

By Susan J. Dansie

Lethality Assessment and Safety Planning

Screening and assessment are a special problem and a special opportunity facing those of us who work with battered women or perpetrators of family violence. How do we effectively assess who is at risk, and what can be done after the initial assessment? Two approaches, lethality assessment and safety planning, are discussed in this article.

The time when a woman is attempting to leave an abusive relationship is the most lethal, with the severity of violence and the potential for being killed increased fivefold during or after leaving the batterer.¹ When working with families caught in the cycle of violence, workers from many disciplines come into contact with the victims or batterers. Assessment at this time can help save lives. Normally, assessment is done through an interview with the victim to assess the potential lethality of her batterer and to develop a safety plan for her and the children. The use of both tools not only provides information applicable to intervention, but also serves to give the victim a sense of empowerment in being able to assess her own position and plan accordingly with a sense of self-confidence and control.

WHAT IS LETHALITY ASSESSMENT?

Lethality assessment is the attempt to identify the circumstances when a batterer is most dangerous by evaluating the batterer's beliefs and patterns of violence, coercion, and control. A variety of approaches toward lethality assessment are available and appear to have a lot in common. The following information was developed by Barbara J. Hart, Esq. in *Assessing Whether Batterers Will Kill*.² Such an interview should be conducted solely with the battered woman. The assessment looks at a number of predictors. The underlying assumption is that the higher the number of predictors, the higher the potential for the batterer to commit a homicide or engage in potentially lethal behaviors.

Predictors of lethality include:

- **Threats of suicide or homicide**, including killing himself, the woman, children or relatives;
- **Fantasies of homicide or suicide** in the guise of fantasizing "who, how, when and/or where to kill;"
- **Weapons owned by the perpetrator** who has threatened to use them or has used them in the past (the use of guns is a strong predictor of homicide);
- **Feelings of "ownership" of the woman;**
- **"Centrality" to the woman** (idolizing and extreme dependence);
- **Separation from the woman** (this is an extremely dangerous time when perpetrators make the decision to kill);
- **Dangerous behavior increases in degree** with little regard for legal or social consequences;
- **Hostage-taking;**
- **Depression (acute);** and
- **Repeated calls to the police.**

In the lethality assessment developed by Fernando Medeiros of Common Purpose, Inc.,³ if the batterer fits into one of the following three profiles he or she is considered to be highly lethal.

• **The obsessed perpetrator:**

cannot tolerate separation from the woman; is jealous; monitors activities and movements; threatens to kill or harm her if she leaves or attempts to leave; is likely to stalk, kill or injure his partner.

• **The sadistic perpetrator:**

is vengeful; has a bizarre, depersonalized character; treat the woman as if she is not a person; has patterns of violence which include inflicting severe pain or torture; moved to violence without any warning or apparent provocation; does not usually have a criminal record; would be employed or have a prestigious position in the community.

• **The hyper-violent perpetrator:**

takes offense easily; is set off by limit-setting or questioning of his manhood; might have a criminal record with a lot of violence in his background; has a long and adversarial relationship with those who represent authority.

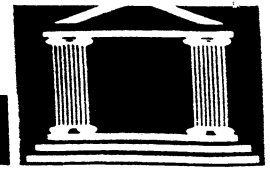
CAUTIONS ON LETHALITY ASSESSMENT

It is important to interview the battered woman separately from her batterer because interviewing her in his presence may endanger her. Often a battered woman may not speak truthfully with the threat of continuing danger presented by the presence of the batterer.

The following cautions on assessment are taken entirely from the text of *Point/counterpoint: Lethality and dangerousness assessments* (see endnote 4). At this time, lethality assessments are more an art than a science and cannot be considered precise by any means. They are not a tool for "certain prediction but rather one for risk assessment and safety planning or intervention." Some in the field are concerned that lethality assessments may present battered women an advocate with the "false hope" of limited risk which may cause battered women to not take a serious enough approach toward ensuring their safety. Conversely, there is a feeling that the assessments might raise fears among line workers in the social service fields to a point that interventions reach a "unrealistic and counterproductive level."⁴

WHAT IS SAFETY PLANNING?

Safety planning means systematically looking at what is happening around a battered woman, and what her options are. It is a tool devised to give her a specific plan to use in times when violence begins to escalate or erupt. Safety planning is also a process which is used to help a battered woman devise a plan to leave, and keep the batterer away from her and her children. Safety plans are usually developed with the assistance of an advocate, but the major input on the specific plan comes directly from the victim herself. Such plans should be tailored to each woman's situation. The safety planning process not only addresses options for protecting the battered woman and her children, but also allows her to see what takes place before a violent episode with her batterer.



The process can be used to assist her in developing a plan for getting protection orders, or for removing her batterer from the home. The plan helps to ensure her and her children's safety in the event of a violent episode in which she must act immediately. They are also useful in the event that the batterer has been removed from the home but still poses a real threat.

It is preferable that a plan be developed and available prior to a violent episode. Such a tool frequently will help enhance a woman's self-confidence and give her a feeling that she has resources at hand to assist her in leaving the abusive situation.

Components of a safety plan may include:

- ascertaining how to stay safe during the violent incident such as a plan for getting out of the house, where her purse and keys are, and where an extra set of keys is hidden;
- deciding who can be told about the violence and will call the police if they hear any suspicious noises coming from the woman's house;
- teaching children to use the phone to call the police or fire department;
- developing code words to be used with friends and family if the woman is in immediate danger;
- planning for where to go if she must leave the house;
- having access to clothes, valuables, licenses, birth certificates, legal papers, money, bankbooks, credit cards, etc.;
- listing important phone numbers and keeping them readily available.

Some safety-enhancing measures a woman can take after the batterer has been removed from the home include:

- changing the locks on doors and windows, installing outside lighting, and installing metal doors and security systems that might include bars on the windows or an electronic monitoring device;
- planning for an escape from second floors, and having full availability of smoke alarms and extinguishers in the case of fire;
- teaching the children who and how to call if they are taken by the batterer;
- letting those who care for children know who is allowed to have contact with them;
- ascertaining where to get copies of protection orders in the instance the original is destroyed, and developing a plan of what to do if the batterer violates the protection order.



allowing for a route or time where she would not run into the batterer.

A plan for paying attention to the battered woman's emotional health may be addressed by the following:

- developing a plan for what she can do if she feels she wants to return to a potentially abusive situation;
- developing a plan for when she needs to communicate with her batterer either in person or by phone;
- compiling a list of books, support groups or workshops, and actions she can take to strengthen herself when she is feeling down.⁵

Predicting which batterers will escalate their violence to a lethal level and planning for the safety of women and children are an inexact art, yet are critical in reducing domestic violence homicides. Assessment tools vary depending upon preference. Elements of the safety plan, necessarily, vary from individual to individual. Regardless of the type of assessment tool or the elements of the safety plan, court workers and advocates have a compelling mandate to look at who murders and how they murder. This information may save lives, while providing battered women with a concrete opportunity to assess their own position and adopt a plan of action which provides a sense of self-confidence and control.

What is Available?

Further information on lethality assessment and safety planning is available through the Family Violence Project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges at 1-800-527-3223.

Safety on the job and in public for a battered woman may be enhanced by the following:

- deciding who at work to tell about the situation;
- having phone calls at work screened;
- developing a plan for where to go when leaving work, and having a plan for what to do if she runs into problems on the drive home;
- looking at what to do if she uses public transit;
- paying attention to where and when she shops and banks.

1. Massachusetts Department of Social Services Domestic Violence Unit. (1995). *Domestic Violence Protocol for CPS* (Protocol #PR-95-002). Boston, Massachusetts.
 2. Hart, B. (1990). *Assessing Whether Batterers Will Kill*. Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Reading, Pennsylvania.
 3. Massachusetts Department of Social Services Domestic Violence Unit. *op cit*.
 4. Hart, B.J., & Hamberger, L.K. (1994). Point/counterpoint: Lethality and dangerousness assessments. *Violence Update*, 4(10), 7-10.
 5. Office of the City Attorney. (1990). *Personalized Safety Plan*. San Diego, California.

Hart, B.J. and Stuehling, J. (1992). Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Reading, Pennsylvania.