



## **Safety Plan for Sexual Assault Survivors**

This guide is designed to help advocates work with survivors of non-intimate partner sexual assault to identify potential triggers or overwhelming life events and create a safety plan tailored to the individual's needs and concerns. Many survivors experience internal and external triggers, as well they can feel overwhelmed on anniversaries of certain life events. An effective safety plan empowers the survivor to reclaim a sense of safety and security by addressing immediate safety needs and outlining strategies to help reduce future incidents of physical, mental, emotional, and /or financial harm. Unfortunately, constructing and implementing a safety plan cannot ensure that an individual will not face violence nor feel the pain of trauma again; its goal is to help survivors feel as safe as possible given their current life circumstances. If you have questions or need assistance with Safety Planning with survivors, contact Erica Blackwood, SADI Specialist, at [erica@nccasa.org](mailto:erica@nccasa.org)

*A message about continuing to center the needs of marginalized survivors during this time.*

**As we continue to work with survivors in our communities, it is imperative to our work that we are centering the experiences of our most vulnerable survivors. Consider this when you are doing outreach by providing visibility of services for these communities. If you have a Latinx outreach coordinator or an LGBTQ+ outreach coordinator, ask if they would like to share a message for those communities. Further, your agency could do something in the media to talk specifically about the impacts of sexual violence on folx with marginalized identities in your community. You may provide statistics, barriers to accessing services, information about generational and/or**

**institutional trauma that people from specific cultural or racial backgrounds face, as well as the intersections of sexual violence and oppression. You could talk about the impact of sexual violence on men and non- binary folx. Use this as a platform to educate the community while also increasing your visibility.**

As you use this guide, please keep in mind the following:

- Survivors may neither have nor want to share the answers to all the questions you ask. And that's okay.
- You do not need to ask every question provided. In fact, doing so may be overwhelming (to you and/or the survivor!). Allow the survivor's experiences and current situation to help determine which questions are appropriate.
- Understand that safety in the context of trauma is not only defined physically, but also includes emotional, mental, spiritual safety. Keep in mind, that safety is also always defined by the survivor in front of you. Allow them the space to define what feels safe for themselves.
- Safety planning is an ongoing process, not a one-time conversation. Your initial conversation with the survivor should give you a sense of their immediate safety needs, which, in turn, will help you and the survivor identify safety issues that require immediate attention and those that can be addressed in subsequent meetings.
- This guide is a general template for safety planning with adult survivors. It is not meant to be exhaustive, nor will it be applicable in every situation.

***Identify community and/or population-specific safety concerns:***

Every survivor presents different issues and safety concerns. A survivor who identifies with one or more traditionally marginalized or underserved communities may have distinct safety planning needs. It is important for services providers to remember that, because of historical/ intergenerational trauma, many survivors of violent crime, ( for example, those from African American, immigrant and American Indian/Alaska Native communities), are forced to confront multiple

layers of traumatic experiences as they recover and heal. Bear in mind these examples are not exhaustive of all communities who experience historical/intergenerational trauma. The effects on individuals of trauma coupled with ongoing oppression can result in maladaptive parenting and coping mechanisms, navigating complex cultural circumstances, or overcompensated self-reliance. Historical/Intergenerational Trauma has real life consequences. Therefore, it is important to be aware of specific safety concerns that may be relevant to:

- Survivors with disabilities (physical and/or cognitive)
- Older adults
- Minors
- Survivors who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ)
- Undocumented and Non-U.S. citizens
- Those from immigrant communities
- Native American/ Alaska Native and tribal communities
- Farmworkers
- People of color
- People living in poverty
- People who are homeless
- People who are geographically isolated, such as those living in rural communities
- People who are a part of insular, isolated groups/communities, such as some religious sects
- People who are linguistically isolated
- People who have been trafficked or sexually exploited
- Military service members

***Provide interpreters when needed.***

Interpreting for sexual assault-related issues requires additional expertise. For example, interpreters should be comfortable hearing about and using vocabulary necessary to interpret acts of sexual violence, including interpreting any informal language/slang used by the survivor. To protect survivors' confidentiality and safety, do not use victims' family members or friends as

interpreters; use qualified interpreters that are not associated with the perpetrator. If necessary, be prepared to provide telephonic interpretation by an interpreter who does not live in the survivor's community. For NCCASA members, the language line is free to use. Guidance on how to use the language line for NCCASA members is located [here](#).

### ***Be conscious of gendered pronouns.***

Not all survivors are female, nor are all perpetrators male. Not all victims are sexually assaulted by a perpetrator of the opposite sex. Not all same-sex sexual assaults involve people who identify as LGBTQ. Some survivors may prefer to be referred to by a pronoun that is different than their sex assigned at birth. Be conscious of your use of gender pronouns and if you need clarification, ask.

**TIP:** It may be helpful to identify your own pronouns to start this conversation. Follow the survivors lead in using pronouns to identify others in their story and when in doubt, use they/them pronouns. Do not ask the survivor their “preferred” pronouns. Simply ask them what pronouns do they use.

### ***Underserved Populations***

Safety planning with underserved populations also deserves special considerations. Male survivors, current or previously incarcerated survivors, along with the majority of the groups listed above, may not have the same access to resources as other populations who seek services from your agency. NCCASA and [Just Detention International](#) have a wealth of resources on serving prison populations and safety planning with currently incarcerated survivors, as well, you can find resources to service previously incarcerated survivors or encourage them to tell their stories on JDI's website. NCCASA members have access to PREA resources [here](#).

Male victims of sexual violence often do not speak of their abuse or seek help. They are frequently alone with their experiences and feel deep shame. Most dual agencies and rape crisis centers have focused on violence against women, not the experiences and needs of men – which can be very different, in many ways.

Oftentimes, males are more reluctant to seek services due to the associated stigmas, your agency's branding and presentation of services (whether or not there are females or references to women only on every brochure). In order to address the needs of this population, it is paramount that your agency assess its capacity to engage these survivors. Once the survivor has sought out services from your agency,

Use this safety plan as a beginner's guide to understanding what trauma-informed service delivery and safety planning looks like to many of these marginalized populations. If these populations have not been recognized before in your agency or you see gaps in service delivery, particularly when your survivor holds one or more of these marginalized identities, this is a great way to get a conversation going with survivors on knowing what safety and advocacy looks like for them. Again, look to be survivor- led and client- centered.

## **PHYSICAL**

### ***Immediate Physical Safety***

- Where and in what ways might you come into contact with the perpetrator?
- Where did the assault occur and is your home physically safe?
- What information, if any, does the perpetrator have about where you live, work, or go to school, or about other places you go on a regular basis?
- Has the perpetrator threatened you, either directly or in other ways (e.g., threatened to tell other people, get you fired, report you to immigration authorities, “out” you as LGBTQ, or post pictures or statements online)?
- Has the perpetrator contacted you since the assault?
- Has the perpetrator stalked you, your friends, or your family?
- Are you considering reporting the assault to law enforcement? If so, do you have any questions about the reporting process?

- Do you have a civil restraining order or other type of protection order against the perpetrator? If not, do you think some type of protection order would be helpful?
- Do you have any reason to be concerned about the perpetrator's family or circle of friends?
- Do you have any injuries or other health concerns as a result of the assault? If so, have you been able to receive medical care?
- Do you have a cell phone you can use if you need to call for help?
- Are there specific things you can think of doing that might help you feel safe?
- Do you have a plan in case of emergencies (i.e., if you were in danger or needed medical attention, who you would call, where you would go, and how you would get there)?

### ***Safety and Technology***

- Does the perpetrator know your phone number? Your email address?
- Does the perpetrator know any of your passwords?
- Do you have any social media accounts (e.g., Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Linked In, etc.)? Are you "friends" with the perpetrator? Is anyone in your social media network "friends" with the perpetrator? Do you know how to block the perpetrator and perpetrator's contacts from accessing you via these avenues?
- Has the perpetrator or the perpetrator's friends or family contacted you using these mediums? If so, can you gather (and retain) evidence of this contact?
- Has the perpetrator or the perpetrator's friends or family posted anything about you online? What was posted? Is the post still online?
- Have you reviewed your privacy settings (on shared computers, social media sites, etc.) since the assault? Can you adjust those settings to keep your personal information more secure?
- Have you searched for your name on the internet? If so, does any private information (home address, phone number, etc.) show up? Do you need help removing this information?

- Did you meet the perpetrator online? Are you concerned that the perpetrator will contact you on the Internet?

**TIP:** Encourage the survivor to save any electronic records that might be relevant to the assault, including texts, emails, Facebook posts, or other electronic messages sent to or from the perpetrator before or after the assault. Find out how to retrieve any deleted information you may need to access as evidence.

### **MENTAL**

Some survivors may find sexual assault to be so overwhelming and traumatic that they are suicidal. It is important to normalize these ideations for the survivor to overcome the stigma associated with openly discussing suicide. Letting survivors know that having those thoughts are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation can help a survivor feel more comfortable in discussing the topic with you. Be alert for survivors who implicitly or explicitly mention that they are thinking of hurting themselves or taking their life, and have a plan or intent. If, based on your conversation with a survivor, you believe this may be a possibility, do not be afraid to ask the survivor directly if she or he is thinking about hurting themselves; people don't get the idea to hurt themselves simply from someone mentioning it. All staff who work with survivors should be trained on how to work with suicidal clients. Organizations should have internal policies and protocols for staff to follow if they determine a client is a danger to self or others. These policies should be consistent with survivors' privacy rights and the organization's other privacy obligations.

If you feel unqualified or that it is inappropriate for you to discuss these issues, refer the survivor to a sexual assault specific advocate or licensed counselor who can. Make sure to keep an up-to-date list of resources/services available to sexual assault survivors in your area. The following are important numbers to keep in mind. All of these helplines are confidential and available 24/7:

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255
- Trevor Project Hotline (for LGBTQ+ youth): 1-866-488-7386

- Department of Defense Safe Helpline (for survivors in the military community): 877-995-5247
- Veteran Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255

There are also Mobile Crisis Response teams available, if the survivor feels comfortable with this option. Mobile Crisis Management services are available full time for crisis prevention or if the survivor or someone they know is experiencing a crisis related to mental health, substance abuse or developmental disabilities. Mobile Crisis teams can meet them in a safe location, including their home, school or workplace. Always check with the survivor before making any decision to enlist outside resources. You can find county- specific resources [here](#).

For those who do feel qualified and will be discussing these issues with survivors, we have included some suggestions for addressing emotional safety while being mindful of the possibility that your records could be subpoenaed.

**TIP:** Be sure to ask the survivor if they feel mentally and emotionally safe in their homes. If they answer no, talk with them about creating a space that is. Whether this be physical actions, such as redecorating an area to provide a visual space that they can identify as safe, or mindful actions such as meditation and grounding techniques.

## **EMOTIONAL**

Consider the survivor's emotional safety. Addressing threats to a sexual assault survivor's emotional safety can be just as important as addressing physical safety concerns. After an assault, survivors may develop harmful or normalized coping mechanisms by their communities of support (family, friends, etc) such as substance use or other addictions, cutting/self-mutilation, eating disorders, increased risk-taking, or other high-risk behaviors.. Many survivors experience trauma-induced mental health conditions (like depression, anxiety, or suicidality), isolate themselves from friends and/or family, or feel unsafe in their own bodies.



Frequent check-ins around the survivor's emotional safety may be crucial to helping them develop healthier coping mechanisms.

### ***Discussing Emotional Safety***

Discussing emotional safety with a survivor can be a complex process. Emotional safety is extremely important. However, be aware that any information you document about a survivor's emotional state can be subpoenaed and, if it has to be released, will likely be used to discredit the survivor. Although it is best practice to document as little information as necessary to provide services, follow your agency's guidelines on documentation.

Below are a few suggestions for questions to get your emotional safety conversation started with clients, as well as some strategies for survivors to increase their emotional safety and healthy coping skills.

- If you are feeling emotionally distressed, what are some activities you can do to feel better? How likely are you to do those things?
- What have you tried before?
- Did you find it helpful? Why or why not?
- What are some of your triggers?
- How does your body feel when you are triggered?
- Where can you go that you will feel relaxed and safe?
- Who can you speak to when you are experiencing difficult emotions?
- I will remind myself daily of my best qualities.

### ***Here are some Emotional Health and Safety Suggestions:***

- Take time for myself to engage in self-care activities such as meditation, journaling, yoga, playing music, reading, etc.
- Take part in social activities
- Take part in a supportive group in some capacity
- Get plenty of sleep
- Eat nutritionally
- Try to exercise a few times a week, even if it is just going for a short walk

- Try not to overload your schedule by limiting appointments to reduce stress
- Avoid excess alcohol, food, shopping, etc.
- Find positive, constructive ways to express my feelings
- Use “I can” statements with myself
- Be assertive with others
- Remember: “I am the most important person to take care of right now.”

## **SPIRITUAL**

For many individuals, profound traumatic experiences result in painful existential searching. A sexual trauma often causes an unimaginable wounding of the soul. Survivors may find themselves preoccupied with difficult questions about existence, good and evil, justice and fairness, spiritual beliefs, faith, and higher universal powers. Many will question the very foundation of beliefs they have built their lives upon to this point. This questioning can lead to a sense of being lost and adrift with nothing to trust or believe in. Recovery will be dramatically affected by how well these issues are resolved for the survivor.

Below are some questions to help guide a conversation to assess the survivor’s spiritual safety:

- Does the perpetrator or anyone else ridicule or insult your religious or spiritual beliefs?
- Are you being prevented from practicing your religious or spiritual beliefs?
- Is someone using your religious or spiritual belief to manipulate or shame you?
- Is someone forcing your children to be raised in a faith that you have not agreed to?
- Does someone use religious texts or beliefs to minimize or rationalize abusive behaviors? (such as physical, financial, emotional or sexual abuse/marital rape)

- Do you feel safe enough to reach out to a trusted member of your spiritual/religious community for support? If not, can you identify support outside your community?
- Are you able to explore options for practicing your faith/religion in a safe way?

## **FINANCIAL**

For sexual assault survivors, the economic impact of assault or rape is often devastating. The number of productive days people lose when they experience sexual violence can have lasting effects on their finances. Some survivors have also reported their interrupted education path also hindered their career goals. Some also drew a direct line from the sexual violence they experienced to underemployment and workplace performance issues.

Sexual violence survivors and society also face economic costs. Rape and attempted rape can cost survivors more than \$120,000 over their lifetimes, according to CDC research. Beyond racial disparities, income disparities proved most damning when it comes to susceptibility to sexual assault and rape. Health care for a survivor can be extremely costly, and the full scope of physical and mental health care needs may not be fully known until long after the attack. Sexual assault victims may wait months or years to report the crime due to trauma or fear, reducing their chances of being awarded economic relief through the court system.

Perpetrators can use finances as a way to gain and maintain power and control over the survivor. This can be seen in a variety of ways. If a survivor is living with their perpetrator, if the survivor is financially dependent on someone who has not been supportive of them since their assault, or, if the perpetrator is someone the survivors works for or with. Research shows that socioeconomic status can play a huge part into survivors ability to recover financially from sexual violence. This is an issue that can also tie back into the physical safety of the survivor. If the survivor is having to remain at a job where a perpetrator is, because they absolutely need the job and fear retaliation from authority figures, fear being outed, fear being reported if they are undocumented, or some other fear that represents a threat to their financial security, these are things to discuss with them.

Below are some examples of how victims may be financially impacted by the sexual assault:

- Debt from healthcare, damaged property, moving and security costs
- Dependency on the abuser for basic needs
- Job loss or lost wages
- Unfinished education or training
- Eviction and damaged tenant history
- Loss of personal property

While we know that victim's compensation is an option to some survivors, there are stipulations that make that option not feasible for their situation. If the survivor can become more financially independent and establish a credit history, that can help give them the confidence and security they need to overcome some financial disparity. Economic considerations should be a part of all existing safety planning services. This will not only protect survivors' economic security but also ensure their ability to seek justice and obtain independence in the future. **NCCASA also wants to lift up that as much as advocates work with survivors for individual advocacy around finances, it is just important that they participate in system conversations in their community about affordable housing, transportation, child-care, access to healthcare and a living wage.** Below are some steps to help the survivor safety plan financially:

1. **Assess your financial situation**

- If possible, start with a thorough accounting of your household finances. What are the household assets, and how much debt are you carrying? Which are joint accounts, and which are just in one person's name? Whose names are on the mortgage? How much income is coming in? If there are safe ways for you to get that information, try to collect it.
  - If the perpetrator is not an intimate partner or someone you reside with, and is attached to your financial situation ( boss, coworker, someone who works at your location but in a different department, teacher, administrator, etc.), talk with your advocate about the effect this is having on your finances. Are you missing days from work to

avoid the perpetrator? Are you having to take days off to attend court appearances or doctors appointments? Are you having difficulty paying for childcare during these circumstances?

## **2. Set up a way to communicate privately**

- You'll need a safe way to correspond with financial institutions, support groups and a divorce attorney if necessary. While your personal email may seem safe, it's not unusual for suspicious partners to install spyware or keystroke tracking software on the shared computer. Instead, set up a new, private email account that you check only from computers outside your home. Some examples are a computer at work, at a friend's or relative's home, at a local library or in a shelter.

## **3. Open a bank account**

- To start building your financial safety net, open a checking account at a different bank than the one where your partner has an account. Use your new address for the account or request that all communication from the bank be emailed to your secret email address. Start squirrelling away any money you can in your new account. Even if you save only a few dollars a week, it's a start.

## **4. Pull your credit report**

- Your credit report can give you important information about your household finances, from bank account balances to debt owed. More importantly, you can find out where you stand when it comes to your credit history, since having good credit will make it easier for you to rent an apartment, get a credit card and take other steps to start fresh.

## **5. Start building your credit history**

- Having a credit card in your own name – and paying the balance in full and on time each month – is the best way to start establishing a credit history. If you're not working, it may be easier to get a credit card in your name while you're still married, because issuers typically consider household income

when making approval decisions. If you're denied, try a store or gas station card. Those often have looser credit requirements. If you are unable to get any of those, try a secured card. It may cost you money to put up front and "secure" the card, but with timely payments, you are able to build a positive credit history. Even if you only charge a cup of coffee a month and make the payments on time, it's a great way to start building credit.

## **6. Get help**

- If you're in a precarious financial situation or if you fear for your safety, you don't have to take these steps on your own. Some organizations can connect you with financial counselors who can help. They can also help you access financial resources such as emergency assistance, utility assistance, public benefits, legal aid and more. Similarly there are more resources for bill assistance at [NeedHelpPayingBills.com](http://NeedHelpPayingBills.com). There are North Carolina specific resources here, and you can also check for assistance by county. Essentially, just having a conversation with the client about their financial security can be effective at helping the client start to safely plan for themselves financially.

As an advocate, here are some additional ways you can help survivors. You can either encourage them to do these things on their own, or with their consent, do these things with them:

- Change accounts or passwords to finances, email and social media. Freeze credit reports and/or post fraud alerts to the three main credit reporting agencies.
- Change direct deposit, emergency contact, retirement and insurance plans, and other data on file at the workplace that might allow perpetrators to access survivors, in person or financially.
- Change the survivor's mailing address to a P.O. box or another alternative address to receive bills and other financial statements. Certain states have address confidentiality laws in place. If someone at your agency is trained in

the Address Confidentiality Program, you may want to speak with them. Similarly, you can get trained or get more information about it [here](#).

- Store important documents, items and emergency funds in a safe location.
- Assess alternative transportation options that will keep the survivor safe without incurring extra costs. If added costs are unavoidable, determine how to recoup them or partner with local public transit, car donation or ride-sharing organizations.
- Work with survivors to mitigate risks to them and their children due to childcare by:
  - Researching alternative childcare providers at the same or lower cost.
  - If low-cost options are not available or safe, apply for childcare subsidies or other aid.
  - Notify the provider if you are certain they will not discriminate against the survivor or their children, especially if the perpetrator is not allowed to pick up the children due to custody issues or a CPO.
- Work with survivors and their housing provider to:
  - Change the locks and repair windows or doors that were damaged in an assault.
  - Break the lease and move out.
  - Install security equipment or other measures.
- Work with survivors and their employers to:
  - Change survivors' shift, location or workspace (ex. move the desk away from doors/windows).
  - Change work phone number or email address.
  - Establish a code word to signify the need to call for help.
  - Allow survivors to screen or record their messages if they choose.
- Work with survivors and their schools to:
  - Change the perpetrator's housing instead of the survivor's to reduce the burden of relocating.
  - Help the survivor to change classes or campus job schedule while protecting a scholarship.
  - Ensure the survivor has access to either private or school-based health care and insurance.

- Notify security at the survivor's school, office and/or housing unit about potential risks.

**NOTE:** On the page following the references, is a sheet that survivor's can fill out with you or for themselves that adds to the emotional/ mental safety planning. "The Glow- Up Guide" is meant to get survivors thinking about ways to care for themselves outside of your visits with them. Please be reminded that when speaking with survivors about self- care it is important to remember that self-care does not work without community care and that sometimes self-care is being able to pay for groceries or a bill. Assisting the client to find these resources can also fill some of the time required to advocate for the client.

**References:**

Safety Planning with Adult Sexual Assault Survivors:A Guide for Advocates and Attorneys

Victim Rights Law Center. <https://www.victimrights.org/>

1 in 6 Organization. <https://1in6.org/>

The Victim Advocate's Guide to Safety and Economic Security. Wider Opportunities for Women

<https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ESS-Victim-Advocate-Sector-Guide.pdf>







# GLOW-UP GUIDE



Signs I am starting to experience burnout:

Ways I can relieve stress:

People I can depend on for support:

Sources of professional support (i.e., advocate, healthcare provider):

Music I can listen to and relax:

Places I can go to feel happy and calm:

Positive affirmations to remind myself of my value: