

Safety Plan for Families and Friends

It is a myth that persons with mental illness are violent and dangerous. In fact, people with mental illness are more often the victims of violence than the general public.

However, sometimes during a mental health crisis or a severe psychotic episode a person may experience such intense feelings of confusion, fear and paranoia that they may act out aggressively toward others, including their immediate family and friends. This may include verbal threats and accusations, destruction of property, arson, and sometimes physical aggression and harm to pets. Your safety is very important. There are things you can do to increase your safety, especially if aggressive or threatening behaviors are recurring.

If you or anyone else is in danger, don't hesitate to call 911.

See "Responding to a Mental Health Crisis" Fact Sheet for more information about what you can do to support your family member/friend if they experience mental health crisis and/or psychotic episode.

What is a safety plan?

A personal safety plan is a way of helping you to protect yourself, your children and other vulnerable persons in the household. It helps you plan in advance for the possibility of future threatening or violent behavior and how you can increase your safety.

How do I create a safety plan?

When creating a safety plan, you will need to think about what to do and what to expect. If unsure what to do, you can contact Schizophrenia Society of Ontario by calling 1-800-449-6367 and speak to one of our counselors who can help you assess the risk that you may be facing and help you create a safety plan. Other agencies that can offer support and advice could be your local distress centre (visit for a full list: www.dcontario.org/help.html), Assaulted Women's Helpline (1-866-863-0511) and Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868). You can also talk with someone you trust such as a friend, colleague, doctor, lawyer, or social worker.

Please note that professionals may have to report the situation to a children's aid society if they believe there are children at risk and in need of protection.

What to consider in your safety plan:

- Take threats – implicit and explicit - seriously. Pay attention to their manifestations and be ready to respond in the best interest of everyone by calling 911 or vacating the home.
- Tell people you can trust about your concerns, threats you've received, and any aggressive behavior you witnessed/experienced.
- Ask trusted neighbours or friends to call the police if they hear fighting, loud noises, or see anything suspicious.
- If you have children, teach them how to dial 911. Make up a code word that you can use when you need help.
- Call a counselling agency or crisis helpline to discuss your situation and how to create a safety plan.
- Have a list of emergency contacts readily available – 911, police, hotlines, friends and family, local mobile crisis teams, psychiatrist, lawyer, etc.
- Think about people who might help you. Think about people who will keep a bag for you. Think about people who might lend you money. Make plans for your pets.
- Think about a place you can go where you will be safe such as:
 - A friend's or relative's place, if it is safe.
 - A hotel or a shelter.
 - If you must leave the home, your local mobile crisis team or police should be contacted immediately if the situation involved harm or high risk of harm. If possible, prior to leaving, remove objects that the individual could use to harm themselves.
- Think about ways that you can get out of your home safely. Practice ways to get out.
- Consider isolation and exit strategies for each room of the home. Should you need to isolate yourself in a room at any time, consider whether the room has a lock on the door, telephone and viable exit. Avoid the kitchen or garage where there are likely to be knives or other weapons; and avoid rooms where you might be trapped, such as the bathroom, or where you might be shut into a cupboard or other small space.

- Remove or conceal any weapons in the house (firearms, swords, bats, etc.). If it is impossible to get them out of the house, take precautions to ensure that they are locked away, concealed, and inaccessible to anyone but you.
- Remove or conceal any other items in the home that can be used as a weapon or to destroy property (e.g. knives and other sharp objects, matches and lighters, any heavy or blunt objects, etc.).
- Install smoke detectors on each floor, and keep fire extinguishers easily accessible.
- Think about a safety plan for vacation and any other setting outside of your immediate home.
- Make a list of any previous acts of aggression, violence or property damage and log them every time they occur. This will help determine what threatening behaviors the individual is inclined to during a mental health crisis/psychotic episode and how to safeguard against them. This is also useful information to provide to the individuals' treatment team or to the police. See "Documenting what Happened" fact sheet for more information.
- Put some money away in a safe place a little at a time. Try to keep a small amount of money on you at all times - including change for the phone and for bus fares.
- Put together a bag of things you use everyday (see the checklist below). Hide it where it is easy for you to get.
- Go over your safety plan often.

What to bring with you if you leave - checklist:

Ideally, you need to take all the following items with you if you need to leave your home. Some of these items you can try to keep with you at all times; others you may be able to pack in your 'emergency bag'.

- Some form of identification.
- Birth certificates for you and your children.
- Passports, visas, Permanent Resident papers, and work permits.
- Money, bankbooks, cheque book, and credit and debit cards.

- Keys for the house, car, and place of work. (You could get an extra set of keys cut, and put them in your emergency bag.)
- Driving licence (if you have one) and car registration documents, if applicable.
- Prescribed medication(s).
- Copies of documents relating to your housing tenure (for example, mortgage details or lease and rental agreements).
- Address book.
- Family photographs, your diary, jewellery, small items of sentimental value.
- Clothing and toiletries for you and other family members/children.
- Your children's favourite small toys.
- Documentation relating to your family member/friend's mental health - e.g. list of medications, contact information for the treatment team and/or psychiatrist, and copies of medical records if you have them (e.g. psychiatric reports, Community Treatment Orders).