

# Safety Planning

*Tennessee Domestic Violence Shelter Best Practices Manual / Section II*



Safety planning is, at its core, helping survivors create a plan to keep themselves and any vulnerable dependents, such as children and pets, safe while living in an environment of domestic violence and abuse, preparing to leave, and after leaving an abuser. The strategy behind safety planning is to reduce the risk of violence the survivor faces. Each person's plan should be crafted with

their individual situation in mind and altered when circumstances change; for example, strategies for survivors in shelter will be different than strategies for survivors in transitional or permanent housing.

In order to centralize survivor safety in the most comprehensive way possible, advocates must evaluate a survivor's risks, which include the complex networks of needs and problems each survivor faces. Advocates and survivors should work to address the complicated realities of the survivor's experience. Good safety plans recognize that the most obvious risks for a survivor, physical abuse, may be only the tip of the iceberg. Safety planning begins with the individual survivor and the immediate circumstances of their abuse, but may end with concerns about housing, education, and job skills.

Survivors need advocates to take a more complete view of their risks and strategies. However, many advocates tend to focus solely on physical violence when safety planning. Effective safety planning must take into account the diverse social factors of a survivor's life that impact their choices and decisions. These social factors can facilitate or hinder a survivor's safety. For example, a survivor's family may be a resource for housing and emotional or financial support in the wake of abuse, or a survivor's family may side with the batterer, compromise the survivor's confidentiality, or turn them away from housing.

Social factors that influence safety planning include external conditions, pressures, norms, and practices that affect the dangers a survivor faces. It is important to recognize that whether visible to outside observers or not, social risks are real and significant to the individual.

**Attempts to assess safety needs and create a safety plan should consider a variety of key factors in a survivor's life including:**

- Homelessness and financial hardship

- Drug or alcohol addiction
- Lack of education and job skills or history
- Sexual and gender identity
- Language and immigration status
- Child protective services
- Law Enforcement and the justice system
- Religion
- Nationality and culture

**Examples of how social and life-generated risks may influence safety:**

- 1- Lack of language skills and immigration status can exert a high level of pressure on a survivor's decisions. The survivor may be afraid to live in the US without the day-to-day help of an adult who speaks more fluent English (which their abuser may have provided). They may be fearful of any contact with law enforcement because the language barrier makes them immediately identifiable as an immigrant, and they face the threat of deportation and being separated from their family or children. Advocates should recognize this social risk and be able to evaluate the degree to which a survivor's limited English influences their choices and decisions. Advocates can mitigate this by locating resources to help the survivor with translation and immigration services.
- 2- A Native American woman whose batterer has been drinking alcohol may make very different decisions about contacting law enforcement when she is being abused than a white, suburban woman in similar circumstances. The Native American woman's experience might tell her that her abuse would probably be overlooked and that law enforcement would focus on her and her partner's alcohol usage. She may be opposed to getting law enforcement or other systems involved based not only on her personal experiences with non-Native organizations, but on the experiences of others in her community. The white suburban woman may have fears of the legal system, but would likely have a greater sense of trusts that law enforcement would help her. The way survivors view the police, courts, and advocates, based on the history of oppression in their culture, limits or enhances each survivor's ability to seek help regarding their partner's violence.



## Leaving & Staying

Leaving can include entering shelter or other safe housing, living with family or loved ones, or any other strategies that remove survivors from the abuser's home or life. In this context, leaving may also include having the abuser removed from the home, thus 'leaving' the relationship. However, it is important to be aware that safety-planning strategies vary widely depending on what the individual survivor's version of 'leaving' looks like.

Staying can include either deciding not to leave the home and relationship, or choosing to return to the relationship and perpetrator's residence from a 'safe'

## On Staying & Leaving

For some victims, leaving makes things better; it may even be lifesaving. Advocates want victims to leave abusive relationships because in many cases, leaving works. But advocates should know that strategies for leaving are not enough. During and after leaving their abuser is the most dangerous period for a victim of domestic violence. After a survivor leaves, the abuser has lost all power and control over the victim, and may re-exert this control by escalating to greater levels of violence or even murder.

Leaving can also cause significant financial burdens on survivors and can place children in precarious circumstances. Leaving can mean the loss of home, health care, job, child custody, faith community, immigration status, or the support of family and friends. Before a survivor decides to leave, they must weigh all consequences. Survivors should be encouraged and supported in making their own decisions about leaving or staying in the context of their lives and culture. Advocates should understand that, for some survivors and their children, leaving makes their lives more difficult and dangerous. Shelters are not magical havens that can guarantee a survivor safety from an abuser.

“Leaving ... has become the standard by which victims are judged. Leave and you are worthy of the full range of services and protection. Stay and the resources may be limited, the consequences sometimes severe. Victims who don’t leave are often unfairly judged to be making poor decisions, viewed as “not being serious” about stopping the violence, or as somehow responsible for not preventing it.”

(When Battered Women Stay... Advocacy Beyond Leaving, Jill Davies, 2008)

### **Some things advocates should consider when helping survivors plan for staying or returning:**

- In the past, what strategies have worked for and against the survivor?
- What are the survivor’s personal and social barriers to living independently?
- What would help the survivor overcome these barriers?
- What are the survivor’s personal and social resources?
- What are abuse strategies the abuser uses beyond just physical violence (emotional, financial, using children, using isolation, etc)?



**Supervision Question: How can an advocate help plan with the survivor to mitigate the abuser’s power and control strategies?**

## Tips for Safety Planning

### **Staying/Returning-**

- Be aware of access to exits in the home or other spaces where abuse commonly occurs.
- Practice ways of getting out of the home safely, other than using main doors.

- Keep a small ‘go bag’ at a trusted friend or relative’s house.
- Tell trustworthy neighbors about the violence, and when it would be safe or helpful for them to call police.
- Devise a code word to use with trusted family, friends, coworkers and neighbors to indicate when the survivor needs police intervention.
- Plan where to go if leaving becomes necessary.
- Survivors should trust their instincts and judgment.

### **Leaving-**

- Establish bank accounts in survivor’s name only.
- Remove survivor’s name from any shared bills or accounts.
- Leave a ‘go bag’ including money and important documents with a trusted person.
- Determine safe housing, whether in shelter or with trusted loved ones.
- Carry change, a calling card, or safety cell phone at all times. Do not depend on a cell phone if the batterer is on the same phone plan.
- Advocates should discuss Orders of Protection with the survivor, including pros and cons and the process of applying.
- Discuss and practice a safety plan with any children, including how and when to call 911. Have the children rehearse their name, the survivor’s name, and address, and tell the children never to intervene in fights between adults.
- Inform the child’s caregiver or school who has permissions to pick up the child.
- At work survivors should inform safe supervisors or building security that the abuser should never be allowed on the premises.
- Devise a safety plan for coming and going from work.
- Plan for any communication with the batterer, including court and custody exchanges.
- Change all digital passwords, even those the survivor does not think the abuser has had access to. Don’t forget online banking passwords.
- Change all privacy settings on social media to the most stringent setting.
- Block known profiles of the abuser on all social media platforms.
- Turn off GPS on electronics, also turn off location tagging on social media, and apps like ‘find a friend’, ‘find my i-phone’, or other social apps that the abuser may have access to.
- Do not use electronics if the abuser shares the data plan.
- For more tips on technology safety, visit <http://techsafety.org/> and see page 207 for information on technology use in shelter.

## **Safety Planning and Harm Reduction with Survivors Who Struggle with Substance Use**

Shelters practice *harm reduction* by providing safe shelter, food and support for survivors who have experienced violence, whether or not they ultimately decide to leave their abuser. This lets

survivors know that they have support no matter what. Shelters should also assure victims that they will be supported and receive services regardless of past or present substance use.

Harm reduction principles help survivors to feel safer, which minimizes the risk for increased substance use or relapse.

### **Discussions about substance abuse when safety planning should include:**

- The various stressors experienced, not just the violence.
- How has the survivor managed to cope with the violence and other stressors?
- How does the survivor feel about how they have been coping? How has the coping helped? How has it not been helpful? Are they interested in exploring other ways to cope?
- How does the survivor find ways to take care of themselves? How can you support them in this?

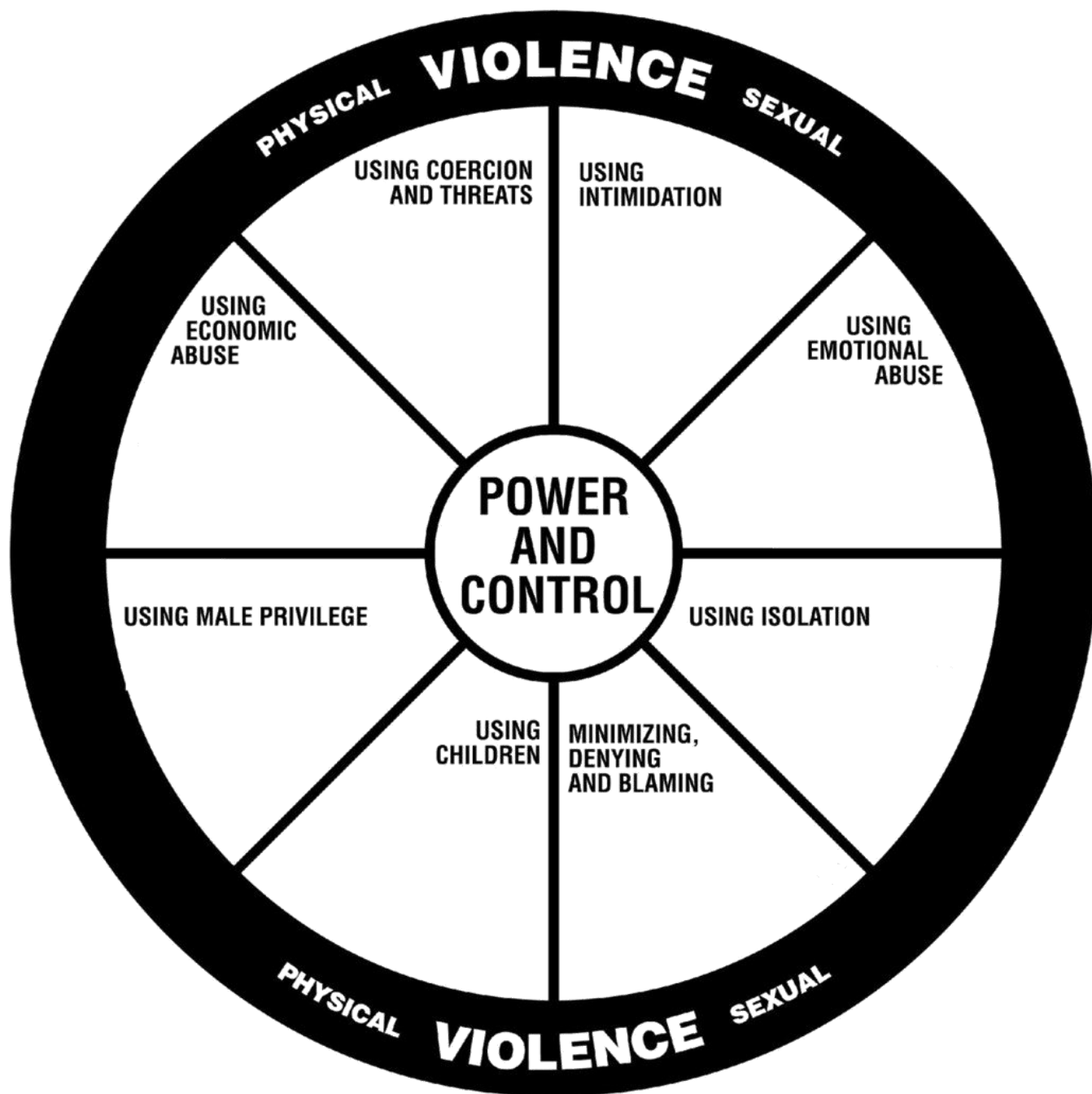
### **Discussion specifically about substance abuse should include:**

- How does the survivor feel about their substance use? Does it affect their life?
- Do they see their substance use connected to their experience of violence?
- Does their partner use substances as a means to control them (control their behavior or their supply)?
- Does the abuser use substance use as an excuse for violence?
  - Does the survivor think the substance use sometimes gets in the way of safety?
- If Yes, how and in what areas?
  - How have they planned for safety, or what have they done to stay safe before?
  - How can you help support the survivor in feeling safer?
- Can they use substances with safer people or in safer settings?
  - Do they know what types of situations might “trigger” stressors to their substance use?
- What have they done / can they do to deal with those triggers?
- How can you support the survivor in this?
  - Is the survivor interested in making any changes in their level of substance use?
- If so, do they know what changes they would like to make? Do they have any idea about how they might make those changes?
- How can you support them in this?
  - Are they interested in talking about their substance use? Is there anyone else they might benefit from talking to about the substance use?
  - Have they accessed supports for substance use in the past?
- What was helpful?
- What has not been helpful?
- How can you help them to find support that they are comfortable with?

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**The following pages contain sample safety plans and planning tools. The plans are created to be conversational and survivor-led. Each survivor is different, and has different risks and needs for safety. No one safety plan can serve everyone. Advocates should be prepared to spend time asking questions and exploring the survivor’s individual concerns.**

Walking survivors through a blank version of the traditional Power & Control Wheel is a great way to begin safety planning. This gives each survivor the opportunity to identify the ways in which their abuser uses the various power and control tactics identified in the wheel. This gives the advocate a more complete understanding of the survivor's risks and what the safety plan needs to address.



## Sample Safety Plans

### *Plan for Staying or Returning*

Signs you recognize when your partner has been violent in the past:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

List some of the safest places in your home. These will be the lowest risk places- places where there are no weapons or if you fall, you will be less likely to be injured. Avoid arguments in the bathroom, kitchen, near any weapons, or in rooms without an outside exit.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Use your intuition and judgment to decide the seriousness of the situation. List some things that have worked in the past to calm your partner down before an incident.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List ideas you might have to protect your children in a bad situation. This may include: having children stay in a lockable room when an incident occurs; having a phone with emergency numbers for them to call when a serious situation occurs, or having code words to use when you are in danger to let your children know they need to call emergency phone numbers. Talk with your children about what to do in an emergency situation.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

In a dangerous situation, have a list of neighbors or friends' phone numbers to call who can come help.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What are some things that might make you feel safer within your home? Examples might be: important phone numbers, telling a trusted neighbor or friend about the violence and establishing a code word in case you need them to call the police, storing copies of important documents in a safe place, or anything else you think would be helpful.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Are there specific things about being with your partner, or in the home, that you have concerns, questions, or fears about? Your advocate can help you safety plan around these concerns.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

NOTE: It might not be safe for you to keep this document with you. [ORGANIZATION] can store it in your file and an advocate can review it with you anytime you want, in person or on the phone. You can change or update your plan at any time.



## *Plan for Leaving*

Have you left your partner in the past? What worked and what did not?

What things can you do to prepare for leaving without your partner finding out?

List things you may need when you leave. Important things may be: identification, birth certificates, car registration, social security card, medication, school and vaccination records, money, change of clothes, important pictures, baby necessities, etc. Having a phone with emergency numbers may be helpful.

Keep these things in a location that's easily accessible when leaving. Where would that be?

If you do decide to leave a relationship, how will you get out safely? List exits you could use in your home if you were to leave and days or times when it is safest to leave.

Do you have any supportive people you trust who can help you when leaving? Any neighbors, family, or close friends that know your situation who you could contact or stay with in case of emergency?

You may want to give them a safe word to let them know you are safe even if you choose to stay. What would that safe word be and who would you give it to?

In the case of emergency and you need to leave quickly, where would you go?

Plan A:

- a. Location:
- b. Telephone number:

Plan B:

- a. Location:
- b. Telephone number:

Plan C:

- a. Location:
- b. Telephone number:

Here are some local resources that you can call:

[ORGANIZATION CONTACT INFO]

Resource 2-

Resource 3-

Resource 4-

What are some things that worry you about leaving? How can you plan for those things? Your advocate can help you brainstorm.

### ***Safety Plan for Shelter Living:***

Some things that will help you during your stay in shelter include: identification, birth certificates, car registration, social security card, medication, school and vaccination records, change of clothes, baby necessities, accessibility items. Do you have these things?

Living in shelter can be very stressful; are there any worries or questions that you have?

Do you have an order of protection?

Are you dealing with any legal issues related to your partner (custody, criminal charges, order of protection, divorce, etc.)? Do you have any worries, questions, or needs regarding these legal issues?

Do you need to communicate with your partner (e.g. for custody exchanges, personal items, court proceedings, or other reasons)? Your advocate can help you think of strategies to be safer when talking to or meeting with your partner.

Stalking is very common when people leave their abusive partners. Has your partner ever done anything that felt like stalking (e.g. following you, tracking you, reading emails or social media, excessive phone calls, going to your work or other places you frequent)?

Does your abuser have access to you via social media or other technology? Does he know your passwords, or do you share a phone plan?

Do you have children?

- This can be a very stressful time for parents and children, do you have any worries or questions about your children in shelter? (e.g. new schools, doctor's visits, worries about their emotions or behavior)
  
- Do you have a plan, or need help planning, for your children's schooling? (e.g. transportation, registration, alerting school officials to not let your partner pick up the children)

What are other things that worry you about being away from home? How can you plan for those things? Your advocate can help you brainstorm.


### Resources:

*When Battered Women Stay... Advocacy Beyond Leaving*, Jill Davies, 2008; <http://www.bcsdv.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BCS-Pub20.pdf>

*Assessing Social Risks of Battered Women*, Radhia A. Jaaber and Shamita Das Dasgupta, <http://vawnet.org/material/assessing-social-risks-battered-women>

*Safety Planning for People with Disabilities Preparing to Leave an Abusive Situation*, Disability Services ASAP (A Safety Awareness Program) of SafePlace, 2000

*Safety Plan for Victims of Domestic Violence*, <https://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/safety-plan-for-victims.pdf>



For more on needs assessment planning, see page 183

For tips on safety planning with children, see page 74

*Technology Safety Planning with Survivors*, NNEDV Safety Net Project, 2003,  
[http://www.ncdsv.org/images/NNEDV\\_TechSafetyPlan\\_CanadaEnglish\\_BC\\_2008.pdf](http://www.ncdsv.org/images/NNEDV_TechSafetyPlan_CanadaEnglish_BC_2008.pdf)

Domestic Violence Resource Center, On Safety Planning, <http://www.dvrc-or.org/safety-planning/>

*Assisting Survivors with Personal Privacy Management: Digital Technology and Safety Information Booklet*, PCAR, 2012, [http://www.ncdsv.org/images/pcadv-pcar\\_assistingsurvivorswithpersonalprivacymanagement\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ncdsv.org/images/pcadv-pcar_assistingsurvivorswithpersonalprivacymanagement_2012.pdf)