

# 20 things we can learn about risk through engaging the adult user of domestic, family and sexual violence

## ... but first, 8 fundamentals



Understanding and assessing the risk posed by a user of violence takes into account as much of the following as possible:

- the victim-survivor's own views about the level and nature of risk (if she is worried for her safety, that usually reflects significant risk)
- the presence of evidence-based risk factors, including those associated with higher lethality risk
- any available observations of the perpetrator's language and articulated thinking, attitudes and beliefs, emotional states and behaviour
- information from partner agencies and other sources
- your and other workers' professional judgements about the risk.



Risk assessment is an ongoing, dynamic process of analysis that continuously informs both safety planning and risk management.

Consider both the seriousness of risk, and the degree of imminence. Risk can be serious even if the threat that the user of violence poses to the victim-survivor does not appear to be imminent.

Risk can be serious in terms of high risk of lethality or severe injury, and / or in terms of degree of social entrapment and impacts on victim-survivor human rights and freedom/space for action, and impacts on family functioning, child development and wellbeing.



Risk assessment assists us to consider:

- How likely is the perpetrator to continue to use DFSV despite the presence of service system responses that attempt to place constraints on his ability, inclination or choices to do so?
- What behaviours is he at risk of using or escalating?
- Are we doing enough to assist the victim-survivor in managing risk and in attempting to build safety for her and her family?
- Are we doing things that might be making the risk worse?
- Who do we need to share information with to understand more, and/or to inform others, about the risk?



Ensure you are familiar with the risk assessment and risk management framework in your region or jurisdiction.

Is there a common risk framework that the specialist DFSV sector encourages appropriate services to use?

Does this spell out different responsibilities and tools for different types of services? In identifying, assessing and managing risk?



Be familiar with resources focusing on users of DFSV who pose a serious risk of causing severe harm.

See, for example:

- the Homicide Timeline <https://homicidetimeline.co.uk/>
- ANROWS pathways to intimate partner homicide <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/pathways-to-intimate-partner-homicide/>
- Practice suggestions for identifying and responding to male perpetrators of DFSV who pose a risk of severe harm (available if accessing through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



Practitioner self-reflection is central to learning about risk when engaging an adult user of violence. Ask yourself – am I:

- open to the likelihood that the adult is using violent and controlling behaviours (far) worse than what he is disclosing?
- so focused on trying to change his behaviour that I am missing opportunities to learn about and respond to risk and harm?
- missing something about risk because of my attitudes, approach, sympathy for him, or his skill in impression management?
- balanced between optimism and pessimism in my engagement?



Users of violence often under-report their violent and controlling behaviours. They often aim to present themselves in a positive light, justify their harmful behaviours through “I’m the victim here!” thinking, find it hard to face up to their behaviours due to shame, and/or deliberately lie about their behaviour. We often therefore can’t conduct a complete risk assessment solely through engaging the user of violence... but direct assessment with him can contribute towards a multi-pronged risk assessment.



Every year, thousands of women who are the victim-survivor to a male partner's use of coercive controlling DFSV are misidentified as the perpetrator by first responders and other services.

Become familiar with predominant aggressor assessment guides and tools.

When we determine that misidentification has occurred, informing other services of this can be crucial. The misidentification of women as perpetrators is a common occurrence in domestic homicides against them.

## ... and now, 20 things we can learn about risk



Reliable information about evidence-based risk factors (EBRFs) for heightened lethality risk is most likely to arise through victim-survivor disclosures, to your or to other services.

However, highly valuable information relating to some EBRFs can be obtained through engaging the user of violence, to augment information obtained elsewhere.

At the very least, you might be able to identify factors such as depression, substance misuse, unemployment, status of his intimate relationship, partner pregnancy or presence of a young infant(s) in the household, recent separation, etc. through engaging him.

He might be likely to deny other EBRFs, however, relating to his recent or historical serious harm-causing behaviours, coercive control and threats.

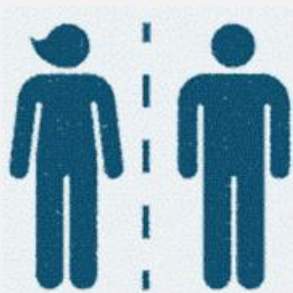


Seek to identify any escalation and changes in EBRFs that he is willing to talk about or provide indirect indications of.

Has his use of substances been increasing recently? If he is depressed or experiences a mental health condition, is this getting worse?

Does he seem to be putting more energy and effort into monitoring the victim-survivor, or in other controlling tactics (as far as you can tell)?

There might or might not be an escalation in his use of physical violence (or he might never have used physical violence), but escalating coercive controlling tactics, and/or worsening mental health, increased substance use or changes in other EBRFs, might indicate significantly increased risk.



Listen out for information about evidence-based risk factors focusing on the victim-survivor's circumstances or other situational variables.

Through the normal course of holistic assessment, you might find that his partner has separated from him, or that she is pregnant or they have an infant in the family.

You might also be able to determine other situational variables that indicate his partner's isolation or lack of power, through asking incidental questions about their relationship and family circumstances – for example, if she is a recent migrant, is her family here or overseas? If she is a First Nations woman, where is her country and does she have kin living locally?



Engage in **double listening** – learning (or making informed guesses) about the victim-survivor's situation and resistance to the violence by extrapolating from the perpetrator's accounts of her responses (filtered through his "I'm the victim here!" lens).

For example, if the user of violence says "She stood between me and the door, I tried to take a time out, but she wouldn't let me go..." we can generate ideas about what she is currently prepared to do to resist his controlling tactics, and what her resistance might mean for acute risk (that is, his suppression of her resistance).

If he says "She needs a psychiatrist, she's having panic attacks all the time now!" it could indicate that she is becoming increasingly frightened of him.



Listen out for indicators that might suggest that the victim-survivor is facing vulnerability circumstances. Identical perpetrator behaviours can pose a different degree of risk depending on the circumstances of the survivor.

For example, a pattern of emotional violence can cause greater harm to a victim-survivor experiencing depression than one who is feeling more robust.

A physical assault can pose a higher risk to a victim-survivor with an ABI.

A perpetrator's systems abuse tactics are likely to have a greater impact if the victim-survivor has a criminal record.

Tactics to undermine the mother-child relationship might have an even worse impact on a child who is experiencing a developmental delay or where the user of violence has isolated them from extended family supports.



Ask him questions about aspects of day-to-day life in his relationships and family, and stretch a general psychosocial assessment, to attempt to reveal possible signposts to his use of coercive controlling behaviours.

For example, exploring his financial situation can reveal if he owns the family home and how decisions around money are made.

Exploring his partner's psychosocial context can reveal his attitudes towards her extended family or friends, and the possibility of his use of social control.

A focus on his children might reveal any tactics being used to control how his partner parents or to control particular aspects of his children's daily life.



Listen out for other power advantages that the user of violence might have in relation to the victim-survivor, in addition to gender, that he can either deliberately make use of or otherwise benefit from to control and entrap.

For example, dating adults much younger than him; using his extended family network to arrange a forced marriage or to inflict honour-based violence; if his partner is a First Nations woman and he has white privilege, taking advantage of systemic racism to manipulate the service system to view her as an 'incapable mother'; taking advantage of a partner's disability to use sexualised violence as she is financially and practically dependent on him; using image-based abuse to humiliate a recently separated partner who did not want aspects of their gender identity or sexual orientation to be known in particular contexts.





Listen out for indicators that the user of violence is attempting to manipulate service systems – child welfare, family law, mental health, police, etc. – to portray himself as the victim and his ex/partner as the aggressor or as unreliable, mentally ill or an unfit parent.

You might be able to discern this through the tone of his narratives about his ex/partner, how he presents her/him/them to you.

Is he trying to strongly convince you of something negative about them?

Does it appear that he is trying to convince other services of the same?

Try to open up a space to hear his narratives about her, her actions, and about the situation he is in – while at the same time, attempting to minimise collusion so that he doesn't come away thinking that you agree with his pathologising and hostile narratives.



If the user of violence has children, and/or has a co-parenting role, create space for him to talk about his co-parenting arrangements – while trying to minimise collusion with his violence-supporting narratives and beliefs.

How does he see his access to his children? If his access has been restricted, who does he blame? How strong is the blame?

Does he seem to have a sense of entitlement or ownership of his children?

What are his views of his ex/partner as a parent? Is he mostly critical of her parenting? Can he genuinely name positive qualities about her as a parent?

Does he appear to understand how vital the quality of the relationship is between her and their children? Does it appear that he might be doing things to undermine these relationships?



Related, it might be appropriate to explore the degree to which he understands his children, and how he sees his role as a parent. Try to do so in relation to each individual child, rather than to his children as a whole.

Much can be learnt about his attitudes towards his children, knowledge of appropriate child development, his preferred parenting strategies, how he manages his own difficult feelings as a parent, and what he models to his children, through the use of father-affirming, positive questioning.

By starting with a focus on healthy fathering, you can then move towards a focus on what it looks like when he isn't being his 'best Dad'.

You can also obtain important assessment information just by how he responds to your positive questions about healthy fathering, and the attitudes and beliefs that are implicit between the lines of what he says.

For guidance, see **Three anchors model for engaging abusive fathers**, and **Engaging fathers who perpetrate violence and control** (available through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



There are certain 'characteristics' of some perpetrators that suggest serious risk to victim-survivors. You might be able to discern the presence of any one or more of these through the adult's narratives or from other sources:

- heightened "she has done me over!" thinking, blames her excessively, clear or thinly veiled hostility towards her
- substantial dependency, "I can't live without her"
- heightened possessive jealousy
- desperation, nothing more to lose, major identity loss, hopeless about his future, his life deteriorating
- revengeful, "I won't let her win!"; "I won't let some other fella parent *my* children!" – fixated on his rights in a way that makes her invisible
- views intimate relationships mainly as a means to obtain/coerce/force domestic and emotional labour, status, financial and sexual benefits
- very disparaging about her parenting, says the kids are better off with her
- highly narcissistic and attacks others to avoid experiencing shame
- clear misogynistic / male supremacist beliefs and practices
- sadist sense of enjoyment in inflicting suffering



Related, we can listen out for warning signs in what the user of violence says that suggests he might be stepping into posing a serious risk.

For example, anything that he says about understanding how men can be 'driven' (according to his violence-supporting worldview) towards engaging in particular severe acts. Or indications that he is giving up on his efforts to try to control his ex/partner and is increasingly focused on 'making her pay'. Or that he is feeling increasingly hopeless about his life and his future, and that the victim-survivor has 'stripped' his life away from him. Etc.

See the resource **Practice suggestions for identifying and responding to male perpetrators of DFSV who pose a risk of severe harm** (available through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



**Threats and inferences of suicide by users of violence are significant evidence-based risk factors for serious outcomes of DFSV. A threat or inference of suicide can reflect a genuine intent to suicide. It can also be used by adults perpetrating violence as a deliberate tactic of coercive control. Sometimes both intents occur simultaneously. Regardless of the underlying intent, threats or inferences of suicide should always be taken seriously.**

**Periodically screen for whether an assessment of suicide risk is required, especially if there are significant changes in the individual's circumstances, presentation, and/or factors common to both DFSV and suicide risk** (see <https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-professionals-working-adults-using-family-violence/responsibility-3> - scroll down to the link to the resource Recognising suicide risk in the context of adult people using violence)

**Internet search for WWP AC 23: Workshop 6 "Suicide Prevention in high-risk, high-harm domestic abuse perpetrators" for an excellent and highly practical webinar on identifying and responding to suicide risk amongst adult users of DFSV.**



**Explore aspects of the person's identity that are important to him/them. What meaning does he have in his life independent of the victim-survivor, or that is not reliant on her?**

**Has he experienced identity loss, or now has a big vacuum in his life, because of responses to his violent and controlling behaviour by the victim-survivor (e.g., separating from him to try to become safe) or by authorities (e.g., police and courts placing restrictions on his access to his children), or due to other consequences (e.g., loss of a job, or of reputation or status)?**

**See the resource **Case planning for adults who perpetrate DFV** for details on how to respond to identity loss** (available if accessing through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)



**New or changed circumstances can represent acute spikes in risk. Examples are numerous, the following just a sample:**

- the perpetrator's substance misuse or mental health worsening
- the victim-survivor separates from him, or in other ways increases her resistance to his violence & control and attempts to regain some freedom
- the perpetrator incensed about facing court
- losing a family law case that he expected to win
- losing a job or other benefits as a consequence of his use of violence



**In addition to monitoring for new or changed circumstances, explore the meaning that the user of violence makes out of them. The meaning he makes out of the new or changed circumstance mediates the significance for risk.**

**The influence of a new or changed circumstance can also depend on perpetrator 'characteristics' as outlined previously. For example, for a user of violence who struggles with possessive jealousy, his ex-partner re-partnering or dating for the first time since separation can represent a big spike in risk.**

**Given what you know about the user of violence, and about other users of violence who share broadly similar circumstances, characteristics and behaviours, anticipate upcoming events that might 'trigger' escalating risk.**



Protection orders, corrections orders, bail conditions and other orders have mixed success in enhancing safety for victim-survivors. To assess how much an order might or might not help to build safety, and to motivate compliance with the conditions of the order, explore the following when you are engaging with a user of violence who has a current order:

- The perpetrator's knowledge of the conditions of the order, and his attitude towards the conditions
- His understanding of the consequences of breaching conditions, and whether he believes these consequences would actually be administered
- Degree to which perceived consequences would actually act as a deterrent
- Any other motivations that matter to him for not contravening the order
- The likelihood that these reasons and motivations would exert an influence on his decision-making during times when he might be tempted to contravene the order.



If the adult user of violence is participating in a DFSV behaviour change program or an alternative safe and appropriate intervention, his mere participation and even completion of the program is not in itself an indicator of change. Outcomes vary substantially. Some men attempt to weaponise their participation in a program to the disadvantage of their ex/partner.

See the resource **Perpetrator intervention program completion certificates are dangerous** <https://www.respect.org.uk/resources/79-perpetrator-intervention-program-completion-certificates-are-dangerous> for a highly useful focus on intermediate indicators you should be looking for from participation in a program, to determine if the user of violence is possibly on track to become safer for current and/or future intimate partners and family members.

Obtain the adult's consent to share information about where he is at in terms of these indicators with other services (depending on your jurisdiction's information sharing laws, his consent might not be required if risk is serious).



**Unmet complex needs can significantly contribute towards risk. Substance misuse, mental health struggles, gambling harm and housing insecurity might not only increase the risk of injury-causing violence, but also become further 'reasons' for the adult's choices to use coercive controlling tactics.**

**A significant (minority) proportion of adult users of DFSV have a cognitive disability or impairment, which adds to the complexity.**

See the resource **Case planning for adults who perpetrate DFV** referred to previously for details on understanding and responding to complex needs, particularly in relation to substance misuse and mental health problems.



Many, but not all (or even most) adult users of DFSV have a complex trauma background. Some also face constant precarity due to the ongoing experience of structural and systemic violence directed to their minoritised community.

Most adult users of DFSV have skills in emotional regulation, at least to a degree. They choose not to draw upon their existing skills in some contexts, however. Instead they decide to use violent and controlling behaviours to achieve particular outcomes based on their violence-supporting narratives and underlying gendered beliefs.

Some adult users of violence with a complex trauma background, however, genuinely lack emotional regulation skills, or at least these skills are not very strong. In addition to a gendered component where they use violence in intimate relationships and family contexts, they might have a history of more generalised violence in other settings.

Understanding a client's trauma background can be an important part of assessing risk, and in responding to him in a humanising way. See the resource **Working with adult users of DFV with a trauma background** for details (available if accessing through a linkedin account from the Featured section of <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodney-vlais/>)