



Physical Danger in Abusive Relationships

Men and women who batter or otherwise abuse their partners are dangerous. Those who misuse power to intimidate, confuse, entrap, or otherwise control or dominate their partners are not only capable of, but are also prone to escalate in their controlling and abusive behaviors over time. At any given moment, an abuser can repeat a pattern of physical violence or become physically violent for the first time. Under any number of circumstances, physical violence can reach the point where it results in serious injury or even death.

Research is being done to better understand and predict when a batterer will seriously injure or kill his/her partner. “The presence of certain risk factors in greater number and intensity are suggestive of potential for life threatening violence,”¹ but there is no way to accurately and consistently predict or prevent dangerous behavior. The best predictor of danger is, in fact, each individual person. Paying attention to feelings of fear or apprehension can provide information that is more pertinent and more reliable than any particular survey or study.²

Knowledge and insight about risk factors and the danger level of abusive relationships equips individuals to make choices that promote safety. Safe Place Ministries offers this *Quick Look* at the danger-in abusive relationships for educational purposes in hopes that potential victims, religious leaders, and friends and family members will become more aware and better able to protect themselves and others.

The following information related to risk factors is taken in part from the Santa Clara County Probation Department’s *Domestic Violence Lethality Risk Assessment*, and Barbara Hart’s *Assessing Whether Batterers Will Kill*.

- **History of violence against partner, children, or others.** A history of physical violence is one of the best predictors of future physical violence.

- **Recent escalation of physical or sexual violence, and or verbal threats.**

- **Threats of homicide or suicide.** The batterer (abuser) who has threatened to kill himself, his partner, the children, or her relatives must be considered extremely dangerous.

- **Fantasies of homicide or suicide.** The more the batterer has developed a fantasy about who, how, when, and/or where to kill, the more dangerous he may be. The batterer who has previously acted out part of a homicide or suicide fantasy may be invested in killing as a viable *solution* to his problems. As in suicide assessment, the more detailed the plan and the more available the method, the greater the risk.

- **Weapons.** When a batterer possesses weapons and has used them or has threatened to use them in the past in his assaults on the battered woman, the children, or himself, his access to those weapons increases his potential for lethal assault.

- **Ownership of the battered partner.** The batterer who says “Death before divorce!” or “You belong to me and will never belong to another!” may be stating his

fundamental belief that the woman has no right to life separate from him. A batterer who believes he is absolutely entitled to his female partner, her services, her obedience, and her loyalty, no matter what, is likely to be life-endangering.

- **Centrality of the partner.** A man who idolizes his female partner, or who depends heavily on her to organize and sustain his life, or who has isolated himself from all other community, may retaliate against a partner who decides to end the relationship.

- **Separation violence.** When a batterer believes that he is about to lose his partner, if he can’t envision life without her or if the separation causes him great despair or rage, he may choose to kill.

Battering by a partner is the leading cause of injury to women in the U.S.A between the ages of 15 and 45.

U.S. Surgeon General

Family violence kills as many women every five years as the total number of Americans who died in the Vietnam War.

American Medical Association

30-50% of all murders of women in America are committed by intimate partners.

The Domestic Violence Sourcebook

- **Depression.** When a batterer has been acutely depressed and sees little hope for moving beyond the depression, he may be a candidate for homicide and suicide. Research shows that many men who are hospitalized for depression have homicidal fantasies directed at family members.
- **History of drug/alcohol use**
- **Access to the battered woman and/or family members.** If the batterer cannot find her, he cannot kill her. If he does not have access to the children, he cannot use them as a means of access to the battered woman. Careful safety planning and police assistance are required for those times when contact is required; e.g., court appearances and custody exchanges.
- **Repeated outreach to law enforcement.** Prior calls to the police indicate elevated risk of life-threatening conduct. The more calls, the greater the potential danger.
- **Escalation of batterer risk.** A less obvious indicator of increasing danger may be the sharp escalation of personal risk undertaken by a batterer. When a batterer begins to act without regard to the legal or social consequences that previously constrained his violence, chances of lethal assault increase significantly.
- **Hostage taking.** Prohibiting movement, false imprisonment, or actual hostage taking.

If you marked even one risk factor, or if you have witnessed an increase in your partner's violence or in your sense of entrapment, we strongly urge you to consider the following options to help keep yourself safe:

1. Work with a Safe Place Ministries staff member or local domestic violence advocate to further assess the dangerousness of your relationship and to complete a safety plan for you and your children.
2. Locate or at least call the nearest secure shelter and become familiar with their services and admission procedures.
3. If you have reason to believe that you may be in imminent danger, seriously consider going into a secure shelter and/or filing for a Civil Protection Order (CPO).³
4. Inform your children and neighbors about what to do if you are physically attacked. Assign one or more people to call 911. Follow up with law enforcement and the criminal justice system if your batterer is charged.⁴
5. Ask victim service providers if there are other measures available to you to help keep you safe (a free cell phone or a special alarm program for high-risk situations).

“But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works.”

Psalm 73:28

Additional Resources

He Promised He'd Stop, Michael Groetsch.

The Gift of Fear, Gavin De Becker.

A Safe Place Ministries Quick Look—Protection Orders.

www.vaw.umn.edu/vawnet/lethality.htm

www.safeplaceministries.com/

¹ Santa Clara County Probation Department, *Domestic Violence Lethality Risk Assessment*.

² Gavin De Becker, *The Gift of Fear* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1999), pg. 77.

³ Protection orders do not guarantee safety. Each individual needs to learn about protection orders and decide if obtaining one would increase or decrease the likelihood of being harassed or harmed by an abuser.

⁴ Being charged with battery provides more protection for you and increases the likelihood that the batterer will be ordered into batterer treatment.