-making,
- III) the variety of strategies used by battered women to reduce risks, and
- IV) the role of advocates in responding to safety concerns and meeting basic human needs.

Safety planning is a broad and complex topic. This paper provides only a very brief summary of each of these areas. For more information see: Davies, J., Lyon, E., Monti-Catania, D., (1998). *Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage .

## **I) Batterer-generated risks**

A common image of domestic violence is a woman with a black eye and bruised face. Domestic violence is often seen as solely physical violence. However, physical violence is just one of the tactics used by batterers to control their partners, and therefore it is just one of the risks battered women and their children face. Batterers' controlling behavior may also cause risks to the children, psychological harm, the loss of housing, health care, employment, or current standard of living. [See chart at the end of this paper.] In addition, some battered women may not consider the physical violence to be their greatest risk.

A battered woman will face one set of batterer-generated risks if she stays in the relationship and a different set if she leaves. Leaving a relationship does not guarantee the reduction or elimination of a risk. For some battered women, leaving may create new risks or increase existing ones.

Battered women continually analyze the risks they face. Part of a battered woman's risk analysis is consideration of the effect that staying in or leaving the relationship will have on those risks. A question frequently asked about battered women is, "Why do they stay?" This question does not reflect the real issues and considerations a battered woman must face. The questions a battered woman may ask herself are more complete, such as:

“Should I stay and risk the violence?” “If I leave will the violence be worse?” “Should I leave and place myself and my children in poverty?” “Should I leave and risk losing my children in a custody battle?”

**Example:** Beth and Don have been together for two years and have a 1 year old daughter. Don made all the decisions in the family and when Beth tried to assert herself Don beat her up “to show her who is boss.” Beth left Don right after their daughter was born. Don then harassed and threatened Beth at her job until she was fired. He also filed for custody of their daughter alleging that Beth was a bad mother. Don told Beth that if she wins custody, “you’ll never see your daughter again.”

**Discussion:** Beth left Don because he hit her. Beth faced new risks once she left, including the loss of her daughter. For Beth, the risk of losing her daughter was her greatest concern. Don knew this and continued his control by using their daughter. Don caused Beth to lose her job, knowing this would undermine her ability to fight for custody and independently provide for herself and her daughter. He then filed for custody, knowing Beth would not separate from her daughter.

## II) Life-generated risks

Not all the risks battered women face are batterer-generated. Battered women also must confront life-generated risks. These are the types of risks anyone might have to face. For example, a battered woman may be laid off from a job because of the company’s downsizing. Other examples of such risks include health concerns, poverty, and bias or discrimination. Life-generated risks are an important factor in battered women’s decision-making, and sometimes batterers will use them to further their control. Safety plans must incorporate consideration of and response to life-generated risks.

**Example:** Erica is economically poor. She has very little work history and few job skills. She just started to work at a small company in her neighborhood. She walks to work and a friend watches her child while she works. The job pays above minimum wage with health benefits but gives Erica no time off

for the first six months. Her boss has made it clear that if she misses work, he'll have to fire her.

Al, the father of Erica's child, is controlling and jealous. After Erica's first day on the job, he accused her of sleeping with her boss to get the job and told her he doesn't want her to work there anymore. When Erica said, "there's no way I'm going to quit this job!" Al knocked her to the ground and beat her.

**Discussion:** Erica needs to keep her job. It pays enough for her to live on, she can walk to work, and her child care is in the neighborhood. Ultimately, economic independence will give her real options. Her decisions about her relationship and her safety plan will be guided by the fact that she faces the life-generated risk of poverty. Safety strategies that will make her lose her job will be rejected. Another consideration is that Al, knowing Erica has no financial resources other than her paycheck, may try to make her lose the job in order to further his control. Advocates and other professionals who intervene with Erica and Al have to respond to this set of concerns, not only physical threats and violence.

### **III) Battered women's safety planning strategies**

Typically, when a battered woman experiences a batterer-generated risk, such as physical violence, she tries to figure out why it happened and how to keep it from happening again. She may develop a number of strategies to reduce or eliminate the risk. She may reach out to family or friends, try to talk with her partner about what happened, seek the help of a domestic violence project, counselor or clergy person. These strategies are "safety plans," although few battered women would actually use that phrase. Each battered woman faces different risks and has different options and resources. Therefore, each woman's safety plan will be unique.

Battered women use complex and creative safety plans to reduce the risks they and their children face. As any person making a significant life decision, battered women must consider the consequences of pursuing certain options.

- Examples:**
- ▶ If I call the police they can stop the current attack, but my partner will lose his job (that supports our family).
  - ▶ If I get a protective order he'll be forced to leave the home, but I can't afford the rent on my income alone.
  - ▶ If I stop seeing him, he said he'd kill me.

Such consequences may make a particular option useless or raise additional risks the battered woman must address in her plan.

### **Characteristics of battered women's safety plans**

Although each battered woman's risks and plans are unique, there are some common characteristics of most safety plans, including the following:

- Battered women's safety plans seek to reduce or eliminate the range of batterer-generated risks a battered women faces, not just physical violence.**

Batterers use a variety of tactics to control their partners. Battered women and their children must face the range of consequences and risks these tactics create. [See Battered Women's Risk Analysis Chart at the end of this paper.] Any of the risks could result in serious harmful consequences for the woman and/or her children.

- Battered women's safety plans may include strategies for staying in the relationship and/or leaving the relationship.**

Since batterer-generated risks differ if a woman stays in or leaves a relationship she will need different safety strategies for each. For some women, leaving the relationship will increase her risks and staying will be her best possible alternative. This may seem an unacceptable conclusion, but it is the reality for some battered women.

- Battered women's safety plans include consideration of life-generated risks.**

As battered women make decisions about their lives and options, they think about more than the risk of physical violence and other batterer-generated risks. They can't ignore concerns raised by their economic status, health, educational opportunities for their

children, or how a system might respond to someone of their race, ethnicity, class, or other characteristic. A battered woman's plan will also try to reduce the ways in which a batterer could use life-generated risks to further his control.

**Battered women's safety plans may have short-term and/or long-term timeframes.**

Battered women's plans may span a few days or months or may last for many years. Time frames are often determined by the nature of the risks and options. A woman's plan may be built around certain events that will increase her options. For example, a woman may decide to leave once she's graduated from school, has a job, or her children are old enough to take care of themselves. If a woman's plan to leave will take a period of time, she may have a variety of strategies to keep her and her children safe while she stays. For example, a woman may have a friend or family member move in with her family for awhile because she knows her partner will not hurt her while another person is living there.

**Battered women's safety plans will change.**

Safety plans are not "written in stone." A battered woman will continually adjust her plan as a result of changed circumstances. As battered women develop and implement their plans, they gather information and experience that they then incorporate. Key elements affecting safety plans are: the success or failure of current strategies, the batterer's reaction to his partner's strategy, and the information and resources provided by advocates and others responding to domestic violence.

The fluidity of safety plans can be frustrating for agencies and systems trying to respond to domestic violence. A woman may tell a system she will implement a particular strategy one day and then a completely different one the next. These changes are simply part of ongoing adjustments in a woman's plan and typically reflect rational decisions that respond to some change in circumstances.

**Example:** Cira calls the police for help when her partner Ray begins to punch and kick her. She tells the police she wants Ray to be arrested and put in jail.

The prosecutor's office calls Cira and tells her they cannot hold Ray in jail and that they will need her to come down to the office to give a statement and come to court hearings or they will drop the charges. Cira considers this new information. She is worried that if she works with the prosecutor Ray may hurt her after he is released from jail. Also, Cira has no transportation to get to the prosecutor's office and she can't afford to take time off from work to go to court hearings. Cira changes her safety plan and tells the prosecutor she doesn't want Ray prosecuted.

Responses to domestic violence should anticipate that safety plans will change.

Although most battered women understand the risks they face and have developed useful strategies to address them, some battered women do not. A battered woman may have an incomplete analysis of the risks she faces. In addition, some safety plans may be incomplete and some are based on inaccurate assumptions and information. For some battered women, mental health issues including drug/alcohol abuse will affect their risk analysis and safety planning.

#### **IV) The role of advocates**

Advocates have a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding batterer-generated risks and the options and resources available to battered women. Advocates provide the opportunity for battered women to enhance their current safety plans. An advocate begins this process by understanding each battered woman's perspective on her risks and options. The advocate can then begin to add her information and resources to the woman's current safety plans. It is this sharing and integration of advocate's information with each battered woman's perspective that may enhance safety plans for battered women and their children.

**Example:** Liz's safety plan was to stay in her relationship until her children finished school for the year. Her plan was then to go to a shelter and eventually find a new apartment. Liz called the shelter to get some information. The advocate at the shelter talked through Liz's safety plan with her. The advocate gave Liz information about protection orders, child support enforcement and what would happen if she called the police when her

partner hit her. Liz used this information to change her plan. She decided to ask for a protection order that would order her partner out of her apartment and then pursue child support so she and her children could afford to stay there.

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## Battered Women's Risk Analysis Chart

As battered women experience and respond to their partner's behavior they will analyze a wide range of risks stemming from their partner's violence. These can be described as "*batterer-generated risks*".

The following chart: *Battered Women's Risk Analysis: Batterer-Generated Risks* was developed to illustrate a number of points, including:

- ▶ Physical violence is just one of the batterer-generated risks faced by battered women. Battered women may not consider physical violence to be their greatest risk.
- ▶ Leaving a relationship does not guarantee the reduction or elimination of a risk. In some circumstances, leaving may increase risks for some women.
- ▶ Much domestic violence advocacy focuses exclusively on responding to the risk of physical violence. The primary strategy used is to get women to leave their relationships. This approach will not fit the reality of some battered women's lives or safety plans. To enhance a woman's safety plan, an advocate will ensure that women have relevant information about all their options and choices.
- ▶ Every battered woman must be approached as an individual with different risks, options, and resources. The chart lists the potential batterer-generated risks that women face and the effect of staying in the relationship or leaving the relationship has on those risks. Of course, not all the risks nor potential scenarios listed apply to every battered woman.

## Battered Women's Analysis: Batterer-generated risks

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Possible risks if she stays in the relationship	Possible risks if she leaves the relationship
<b>Physical</b>	
<p><b>Physical injury:</b> he can continue to hit her and injure her</p> <p><b>Death:</b> he may kill her</p> <p><b>HIV:</b> through unsafe behavior with partner, she may have no choice regarding sex, including whether to practice safer sex, he may sexually assault her</p>	<p><b>Physical injury:</b> he may continue to hit and injure her. Some studies have shown he may be more likely to hurt her after she has left.</p> <p><b>Death:</b> threats can surface when a woman explores leaving or tries to leave, "If I can't have you nobody will." Leaving does not insure that he will not find her and may increase the chance she will be killed.</p> <p><b>HIV:</b> unsafe behavior with partner may continue, he may sexually assault her</p>
<p>Much advocacy ends at this point on this list of risks that women with violent partners face. The risks that follow are acknowledged, and advocates do try to respond to these concerns. However, the primary resources, options and <u>services</u> are designed to address physical risks.</p>	
<b>Psychological</b>	
<p><b>Psychological harm:</b> his use of violence to keep control will continue to affect her and he can continue to attack her verbally &amp; emotionally</p> <p><b>Substance abuse:</b> she may abuse drugs and/or alcohol to help her cope with the emotional and physical pain</p> <p><b>Long term effects:</b> she may experience long term psychological issues</p> <p><b>Suicide (victim, partner):</b> he could commit murder/suicide, she may commit suicide as a result of the psychological effects of his violence or her desire to take control of a death she may believe is inevitable</p>	<p><b>Psychological harm:</b> he may continue to have access to her, particularly if they have children in common and there is ongoing contact due to court ordered visitation</p> <p><b>Substance abuse:</b> even if she leaves she will take an addiction with her, she may abuse drugs and/or alcohol to cope with her new life situation</p> <p><b>Long term effects:</b> she may experience long term psychological issues</p> <p><b>Suicide (victim, partner):</b> he could commit murder/suicide, she may commit suicide as a result of the psychological effects of his violence or her desire to take control of a death she may believe is inevitable</p>

## Battered Women's Analysis: Batterer-generated risks

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Possible risks if she stays in the relationship	Possible risks if she leaves the relationship
<b>Children</b>	
<p><b>Physical injury or psychological harm to children:</b> children can witness violence, be the object of physical violence or psychological attack, can be hurt while trying to protect their mother</p> <p><b>Loss of child/ren :</b> child protective services could become involved if violence is disclosed, "failure to protect"-type arguments could be used to place children in foster care or proceed on termination of parental rights case</p> <p><b>Being alone, single parenting:</b> he could be emotionally unavailable, he could do little to help her with the children</p>	<p><b>Physical injury or psychological harm to children:</b> children can witness violence, be the object of physical violence or psychological attack, can be hurt while trying to protect their mother, may be at greater risk while on visitation without parent-victim present, no visitation may also harm the child</p> <p><b>Loss of child/ren:</b> he could legally gain custody or just take the children, child protective services could still be involved or become involved</p> <p><b>Being alone, single parenting:</b> he is unavailable and she may not be able (or want) to "find someone new," he may not visit or help raise the children, it may not be safe for the children or her to have him do so</p>
<b>Financial</b>	
<p><b>Standard of living:</b> he may control the money and give her little money to live on, he could lose or quit his job, he could make her lose or quit her job</p> <p><b>Loss of income/job:</b> he could keep her from working, limit how much she works, he may sabotage her efforts to find a job, succeed at a job or pursue job training</p> <p><b>Loss of housing:</b> she could be evicted due to "disturbance" or damage he has done</p> <p><b>Loss or damage to possessions:</b> he may destroy things of importance or value to her to further his control</p>	<p><b>Standard of living:</b> she may now live solely on her income, she may have to move out of her home, neighborhood, she may have less money, he could make her lose her job</p> <p><b>Loss of income/job:</b> she could lose his income, have to quit a job to relocate, have to quit if she has become a single parent, he could keep her from working by harassment, threats</p> <p><b>Loss of housing:</b> she may need to move out in order to leave relationship or go into hiding for safety, she could lose her residence as part of a divorce</p> <p><b>Loss or damage to possessions:</b> he may destroy things of importance or value to her to further his control, she may have to leave things behind when she leaves, he may win the right to possessions in a divorce proceeding</p>

## Battered Women's Analysis: Batterer-generated risks

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**Possible risks if she stays in the relationship**

**Possible risks if she leaves the relationship**

### Family and Friends

**Threat or injury to family or friends:** may be at risk, particularly if they try to intervene

**Threat or injury to family or friends:** may be at risk, particularly if they try to intervene, protect the woman, provide her with housing; threat can be used to keep a woman from going into hiding--"If I don't know where you are I'll get your family."

**Loss of family/friends' support:** they may want her to leave and stop supporting her if she stays, they may not like him or may be afraid of him, he may keep her isolated from them

**Loss of family/friends' support:** they may not want her to leave him, they may blame her for the end of the relationship

### Relationship

**Loss of partner or relationship:** he could leave her or be unavailable emotionally

**Loss of partner or relationship:** leaving means the loss of her partner and significant change to the relationship

**Loss of caretaker:** if she is disabled and he is her caretaker he may not adequately care for her

**Loss of caretaker:** if she is disabled and he is her caretaker he will no longer be there to help her

### Arrest, legal status

**Her arrest:** he could threaten to turn her in or turn her in if she has participated in criminal activity, he may threaten this to keep her from leaving, he may force her to participate in criminal activity, she may defend herself against him and be charged with a crime. Arrest could lead to incarceration, loss of job, loss of children, public embarrassment, etc.

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**Partner's arrest:** he might be arrested leading to his retaliation, the loss of his job, public embarrassment for her and her family

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**Loss of residency status:** ongoing threat, he could carry out that threat

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