


The Supervisor's Role in Promoting Worker Safety


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Worker Safety

- o GAO Report (2003) on retention:
 - o One state's peer **exit interview** process of child protective services workers:
 - **90% experienced verbal threats**
 - **30% experienced physical attacks**
 - **13% threatened with weapons**


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Client Violence

- o AFSCME survey of front-line workers:
front-line workers: many acts committed by child clients


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Worker Safety and Retention

- o Landsman study (2008): Inverse relationship between perceptions of job safety and job satisfaction (perhaps suggesting that child welfare workers are drawn to the job in part because of the risks)


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



The Risks

- o Client violence
- o Dangerous persons in environment (e.g., accidentally walking in on a drug transaction; street violence)
- o Dangerous homes (meth labs, animals)


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Levels of Risk

- o **Most physical assaults do not result in physical injury**
- o **Most physical assaults consist of hitting, biting, scratching, kicking or choking**
- o **Most do not involve a weapon; where weapon is used, most likely to be an available object such as a book, phone or ashtray**


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Victim characteristics

- o Most studies found no overall strong correlations
- o 2005 CU study showed younger workers more likely to experience violence than older social workers
- o Findings contradictory re gender differences, but according to NASW self report study, male social workers were twice as likely to experience physical attacks (39% compared to 21%)


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Perceptions of Risk of Home Visiting

- o 2003 NASW survey of child welfare section members:
 - 98% make home visits alone
 - 63% experienced threats
 - **94% said they felt generally safe making home visits**
 - Only 2% said their safety was one of the most challenging aspects of their job


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Difficulties of risk assessment

- o Many acts of client violence are random and impulsive
- o Violence has a low base rate and doesn't happen frequently enough to make it easy to predict
- o Risk Assessment Checklist needed, none developed

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa




Understanding the Context of Client Violence

Most violent behavior is an interaction between:

- o the person's internal dynamics
- o the interpersonal situation
- o the environmental system


© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Recognizing Potential Violence

1. Client factors or signals
2. Environmental signals
 - Clients and others who could be hurt?
 - Persons who might serve as inciting audience?
 - Colleagues available for assistance?
 - Weapons or objects which could be used as weapons?

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Recognizing Potential Violence

- o Important skill for caseworkers and supervisors
- o Knowledge of early signals gives time to rapidly assess and intervene
- o Assess danger signals coming from:
 - The client
 - The environment
 - Within yourself

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Internal signals: gut reactions

- o Gut feelings are Important source of knowledge – stay in touch with feelings throughout
- o Victims of violence often ignore their intuitive fear
- o Being aware of own feelings allows one to control expressions which might exacerbate the situation (authoritarian, overcontrolling postures or attitudes)

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



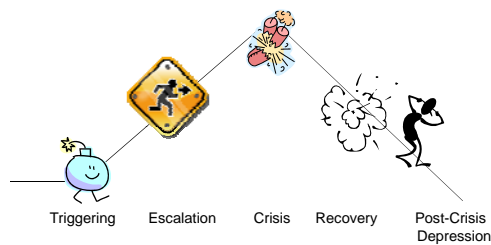
Gut reactions

TAKE CARE to avoid

- o Hyper-vigilance -- can interfere with recognition of real danger signals
- o Cultural biases or misinformation

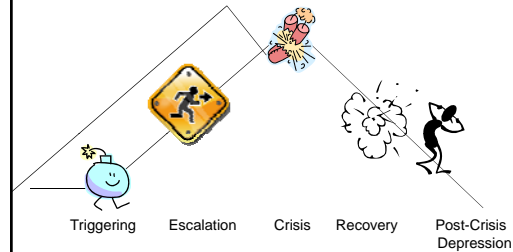
© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

Assault Cycle



© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

Assault Cycle



PHASES OF ASSAULT CYCLE

Source: Kaplan and Wheeler (1983)

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Prevention

- o Assault cycle—early intervention
- o Best protection is good communication skills:
Interview pointers--
 - De-escalating verbal communication
 - De-escalating nonverbal communication
 - Clarifying relationship
 - Stay calm and think

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Prevention

- o Workers with high internal locus of control less likely to be victimized (belief that they can control their environment leads to taking protective measures)
- o Authoritarian, overcontrolling postures and attitudes may precipitate violent reactions

(Weinger)

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

● ● ● | **Additional strategies**

- **Alter the environment**
- **Retreat**
- **Enable client means of retreat**

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

● ● ● | **Exercise One: Assessing Worker Skills**

- **Form groups of three or four**
- **Discuss the skills and ideas in these two handouts**
- **Consider what your workers are already skilled at as well as identifying areas of need for additional training and supervision.**

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

● ● ● | **Safety Policies and Procedures for Prevention, Intervention, and Aftermath**

- **Raise consciousness so that client violence is seen as a legitimate practice concern.**
- **Administrators and supervisors take the lead in promoting safety.**
- **Offer high quality in-service safety training.**

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

● ● ● | **Safety Policies and Procedures for Prevention, Intervention, and Aftermath**

- **Supervise regularly around safety issues.**
- **Develop a user-friendly means of reporting and tracking incidents of violence.**
- **Establish protocols with other organizations that agencies have interdependent relations with regarding safety.**

(Newhill)

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

● ● ● | **NASW Recommendations**

1. **Safety plan of action**
2. **Evaluation and maintenance of building exterior and physical layout**
3. **Rules, regulations and procedures**
4. **Training**

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa

● ● ● | **Pros and Cons of Safety Training**

- **Balance the need for awareness and self-protection against the risk of hyper-vigilance and/or distancing and polarization between worker and client**

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Exercise Two: Safety Plan of Action

- o Table top discussions of areas 1 through 4 on handout
- o Consider, for your unit/area:
 - What is already in place?
 - What is realistic?
 - What are critical next steps?

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Safety During Home Visits

- o Stay connected to office
- o Park where you can't be blocked in
- o Remain aware of surroundings
- o Notice hesitancy of client to open door
- o If additional persons are in the home, may need to reassess
- o Trust your gut

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Environmental Safeguards

Analyze your worksite:

- o Draw a picture – note protective and risk features
- o Note and remove items in workplace that could be used as weapons or missiles
- o Consider placement of security devices (buzzers, intercoms)

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Response Planning - What if?

- o Planning for "what if" needs to be part of staff meetings, ongoing training
- o Receptionist's responsibility to make initial assessment and direct client to space within office which offers appropriate level of security

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Response Planning - What if?

- o Use "code words" to indicate possible danger to staff
- o Social worker alerts supervisor/member of team, who joins him to meet client; telephones worker after he has been interviewing client for a few minutes
 - Supervisor asks "yes" or "no" questions to check on worker safety

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Aftermath of Violence

Three Stages of Impact on Workers:

1. Immediately: Sense of control and expectations turned inside out. Shock, denial, disbelief, numbness.
2. 24-48 hours later: Surges of intense and fluctuating emotions. May experience flashbacks and intrusive thoughts.

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



3. After time, attempts to assimilate new view of reality, mourn loss of sense of trust and invulnerability, gain sense of safety that encompasses the fragility of life

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Common consequences of violence on worker's emotional well-being

1. Feelings of incompetence and failure
2. Guilt and shame
3. Sense of personal responsibility
4. Anger
5. Sense of vulnerability
6. Denial

o Weinger, 2001; Guy & Brady, 1998

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Common Worker Behavioral Responses

- o (Denial) Worker underestimate impact; seek to assure colleagues and family members. May return to work prematurely.
- o Take more protective measures with clients (more screening, more selectivity)
- o Proactive steps to increase personal safety (e.g., training, self-defense)

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Steps to take after violent incident

- o **Worker admit violence occurred**
- o **Support the victim**
- o **Possible counseling/crisis intervention within 24-72 hours**
- o **Provide opportunity for victim to talk**
- o **Encourage victim to write up report**

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



Supervisory Steps to take after violent incident

- o Remove stigma from help seeking
- o Referrals/counseling for loved ones/and colleagues
- o Review circumstances surrounding incident for future violence prevention/intervention, make decisions re client assailant

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa



*Avoid complacency:
"It will never happen here."*

© Copyright 2009 The University of Iowa