

Assessing Lethal and Extremely Dangerous Behavior

Abusive relationships often become more violent over time. While it is impossible to predict with any degree of certainty when relationships will escalate to lethal violence, researchers have identified some common factors. Lack of the following circumstances does not necessarily indicate that violence will not become lethal. Abused women and advocates should always use extreme care in planning for safety and should rely on their own instincts in determining appropriate responses to violent situations. Advocates and other professionals can, however, help women assess the risk their perpetrators pose to them.

Lethality Assessment Factors

- Threats of Suicide or Murder: In the vast majority of cases where women are killed, the perpetrator has first threatened her life or his own. A suicide threat should be taken very seriously. In many cases, men murder their wives and children, and then commit suicide. The more specific a threat, the more seriously it should be viewed.
- Availability of Weapons: A risk of lethal violence has also been associated with the batterer's possession of or access to weapons, the use of weapons or threats of such use in prior incidents and escalation of the violence in frequency or severity.
- Controlling and Jealous Behavior: A risk of lethal violence is associated with an increase in controlling or jealous behavior. Such behavior can include following her, demanding to know where she is at all times or restricting her movement.
- Use of Drugs and Alcohol: Alcohol may reduce inhibitions to use lethal violence or prevent a batterer from adequately understanding the lethal nature of the force he is using.
- Depression: The mental health of the man can indicate his propensity for lethal violence. If a man has lost hope and "given up" he is more likely to cause serious injury or death.
- Batterer's Isolation: Studies indicate that the isolation of the batterer and the extent to which he is dependent on the battered woman correlate with the use of lethal violence.
- Escalation of Violence: Studies also indicate that escalation of the violence in frequency or severity can also indicate increased dangerousness.
- End of the Relationship: Research indicates that the most dangerous time for a battered woman is after she ends the relationship. In the United States, some statistics show that women who leave their batterers are at a 75% greater risk of being killed by their batterers than those who stay. It is very important for a battered woman to make her own decision to leave a relationship because she is in the best position to assess the potential danger.
- Choking or Strangling: Legal professionals have identified the abuser's prior "choking" or "strangling" of the victim as an indicator of extreme danger.

While an advocate can help a battered woman understand the choices and options that are available to her, only the woman herself can make the decision about what course of action is best for her. Although lethality assessments can be useful, she is the best judge of the danger her batterer poses to her.

Modified from Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights