

**IN THE MATTER OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION  
INTO FAMILY VIOLENCE**

**ATTACHMENT SW-7 TO STATEMENT OF SCOTT JAMES WIDMER**

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This is the attachment marked '**SW-7**' produced and shown to **SCOTT JAMES WIDMER** at the time of signing his Statement on 21 July 2015.

Before me: .



**An Australian Legal Practitioner within  
the meaning of the Legal Profession Uniform Law (Victoria)**

Men who use violent and controlling behaviours

A framework for comprehensive  
assessment in men's behaviour  
change programs

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# A framework for comprehensive assessment in men's behaviour change programs

Safety, Accountability and Human Rights

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## Introduction

### Policy and legislative context

The Victorian Government is committed to reducing family violence. *A fairer Victoria* identifies family violence as one of the key priorities of the government's social policy action plan.

The aims of the family violence reforms are to:

- improve the safety of women and children, particularly those at greatest risk of experiencing family violence
- ensure that men who use violent and controlling behaviour are held accountable for their actions
- prevent family violence from occurring.

The government initiated major reforms of the family violence service system in 2005. The whole-of-government reforms provide for an integrated response across community services, justice and police.

The *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* furthers these reforms by broadening the definitions of family violence, and contains improvements to the justice system to better respond to family violence.

- Research on family violence indicates that it is a chronic, under-reported and gendered problem, in which women and children are significantly over-represented amongst victims.
- In 2007–08, Victoria Police recorded more than 30,000 family violence incidents.
- In 2003–04, 36 per cent of family violence incidents attended by Victoria Police were repeat visits to the same household.

### Men's behaviour change

Timely and appropriate responses to men who use violent and controlling behaviour are a key component of an integrated family violence system.

A great deal has been achieved towards collaboration between men's behaviour change programs and family violence services for women and children, accommodation services, police and courts. To ensure that the safety of women and children is protected at all times, it is important that clear referral pathways and intake processes are provided for men who use violent and controlling behaviour, and that men's behaviour change work is undertaken in a skilled and systemic way.

Intake practices – including those for referral, assessment and waitlist management – are subject to minimum standards set down by the men's behaviour change peak body, No To Violence (NTV). These standards identify the basic requirements for intake, whilst allowing for considerable variation amongst program providers.

In early 2009, a service intake model for men's behaviour change programs was released after widespread consultation within the men's behaviour change sector, and the family violence sector more broadly. In addition, extra funding has been allocated to the Men's Referral Service (MRS) to accept and respond to active referrals from police on weekends.

## Common assessment and risk management for victims of family violence

In 2007, the government launched its *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework*, to enable a wide range of professionals to better identify and respond to family violence.

The framework identifies six components required to effectively identify (risk assessment) and respond to (risk management) victims of family violence:

1. a shared understanding of risk and family violence across all service providers
2. a standardised approach to assessing risk
3. appropriate referral pathways and information-sharing
4. risk management strategies that include ongoing assessment and case management
5. consistent data collection and analysis to ensure the system is able to respond to changing priorities
6. quality assurance strategies and measures that underpin a philosophy of continuous improvement.

To ensure service delivery is consistent across the family violence service system, regardless of the particular circumstances of a family violence incident, or of an individual's entry point into the system, the framework also provides three accompanying practice guides, focussed on:

- identifying family violence
- preliminary assessment
- comprehensive assessment.

## The need for a common framework for comprehensive assessment in men's behaviour change programs

The growing worldwide trend towards an integrated family violence service system has seen a shift towards the development of 'common' standards and practices among service providers. One of the aims of an integrated system is to ensure that both victims and users of violence receive consistent attention right across the full range of services, including from specialist family violence service providers, police, courts, and mainstream service providers.

The developments outlined above offer fresh opportunities for providers of men's behaviour change programs to reflect on their assessment practice. During the consultation process for the men's behaviour change program *Service intake model*, providers identified a need for a new, common resource for comprehensive assessment. They felt that a common framework, with a common language and approach, would:

- foster equity of service provision across the state
- facilitate referral and information-sharing between men's behaviour change programs, and also between these programs and other service providers in the integrated family violence system
- promote programs' accountability to women and children, especially in terms of safety
- contribute to the provision of relevant and quality services to women, children and men.

In May 2009, an expert panel of men's behaviour change professionals was convened to inform the development of a new framework for comprehensive assessment in men's behaviour change programs.



## Using this framework

### The aims of the framework

This framework has been developed to achieve greater commonality of practice amongst men's behaviour change programs with regard to:

- initial and continuous identification of risks, threats and dangers to the safety of women and children
- facilitating men's entry into the health and community service system
- assessing men's suitability for participation in a men's behaviour change program
- ongoing review of men's participation in a men's behaviour change program.

#### Initial and continuous identification of risks, threats and dangers to safety for women and children

Comprehensive assessment of men in the context of family violence provides an opportunity for contact with the women and children affected by that violence. For men's behaviour change program providers, risk assessment and risk management of women and children (even when not undertaken by the Men's Behaviour Change program providers themselves) are a vital aspect of comprehensive assessment.

#### Facilitating men's entry into the health and community service system

Many men who go through a men's behaviour change comprehensive assessment will not ultimately participate in a men's behaviour change program. Some will be referred to another service or intervention (perhaps as a precursor to participation in a behaviour change program); others will choose not to use the service/s on offer. In this sense, comprehensive assessment is a process through which men might enter the service system, if they choose.

#### Assessing men's suitability for participation in a men's behaviour change program

Not all men are suitable to participate in a men's behaviour change program at the time of their assessment. Please see *Deciding on a course of action* for discussion of the circumstances in which a man's participation might be deferred.

#### Ongoing review of men's participation in a men's behaviour change program

Comprehensive assessment potentially comprises two phases. It involves initial assessment, and for men who go on to participate in a men's behaviour change program, it also involves ongoing review.

### Structure of the framework

Comprehensive assessment is a process that takes place for the duration of a man's contact with a men's behaviour change program; or even beyond that, if his (ex)partner continues contact. This framework addresses some general issues regarding comprehensive assessment before presenting two practice guides, on initial assessment and ongoing review. The framework also contains resources in the form of assessment tools, including a recording template for initial assessment and case management planning.

Comments in text boxes are contributions from expert panel members

## Who should use the framework

This is a framework for use by Department of Human Services-funded men's behaviour change programs operating in the context of the Victorian integrated family violence system. Comprehensive assessment requires a high level of client engagement skills, and detailed safety planning and case management responses. As such, it is intended that the framework will be used primarily by specialist family violence professionals working with men who use violent and controlling behaviours. NTV requires assessment workers to:

- be a Level 3 (A) Facilitator, or
- to have a Graduate Certificate of Social Science (Male Family Violence – Group Facilitation) and at least 200 hours of experience facilitating men's behaviour change groups.

The framework might also be of value to trainee assessors and others wishing to understand more about the processes and underlying concepts of men's behaviour change work.

## Standing of this framework in relation to other frameworks and standards

### *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework*

The *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* provides evidence-based information about indicators of risk, and focuses its suggestions for practice on working with victims of family violence.

This *Framework for comprehensive assessment in men's behaviour change programs* is primarily for use with men who are known or thought to have used, or be using, violent and controlling behaviours against a family member. Assessment of these men includes contact with – and sometimes assessment of – women and children. As such, this framework both complements and utilises the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework*:

- It *complements* the use of the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* with women, by noting issues specifically pertaining to men's behaviour change that program providers or women's family violence workers could explore with women.
- It *utilises* the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* by requiring men's behaviour change programs to follow the practice guides as they assess women's and children's risks and needs.

Women and children who are affected by men's use of violent and controlling behaviour, and who are not currently in contact with a women's family violence worker, should be assessed using the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* and referred appropriately.

If women are already in contact with a family violence worker, the assessor should liaise with that worker to ensure that appropriate risk assessment and risk management have been undertaken, before speaking with the woman about men's behaviour change.

In addition to the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework*, contact with women and children should be informed by the following resources:

- *Practice guidelines: women and children's family violence counselling and support programs*<sup>1</sup>
- *Men's behaviour change group work: minimum standards and quality practice*.<sup>2</sup>

Comprehensive assessment of men sometimes reveals risks to children from their mother, or from both parents. Men's behaviour change program providers have a duty of care to assess and respond to risk to children in their own right. Because of the serious effects of family violence, it is essential that program staff understand the need to notify child protection services where they believe a children are at risk of significant harm.<sup>3</sup>

#### NTV Minimum Standards

This framework is informed by and consistent with NTV's minimum standards, expounding on the ideas and issues identified in the NTV manual, *Men's behaviour change group work: minimum standards and quality practice* (hereafter referred to as NTV's *Minimum standards*).

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Human Services (2008), *Practice guidelines: women and children's family violence counselling and support programs*, Victoria

<sup>2</sup> No To Violence (2006), *Men's behaviour change group work: minimum standards and quality practice*, Victoria

<sup>3</sup> No To Violence (2006), *Men's behaviour change group work: minimum standards and quality practice*, Victoria, p22

## Components of comprehensive assessment

Comprehensive assessment is best understood as a non-linear process that fulfils many overlapping purposes, each of which is discussed separately below. It enables the assessor to:

- have contact with women and – indirectly – children who might be experiencing violence
- identify risk indicators, dangers and threats
- engage the man and explore his motivation for change
- introduce the men's behaviour change program and (in a very preliminary way) some of the fundamental ideas of men's behaviour change
- challenge violence, and model and promote non-violence
- gauge which forms of support might best assist the man to work towards changing his behaviour
- decide on a course of action
- establish a baseline for monitoring.

### Have contact with women and children

Comprehensive assessment is usually (but not always) a program's first contact with a man's (ex)partner and children. If they wish it, this contact continues through the process of ongoing review. According to NTV's *Minimum standards* (p 105), "this contact has many purposes. It:

- assists staff to ascertain and respond to the safety needs of women and their children
- enables staff to ascertain and respond to other support and information needs of women and their children (thereby becoming a pathway into the support system)
- offers women a chance to discuss their options and decisions about the relationship
- helps women and older children to get accurate information about the program and the man's participation
- offers opportunities for women and children to give information to staff about men's behaviour
- contributes to holding men accountable for their ongoing behaviour.'

NTV suggests that 'contact and support of women and children should primarily be about their safety and wellbeing. It is equally important for women and children who appear to be in no physical danger' (p 105).

As discussed above, comprehensive assessment for women should be based on the practice guide outlined in the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework*, with additional questions about the man's behaviour and discussion about the men's behaviour change program.

Department of Human Services-funded men's behaviour change programs in Victoria have the capacity to refer children to specialist family violence services for assessment and recovery. At the time of writing, it seems that these community resources are under-utilised by men's behaviour change programs, and that this might be an area requiring improved practice.

'Whilst acknowledging that it is important to have basic information about the man before group process, I do not rely on his self-reporting for my assessment of risk for his partner and children. In the assessment with the man, I am interested to know what a man will tell me about the violence he has used. I do not undertake the assessment with the belief that I will now be able to make an effective assessment of risk to partners and children. That is the function of the assessment with the (ex)partner and at times the children. The information from the man is additional to that.'

'The assessment begins the process that is continued in the men's behaviour change program – that of creating a safe place for the man to begin the process of change. Depending on the man and his awareness, willingness to disclose, his phase in the cycle, and motivation and intention, the assessment can have many outcomes. Through telling his story, he may begin to acknowledge his violence and abuse, sit with his shame, become aware of the choices he makes, and/or start to identify his goals and the necessary changes in his attitudes and behaviours. This depends on the man and his willingness at this point to accept invitations to engage in the process.

'For some men, the assessment process can be very powerful, for others not. It is not the function of the assessment to do the work of the group, but it can start the process.'

## Identify risk indicators, dangers and threats

Men almost always present for assessment for entry into a men's behaviour change program because of their use of violent and controlling behaviour towards a family member, even if they are not yet ready to admit this. This means that one of the most fundamental reasons for assessing them is to check on the needs and safety of their family members. Comprehensive assessment of a man needs to focus on the safety of:

- any women and children who might be affected by his behaviour
- the man himself
- staff
- the broader community
- existing members of the program's relevant men's behaviour change group.

The 'Aide memoire' of the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* (see page 28) contains a range of evidence-based risk and vulnerability factors for which assessors need to be particularly alert. The presence or absence of these risks is not predictive of an outcome, and professionals need to draw upon their clinical judgement when they evaluate the information they have gathered (see 'Making meaning of the information'). Assessors also need to enquire about the likelihood of risk factors arising in the future, and use their professional judgement to evaluate the relevance of a risk factor in each given context. For example, if a man has had a mental illness but is currently being treated and is well, this risk factor is not currently present and should not add significant weight to the assessment. However, the assessor should enquire about what helps the man to stay well, and the likelihood of this wellness continuing.

Whilst comprehensive assessment activities with men sometimes reveal a threat or danger, it is not possible to properly assess actual risk to women and children without hearing their stories. Assessors can, however, assist to *augment a risk profile* by identifying risk indicators and maximising the chances that a man will disclose information about his actions, attitudes and intentions. This information – if shared appropriately with police and/or women's and children's services – might assist with safety planning, and help with prevention of or intervention in future episodes of violence (see the Victorian Government's forthcoming fact sheet on information sharing in the context of family violence).

## Engage the man and explore his motivation

There are many pathways into a men's behaviour change program; most involve referral by a third party. Research by the SAFER Project<sup>4</sup> suggests that few men present, having identified a need for change, without instigation by another person. This framework presents approaches and methods that can be used to explore motivation with men, and is therefore relevant regardless of men's pathway into a program.

<sup>4</sup> Diemer, K. et al (2009). *Continuous Improvement Practice Principles for Men's Behaviour Change Programs in Victoria*, SAFER Victorian Family Violence Reform Research Project, <http://research.cwv.asn.au/AFRP/FamilyViolence/SAFER/SAFER%20Publications/Continuous%20Improvement%20Practice%20Principals%20for%20Men%27s%20Behaviour%20Change%20Programs%20in%20Victoria%20Diemer%20et%20al.pdf>, accessed 29/07/09

Engaging men about their behaviour and motivations to change is an important aspect of initial assessment, because without it a man is unlikely to want to participate in a program. One of the key challenges is getting men to the point where they identify their need for change and start talking about their goals with reference to their own behaviour. This is rarely achievable in the context of initial assessment, but it is important to make a start. In the first instance, assessors seek instead to understand how and where the man locates 'the problem', because this informs the approach to working with him.

Using the 'changes of stage'/transtheoretical model of Prochaska and DiClemente,<sup>5</sup> most men who present to a men's behaviour change program are still in the 'pre-contemplation' stage of seeking change. Some might have advanced further, and while still lacking understanding and minimising/justifying their use of violence, are looking for ways to change their behaviour. In either case, assessment can be used to engage men with their existing hopes for their relationships and for themselves, as part of assisting them to construct their own reasons for engaging in the behaviour change process. While this process takes time to evolve and take root, assessment should be used as an opportunity to make a start, so that the man starts to build his own motivation for doing the work.

'I still work with hope and belief for the man, whilst accepting that he might just be in the remorse phase right now.'

It is vital to recognise that a man's motivation might vary from day to day. Furthermore, most men will have a mixture of motivations, with the newly-establishing reasons for change battling for space against his well-established defensiveness and desire to maintain the status quo (which is often his power and privilege). In these senses, it is important not to get caught up in the idea of the 'truth' of his motivation. Rather, assessment can be used as a reference point, or a snapshot, of a man's view at this point in time, against which later comments or motivations might be compared or contrasted.

### Introduce men's behaviour change

Initial assessment is usually the first opportunity to present information about the structure and approach of a men's behaviour change program – to both men and their (ex)partners. This information generally includes the services the program offers, the reasons for privileging group work over other forms of behaviour change work, the value for men in having support to change, program 'rules', and the reasons for the program having contact with the women and children affected by men's use of violent and controlling behaviour.

Men who demonstrate particularly high levels of violence-supporting attitudes (such as openly blaming women or making jokes about women during assessment) might carry this behaviour into a group process, and reinforce other members' patriarchal attitudes. In this context, an assessor might explore with a man how he would feel about being challenged about statements such as these in the group, and what strategies he could employ to minimise their use.

<sup>5</sup> Prochaska JO, Velicer WF. (1997). 'The transtheoretical model of health behavior change. *Am J Health Promot* 1997 Sep-Oct;12(1):38-48.



Anecdotally, a significant number of men will present for one assessment appointment, but then have no further contact with the program. Some assessors believe that it is therefore helpful for an assessment interview to have some characteristics of a single-session intervention. For example, some programs provide men with information about immediate strategies that they can use (such as 'time out'), whilst stressing to men the limited effectiveness of these tools in the absence of concurrent support.

Likewise, during assessment some assessors utilise some of the same basic psycho-educational approaches that they use in programs. For example they might ask men to use 'I' statements and/or to refer to their (ex)partner and children by name. These assessors report later receiving positive feedback from men about these practices, even among men whom they did not expect to return.

Use of psycho-educational approaches such as these in the context of an assessment interview is controversial. In general, men who do not return after a first appointment are unlikely to be far enough along the 'continuum of behaviour change' to utilise the information or ideas they are presented with. Some assessors are concerned that such approaches might divert practitioners' attention from assessing safety, and/or result in men feeling discouraged about their capacity for change, because of the perhaps unrealistic demands that this approach might make of them. Clearly, any work to introduce the concepts of men's behaviour change via the approaches outlined must be undertaken within the framework of safety. Assessors need to judge on a case-by-case basis whether there might be any gain in presenting information beyond the basics described in the first paragraph of this section, above.

### Challenge violence, and model and promote non-violence

Comprehensive assessment provides opportunities to challenge men respectfully about their use of violent and controlling behaviour, and to model non-violent ways of communicating and resolving difference. These opportunities involve both process and practice.

With regards to process, for example, where assessment is carried out by one female and one male assessor, it can be a chance to demonstrate ways of relating that do not involve 'power-over'. Like everyone, assessors are the bearers of gendered behaviour, and so it is unlikely that all gendered ways of communicating could be eliminated from assessment practice. Nevertheless, it is helpful to avoid stereotypically gendered behaviours, such as the female assessor taking notes or offering drinks. It is also very important for the assessment team to have clearly identified processes for who will challenge men about their behaviour, and how.

### Challenging what men say about their behaviour

With regards to practice, the way that assessors challenge what men say about their behaviour is one example of modelling and promoting non-violence. Possibly one of the least understood issues in men's behaviour change work is the issue of 'challenging' a man on his behaviour. For people who do not work directly with men, 'challenge' is often imagined as confrontational. Yet experienced workers report that direct confrontation is rarely productive, especially during initial assessment. They have found that it tends to lead into dead-end situations that highlight difference and tap into the right/wrong attitudes of many men, in which men might well conclude, 'we'll just have to agree to disagree'.

Men are more likely to experience initial assessment as a positive experience if they feel listened to and respected. Each professional brings their own communication style to assessment, however some core approaches such as active listening are common. Most assessors also speak of the value of calm, methodical and understated approaches – particularly given the need to not inflame or heighten a man's mood or defensiveness. They suggest that in initial assessment, a curious, rather than interrogative, line of enquiry is safer, and more likely to result in a man engaging in the process.

Experienced assessors suggest that the practice of challenging men during initial assessment is somewhat different to challenging in the context of a men's behaviour change program. When a man is at the beginning of his behaviour change journey and is not yet participating in a program, the challenge is less likely to be direct, and more likely to be exploratory. Later, as he develops an understanding of the effects of his own behaviour and his responsibility for changing it, more direct challenges become possible (although decisions about this are always based on the current risk assessment for any affected women and children).

The example below serves to illustrate these differences in approach to challenging a man who says, 'She kept nagging and nagging, and I just snapped.'

#### Challenges in the context of initial assessment

Assessor: "I wonder what Jane might say about what happened?"

This approach serves many purposes:

- it acknowledges the possibility of a different viewpoint, narrative and experience
- it demonstrates that the assessor is not only interested in the man's version or story
- it brings the woman into the conversation as a real person, by use of her name
- it challenges the right/wrong dichotomy often held by men who use violent and controlling behaviours.

OR

Assessor: "What happens when you snap?"

Man: "I just start yelling at her."

Assessor: "And so I wonder, how is that working for you?"

This approach invites the man to start to name his behaviour, rather than use 'smokescreen' language, and then asks him to reflect on whether this behaviour is meeting his own needs. This can assist him to uncover his own reasons for wanting to change.



### Challenges in the context of ongoing program work

Facilitator: 'I notice you've said "just" three times tonight – you know, as in "I just snapped". Let's go through step-by-step what happens in that moment of "just".' (The facilitator might go on to explore with the man the thoughts and feelings that gave him 'permission' to use violence/abuse, and to talk about where he could have made some changes that would assist him to make different choices).

AND/OR

Facilitator: 'What happened when you "just snapped"? What did you do? How do you think Jane would have experienced you "just" snapping?'

### Gauge which forms of support might assist

'Locating the responsibility for the violence with the man and not being 'sucked into' the reasons why he uses violence ... can be tricky as there are likely to be stressors in this man's life which may be tragic and evoke a sense of sadness and empathy during the assessment.

This must not derail the assessment and the fact that the man is responsible for his own behaviour.'

Comprehensive assessment is a process by which a man and a program provider jointly work out what forms of support might best assist him to work towards changing his behaviour and what (if any) services he will use. A first decision in this regard will be made at the end of the initial assessment, but might be revisited during ongoing review. Options include some or all of the following: groupwork, individual counselling, referral and case management. Assessors need to collect and evaluate information in order to make a judgement about which, if any, of the above might suit each particular man, given his current circumstances.

In general, groupwork is seen as the optimal approach to men's behaviour change, for reasons discussed at length in NTV's *Minimum standards* (p 48). Historically, assessors have used the phrase 'assess readiness to change' as their primary evaluation indicator, usually in the context of readiness for such groupwork. Yet this is a potentially problematic indicator on several grounds. First, men need to be a significant way along the change continuum to be 'ready' to change; and it is doubtful that such readiness is necessarily a prerequisite for getting value from a group. Rather, exposure to the ideas and issues addressed within a men's behaviour change group might assist men to move towards readiness to change.

Secondly, evaluating 'readiness' is a difficult concept. Experienced assessors warn of the potential to be seduced by men's narratives, in particular their expressions of remorse and their intentions to change. It is difficult to know how, if at all, an assessor can judge 'readiness to change' in the context of assessment.

An alternative to assessing readiness to change is assessing suitability for participating in a program. This, and other issues concerning evaluation of a man's presentation, are discussed on page 23.

## Decide on a course of action

Comprehensive assessment provides opportunities to identify:

- issues that might impact on the safety of the a man's (ex)partner and children, and to participate in a program
- issues that might warrant referral
- issues that might affect the way the program works with this particular man
- times when a man might be more likely to drop out of a program or require more intensive support (for example, when his court case is over, or is dropped, or his (ex)partner takes him back).

These issues form the basis of a case plan, which is a key task of comprehensive assessment (see page 24).

## Establish a baseline for monitoring

Initial assessment provides baseline data for monitoring:

- any changes in risk indicators, dangers and threats
- shifts in a man's behaviour
- changes in the needs of any family member.

These are discussed more fully in 'Practice guide 2: ongoing review' (page 26).



## Practice guide

## Practice guide 1: initial assessment

### Approach

#### The importance of careful practice

Initial assessment of men who use violent and controlling behaviour necessitates careful practice in order to:

- maximise the potential for the assessment to contribute to women's and children's safety
- avoid or minimise collusion with men's violence-supporting narratives and beliefs
- avoid exacerbating risk in other ways
- maximise the chances that men will choose to participate in a men's behaviour change program.

#### What men bring to assessment

Few men who undergo initial assessment for a men's behaviour change program have experienced anything similar before. For the vast majority of men, assessment will be the first time that anyone has invited them to talk openly about their behaviour and its effects on their family members, particularly whilst neither judging nor colluding with them. For many men, this will also be their first encounter with the broader service system. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this framework to address issues of men's 'mandate' for seeking to enter a program, it is reasonable to assert that very few men approach a program entirely of their own volition and wanting.

In these contexts, men are often very scared and anxious. They are often frightened of losing control of their emotions, and/or entering a process over which they feel they have no control. They also have concerns about confidentiality and the potential involvement of various authorities, such as police, Centrelink or Child Protection.

#### What women bring to assessment

As noted earlier, comprehensive assessment is usually (but not always) a program's first point of contact with a man's (ex)partner and children. Likewise, it is often also the first time a woman has contact with the family violence system. NTV's *Minimum standards* (pp 49-50) discuss women's experience of men's behaviour change work in some detail. In summary, some of the feelings women bring to assessment might include: hopes for their (ex)partner's behaviour and their relationship, fear that the program staff might pressure them to reunite or remain with their (ex)partner, ambivalence about the process – including a well-founded lack of trust – and feelings of guilt and/or confusion about having instigated their (ex)partner's assessment, as well as anger, rage, indignation, pain, liberation, fear of the future and hopefulness.

Like men, women are often frightened of losing control of their emotions, and/or entering a process over which they feel they have no control. They are also likely to have concerns about confidentiality and the potential involvement of various authorities, particularly (but not only) Child Protection.

Samples of most of these operational protocols are provided in the *Practice guide*.

### What assessors bring to assessment

Each assessor brings her or his own theoretical underpinnings and counselling experience to comprehensive assessment. This means that no two assessors will assess in the same way. For example:

Assessor 1 writes:

*'I have a positive and strengths-based approach in my counselling and groupwork with men, women, children and families. This includes working with men who use violence towards family members. Philosophical and theoretical frameworks that have informed the development of my approach to working with men who use violence are post-structural feminist theory, social learning theory, systems theory, existential therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, and increasingly narrative therapy. This approach commences with the first contact with men and is evident in my approach to assessment.'*

Assessor 2 writes:

*"When working with men who use violence with family members I am constantly focussed on what I believe are the fundamentals of this work, such as safety, responsibility, accountability, choice, and a focus on behaviour. I draw on my learning of many theoretical perspectives used eclectically ... Feminist theory gives me the basis to challenge some of the stereotypes which portray women and men as not equal and his beliefs about the role of women in society. Motivational interviewing techniques help keep a focus on enablers, rather than barriers to change, and include goal-setting and problem-solving. Construct theory provides some insight into the man's belief system and his core constructs, and how he understands his world. Cognitive behavioural therapy helps me to understand how the man thinks, and ways to challenge violent behaviour patterns and thinking. Rogerian Theory is based in the idea of unconditional positive regard, reflecting, developing empathy and being genuine - all-important for engagement and maintaining a focus on the behaviour whilst respecting the person.*

*A 'theory of restraints' is based on Michael White's narrative theory, and was developed by Alan Jenkins. Its central focus is asking what is stopping this man from being non-violent, and inviting the man to tell his story and look at how he can change or rewrite his story. Social learning considers the inter-generational patterns, role-modelling and other influences in the man's life, as well as his sense of self-efficacy and possibility of behaviour change based on past successes. Systems theory helps to assess where the man fits in his family and social network,s assessing his supports and interaction with others, which tells us how he operates in the world and may highlight any safety risks ... I like the invitational approach, and consider personal development and awareness of my own issues essential to this work especially in relation to my own understanding of masculinity, relationships and respectful communication."*



Assessor 3 writes:

*"Assessment is undertaken with the knowledge that family violence, largely perpetrated by men, has a significant, adverse effect on women and children's health and wellbeing. Feminist theory provides an understanding of family violence prevalence in our culture that places men in positions of power disproportionate to women, and perpetuates a dominant belief throughout society that men are entitled to exert that power over women and children. I believe that men should be held accountable for their behaviour. Therefore, initial assessment for me is primarily about checking for safety risks for women and children, and the man. I ask specific questions of the man and listen carefully to his story, assessing his stability, and the way he explains his abusive and violent behaviour – cognitive behaviour theory is helping me identify his thinking style and underlying beliefs. A Humanist and Narrative approach governs the way that I respectfully communicate with the man, helping me engage him about the practice of partner contact, and invite him to consider the importance/value of changing his behaviour."*

### The role of assessor

Most assessors are also facilitators in men's behaviour change groups; this is an asset, because of the wide-ranging experience of issues that facilitation offers. Whilst there is some overlap in roles, it is important to recognise that the roles of assessor and facilitator are different, not least because in assessment, neither party has prior knowledge of the other.

In the process of initial assessment, an assessor is taking the first steps towards introducing a man to a range of new concepts and practices, chief of which is his responsibility for his own behaviour. The assessor has little or no prior knowledge of the man on which to base an approach; rather they start to engage in a process of seeing what approaches and concepts appear to have the most relevance to the man's experiences, and which might be the greatest constraints on him changing his behaviour. The information yielded by the man is not only verbal, but is also communicated by his affect, body language, and choices about what (or what not) to talk about. In these senses, the role of assessor is largely an exploratory and observational one, albeit with a strategic focus.

### Method

Comprehensive assessment is rarely a linear process. It might best be described as a *directed conversation*, in which the assessor explores a range of issues in a strategic way, with intended outcomes. Experienced assessors talk about the need to listen at two levels. First they listen for information, and second for the man's narrative – how he tells the story, and where he places himself in it. The latter is what opens up points of engagement, and the possibility of drawing a man into the men's behaviour change process.

It is tempting to amass a large amount of data via an assessment process, and so it is important to prioritise seeking information that

- is known to be relevant to women's and children's safety, and/or
- appears relevant to assessing the individual's suitability – and begins his preparation – for a men's behaviour change program.

By focusing on issues that meet these criteria, and excluding collection of extraneous data, assessors maximise the amount of time they have available for deeper discussion.

Service providers need to conduct the assessment in a way that ensures the man:

- feels (and is) safe enough to have a conversation about the issues
- is able to communicate and be understood appropriately
- is being engaged in a culturally sensitive manner
- is clear about the responsibilities of the assessors.

Men who speak limited English need to be offered the use of an interpreter from an accredited interpreting provider. Men who have disabilities that affect their communication need to be offered a method of communication that suits their preferences. Using friends or family as an interpreter or communicator is never appropriate in the context of assessment.

While an in-depth understanding of the culture and values of a particular community group may not be possible, an open and tolerant approach to cultural differences can be demonstrated through both respectful questioning about relevant elements of the man's culture, and tolerance for views and practices described that are not familiar to the assessor. Assessors need to be skilled and comfortable to address and respectfully challenge men who claim violence against women as inherent to their culture.

## Processes

Processes for initial assessment vary greatly, from professional to professional, and from agency to agency. Approaches are informed by many factors, including assessors' counselling and theoretical frameworks, available resources, and allocation of roles and responsibilities in the integrated family violence system.

### Pre-assessment practice

Most men have some telephone contact with a program provider before their initial assessment interview. Ideally, this contact would be with program staff, who can:

- make preliminary enquiries regarding the safety of the man's (ex)partner and children
- provide information about the assessment process, including what happens in the interview, the number and gender of the assessors
- enquire about and respond to any special needs the man has, in order to take part in the assessment interview (such as an interpreter)

At the very least, it is helpful for men to receive written information that provides details about the time, date, venue for the interview, and an overview of the interview process.



### Number and length of interviews

NTV's Minimum Standard 17 requires that 'Intake assessment includes at least one face-to-face interview conducted by an appropriately qualified family violence worker'.

A second interview might be beneficial if, for example:

- there has not been enough time to cover all of the assessment tasks
- a man has needed to undergo assessment for another issue (such as a mental health issue) before completing the men's behaviour change program assessment
- the assessors feel they need more information or discussion with the man before making a decision about a man's participation in the program.

A second interview also offers the advantage of further one-on-one discussion with a man after contact with his (ex)partner.

### Gender and number of assessors

Female facilitators report that when men are not assessed by a female worker, they are more likely to seek alliance with their male facilitator. Their experience is that it is more difficult to engage and connect with a man in a groupwork setting, without having been part of his initial assessment. This is a powerful reason to ensure that men are always assessed by at least one female assessor. According to one assessor, 'I have found the [inclusion of a female assessor] beneficial in establishing a trusting relationship with each man who is to enter the group - this helps to stop the "boys club" feel to the start of some groups, where the female facilitator can be marginalised or ignored'.

Many program providers have two assessors to jointly conduct an initial assessment, most often one female and one male. This provides an opportunity for the assessors to model shared power, and positive and respectful interactions between a man and a woman. It also offers men an insight into how facilitators might work with them in group settings.

The involvement of two assessors in an interview also offers other advantages:

- it enables two perspectives, which is particularly important when considering nonverbal information provided by the man
- it might lessen the possibility of collusion
- it facilitates note-taking.

These benefits need to be considered against resource issues, and the possibility that men might find the presence of two assessors intimidating.

### Supervision/review of assessments

Expert assessors regard assessment by two assessors as best practice. An alternative to the physical presence of two assessors is the practice of having a single assessor whose work is reviewed or supervised by another.

### Contact with women and children

A man's assessment is not complete until contact has been established with his (ex)partner/s. This contact is usually instigated after a man's interview, before he officially commences in a program. For detailed information on contact with women and children, refer to NTV's *Minimum standards*.

### Assessment groups

Some program providers conduct open-entry groups and include men's early participation in these groups as one element of their assessment, in addition to an individual interview. This can provide valuable insights into the ways that a man might experience and participate in a group, but cannot be a substitute for a one-on-one assessment interview.

### Tasks

The components of comprehensive assessment fall into five broad task areas:

- information-gathering, in which the assessor seeks to identify a range of factors that might impact on the safety of the man, his (ex)partner and children, as well as on his behaviour change pathway
- evaluation, in which the assessor attempts to make sense of these factors and their relative importance
- action, in which the assessor responds to identified factors in a timely and comprehensive manner
- engagement, in which the assessor seeks to assist the man to begin to self-identify with the need for his own change, and need for involvement in a program
- psycho-education, in which the man has opportunities to obtain some basic ideas and strategies that might assist him to keep his (ex)partner and/or children safe.

These aspects are reflected in the detailed descriptions of tasks below.

### Interviewing men

Comprehensive assessment of a man's suitability to participate in a men's behaviour change program is a process that takes place with the man, and separately with his (ex)partner/s and children.

With the man, the assessor:

- introduces the assessment process
- identifies the man's current context
- identifies and responds to risk indicators, dangers and threats
- identifies and responds to factors that impact on behaviour change process.

Each of these steps is discussed below.

**Practice example: stalking**

'A lot of stalking and breaches go unreported, and this [unreported stalking] is what it's important to know about. With stalking there is so much embedded in men's ideas about protectionism ("I just want to make sure they are safe at home"), ownership and propriety, that it also takes a bit of work to unpack these ideas.

'I will often ask men how capable they feel they are of giving their partner space, and respecting that space. This allows me to explore what they might do to try and maintain contact or "keep tabs". It is also vital to explore with those men who are recently separated and want to reconcile or want "answers" from their ex.

'I ask things like "Do you find yourself driving past her house on a regular basis? How often do you do it? How often do you text or call her? How do you think she feels about this? Do you do anything else that, if I was a fly on the wall (or if your mates knew), we might think is keeping tabs on her?".

'I am also interested in the language he uses to describe his behaviour – I mirror this language initially, and then look at renaming it. For example, I might ask, "What do you think it is like for you partner that you keep tabs on her and monitor her like that? Did you know that the type of behaviour you are telling me about is called stalking, and is against the law? What is that like for you to hear? How does that fit your view of yourself as a man, and as a husband and father?'

**Introducing the assessment process**

Recognising that the assessment is likely to be difficult for men, it is important to advise them at the beginning about:

- how long the interview will take
- a brief overview of the assessment process, including its purpose
- the role/s of the assessor/s
- any ground rules for assessment, such as use of 'I' statements, or referring to women and children by their names (the use of such approaches in the context of an assessment interview is controversial, and are mentioned here not as an endorsement, but an idea for consideration – see page 10 for discussion)
- what will happen if they feel emotional or upset
- limited confidentiality, the role of taking notes and how files are kept
- the possible outcomes of the assessment, and any actions that may be taken after the assessment.

**Identifying the man's context**

It is important to have an understanding of the man's current context, by enquiring about and documenting:

- the names and ages of all of the man's affected family members, taking into account men having blended families, biological and step-children, and multiple partners or ex-partners (a genogram can be helpful)
- the man's current relationship status and relationship history
- the man's parenting status, including access to children and the presence of any current or pending Family Court orders
- the man's educational background, literacy and employment status.

**Identifying and responding to risk indicators, dangers and threats**

Assessors use a combination of direct questioning and inference to identify the presence of risk indicators, threats or dangers, and to enrich both their own and the man's understanding of these.

Evidence-based risk indicators for future family violence are summarised in the 'Aide memoire' in the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* (see page 28).

Other issues that might trigger assessors' further enquiries and safety responses include a man:

- indicating that he might break a court order (this includes him identifying factors that might be implicated in him breaking an order, such as getting drunk)
- using very dissociated language about or towards his (ex)partner and/or children
- being involved in criminal activity and having friends and associates who are involved in criminal activity (this is thought by some family violence and legal practitioners to speak of a disregard for the law)
- stopping psychiatric medication without medical support, such as anti-psychotic or anti-depressant medications
- changing his patterns of consumption of alcohol or other drugs
- making threats to abduct children, or to see them when a court has ordered otherwise
- appearing to have intimate knowledge of what is going on in his (ex)partner's life, for example knowing that she has changed the locks.

Commencement of family court proceedings or a Department of Human Services child protection notification, or a man learning of outcomes that are unsatisfactory to him might also be a risk flag to assessors. To look for risk indicators, dangers and threats, assessors might explore:

- the most recent family violence episode
- the history, type, frequency and severity of the violent and controlling behaviour, and whether there has been any change in its frequency or severity
- the man's perceptions of the effects of the violence on his (ex)partner
- the presence of children, and the man's perceptions of the effects of the violent or controlling behaviour on them
- the man's legal standing, including current or previous court proceedings or orders, charges or convictions, and any reports required by statutory or other bodies (this includes whether or not the man has complied with legal orders)
- what (if anything) the man has done in the past to keep his (ex)partner and children safe.

Assessors might also need to ask direct questions about matters such as possession of weapons.

### Identifying and responding to factors that impact on behaviour change process

There are many different factors that will impact on how a man experiences a behaviour change program, and the value he might take from it. Broadly, these may be categorised as follows:

Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why he thinks he's there</li> <li>What he thinks needs to change</li> <li>What his motivators are (for example, 'I don't want the police to come/to go to jail/to lose my kids')</li> <li>Who or what he sees as 'the problem'</li> <li>What he identifies as goals, in terms of behaviour change</li> </ul>
Capacity for meaningful engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whether he can attend regularly</li> <li>Whether he has mental health or addiction issues that might impact upon his attendance and participation</li> <li>Whether he has the cognitive capacity to grasp the ideas presented, generalise from them and apply them in his own life</li> <li>His capacity for empathy</li> <li>How supportive he appears to be towards other people in his life</li> <li>How he engages with the assessors</li> </ul>
Commitment to participating in the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whether he accepts that, throughout the program, group facilitators will contact women and children who are affected by his violent and controlling behaviour</li> <li>Whether he is willing to accept the provider's policies regarding limited confidentiality and responding to criminal acts and breaches of court orders</li> <li>Whether he is able to have a conversation about how he might help to keep his (ex)partner and children safe, particularly in relation to physical violence (noting that this such a conversation is <i>never</i> a reliable indicator of their actual safety).</li> </ul>

### Preparing the man for the program

Programs might differ in the amount of information they provide to men about how their program operates. At minimum, NTV's *Minimum standards* require programs to tell men about limited confidentiality, partner contact, program participants' rights and responsibilities, and any fees payable.

Different assessors will take different approaches to preparing men for their program, especially in relation to talking about women's and children's safety. Some will thread this information through the conversation; others will speak to it at the beginning or end.

It is generally helpful for men who are entering a group to have a basic idea of the composition and format of the group.

## Interviewing affected women

Comprehensive assessment of a man's suitability to participate in a men's behaviour change program includes contact with his (ex)partner/s and children, and some form of assessment (not necessarily undertaken by the men's behaviour change program provider).

With each woman who has experienced male family violence (and as appropriate, older children), the assessor:

- introduces the assessment process
- undertakes an appropriate level of assessment
- talks about the man's behaviour
- talks about the man's current context
- talks about men's behaviour change.

Each of these is discussed below.

### Introducing the assessment process

Recognising that the assessment is likely to be very difficult for women, it is important to advise them at the beginning about:

- how long the interview will take
- a brief overview of the assessment process, including its purpose
- the role/s of the assessor/s
- what will happen if they feel emotional or upset
- how their confidentiality will be maintained (and limits to that confidentiality)
- the possible outcomes of the assessment, and any actions that may be taken after the assessment.

### Undertaking an appropriate level of assessment

It is very important that women have an opportunity to talk about their experiences and obtain information about their options, before being invited to talk about men's behaviour change. All women should be assessed using 'Practice Guide 3 (Comprehensive Assessment)' of the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* before men's behaviour change is discussed.

If a woman is already being supported by a family violence worker outside the men's behaviour change program, the assessor should liaise with that worker to ensure that comprehensive assessment has been carried out, and that a safety plan is in place.

If a woman is not currently being supported by a family violence worker, it is appropriate, during a phone conversation with the woman, to explore two options:

- comprehensive assessment, followed by discussion of men's behaviour change and then referral to women's service, or
- referral to a women's service, with the option of returning for discussion about men's behaviour change if she wishes, at a later time.

If a woman is being assessed by a men's behaviour change program, this assessment also generates important information and insights into the man's behaviour, motivation, commitment and suitability to participate in a program.



### Safety planning

All women and children who experience family violence require a safety plan. This typically involves planning to avoid serious injury, to escape violence (crisis management), and to ensure child/ren's safety in preparation for leaving. A safety plan usually involves:

- compiling a list of emergency contact numbers
- ensuring that a woman and her children have a safe place to go to in an emergency
- identifying how they will get to the safe place
- identifying friends, family and community members who can provide support
- identifying all family members affected by the violence
- ensuring cash money is readily available
- making provision for safety from electronic surveillance (such as tracking a woman's internet use)
- having a place to store valuables and important documents.

### Talking about the man's behaviour

Contact with women and children is primarily about their wellbeing and safety. It is vital that they are not re-traumatised by needing to repeat information unnecessarily. For that reason, if a woman has already disclosed her story to a family violence worker, and would prefer not to go through the process again, assessors should consider asking for permission to obtain the information from that worker (following appropriate protocols for information-sharing).

If the information cannot be shared and/or the woman would like to talk again about her experiences, it would be appropriate to seek information on the risk indicators, threats and dangers listed above. One way of exploring this is to ask a woman to tell the story of her (ex)partner's behaviour that was most significant to her – that is, which had the greatest impact on or caused the most fear for her and/or her children.

### Talking about the man's current context

Contact with women offers assessors a valuable opportunity to identify inconsistencies and omissions from the information provided by men. All information about the man's current context should also be gathered from his (ex)partner, whilst respecting the man's legal right to confidentiality of his personal information (for example, information about his sexuality, other partners/children, or work status).

### Discussing men's behaviour change

In the course of assessment, women often want to obtain information about what happens in programs, about whether their (ex)partner is likely to change, and about what their (ex)partner's participation might be like for them. Many women will also use the assessment to gauge whether they will be respected and believed.

Discussion of men's behaviour change with a woman needs to focus primarily on her own hopes, concerns and needs, and those of her children.

It is vital that women know that participating in a men's behaviour change group is by no means a guarantee that a man will change. Some men do give up controlling their partner, and stop their use of violence. Others might stop their use of physical

violence, but continue to use other forms of abuse or control. Men who attend, but are not committed to changing their own behaviour and attitudes, might not change their ways at all. Others might take a long time to change, or change for a while, but slip back into their old ways. Assessors need to stress that only a woman can judge whether her partner or other family member is changing, and if so, what this change means for them. Women need always to be encouraged to base their decisions on how their (ex)partner is actually behaving, not on their hopes for how he might change.

### Documenting the information collected

Program structure and roles and responsibilities of program staff will influence how information is documented and acted upon. NTV's *Minimum standards* (p 97) suggests that 'file notes need to discriminate between fact and interpretation, records should never contain speculation about future behaviour, quotes should be written down wherever possible, and disclosures should be attributed to the person who makes them (for example, "Mr N said ...")'. Having two assessors present is useful for this reason.

Forms and templates can streamline data collection and prompt assessors to collect all relevant information. However, it is important not to use them as interview schedules or questionnaires, as this method of information gathering is unlikely to yield rich or useful information, nor facilitate the beginning of a man's engagement process.

The recording template presented in this framework recognises the non-linear process of assessment and also the need for future readers of a file to be able to access information quickly and easily. It also provides for clear and visible flags of risk indicators, threats or dangers.

Historically, program providers have been concerned about including in a man's file any information obtained from a third party. This has often meant that important information or flags of risk indicators, threats or dangers are not documented in the place where they could be most useful: on the man's file. Recent legal opinion obtained by the Department of Human Services suggests that all information relating to a client of a men's behaviour change program may be the subject of a court subpoena: this includes any information provided by a man's partner, *even if this is kept in a physically separate file and/or regardless of whether the woman is registered as a client of the service in her own right*. However, if a man's file contains information gained from other parties, such as his partner, the agency may apply to the court for this information not to be disclosed.

In light of this, agencies need to establish clear policies about what information to record in writing, and how and should consider seeking legal advice when the circumstance arises. Moreover, they need to be prepared to make a strong, safety-based case to a court about why a man should not have access to information provided by other parties.

Men's behaviour change programs operating from a community health centre may also be subject to a Freedom of Information request. These agencies will need to refer to the *Public Records Act*: 'Section 33 - Personal Privacy', and 'Section 1B - Information Gained in Confidence', to inform their decision on the release of information.



'The process of change involves pre-contemplation, contemplation, action and maintenance, and may involve relapses. All work in men's behaviour change needs to be accountable to women's and children's experience, and criminal acts of violence need to be reported to legal representatives such as police, or child protection authorities.'

The *Health Records Act 2001* and the *Information Privacy Act 2000* cover all personal information handled by the Victorian Public sector and its funded organisations. Funded organisations are required by the standard clause in the service agreement to comply with both Acts.

#### Using the case classification code table

The case classification code table provided in the recording template is that used by Victoria Police and 'Practice guide 2' and 'Practice guide 3' of the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework*. Use of these codes by men's behaviour change programs for assessment purposes will contribute to greater integration, and to more systematic and timely responses to risk.

#### Making meaning of the information collected, and deciding on a course of action

The processes described above generate a significant amount of information; evaluating it and deciding on a course of action is a complex undertaking.

#### Acting on the presence of risk indicators, threats or dangers

Where risk indicators, threats or dangers are identified, assessors need to draw upon their own and their peers' professional judgement to decide upon a course of action. Strong relationships with women's family violence workers and police are vital in this context. When acting on the presence of risk indicators, threats or dangers, assessors need to document all factors in their decision-making, along with the process they have used to decide on their course of action.

#### Privileging women's voices

Historically, women's accounts of men's violent and controlling behaviour have been denied, ridiculed and even suppressed. Men's behaviour change work is therefore an opportunity to seek out and value women's experience, and – in general – to privilege the voice of women who experience men's violent and controlling behaviour over that of men who use violent and controlling behaviour.

Men's behaviour change work is founded on the premise of safety. A man might say (and even truly believe) that he is not violent; but if his partner says otherwise, then men's behaviour change professionals will be guided by her statements and needs. This means that information provided by a woman in the assessment process – about her sense of safety and experience of her (ex)partner's behaviour – of necessity carries more weight than that provided by the man.

However, the nature of family violence means that workers must absolutely believe a woman if she says she is unsafe, but remain sceptical if she says there is no problem. Whilst research indicates that women are the best predictors of their own safety, many of the behaviours that men use to control their family members are harmful, but not directly injurious. These are often the behaviours that women appear to 'put up with', excuse or deny.

There are many reasons why a woman might collude with or minimise her (ex) partner's violence, including her love for the man, her desire to remain in the relationship, her desire for her children to live with both parents, her shame and guilt, and her fears of reprisal. Men's behaviour change practitioners therefore accept her narratives in these circumstances, whilst holding open the possibility of her

seeking help or disclosing more about her situation at some point in the future, *and* of working with her (ex)partner to address his use of violent and controlling behaviour.

Information from a man's (ex)partner/s is typically collected after his first assessment interview and before he commences in the group. Ideally, this information will be combined with the information collected from him, so that assessors can make a well-considered decision about their course of action. In addition, group facilitators and others who work with the man in the context of his behaviour change should read all relevant (ex)partner contact reports before each group or individual session with him.

#### Deciding on a course of action

Comprehensive assessment offers men a pathway into the service system, and as such, all men who are assessed should have access to services that meet their needs. Appropriate service responses to address the needs of a man who uses violent and controlling behaviours include one or more of the following, in any combination:

- active referral
- men's behaviour change group work
- individual counselling
- referral to sources of alternative or complementary support (for example, services to help men with issues of addiction, or housing)
- secondary consultation to agencies that are providing him with alternative or complementary support
- mobilisation of emergency services in the event of crisis.

In the context of assessing a man's suitability for a program, an assessor might draw on information obtained from the man's (ex)partner, and the man himself, to reflect upon:

- whether he appears willing to abide by the conditions of his participation (such as limited confidentiality)
- his mental health
- his cognitive capacities (including whether the effects of alcohol or other drugs would make it difficult for him to get value from the program)
- the level of threat he might pose to himself, his (ex)partner and children, the general community and program staff.

In assessing suitability for groupwork in particular, the assessor might consider the above, and also whether a man:

- is willing to participate in a group process (for example, his acceptance of the group rules)
- appears contained enough to work in a group setting, and likely to be able to manage group dynamics
- can demonstrate sufficient levels of empathy to be meaningfully involved in a group

- is likely to feel safe in the group setting (this is particularly important for men who are from marginalised communities or who openly admit to having committed sex offences)
- demonstrates behaviours that might interfere with his participation in the group or disrupt others.

Where participation in a program or group appears to be contraindicated, assessors might need further discussion with the man to explore strategies for overcoming the problematic issues.

In the current Victorian policy context, assessors report that in the majority of cases, a man who wishes to participate in a men's behaviour change program will be admitted, sometimes if only because it seems to offer the only possible way to maintain contact with his partner and children. Some programs do, however, have formal exclusion policies, in which common reasons for exclusion are if a man:

- has a heavy, untreated substance abuse issue
- has an untreated psychiatric condition
- is attending non-voluntarily
- has a significant intellectual disability.

In most cases, it is hoped that exclusion is hoped will be temporary. As such, most of the above issues might be understood as reasons for *delayed entry*.

#### The place of professional judgement

Professional judgement will always have a very important place in comprehensive assessment generally, and in risk assessment specifically. When drawing on their professional judgement, it is helpful for assessors to consider:

- all available evidence
- the relevance of the evidence
- how the evidence is obtained
- what might be influencing their decisions (including their prejudices and preconceptions)
- the views of other professionals, as obtained through secondary consultations, supervision or joint assessment work.

#### Documenting a case plan

Beyond providing a basis for making a decision about whether or not a man can be accepted into a program, the information collected during comprehensive assessment can provide vital direction for future work with that man. For example, whilst his motivations for wishing to participate might be questionable or minimal, they might provide a starting point for future discussions. The final step of comprehensive assessment for the purposes of establishing a man's suitability for a men's behaviour change program, is making a plan with him about what will happen next. This plan, including any agreements for action, needs to be documented in a case plan.

## Practice guide 2: ongoing review

### Ongoing review

Comprehensive assessment is best understood as a continuous process. Whilst the dynamics between program staff and each man will change over time, the core tasks of assessing attitudes and behaviour to determine risk – including contact with affected women and children – remain largely unchanged. In the context of ongoing assessment, these tasks are:

- Remaining constantly alert for new or modified risk indicators, dangers and threats, and implementing systems such as routine risk assessment during partner contact to that end.
- Charting change across time, in issues such as the man's motivation for participating in men's behaviour change work, and narratives about taking responsibility.
- Assessing attitudinal or other barriers that might be affecting a man's participation in a program and/or group, including those that might be leading to the possibility of him dropping out, participating passively, holding back, or otherwise not making progress.
- Assessing the nature of the man's participation in the group, and how this might be affecting other participants.
- Assessing the man's behaviour change as indicated by his (ex)partner feedback.

It is vital that ongoing assessment continually refers back to women's experience. Yet the meaning of that experience needs to be carefully evaluated. For example, a woman might experience an increase in her (ex)partner's violent and controlling behaviour because she now has a heightened sense of what is unacceptable, or because she feels safer, and is therefore being less careful about 'upsetting' her (ex)partner. Or it may be that her (ex)partner has escalated his behaviour.

One of the most powerful indicators in ongoing assessment can be the gap between a man's narrative and his partner's. Some practitioners believe that a narrowing of this gap over time might reflect a growing congruence between a man's behaviour and the expectations of his community and (ex)partner.

### Evaluation

Good assessment practice involves a process of continual reflection and improvement, for which this framework could be useful. It is valuable to talk with men who choose to participate in a program, or who are referred elsewhere, how they experienced the assessment process. This evaluation needs to take into account the fact that men might find the experience hard and confronting, but that they might later recognise that it was what they needed.

Where it appears safe to do so, a program might also follow up with men who either did not return to the program after their initial assessment, or who dropped out soon afterwards.

Supervision of assessment practice is also vital. It contributes to assessors' professional development and clinical skills, as well as to their personal wellbeing.

## Assessment tools

### Risk assessment tools<sup>6</sup>

As a framework, this document offers a starting point for a common approach to assessment. Early in its development, the expert panel considered the relevance and suitability of tools intended to quantify risk (which can also be called actuarial tools).

There are few purely actuarial tools in use to assess the risk of violence by men towards women. This may be because of the relative infancy of the risk assessment field, or because the tools that do exist might be hard to generalise outside of the context and population they were developed for.

Tools differ in the way in which the required information is collected. Some tools rely on interviews with the woman, some with the man and some with both parties. Some tools also require details of the man's previous criminal history. The source of information is often dependent on the objective of the tool, which can include determining risk assessment for the woman, probation decisions for the man, treatment for the man and so on.

Risk assessment tools used to assess the risk of future male to female family violence can also differ in the outcome they are assessing. Some instruments were created with the express intent of predicting lethal or near-lethal events. Others aim more to assess the likelihood of re-assault.<sup>7</sup>

A study published in 2005 assessed the predictive accuracy of four of the key risk assessment tools used in the United States and Canada. The study highlighted two important details. **First, the woman's own assessment of her risk of future assault was found to be a better predictor than all of the tools, except the 'Danger Assessment'** (see Appendix Two for a summary of this tool). The ability of a woman to accurately predict her own risk has also been confirmed in other studies.<sup>8</sup> Second, while all of the assessment tools performed better than 50 per cent in predicting re-assault during the follow-up period, none was perfect.

The results of the study prompted the authors to state:

*"Until further field research is completed, the authors recommend that practitioners assess risk systematically, with one of the methods used in this paper, or another method with some evidence of validity and also carefully explore the victim's perception of risk. This information should be combined with all other aspects of the case, the more information the better, and the practitioner's own expert judgement, as the instruments and method have a level of fallibility that means they should never be taken as definitive."*

The expert panel for this framework ultimately concluded that whilst well-validated actuarial tools might have a place in some settings, they are generally not appropriate for the context of comprehensive assessment for men's behaviour change programs.

<sup>6</sup> Much of this discussion is drawn from the Department for Victorian Communities (2007), *Family violence common assessment and risk management framework, draft pp 12-14*. Note that this is an earlier draft of the *Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework* published in 2007)

<sup>7</sup> Roehl, J, O'Sullivan, Cl, Webster, D. and Campbell, J. (2005), 'Intimate partner risk assessment validation study', final report, cited in Department for Victorian Communities (2007), *Family violence common assessment and risk management framework, draft, p 12*

<sup>8</sup> Heckert, D.A., and Gondolf, E.W. (2004), 'Battered women's perceptions of risk



'Behaviour checklists can be confronting but are valuable to name types of violence that the man might not name himself or volunteer. [They are] also useful phenomenologically to explore meaning and process – what it was like to do the questionnaire, what he notices, what he paused over, what he thought twice about noting, what most shocked him, what he had forgotten (or put out his mind) but was reminded about by the questionnaire, what "code words" he would have used to describe the behaviours.'

## Other tools

Whilst NTV's manual on men's behaviour change group work, *Men's behaviour change group work: minimum standards and quality practice* contains a questionnaire-like assessment form, the expert panel was wary of providing a set of questions for use in assessment. This is not only because administering a questionnaire is not conducive to engagement, but also because it might lead to inadequate follow-up questioning around risk indicators, dangers and threats. There was also concern that a questionnaire might be administered by professionals who are not suitably qualified to undertake assessment, to the potential detriment of women's and children's safety.

Historically, NTV has promoted the use of behaviour checklists, with both men and women. Experienced assessors have commented that these tools can be useful in the assessment process because:

- they serve to demonstrate the many different ways that men can use violent and controlling behaviour
- they offer men multiple opportunities to disclose their use of violence
- they show men that the assessors already know how violent and abusive their behaviour might be
- they can be a starting point for discussion (for example, an assessor might ask, "What was the hardest of these to admit to?")
- a man's capacity to cope with the challenges of a checklist can provide an indication of how he might cope with the challenges he would encounter in the course of a program.

Behaviour checklists are best understood as process tools. It is reasonable to assume that a man will not admit to all the forms of violent and controlling behaviour he has used. It is equally reasonable to assume that he will be thinking about them, even if he is not talking about them.

Behaviour checklists can also help women to identify and name the scope of their (ex)partner's behaviour. This can be a powerful and often emotionally confronting experience. As such, women who are being asked to complete a behaviour checklist require support in the process of doing so, every time they do so. It is not safe for women to be complete the checklists in the presence of their (ex) partner, and not appropriate for them to be complete it alone.

Other validated tools that may be used in the course of assessment include those to measure depression (such as the Beck Depression Inventory) or suicide risk.

### Aide memoire

The aim of the 'Aide memoire' in the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework* is to help practitioners collect relevant information through interview, including risk indicators that should be explored to ensure that the risk assessment is based on as much information as possible. The 'Aide memoire' forms part of the recording template that can be found at the back of this guide.

### Recording template

The recording template provided in Appendix One is designed for use in recording information obtained from a man in the course of his Comprehensive Assessment.

Information from a woman about her experiences should be documented on her own comprehensive assessment recording template, provided in the *Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework*, with any additional relevant information (including flags of risk indicators, threats or dangers) regarding her (ex)partner documented in his file as well as hers (for discussion of the legal status of files, please see page 22).

## Appendix one – Comprehensive Assessment Recording template

Name	Family name	First name	Second name	Other names/aliases
Current address				
	Postcode			
Contact details	Home phone number	Work phone number	Mobile phone number	
Age	Email address		Good times to call	
Language & culture	Date of birth	Age in years		
Indigenous identity	Country of birth	Preferred language	Interpreter required (specify language/dialect)	
			<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	
Disability	<input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal <input type="checkbox"/> Neither	<input type="checkbox"/> T.S.I. <input type="checkbox"/> Both	<input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	
	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	(specify nature of disability)		
Emergency contact	Name		Phone number/s	

People affected by the man's behaviour (list children immediately under their primary adult carer and add another page if needed)

Family name	First name	DOB	Address	Phone	Relationship to man
			<input type="checkbox"/> Same as above	<input type="checkbox"/> Same as above	
			<input type="checkbox"/> Same as above	<input type="checkbox"/> Same as above	
			<input type="checkbox"/> Same as above	<input type="checkbox"/> Same as above	

Genogram (see legend, last page)

--



**Legal status, including any orders, charges or court proceedings pending**

[Empty text box for legal status information]

**Parenting status, including access or restrictions to access regarding children**

[Empty text box for parenting status information]

**Employment status and educational background**

[Empty text box for employment and educational background information]

**Mental health status, cognitive capacity, use of alcohol or other drugs**

[Empty text box for mental health and substance use information]

## Account of worst episode of violence

## AIDE MEMOIRE

## Partner (as reported by man)

- Pregnancy/recent birth
- Depression/ mental health issue
- Drug and/or alcohol misuse/abuse
- Has ever verbalised or had suicidal ideas or tried to commit suicide
- Isolation

## Man

- Use of weapon in most recent event\*
- Access to weapons\*
- Has ever harmed or threatened to harm victim
- Has ever tried to choke the victim\*
- Has ever threatened to kill victim\*
- Has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill children\*
- Has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill other family members
- Has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill pets or other animals\*
- Has ever threatened or tried to commit suicide\*
- Stalking of victim\*
- Sexual assault of victim\*
- Previous or current breach of intervention order
- Drug and/or alcohol misuse/abuse\*
- Obsession/jealous behaviour toward victim\*
- Controlling behaviour\*
- Unemployed\*
- Depression/mental health issue#
- History of violent behaviour (not family violence)

## Relationship

- Recent separation\*
- Escalation – increase in severity and/or frequency of violence\*
- Financial difficulties

Circle relevant case classifications in table below and check risk factors in Aide Memoir at right.

## CASE CLASSIFICATION CODE TABLE\*

Instructions: Describe the most serious feature of the current case, and use this code number in the box above.

## CRIMINAL: ABUSE

ASSAULTS		PROPERTY	STALKING	BREACHING I/O
1 Serious (Physical)	4 Threats (non-physical)	7 Serious (Damage)	10 Less than 2 weeks	13 Only
2 Minor (physical)	5 Pet Abuse	8 Minor (Damage)	11 Between 2 & 4 weeks	14 Plus Other Charges
3 Sexual	6 Other types of assault	9 Theft	12 Greater than 4 weeks	

## NON-CRIMINAL ABUSE

- 15 Emotional** Manipulate or controlling behaviour, humiliating or intimidating behaviour, subjecting victim to reckless driving, continual criticism, threatening to take children away or undermining the relationship between victim and children. Threatening to commit suicide.
- 16 Verbal** Swearing or making derogatory insults to the victim.
- 17 Social** Keeping victim away from family and friends, not letting victim leave the house, insulting victim in public.
- 18 Financial** Keeping victim totally dependent, not giving victim enough money to buy things for the household or for basic needs, threatening that victim will lose all victim's property if the relationship ends.
- 19 Spiritual** Ridiculing or insulting victim's most valued beliefs about religion, ethnicity, socio-economic background or sexual preferences.

## NON-ABUSIVE AND NON-CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

- 20 Conflict** Non-violent, non-abusive, non-criminal dispute between family members characterized by the absence of controlling or coercive behavior.

\*This is consistent with the Classification Table used by the Victorian Police in the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Report (the L1

**Man's thoughts on his behaviour, need to change, reasons for change**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a man to write his thoughts on his behavior, his need to change, and the reasons for change. The box occupies most of the page area below the header.

**Other information****Consent**

I, \_\_\_\_\_

consent for this agency to share the information I have provided in this assessment with other relevant agencies for the purposes of:

- (a) referring me to their services, or
- (b) ensuring safety for my family members.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Verbal consent obtained:  Yes No

**Case management plan****Assessment outcomes**

Assessment interview completed	YES	NO
Suitable for program at this point	YES	NO
Contract signed	YES	NO

Program services to be provided and dates of commencement

Any extra conditions of participation

Review date

Referrals

**Staff tasks INCLUDING ACTION ON RISK FACTORS**

What	Who	Due date	Date completed

**Sign off****Interviewer one**

Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer two**

Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

**Supervisor/Manager**

Name

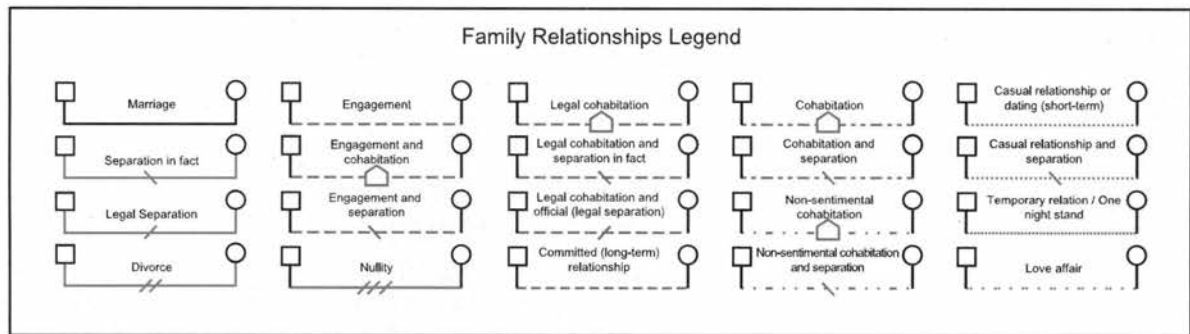
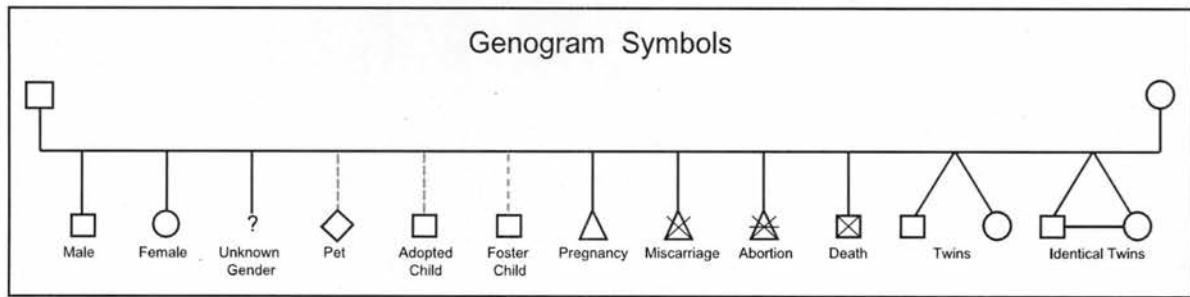
\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix two – Danger Assessment tool<sup>9</sup>

The Danger Assessment (DA) was developed by Campbell in the United States of America (USA) in 1986, following a retrospective review of male to female family violence homicides and near-lethal events. Its aim is to increase a woman's awareness of her risk for future lethal or near-lethal assault. It has been used in a number of settings including health care, criminal justice and women's shelters.<sup>10</sup>

The original DA consisted of 15 items in the form of questions designed to be administered to the victim. Responses were in a yes/no format. This tool was used in combination with a calendar on which the victim is asked to mark violent incidents over the past 12 months and rank the level of severity of the incident on a scale of 1-5.

The reliability and validity of the DA has been established<sup>11</sup> and the tool has been tested for its predictive value in terms of re-assault and homicide.<sup>12 13</sup>

The original version of the DA was revised in 2003 following a multi-city case control study that used women killed by their partners matched with women abused by their partners. The outcomes of that study led to the re-wording of several of the items in the questionnaire, as well as the addition of five new questions, bringing the total number of questions to 20. The score resulting from adding "yes" responses together is used to categorise victims into one of four levels of danger – variable, increased, severe and extreme.<sup>14</sup> The reliability, concurrent validity and predictive value of this new tool has also been established, and shows the DA to be one of the better tools in terms of accuracy for assessing future risk.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This summary was presented in the February 2007 draft of the Family violence risk assessment and risk management framework.

<sup>10</sup> Psychometric Data – Danger Assessment, viewed at <<http://www.dangerassessment.com/WebApplication1/pages/psychometric.aspx>>, accessed 6 July 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Roehl, J., O'Sullivan, C., Webster, D. and Campbell, J. (2005). *Intimate partner violence risk assessment validation study, final report*. <<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209732.pdf>>, accessed 6 July 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Goodman, L., Dutton, M.A., and Bennett, L. (2000). Predicting repeat abuse among arrested batterers: Use of the danger assessment scale in the criminal justice system. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 10, 63-74.

<sup>13</sup> Heckert, D.A., and Gondolf, E.W. (2004). Battered women's perceptions of risk versus risk factors and instruments in predicting repeat reassault. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19 (7), 778-800.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, J.C., Webster, D., Koziol-McLean, J. et al. (2003). Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: results from a multisite case control study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93 (7), 1089-1097.

<sup>15</sup> Roehl, J., O'Sullivan, C., Webster, D. and Campbell, J. (2005). *Intimate partner violence risk assessment validation study, final report*. <<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209732.pdf>>, accessed 6 July 2009.



