Safety Planning and Lethality Assessment with Survivors

Centering survivor safety, autonomy and informed choice

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If someone is in danger: National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233, or text START to 88788

Danger is not constant.

It rises at moments of change: separation, a new partner, a court date, a loss of control. Safety planning and lethality assessment help us see those moments coming.

What the research shows

Greater risk of being killed when the abuser has access to a gun

Campbell et al., 2003

7·5×

More likely to later be killed after a non-fatal strangulation

Glass et al., 2008

Neither factor is always visible. Ask about both directly, every time.

Sources: Am J Public Health 2003 (femicide risk factors); J Emerg Med 2008 (strangulation)

What is safety planning?

A collaborative process of identifying risks and strategies to reduce harm, whether the survivor stays, leaves or is still deciding.

Individualized

Built around this survivor's risks, resources and goals

Ongoing

Revisited as circumstances change, never a one-time form

Survivor-led

We offer information and options; the survivor decides

Principles that guide the work

Trauma-informed

Prioritize choice, transparency and emotional safety

Survivor as expert

They know the abuser's patterns better than anyone

Build on strengths

Name what has kept them and their children safe so far

Consent and confidentiality

Explain limits up front; share only with permission

What is a lethality assessment?

A structured set of questions about factors linked to intimate partner homicide. It opens a conversation about danger.

Danger Assessment

Developed by Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell; pairs a calendar of abuse with a weighted checklist

Lethality Assessment Program

Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence; an 11-question screen used by first responders and advocates

Your agency's tool

Use the instrument your program has trained you on and approved

A tool informs judgment. It never replaces the survivor's own sense of danger.

Risk factors to listen for

Factor	Why it matters
Firearm access	Weapon availability is strongly tied to fatal outcomes
Strangulation	A marker of escalation, even without visible injury
Threats to kill	Threats toward the survivor or children are taken at face value
Separation	Danger can rise when the abuser senses loss of control
Stalking, extreme jealousy	Monitoring and control point to escalating fixation
Abuser's suicide threats	Hopelessness can raise danger to others
Escalation	Rising frequency or severity signals increasing danger

Also ask: "Do you think they could kill you?" The survivor's own fear is a strong indicator.

Using the checklist in conversation

1

Prepare

Choose a private moment and check who can see or hear

2

Explain

Say why you are asking; answers guide options, not judgments

3

Ask

Use questions as written, listen without leading, record answers

4

Share and plan

Explain what the results mean and build the plan from them

Survivors can skip any question or pause at any time.

When the screen indicates high danger

1. Say it plainly: "Your answers worry me. I am concerned for your safety."
2. Offer an immediate connection to the hotline or an advocate
3. Review the safety plan today, including exits and a safe place
4. Discuss firearm removal and protective order options
5. Encourage a medical evaluation after any strangulation
6. Document per agency policy and schedule a follow-up

Core parts of a safety plan

Staying

- Know the safest room and exits
- Keep a charged phone within reach
- Agree on a code word with children and a trusted person

Preparing to leave

- Keep copies of IDs, funds and medications in a safe place
- Pack a go-bag a trusted person can hold
- Choose a route and a destination

After leaving

- Vary routines and routes
- Alert work and school to the risk
- Keep protective order copies on hand

Also plan for children, pets, health needs, disability, and immigration status.

Technology and digital safety

Devices

Use a safe device; phones can carry spyware or location sharing

Accounts

Change passwords and enable two-factor from a device the abuser cannot reach

Location

Check apps, car trackers and shared family accounts

Evidence

Save threats and screenshots somewhere the abuser cannot find them

Sudden changes can alert an abuser. Plan the timing with the survivor.

Pitfalls to avoid

Avoid	Instead
Telling a survivor to leave	Explore options; leaving can be a high-risk time
Promising safety or confidentiality you cannot guarantee	Be honest about limits
Treating a low score as safety	Honor the survivor's own sense of danger
One-size-fits-all plans	Adapt for culture, disability, immigration status, LGBTQ+ identity and rural access
Going without support yourself	Use supervision and debriefing; vicarious trauma is real

Key takeaways

1. Risk changes, so revisit the plan often
2. Use a validated checklist as one input to judgment
3. The survivor leads; we inform and support

Resources

National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-7233
Text START to 88788
thehotline.org