**Practice example of conducting preliminary safety planning with a client who is causing DFV harm regarding his DFV behaviour: A hypothetical worker-client exchange for practitioners without specialisation in DFV**

**Brett Badger and Rodney Vlais  
July 2021**

The following is an example of how to approach safety planning during a session in which the practitioner has engaged the client about his use of domestic and family violence (even if the client’s behaviour isn’t named as such).

Safety planning regarding how the client can prevent or stop himself from making choices to use DFV is difficult. Particularly for clients who are only at the very start of a journey towards taking responsibility for their use of violence, it’s likely that your attempts to safety plan with him in this respect will achieve only very modest outcomes. However, it is important to do what you can do, within the limits of your role and within what’s possible given that you do not have specialisation in engaging DFV perpetrators.

This script demonstrates a few things that many practitioners without such specialisation can do to at least make a start on some preliminary safety planning considerations. It is important to enable enough time in the session to do so – this is not something that can be left to (literally) the last minute or two of the session.

If you have a strong background in using CBT or CBT-related approaches towards helping clients reduce their use of problematic behaviours (e.g., AoD overuse) or to help them manage their mental health, you might be able to go further than the use of the types of safety strategies outlined below. If you would like guidance on how to adapt your existing CBT skills towards assisting your clients to interrupt the chains of thinking, body signs, feelings and behaviours that form part of their choices to use DFV, see pages 64-78 and 126-139 of the practice guide *Engaging Perpetrators of Domestic Violence: Practical Techniques for Early Intervention* by Kate Iwi and Chris Newman, published in 2015 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Remember that safety planning with the client is only one part of a risk management approach. In general, the most important things that you can do to contribute towards the safety of those experiencing your client’s use of DFV concerns the steps you take after and in-between sessions with your client: obtaining guidance from your team leader or supervisor, obtaining guidance through secondary consultations with specialist services, sharing information about risk with agencies as appropriate, and other forms of multi-agency collaboration to help manage risk.

There is a very important difference here between a *safety plan*, that you develop with your client, and a *risk management plan*, which you work on behind the scenes and that you don’t show to your client. A risk management plan focuses on the broader range of actions that you can take, collaboratively with other services, to manage the risk that the client poses to those affected by his use of DFV.

Key risk management actions that can form part of a risk management plan include:[[1]](#footnote-1)

* strategies to respond to the immediate risk presented by the person using violence to adult and child victim survivor/s, or others (such as identified third parties)
* responding to any immediate self-harm risk presented by the person using violence to themselves
* information sharing for the purpose of coordinating and managing risk with other professionals and services, including with those who might be able to reach out to the victim survivor/s
* supporting the person using violence to address their presenting needs and circumstances, ensuring that responses support the goal of risk management
* developing a safety plan with the person using violence that encourages them to seek help, that stabilises aspects of their life, and that interrupts their use of violence and reduces their risk
* talking to the person using violence about options that create safety, including accommodation options, and connections to relevant services, including referral to a specialist DFV service, targeted community or culturally specific services
* ongoing encouragement for further engagement with your own service or other services to increase opportunities to monitor risk over time and service connection.

Some excellent resources have recently been published in Victoria to assist a wide range of services without specialisation in DFV to respond to clients who are using DFV. These include resources to assist in the development of safety plans and risk management plans, and are located at [www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-professionals-working-adults-using-family-violence](http://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-professionals-working-adults-using-family-violence)

The *Intermediate Risk Management* practice guide, for example, contains guidance and templates (see the appendices) to assist with developing client-facing safety plans, and professional-facing risk management plans. The *Intermediate Safety Plan Conversation Model*, appendix 9 of this practice guide, and the accompanying *Intermediate Safety Plan* (appendix 8), are highly useful resources that you can use in combination with this demonstration script.

The following example is deliberately scripted to show a range of strategies you can use, and as such, probably takes a bit longer than the time you might actually have to safety plan with a client about the risk his behaviour poses to others. However, safety planning is not something that should be left to the last minute or two of a session.

I’m conscious of time and that we’ve covered a fair bit today. I think we’ve done some really good work starting that conversation and thinking about the men’s behaviour change program. So just to check, I think we have an appointment scheduled for the same time next week?

Yeah that sounds right, yep.

Well if it’s ok with you I’d like to use our remaining time to check in on where you are at and look at what your next week might look like? That can help us to think about how you can best manage that week and make good choices for you and everyone around you? Does that sound ok to you?

Yeah, yeah ok.

As a practitioner without specialisation in engaging clients on their use of DFV, you will not be conducting a comprehensive safety plan. Nor will be using every tool or strategy you can think of to maximise safety. Your client might be feeling tired, unsettled or any other kind of emotion, given that he was probably not expecting you to talk about his behaviour towards family members during the session.

It is important therefore to check in with your client to see where he is at and to respond accordingly. If he is escalated you might need to adopt a different approach and focus on a de-escalation strategy or even move into a grounding exercise.

During safety planning with your client, seek to emphasise the central concepts of safety, making good choices, and of ‘thinking about impact of your behaviour on others’ as issues for the man to prioritise.

Ideally, safety planning is a joint exercise where the man is engaged with you in looking at potential stressors, challenges and concerns, and in working towards preventive or adaptive choices he can make that will support him to choose non-violent behaviour.

Ok well firstly l want to check in on how you’re feeling now?

Uh l guess a bit wiped out. It wasn’t exactly what l was expecting to talk about today…I just… I will just get going soon and I dunno…[man sighs]

I can see that this has been a difficult discussion. Is there something you could do straight after this session that would help you feel more settled?

Yeah maybe I could go for a walk across the park there and get a coffee or something. I need to pick up Simone from child care at 5 so l guess l could just go for a walk down the street for a while, maybe do some shopping.

That sounds like a good idea, how about tonight at home?

Ah…it’s been a big day l might just watch some tv with Fiona l reckon. Just take it easy and get an early night.

That sounds like a good idea too. We often talk here about the importance of self-care strategies and sleep can be a really important one for people.

Yeah for sure, l loop out with no sleep.

We think of self-care strategies as good ways to support us to feel balanced and make the best choices we can make. You mentioned getting enough sleep, are there other things like that that can really help you?

Yeah l need to keep my running up, that matters to me a lot, I need to do that every 2nd morning otherwise l feel out of kilter and can get grumpy.

Ok so sleep, exercise yep, anything else?

Nah not really.

OK, sounds like sleep and exercise are important. Is anything likely to get in the way of you getting enough sleep, and getting regular exercise?

It is important to explore potential barriers towards your client putting safety planning elements into practice. It is one thing for your client to suggest strategies – actually following through with them is another.

Yeah, Fiona often has a go at me for going out running.

What are Fiona’s concerns?

Oh, she says that it leaves her having to get our oldest ready for school, but she’s so snarky at me, she just ignores me all morning. I don’t know, I don’t want it to lead to an argument.

This sounds important John, maybe we can use this as an opportunity to explore a little about the difference between an argument and being abusive. Would that be OK?

Sure.

[Draws a line down the middle of a whiteboard in the room. Writes the heading “If I was arguing I might…” as the heading on the left side, and “If I was being abusive I might…” as the heading on the right side] Say that you and Fiona do end up arguing about this one time next week, but it stays as an argument and you aren’t abusive. What might you do if you were just arguing and you didn’t cross the line into being abusive towards Fiona?

I guess we would both be raising our voice, maybe talking over each other a bit, probably not listening to each other.

[Writes John’s contributions down the left side of the board, but reframes to what John would be doing, not what both he and Fiona would be doing]. Now, if you were crossing the line [draws an arrow from the left side to the right side that crosses the dividing line] from arguing with Fiona to being abusive towards her, what might that look like?

We’d be … uhmmm … shouting at each other, calling each other names…

If I can just interrupt you John, and focus on what you might do if you were to be abusive. This is about what you can do to be safe, the choices you make. So being abusive would look like you shouting at Fiona, calling her names. What else might being abusive look like, what might Fiona see you do?

Well, standing over her I guess, pointing the figure at her, I mean my finger at her, maybe picking something up and throwing something – but don’t get me wrong, I’ve never hit her.

[Writes John’s contributions down the left side of the board]. What would be the impact if you were to cross the line from arguing with Fiona, to being abusive towards her? What would be the impact on Fiona?

Yeah, like we talked about earlier, I can see how she might feel intimidated, perhaps a bit scared.

And the impact on Simone and Kelly? They would likely be hearing something?

[some silence] Yep, wouldn’t be a good start to the day for them.

The practitioner at this point chooses not to unpack the impact on Simone and Kelly further. While earlier in the session the practitioner engaged John in a bit of conversation about being the best father he can be, and how his behaviour is getting in the way of this, impacts of violence on children can be a very sensitive topic for clients who are using DFV. At this late point in the session, the practitioner wants to put the impacts on his children into view as part of safety planning, but not to explore them.

Would I be right John in saying that you want to be a man who makes good and safe choices for his family?

Yes, of course!

Wow, that’s a really firm response, you want to be a safe man for your family to be around. I can see that you want them to feel good around you, and not worried about what you might say or do.

[leaves a pause]

So let’s say you intend to go jogging regularly over the coming week, and Fiona expresses her concerns, either directly to you or indirectly through her body language. What could you do to ensure that you don’t cross the line into using abuse?

I might be able to prevent an argument by making plans with Fiona the night before to organise the morning. Maybe I can make the kids’ lunches in the evening.

Yes, I can see how that might be a good strategy, discussing and negotiating with Fiona, rather than just declaring that you are going to go running. It sounds like Fiona might feel that her concerns are being listened to if you take that approach?

Yep.

So that sounds like a good strategy. But often it’s useful to have a back-up strategy too. Say that you and Fiona do start to get into an argument about this. What can you do to make sure that you don’t cross the line into being abusive towards her?

Uhm, ahh, just leave, just walk out and go running before it escalates.

Is there a way that you could explain this to Fiona so that she doesn’t just feel that you are walking out on her?

I guess I could explain to Fiona that I know she doesn’t want me to go out running and leave her with stuff to do at home, but that I need to do that as part of dealing with my anger and stress.

Ok. This is a specific situation where you know that you and Fiona sometimes argue about you going out running, and we’re talking about how to stop yourself from being abusive towards her. You’ve identified a strategy here of walking away from the argument, but explaining to Fiona why you need to walk away, and explaining it in a way that indicates you are thinking about her concerns and her needs.

Yes, I guess so.

If we think about other situations, how might you know that you are getting to the point where it might be best for you to, let’s say to take a breather and get some space away, so that you don’t cross the line from arguing with Fiona to being abusive at her?

Uhm, I guess, knowing that I’m getting worked up?

How might you know that, how might you know that in your body that you are getting worked up? What might be the physical signs or sensations?

Oh, I start feeling hot, my thoughts race, I feel my blood boiling… I guess I breathe more quickly. Well, it’s more a sensation of feeling tight, I can’t explain it properly.

So, feeling tight or hot in your body, maybe breathing more quickly, thoughts racing, these are signs that you might be stepping closer to doing or saying something that you might later regret?

Yep.

I know that our time is running out for the session, but just wanted to ask, say that you notice yourself starting to get worked up at some point with Fiona. What might be something that you could say to yourself, a thought or image in your mind, that you can use to remind yourself to take a breather and get away from the situation?

Remembering that the kids are in the house, that would do it.

What if the kids aren’t in the house?

Maybe trying to remember that I’d feel like real shit if I end up blowing up, I dunno.

Ok. We can talk more about this the next time we meet. But there’s some good starting points of things to remind yourself, to tell yourself in your mind.

This is really similar to some of the stuff we’ve talked about when you are feeling urges to have a drink, that you can use the power of thoughts to help you ride through that urge and get to the other side. It’s the same when you are feeling really angry or pissed off, there’s things that you can think or remind yourself that might help you to ride that feeling out without making choices to be abusive.

There’s two more steps involved when taking a breather. So far we’ve talked about identifying when you need to take a breather, explaining to Fiona what you are doing and why you need to get away for a bit. A third step is letting Fiona know when you’ll return, so that she isn’t left wondering and worried about what’s going to happen. Does that sound fair?

Yes, makes sense to me.

The final thing to take into account is what you do when you take a breather and get some space away. What would help you to bring yourself back down so that you return in a calm state?

Like I said before, go for a run. Or even a walk.

What else might you do to prepare yourself to return calm.

Uhmmm… not sure?

What could be some things to think about that will help you to return calm, say while you are running or walking.

I could think about positive things, think about my kids, think about wanting peace in the house, is that what you mean?

Sure, this is something we can again talk more about next week. How you use your time when you are taking a breather is really important. If you use that time to work yourself up more, and fill your head with negative thoughts about Fiona, you’ll come back still pretty heightened.

Yeah, see what you mean.

So, sleeping and exercise, they are important parts of your self-care strategy. Just before we close, can I ask, What does the next week look like to you, between now and our next session. Are there any key stresses or challenges that come to mind? We talked about negotiating with Fiona to go running, are there any others?

Um well work stress maybe. Stressing about all this shit….stressing about drinking. Just worrying about all that.

So how do you think you might best manage that stress and worry?

Um I dunno really. Not sure.

I’m conscious that managing this well would be not only useful for you but for Fiona, Simone and Kelly as well? When we think about this, about your feelings and your choices we think about how they will impact on your family as well.

Yeah that’s fair enough.

I’m wondering if we could do a small exercise that might assist with that, with assisting you to make good choices and to help Fiona and Simone feel safe and supported?

Ok yeah.

This transition is a key step in any safety planning. We are reminding the man that we are thinking about and are concerned for him, Fiona and their two children in everything we are discussing.

There are a wide range of practical strategies, steps or exercises that could prove useful to introduce at this point. These include

* Body scan exercise to assist the man to become aware of ‘early warning signs’ in regards to his own potential escalation into abusive or controlling thoughts and behaviours, as demonstrated in the script above.
* Removing oneself from the situation to take a breather and using the time away to build calm, again as demonstrated above.
* Breathing, grounding or mindfulness exercises.

An additional option is to develop a support map for your client, of key supports they can reach out to at times when they are risk of not making good choices. This could look like as follows:

Can we close by doing a quick map of what key supports you have around you, that you can reach out for support to help manage intense feelings and to help you make good choices at times when you might be taking steps closer towards being abusive.

So we have here a piece of paper with a drawing of a hand on it. There are five fingers there and I’d like you to write in each one of these five fingers someone you could call or reach out to when you feel that might be useful and help support you to make good choices. They could be personal or they could be a professional, whoever you think would be most useful.

Ok, I’ll give it a go, um well there’s MG my best mate, he’s got his head screwed on right and l can talk to him about anything. So him. Um also my Mum, she’s always been there for me and she knows me, she knows Fiona, she knows us. She doesn’t want any more trouble. Um.

Are there any other people or professional services you can think of?

Can l put you on there?

Yes sure, if that is something you would like to do, I’m happy to be available when l can be if you would like to talk more.

Good one, ta. Oh and my AA mentor as well! Robert, he already does this for me l guess so yeah him, he knows about all my drinking like I said.

That sounds like a good choice. One more for the thumb there?

Ha um well maybe my GP? They’ve been pretty helpful with all this and they sent me here. l can talk to them about other stuff too.

Great, that looks really good. Do you feel like reaching out to one or any of these people or services might be a choice you can make to support you across the next week, especially when you might notice yourself starting to become upset?

Yeah I reckon, yeah l can give it a go.

Ok well let’s see if it is useful for you, and in turn helps Fiona, Simone and Kelly to feel a bit safer around you across the next week, and then we can talk more about it at our next session? Some people like to even pin this up on the fridge or send it to themselves as an email or just have some way to have it there as a reminder.

Oh yeah? Ok well maybe yeah, ok thanks for that.

1. Adapted from Family Safety Victoria (2021). Responsibility 4 – Intermediate risk management. MARAM practice guides for working with adult people using family violence. www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-professionals-working-adults-using-family-violence [↑](#footnote-ref-1)