

Safety Planning Guide for Advocates

created by **LaFASA** | Louisiana Foundation
Against Sexual Assault

Whether you are encountering a survivor mere moments after an assault or years down the line, helping to ensure their safety, both physical and emotional, is our top priority as advocates.



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Each safety plan will be as different as the survivor you are serving, taking into account their unique needs, goals, and identities. This guide is in no way exhaustive, but is rather a few suggestions on where to start when approaching safety planning with a survivor.

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Sexual Assault Crisis Center
provide a 24-hour crisis hotline,
information and referral, free
counseling, and more!



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amazing ways we
can give support!



LaFASA

Use a Trauma Informed Approach

Treat survivors with the dignity, respect, and compassion that they deserve. Sexual assault renders a survivor powerless over their own body, and advocates should focus on giving survivors back as much power and control as possible, letting them make decisions. In safety planning, an advocate should stress the importance of safety precautions without panicking the survivor. The survivor is not responsible for what is done to them. Safety planning should breed feelings of empowerment and confidence, not self-blame and responsibility. (i.e. “If I don’t get a protective order, any future harassment is my fault...”) Many safety planning strategies are very burdensome to survivors. It is unfair that a survivor may have to alter many aspects of their lives, often at their own financial expense, and it is alright to recognize this and discuss it with the survivor.

Some safety planning techniques require police involvement, such as protective orders, but this is not the only route for survivors to find justice, peace, and safety. Some survivors, particularly survivors from marginalized populations, have a negative history with police, and reporting should never be pushed.



[Click here to find resources for survivors on the LaFASA website.](#)

Listen

As with all advocacy work, our first job is to listen to the survivor. They know better than anyone what they need, and any plan should be guided by those needs. A safety plan should be a collaboration of their knowledge of their life, and your knowledge of the dynamics of sexual assault. Listen, believe, empower.

Physical safety planning is of the utmost importance, whether you are receiving a call on the hotline, meeting a survivor at the hospital, or sitting down with a client in your office for a counseling session. At every step we need to ensure that a survivor is physically safe from violence and harm. Physical safety needs to be addressed with regards to a survivor's home, school, and work, as shown in the sections below.



The first question a hotline advocate should always ask is, “Are you safe?”

If the survivor is not in a physically safe place, confer with them about how they can get to a safer place. If you feel the survivor is in immediate, life-threatening danger, call law enforcement.

Physical safety planning will look very different if the perpetrator is known or unknown, whether threats to the survivor's life were made, and whether or not the perpetrator has a gun or weapon. These are all valid questions to bring up with a survivor.

Intimate Partner Perpetrator

Intimate partner perpetrators are difficult to safety plan around, as they typically are close to the victim and know a lot about their lives, family, and routines. There are many comprehensive safety planning guides for domestic violence that may be helpful.

Try the “Personalized Safety Plan” by LCADV - the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

A survivor may not be ready to leave an abusive situation, and leaving could pose a serious risk to the survivor and their family. Make plans for when a survivor is ready to leave, or create some harm-reduction strategies to keep them safe until they are ready to leave.

Help to identify a safe place the survivor can stay that the perpetrator would not be able to easily find.

Identify items and paperwork that the survivor would need to take with them if they were escaping their home in a hurry.

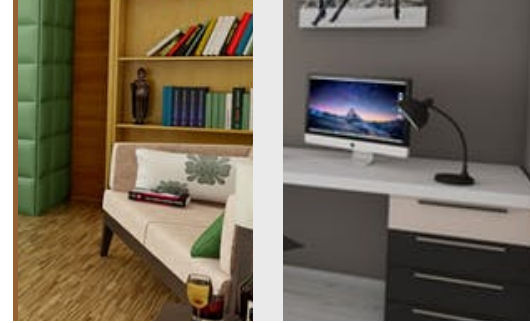


Stranger Perpetrator



After a stranger assault, survivors may face fear and safety concerns over the unknown.

They may fear public spaces, thinking that the perpetrator could be anyone or anywhere.



If the assault happened in their home, a survivor may feel fear staying there.

Change locks or install improved security measures.

Work with a landlord to see if it would be possible to break a lease, switch apartments, or increase security.

Change the space with new furniture arrangements, bedding, or décor to make the site of the assault less triggering.

Internet and Technology Safety

As technology becomes more and more accessible, it can more easily be harnessed by perpetrators to target, abuse, and retaliate against survivors.

Ask the survivor if they are connected to the perpetrator through social media platforms, and see if they can block them.

Talk to the survivor about how social media can be helpful to their healing, but may also be an avenue for harassment from the perpetrator or unsupportive family and friends.

If the perpetrator has access to the survivor's accounts, try to block this access.

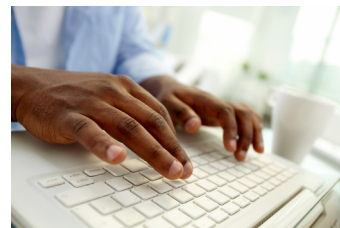
If the perpetrator could potentially be tracking the survivor through GPS, block GPS apps on their phone, or turn the device off.

Even seemingly unassuming posts on social media could potentially be used by a perpetrator to find, stalk, or harass a survivor. Discuss with family and friends the importance of limiting these posts.

If the perpetrator contacts the survivor through call, text, or social media, have them capture and save this information. It could be used by investigators. However, never encourage a survivor to try to act as a detective by contacting the perpetrator. This should only be done when working with investigators.

If a survivor is concerned about video or pictures of them being spread by the perpetrator, talk to them about "revenge porn" laws.

Many people rely on their phone's contacts section for important numbers. Encourage a survivor to memorize or write down important emergency numbers in case they do not have access to their phone.



[Click here for resources on how to become internet and cell phone safe.](#)

Protective Orders



Inform the survivor that they may be able to get a protective order against the perpetrator. In Louisiana, survivors may file for protective orders against an intimate partner, acquaintance, or stranger perpetrator. However, the name and address of the perpetrator must be known so that the protective order can be served.

Ask if the survivor already has a protective order in place.

A survivor should carry the protective order on them at all times, so that if the perpetrator violates it they can present it to law enforcement.

Let the survivor know that though protective orders can be extremely helpful, they do not eliminate 100% of risks.

[Click here for protective and legal resources.](#)

Suicide and Self Harm



Survivors of sexual assault are much more likely to attempt and complete suicide. It is important to ask about suicidal ideation at each step in the healing process, especially if the survivor indicates that they may want to harm themselves.

There is no need or reason to dance around the issue of suicide. Ask outright, “Are you considering suicide?” Using euphemisms shows your discomfort with the subject instead of normalizing these feelings, which could keep survivors from disclosing.

If a survivor is suicidal, remind them if you are a mandated reporter, and explain that you may need to make a report to get them help.

Emergency Emotional Safety Planning

Emergency emotional safety planning is working with a survivor to deal with PTSD, anxiety, and depression in the moment that it is happening. First responders should especially be able to work with survivors through these emotional crises.

Deep breathing is a simple way to calm the body's stress response. Practice some techniques to bring to clients.

Mindfulness, or focusing on the here and now, is a way to manage PTSD symptoms. Help the survivor to focus on the sensations around them, such as the sounds, sights, and tangible feelings, in order to keep them from going back mentally to the assault. Some people will induce a strong physical sensation by holding ice, or putting on a loud song to bring them back into the moment.

Though distraction is not a long term solution to trauma, it can be helpful to talk about another subject to get a survivor's mind off the assault so that they can cope with the processes going on around them.

Encourage the survivor to make a concrete plan for how they will respond if they begin having a flashback or anxiety attack. Use the tools you know about calm breathing and mindfulness. Maybe their plan if they feel symptoms coming is to call a safe and supportive person, pet their dog, or lay down on the hard floor. Whatever will ground and comfort them.

Practice calming techniques. Use the Healing Activity book and share it with clients.

Longer Term Emotional Safety Planning

Refer the survivor for counseling, which many people find helpful in their healing process.

Help the survivor to identify supportive people in their lives whom they can lean on emotionally.

Help to identify a survivor's existing coping mechanisms, and talk about what has worked or not worked for them. Not all coping mechanisms are healthy, such as drugs or alcohol.

Identify self-care strategies, from basics such as eating healthy and sleeping to more involved rituals such as creating art or taking time off work.



This self-care assessment can be helpful for both survivors and advocates.

Safety Planning for Work

Alert coworkers about the situation, and show them a photograph of the perpetrator, so that if the perpetrator is seen around the workplace, authorities can be alerted.

Survivors can consider telling security guards at their workplace about the perpetrator or can approach a supervisor about other ways of increasing safety.

If a survivor is not comfortable telling coworkers about their assault, find other creative ways to maintain their privacy while keeping them safe at work.

If the perpetrator is a coworker, encourage the survivor to find ways to avoid them at work. They could possibly move offices, switch schedules, or adjust break times to avoid the perpetrator.

Survivors may have trouble performing at work due to anxiety or depression following an assault. Discuss ways to manage the stresses of work on top of the stresses of dealing with a sexual assault. Help them to plan for time off, potentially with the help of Crime Victims Reparations.



Work can be uncomfortable for survivors. Help identify what steps will alleviate anxiety.

The Louisiana Crime Victims Reparations Fund helps innocent victims and their families pay for the financial cost of crime when they have no other means of paying. The fund is administered by the Crime Victims Reparations Board under the jurisdiction of the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement.

Safety Planning for Schools

Many similar plans used for safety planning at work can be used for safety planning at schools.

If the perpetrator is a fellow student, consider switching class schedules or changing dorms to avoid them.

Provide campus security with a copy of the protective order and a photograph so they can keep an eye out for the perpetrator on campus.



[Click here for more information about campus sexual assault.](#)

Safety Planning in the Community

Survivors may fear for their safety when out in public living their day-to-day lives. This is particularly true if they live in a small community where they are more likely to see their perpetrator.

A survivor may consider altering their routes and routines, particularly if the perpetrator is close to them and knows their day-to-day activities.

If the survivor and the perpetrator have similar social circles or patronize the same bars, coffee shops, gyms, etc. they may want to consider finding other places to spend time.

A change up in routines or day-to-day activities may be necessary for survivors to feel safe in public places.



LGBTQ survivors may have fewer resources or support networks.

For many LGBTQ survivors, sexual assault is not an isolated event, but is compounded by bullying, verbal harassment, oppression. This complex trauma can make healing even harder.

Some LGBTQ survivors may fear being outed to their families or jobs by the assault or by the perpetrator.

Sexual assault may be used as a hate-crime, causing fear, alarm, and self-blame in survivors.

Survivor with Disabilities

Survivors with disabilities are much more likely to be assaulted by someone close to them, such as a partner, family member, or caregiver. Many strategies used with survivors of domestic violence may be helpful in these situations.

People with physical disabilities may not be physically able to leave an abusive situation.

Have a survivor keep a phone on them at all times, or consider a medical alert device.

Check the accessibility of shelters in your area.

In addition to other documents survivors need when escaping an abusive situation, people with disabilities will need to plan to take medication, assistive devices, and forms for their disability services (social security, etc.).

As a preventative measure, make sure that all caregivers and people working with the survivor have background checks done.



Having a disability can make escaping an abusive situation more complicated.



Ensure all medical needs are met when providing assistance.

Survivor Experiencing Homelessness



Click here for
a list of
homeless shelters
throughout
Louisiana.

A survivor experiencing homelessness may have basic survival needs to deal with before they can begin to heal from sexual assault. Start with the basics, such as shelter, clothing, and food.

A survivor may not feel comfortable returning to a cramped shelter or camp after an assault, especially if it was the site of their assault, get creative with places they can stay (with friends, other shelters, etc.).

Many shelters require ID, and many homeless people do not have IDs. Find local homelessness resources in your area that can assist with this and other needs.

It can be hard to stay in touch with homeless survivors, who may not have steady access to a phone or computer. Find creative ways to reach out, and make sure they have your contact information and know where your center is.

Incarcerated Survivor

Survivors who are incarcerated have an added loss of control, as they are not able to dictate even the most basic parts of their lives. In safety planning, try to find small ways a survivor can regain control.

Self-care may need to be done in smaller, personal ways. Some incarcerated people find comfort in meditation, journaling, reading, or other activities that can be done alone and with little equipment. Get creative.

Work with the facility to ensure that the survivor does not face a threat to their safety from the perpetrator, whether they are another inmate or staff, if possible.

Find creative ways to reduce the risk to the survivor, understanding that getting guards or staff involved for protection may actually increase their risk.

Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) addresses the prevention, intervention, and treatment of sexual assault in confinement. [Click here for more information.](#)



Conclusion

These are just a few common scenarios and concerns, but infinite issues could arise in working with each unique survivor. Creativity, flexibility, and empathy are key in safety planning.

Need more information or have questions? Contact LaFASA!



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