

Guidelines for Assessing Threats and Managing Risks in the Workplace



Risk management-based interventions are common in most workplaces. They are central to effective occupational health and safety prevention and response.

As the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) states:

In practical terms, a risk assessment is a thorough review at your workplace to identify those things, situations, processes, etc that may cause harm, particularly to people. After identification of risk enhancing factors is made, you evaluate how likely and severe the potential risk is, and then decides what strategies should be in place to effectively prevent or control the harm from happening.

The on-line “Risk Assessment” materials of the CCOHS give you useful information and guidance about risk assessment. Please consult these resources at www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/risk_assessment.html. You can help prevent workplace violence by using these tools as part of your workplace review.

In addition, the Bill 168 amendments legally require you, as an employer, to assess the risk of workplace violence.

Threat assessment, risk management and safety planning are processes that you can use to spot and deal well with the risk of workplace domestic violence. In this guide we give you the information and resources you need to respond well to workplace domestic violence.

Your legal duties – judging the risk of workplace domestic violence

The Ministry of Labour’s Health and Safety Guidelines (March 2010) make it clear that “The Occupational Health and Safety Act does not require an employer to assess the risk of domestic violence occurring in a workplace.”

These guidelines go on to state:

“However, an employer may wish to conduct a review of violent incidents or threats of violence from all sources. This may help the employer determine origins of workplace violence and the likelihood violence will occur at a particular workplace.”

Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act requires you to take every safety measure you can to protect workers from domestic violence may occur in the workplace and that a worker is likely to be injured [Section 32.0.4]. This is true in cases where you know or should know that this violence may take place.

Domestic violence may put the targeted worker at risk, and may also pose a danger to co-workers. The dynamics of violence are very different in an intimate relationship context than they are in other settings.

To protect your staff, you need to know how assess risk and handle these issues at work. To do this, you need special training and help from experts in the field.

Defining terms

Sometimes, 'threat assessment', 'risk assessment' and 'dangerousness assessment' mean the same thing. In this guide, we use 'risk assessment' when we discuss assessing risk for the entire workplace. We use 'threat assessment' when we talk about assessing the risk posed by a specific person.

Threat assessment means using tools and or professional judgement to assess the chance that domestic violence will be repeated and will get worse.

Lethality assessment is specifically intended to identify cases where domestic violence can lead to a person's death.

Risk management is a systematic approach to assess and respond to risk. It means, identifying, assessing, understanding, acting on and communicating risk issues among community partners who are working with the victim of abuse or the abuser.

Safety planning means developing an individualized plan for employees who are abused. A safety plan helps reduce the risks that they and their children may face. These plans include strategies to reduce the risk of physical violence or other harm caused by the abuser. They include strategies to maintain basic human needs such as income, housing, healthcare, food, child care and education for the children. The details of each plan vary according to the abused partner's situation – whether they are living with the abuser, separated from the abuser, planning to leave the abuser, or planning to stay with the abuser. The available resources also influence the plan.

You need to review and change risk management processes and safety plans as factors evolve. This is one way to make sure the employee stays safe.

How will a threat assessment help?

You need to do a threat assessment if you know that someone in your workplace is facing domestic violence.

A threat assessment helps the team create a realistic safety plan. It helps teach your workplace reps about domestic violence. It also gives them a way to communicate information about risk to those who need it.

A threat assessment can also help the justice system identify high-risk offenders and provide helpful information to develop appropriate treatment plans.

By doing a threat assessment, you are trying to find out how likely it is that violence will occur. By gathering and evaluating personality, historical, and situational information you can offer an informed opinion about the risk of violence in the future.

This process can serve as a preliminary screening of dangerousness and also guide the critical information gathering process when the assistance of a threat assessment specialist is required.

Signs of increased risk

There are many signs that tell us an employee may face more violence. The Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign tells us about these risks. The risk is greater when the:

- victim has just separated or is planning to leave the relationship
- victim is in a child custody dispute
- victim is involved in another intimate relationship (or is seen to be in another relationship by the threatening partner, especially if the other person is a co-worker or supervisor)
- threatening partner/ex-partner is going through major life changes, such as job, separation, depression
- threatening partner/ex-partner has access to weapons or has a history of abuse with the partner or others
- threatening partner/ex-partner has threatened to harm or kill the victim, children, pets, property or co-workers
- threatening partner/ex-partner has hit or choked the victim
- threatening partner/ex-partner has access to the victim or to their children
- threatening partner/ex-partner has threatened to kill themselves

People who fear for their lives and for their children's and co-workers' safety, are also more at risk. Some women are more at risk. These include women who:

- are under 25 years of age
- Aboriginal
- have a disability
- are visible minorities or new citizens
- are isolated
- have substance abuse issue
- are pregnant and have children from a previous partner
- have a common-law relationship with the abuser

Employers need to look beyond actual violent incidents or threats of violence, to recognize situations with a potential for domestic violence risk.

When is a person at risk of death?

The Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario reviews deaths that result from domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Death Review Committee (DVDRC) recommends ways to prevent these deaths. They also have found the most common reasons for death in these cases. People are killed when the:

- victim was separated from the person who killed her, or she was getting ready to separate from him
- couple had a history of domestic violence
- level of violence had been increasing
- abuser had shown signs of obsessive behaviour, including stalking the victim
- person who killed their spouse was depressed
- abuser had threatened to kill the victim

If you recognize any of these warning signs, you need to think that the victim may be at greater risk of serious harm or death. Don't assume that a victim is safe because she is planning to leave a violent relationship or has just left a violent relationship. A woman who leaves an abuser will be safer over the long term but is in great danger at that time. The most dangerous time for a domestic violence abuse victim is just before she separates, while she is leaving and for several months after she separates. Safety planning is vital during this period. See the NFF brochure on Safety Planning for more information.

The document, *Domestic Violence: Is There a Risk of Death? Practical Tips for Women Experiencing Violence, Neighbours, Friends, Families & Co-Workers* gives you more information about seeing and responding to lethal cases of domestic violence.

Doing a threat assessment

You need a threat assessment when someone says they are going to harm or kill a certain person. And you need a professional to put this assessment together. An expert has the experience and training to decide whether the threat is low, medium, or high. They will also know how best to keep everyone in the workplace safe. If you do not have experts in your workplace, find a specialist. You can ask the police for help.

To keep your employees safe, you need to know what to do before something happens. This means knowing what to do if you have a likely domestic violence issue at work. Who would you turn to if you needed a threat assessment done quickly? What resources would you need? What information will external specialists or other resources need to know in an urgent situation?

Think about setting up a Threat Management Team or a Risk Management Team that includes experts. You may have experts in your organization or you may need to hire outside experts. Train the people in your organization about special resources, the tools they can use, and how to access them. Your health and safety committees, Human Resource staff, managers, supervisors and union representatives will all need this training.

Set up policies that tell staff how to see risk factors and what to do when there is a risk of violence. These policies should let staff know when to call the police. Call 911 right away if the danger is about to happen.

Use threat assessment principles that the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP) and the Canadian Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (CATAP) support.

Consider an employer's duty to provide information to a worker and a supervisor's duty to advise a worker (Bill 168), including personal information, related to a risk of workplace violence from a person with a history of violent behaviour.

Accurate threat assessment depends on accurate information

To understand what the risk is, you need credible, current and relevant information. Gather information on the abuser. It is vital that you do not judge the information you get. Give the data to an expert. That person can conduct a threat assessment.

Here are questions that you can use to help you gather the data you need:

Does the abuser know where the victim works?

Does the abuser have a history of violence towards their current partner or others? Have they ever been arrested for violence?

Does the abuser have a history of substance abuse?

What threats has the abuser made? Have they prepared to carry out a violent plan?

Are more of these incidents happening?

Is the abuser angry, impulsive, mentally ill or depressed?

- Is the abuser facing more stress? Are there things happening in his life that makes him more desperate?
- Has the abuser breached a court order that includes probation or a restraining order?
- Does the abuser have access to weapons?
- Does the abuser have a military or law enforcement background? If so what was his specialty?
- Where does the abuser work? If he works for the same employer as his victim, do they work the same shift?
- How close is his workplace to the victim's?
- What vehicles does the abuser own or drive?
- What does the abuser look like? If you can, get a photo of this person.
- Do the couple have any upcoming anniversaries, birthdays, or court appearances?

Write down information about incidents, requests, notifications, and all responses. Include the reason why you responded and give as many details of the abuser as you can. You can include a description of the abuser, a photo and their vehicle information.

Obtain and update threat assessment tools appropriate to fit the skills and needs of your workplace. Work with experts as needed. For example, you might have the internal resources to gather or coordinate information on the offender / alleged offender but then liaise with police or a qualified threat assessment professional to have the threat assessment conducted and to get advice on appropriate responses or intervention strategies.

Threat assessment tools

There are about 24 spousal violence threat assessment tools used across Canada.

You may need to use a certain tool depending on the circumstances. Each tool has different strengths and uses.

Having access to several threat assessment tools can be confusing. It is a good idea to work with a skilled threat assessor who knows about threat assessment tools.

Prominent threat assessment experts have recommended using both the Danger Assessment Scale (DAS) and the WAVR-21 in a workplace setting. The DAS does not have broad applicability once domestic violence becomes part of the workplace violence scene, but using both instruments in conjunction with each other can provide greater incremental validity to both, and be helpful to the overall assessment.

The Danger Assessment Scale

The Danger Assessment tool is comprised of two parts: the first portion of the tool evaluates severity and frequency of abuse by providing the woman with a calendar of the previous year. The second portion of the tool is a 20-item instrument which includes a weighted scoring system to count yes/no responses of risk factors linked with intimate partner homicide.

You can be certified in using the Danger Assessment by successfully completing the post test for the Online Training Course. You will be able to download a certificate with your name on it, a results page that you can copy and use to put in case files for documentation, and the scoring system worksheet which includes the scoring system's danger level interpretation, personalized with your name, to more accurately determine the level of danger your victim is in.

For more information, please refer to the following website: <http://www.dangerassessment.org/WebApplication1>

Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk

The WAVR-21 (Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk) was developed by Dr. Stephen White and Dr. Reid Meloy. It is intended to be used by Professional Users, but serves to provide a general understanding or awareness about Workplace Violence also including Domestic Violence Risk. The use of the case intake and information form, and the WAVR-21 Short Form helps to orient Corporate Users to information they will need to gather to assist a Professional User Assessment, and the overall threat management process. The Short Form, which is an included part of the WAVR-21 package is a tool for quickly identifying and prioritizing data in threat cases.

The WAVR-21 and its manual can be obtained through

Specialized Training Services, Inc.,
PO Box 28181
San Diego, CA 92198
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info@specializedtraining.com

Risk management

Not all victims at high risk are in the justice system.

It is important that the public is aware of high risk cases. Public education can help friends, family and co-workers see risk and get someone help.

Threat assessment is the first step in risk management. Once high-risk offenders are identified, victims and perpetrators of domestic violence need the right services and programs. This includes:

- on-going monitoring and evaluating the level of risk;
- identifying risk management strategies and putting them in place;
- finding experts to help the victim build a safety planning process
- finding resources and intervention for the offender

The Make It Our Business Suggested Guidelines for Implementing Domestic Violence Security Measures provides ideas on how to manage risk once domestic violence has been identified.

The most effective way to deal with domestic violence cases is through coordinated responses. This way, communication is clear and consistent among everyone (including police, professional threat assessors, Violence Against Women workers, and health professionals). The result is a comprehensive and integrated community response to keep the victim and her coworkers safe.

You may also want to work with community resources to identify risk factors and respond to the risk of domestic violence. Strong working relationships can help everyone address crucial aspects of the situation together. An integrated plan includes actions and programs to address the abuser's violent behaviour. It also includes supports and programs to assist the victim and keep everyone safe.

Safety planning

Asking yourself these questions can help you build an effective safety plan for your employee:

Has the abuser threatened the employee at the workplace? Has he threatened to come to the workplace?
Does he know her location, schedule or shift?

Has the abuser threatened any of your staff? Does your staff or the threatened employee fear for their safety?

Has the abuser been following or coming up to staff?

How does the employee travel to work? Does she have a vehicle or travel by public transportation? Does she travel alone? Is the travel route between the employee's home and work safe? Is the employee's parking arrangement safe?

If the threatened employee has children, are they safe at school or in child care?

Does the employee know about safety planning at home, at work, in the community, at her children's school or daycare? Does the employee have a safety plan for her and her children? Does she want help creating a plan?

Does the employee need to use workplace resources to help her plan for her safety? (For example, she may need telephone and internet resources to find information which cannot be traced by her abuser, to keep documentation and personal effects in a safe place, and to get phone or email messages.)

Does the employee want help in learning how to "cover her tracks" when using email and internet resources on a home computer?

Does the workplace co-ordinator, Human Resources, supervisor, co-workers, and reception staff have the information they need to prevent an abuser from coming to the workplace?

Is there someone in the workplace who has emergency contact information for the employee? This includes any shelters or other places where she may stay.

Is the employee's work schedule flexible enough for her to attend to legal and medical appointments manage court appearances, take care of housing and child care without having to use unpaid leave?

What other information might security need to help protect the employee? How else can they help?

Have you considered putting a trusted supervisor in charge to arrange all contacts with the employee, receive all information and make referrals as needed to streamline the flow of information, and notification processes?

Your employee may need a safety plan for work. It will outline how you and your employee prepare for any violence. Each safety plan is unique. The most effective solutions respond to the victim's and co-workers' needs and preferences. They are based on what options and supports the workplace can provide. Each plan will have to be customized to make best use of available resources in the workplace and the community and to meet the needs of the employee and the employer.

For more detailed information about safety planning, read these guides:

- *Make It Our Business: Responding to Domestic Violence: Help for employers*
- NFF brochure on Safety Planning
- OHSCO Toolbox for Developing Workplace Violence and Harassment Policies and Programs. or
- *Make It Our Business Suggested Guidelines for Security Measures.*

Different needs, different approaches

Some employers conduct threat assessment for the victim (a work group, or the workplace in general) to help build a safety plan. Others provide safety planning tools and resources. Some refer the victim to community resources (police, shelters) or to the employer's EAP provider to develop a safety plan. Some employers use threat assessment to decide whether to increase or lower the level of safety and security measures taken. For example, they need to know if it is better to give the employee a safe parking spot or have someone walk her to and from her car.

Find out what resources exist in your community to help you with threat assessment and risk management. Build relationships with the people and the groups who can help you with this work. And develop plans and protocols for risk management before a crisis occurs.

This Guideline is part of a campaign of the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario.

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The views expressed herein are those of The Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children, at The University of Western Ontario and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Ontario.

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