

ASSESSING DANGEROUSNESS IN MEN WHO ABUSE WOMEN

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(Based on sections of *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*)

A considerable body of research has accumulated about predicting dangerousness in men who batter. The work of Jacquelyn Campbell, Neil Websdale, and David Adams has been particularly important and insightful in this regard.

Abuser programs, other professionals, and abused women themselves have the need to assess the potential that a particular abuser has to kill or dangerously harm his current or former partner and any children that are involved. A considerable number of risk factors have emerged that have predictive value in making such an assessment.

Danger assessment for men who abuse women is still far from being an exact science, however. There are documented killings by men whose previous profile did not make them appear to have the potential for such severe or cruel violence. Therefore all abused women should be encouraged to work with a trained advocate on creating a safety plan. Women should also be encouraged to take seriously intuitions that they have about the dangerousness of a partner or former partner, even if he does not exhibit a large number of the risk factors listed below.

Factors that should be taken particularly seriously include:

- The woman has a strong “gut” sense that the man could kill her or her children, or could carry out a serious and dangerous assault against any of them or against himself.
- He is extremely jealous and possessive. This characteristic becomes even more worrisome when he appears to be obsessive, constantly keeping her at the center of his thoughts and appearing to be unable to conceive of life without her. He has, for example, made statements such as, “If I can’t have you, nobody will.”
- He has a history of severe or very frequent violence toward her, or toward other individuals such as past partners.
- He follows her, monitors her whereabouts, uses high-tech means to keep tabs on her, or stalks her in other ways. He knows where she lives and works, knows names and addresses of her friend or relatives, or is in very familiar with her daily routines.
- She is taking steps to end the relationship, or has already done so.
- He was violent to her during a pregnancy.
- There are stepchildren involved.

- He has threatened to kill her or to hurt her severely, has strangled her, or has threatened her with a weapon (including making verbal reference to using a weapon, even if he did not actually brandish it). He has threatened to kill the children or the whole family.
- He has access to weapons and/or he is familiar with their use.
- He is depressed, suicidal, or shows signs of not caring what happens to him. He has, for example, threatened to kill himself if she leaves him.
- He is unemployed.
- He isn't close to anyone, and no current relationships with friends or relatives are important to him.
- He has a significant criminal history and/or he has a history of using violence or threatening violence against other people.
- He abuses alcohol or drugs heavily, especially if his habits involve daily or nearly daily intoxication.
- He has been violent to children.
- He has killed or in other ways been violent to pets, or has used other terror tactics.
- He uses pornography heavily and/or has a history of perpetrating sexual violence or degradation against his partner or others.
- He has exhibited extreme behaviors when his current partner or past partners have made attempts to leave him.

The current state of knowledge does not make it possible to create a formula from the above factors to create low, moderate, and high-risk categories of risk. A particularly extreme presentation in even one of the above categories can be a basis for serious concern. Professionals, abused women, and others attempting to use this list of factors, need to apply their findings with common sense and intuition. When an abusive man appears particularly dangerous based on the above factors or for other reasons, professionals involved with him should inform the abused woman as soon as possible (more on this below). They should also inform appropriate police departments, any mental health or child protection professionals involved with the man, and anyone else who might be in a position to prevent a dangerous assault from taking place. Abuser programs and other professionals working directly with them should inform him that they are concerned that he may commit a serious or lethal assault, and should try to persuade him to commit himself to a psychiatric hospital, substance abuse detox, or other facility that could contain him and persuade him not to become violent.

An abused woman should of course be informed when the man is showing a worrisome pattern of the above factors, or extreme responses in even one or a few factors. The woman should be encouraged to participate in strategic safety planning. A strategic safety plan can include such

elements as:

- Planning different escape routes from her house
- Hiding spare car keys and important documents (birth certificates, health cards, bank cards) in places where she could grab them and leave quickly
- Varying her daily routine, including the routes she typically takes to get from one place to another
- Setting code words with friends, and with her children, which indicate that there is an emergency, and plan how they are to respond if she says the code word
- Opening a secret bank account
- Informing people at her work of the potential danger
- Informing friends and relatives of the potential danger
- Involving her children in creating a safety plan (see my article “Safety Planning With Children of Abused Women” on this website)
- Staying away strictly from drugs or alcohol herself to make sure that her judgment is never impaired, and seeking substance abuse treatment for herself if necessary
- Advising the local police department of the risk to her, including any past threats or violence, and asking what special services or protections might be available to her

These are just a few examples of the numerous safety strategies she can put into place with the help of an abuse specialist to increase her safety. She can call an abuse hotline and develop a safety plan without even providing her name or telephone number, ensuring her complete privacy. If she can go to an abused women's program and meet with someone face to face, all the better. (For more information on safety planning, see the book *Safety Planning With Battered Women* by Eleanor Lyon, Jill Davies, and Diane Monti-Catania, from Sage Publications).

If she is frightened of her abusive partner it is important for her to make a safety plan *even if she does not plan to leave him at this point*. If she senses that he has a capacity for frightening violence, she should start planning *now* for how she will keep herself and her children safe should a dangerous situation arise in the future. Some psychologically abused women feel confident that their partners would never escalate to violence or threats. However, my experience is that most abusive men - though not all - do become physically frightening sooner or later, even if they never carry through with using violence. It makes sense for every abused woman to spend some time considering how she will respond if the unexpected happens.