

# What is risk?



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## Introduction

The purpose of this resource is to help define and describe the use of risk assessments when working with individuals with complex needs and challenging behaviours. It has been designed to answer basic questions that a front line staff member, a family member, or an individual may have about risk assessment.

## Understanding Risk

Generally, risk is considered to be exposure to danger. At times, people with complex needs may be at an increased risk for a variety of reasons. For example, the individual may experience one or more of the following issues:

- mental health concerns such as paranoia, delusions, hallucinations, anxiety;
- substance use/abuse;
- limited communication skills that may result in aggression/violence;
- decreased intellectual capacity and problem solving abilities;
- limited coping skills for new environments;
- decreased mobility and/or motor functioning;
- and/or many other possibilities.

*It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult undertaking which, more than anything else, will determine its successful outcome.*

*William James*

Occasionally, people with complex needs create risks because of their behaviours. There are different types of risks to take into consideration when providing services to individuals with complex needs.

### Risk to Self

- Individuals may hurt themselves by cutting themselves by accident, by striking themselves on purpose, or by falling out of bed. They may also engage in self-injurious behaviours associated with mental health concerns, which could lead to death.

### Risk to Staff

- Individuals may hurt their staff member for various reasons; some reasons may be obvious (e.g., the staff member implemented a restrictive procedure and got hurt in the process). Other reasons may be less obvious (e.g., the staff member was hit because the staff member was an older male with a specific physical feature like a moustache).

### Risk to Others (including the general public)

- When confused and/or angry, individuals may become a risk to people in the community. For example, individuals may strike another person when they are confused or upset, or individuals might run out into traffic, thus causing a car to swerve into an oncoming lane of traffic.

## Risk to the Environment (including property)

- In addition to hurting themselves or others, individuals with complex needs may cause damage to the area around them. For example, individuals may take items that do not belong to them or destroy their own property when they become upset. Sometimes individuals might engage in fire setting, thus putting the safety of their own home in jeopardy.

It is also important to remember that sometimes staff, others, or the environment can increase the likelihood of the individual being at risk. For example, if someone is scared of heights and uses a glass elevator, they may become upset.

The purpose of these examples is to help draw attention to the fact that risk exists when working with individuals with complex needs. It is not the case for every individual.

At times, individuals with complex needs are capable of using physical force in a way that can cause injury and/or result in the death of others. It is important to examine this risk very carefully. For example, some kinds of risk are considered predatory, meaning that the individual planned to hurt another. On the other hand, some risk arises that is defensive in nature, and appears when a person feels threatened. As such, an individual's risk to self, others or property might appear very disorganized. It is important to understand that different types of risk would require different types of awareness and intervention strategies.

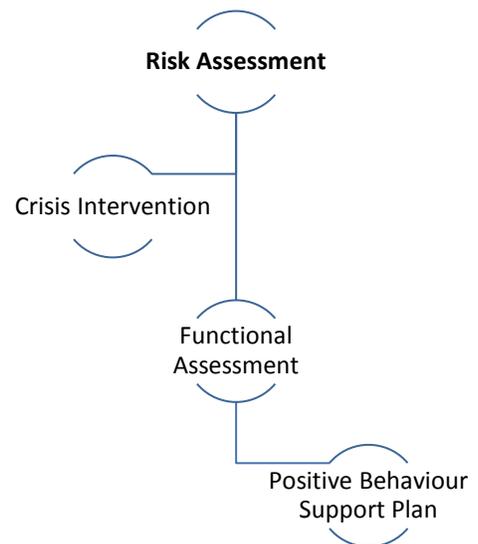
## Risk Assessment

Essentially, risk assessment is the process of trying to decide if someone is at risk for hurting themselves, others, or property, and then using this information to identify ways of addressing and managing the risk. Accordingly, a risk assessment process will often attempt to address the following:

- the nature of the hazard
- the likelihood that the hazard will occur
- the frequency with which the hazard will occur
- the seriousness of the hazard's consequences; and
- the timeframe that the hazard may appear.

(Adapted from: Bower, D. B.; Hard, S.D.; Kropp, P.; & Webster, C.D. (1997). Manual for the Sexual Violence Risk – 20. The British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence & The Mental Health, Law, and Policy Institute, Simon Fraser University.

Initially, a risk assessment will be completed on the individual. The risk assessment provides the 'big picture' perspective in regard to situations when an individual might become a danger to self, staff, others, or property. In situations where the individual may engage in violence, it is important to develop a risk management plan. The risk management plan will help identify ways to enhance the safety and protection of all people and perhaps property.



As well, it would then become necessary to explore the possible need for a functional assessment to help identify the behaviours associated with the risk.

In a functional assessment, the purpose of an individual's behaviours is explored by collecting data specific to the individual, their relationships and their environments. Using this information, the specialist is able to develop appropriate teaching and/or intervention strategies that are specific to the individual. A positive behaviour support plan is then developed from the results of the functional assessment to assist with formalizing, documenting, and monitoring the intervention strategies.

## **What a Risk Assessment Is**

- objective, measurable, evaluation of the risk associated with an individual with complex needs
- a way to help ensure services to be provided are appropriate for the individual and his/her environment
- a way to facilitate communication between staff, agency, individual and the family in a proactive way that helps promote everyone's personal safety

## **What a Risk Assessment is NOT**

- an assessment of the value and/or worth the individual
- an attempt to further label or marginalize an individual
- a process for obtaining additional funding

## **When to Perform a Risk Assessment**

- as part of a transitional service plan
  - e.g., moving to a new service provider, etc.
- when there have been changes in an individual's life. For example:
  - when there have been health changes for the individual
    - e.g., a change in mental health status, change in medication, additional disability etc.
  - when the individual's environment has changed
    - e.g., a new roommate has moved in, the residence has changed locations etc.
  - when there has been a sudden change (increase or decrease) in an individual's behaviour
    - e.g., someone unexpectedly struck a staff member (e.g., an unanticipated behaviour of concern) and the behaviour is going to be examined more carefully

## Conducting a Risk Assessment

'Who' does the assessment is typically based on the initial perceived risk associated with an individual. With some individuals, in some situations where there is little to no risk associated with an individual, the agency's 'qualified behaviour specialist' may be able to complete a basic assessment, using the Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) risk tools, available at <http://humanservices.alberta.ca/disability-services/pdd-central-risk-assessment-best-practices.html>



In situations where the risk associated with an individual is greater, it is important that a trained professional complete a risk assessment. Their training and experience will ensure that the assessment tools are scored and interpreted properly and that proper interventions can be identified. They may also have access to specific tools and resources that are not commonly available to non-trained professionals. As well, they have training in ethical and professional responsibilities, including making decisions based on legal acts such as the Alberta Mental Health Act or the Canadian Human Rights and Citizenship Act. Lastly, professionals, such as psychologists, are well trained and have professional obligations designed to protect the individual and the public.

It is also important to consider which professional is the 'right' person to complete the assessment. Specifically, the training and expertise of the professional performing the assessment is dependent on the risk the person is presenting with. For example, if someone has extreme mental health concerns and addictions, it would be wise to consult a psychiatrist. If the person is presenting with complex behavioural challenges, it may be appropriate to connect with a behavioural consultant or a psychologist.

Typically, the person completing the risk assessment will gather information from a variety of people. The following is a list of common strategies employed in a formal risk assessment:

- Solicit information across multiple domains
  - For example: the residential environment, work and/or school environment, preferred social environments
- Use multiple methods of gathering data
  - For example: interviews, checklists, observations, etc.
- Gather information from multiple sources
  - For example: the individual, family, employer, staff, psychiatrist, social worker, etc
- Gather information on both static (past history) and dynamic factors (current, may be short term)
  - Static factors might include history of mental health concerns, previous violence, previous suicide attempts, family mental health history, etc.
  - Dynamic factors might include family support available, current mental health status, access to stable housing, etc.
- Assess the quality and accuracy of the information
  - For example: is the information gathered current? Is there access to past files/assessments? Were people truthful in their reporting (sometimes there is an attempt to minimize or exaggerate past incidents)?, etc.

- Repeat the assessment at regular intervals or as things arise
  - For example: some individual's risk may require to be assessed on a monthly or quarterly basis, while others behaviours may be more stable and can be assessed annually.

Adapted from: Bower, D. B.; Hard, S.D.; Kropp, P.; & Webster, C.D. (1997). Manual for the Sexual Violence Risk – 20. The British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence & The Mental Health, Law, and Policy Institute, Simon Fraser University.

## Types of Tools/Approaches to Risk Assessment

There are several approaches and resources available for doing risk assessments. Traditionally, risk assessment used to involve using only professional opinions. An educated and experienced professional would interview and/or review documents and come to some type of conclusion about a person's risk.

Over time, it became evident that this was an ineffective approach to risk assessment. The next generation of assessments involved Actuarial data. This involved applying statistics and rules to identify the risk category of an individual. While there is some value in understanding probabilities, it was determined that numbers alone are insufficient at predicting risk. Furthermore, the availability of actuarial data is relatively limited for individuals with developmental disabilities compared to other populations.

Currently, professionals are typically performing the third generation of risk assessment, called Structured Professional Judgment. This means that a trained assessor will use a variety of criteria to help describe and assess risk. Specifically, they will incorporate information from research and statistics, professional theory and practice, and when appropriate, the necessary legal aspects (e.g., constitutional, and/or human rights) associated with assessing risk for an individual.

Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) Program, has published two resources for facilitating risk management. The first resource is the PDD Risk Analysis Form. This is presented as a working document designed to help facilitate the risk assessment process. The second resource is titled RISK: How to Evaluate It, How to Manage It and it offers activities and helpful information for service providers and families who are engaging in risk assessment and management strategies. These resources are found at the links below.

<http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/PDD/pdd-central-risk-how-to-evaluate-manage.pdf>

<http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/pdd-online/documents/risk-analysis-form.pdf>

Knowing applicable policies is important when engaging in Risk Assessment activities. It is likely there will be agency policies that are closely aligned with policies from the funding and accrediting bodies. For example provincial policy may identify which specific key elements are required to be addressed in a risk management plan. As well, there may be specific tools/forms to use in addition to outlining expectations regarding monitoring and documenting risk.

## Case Studies

The following scenarios offer insight into the variety of risk that may arise when working with individuals with complex needs. Please note that these scenarios are fictional and are for educational and discussion purposes only.

### Scenario 1

Joanna is a 38 year old female who is non-verbal. She gets upset when others do not understand what she is trying to say. When people look away and ignore her, she will physically grab the person under the chin and attempt to force the person to have eye contact with her.

Using your own words, try to address the areas below. If you have the opportunity, use PDD's tool (Risk: How to Evaluate It, How to Manage It) to help with your answers.

**Risk to Self:**

**Risk to Staff:**

**Risk to Others:**

**Risk to Environment:**

**Ethical Considerations:**

**Estimate the likelihood that the behaviour will occur:**

**Estimate the frequency with which the behaviour will occur:**

**Describe the possible seriousness of consequences associated with the behaviour:**

**Estimate the timeframe that that the behaviour may appear:**

## Scenario 2

Morleigh is an individual with a developmental disability who experiences depression. He also likes to drink alcohol excessively, even though it interferes with his medication. When he is drunk, Morleigh becomes very depressed and talks about killing himself. Staff are often required to go pick him up from the bar at closing time because he does not want to leave. Morleigh recently lost his job and has spent all of his rent money on alcohol.

Using your own words, try to address the areas below. If you have the opportunity, use PDD's tool (Risk: How to Evaluate It, How to Manage It) to help with your answers.

**Risk to Self:**

**Risk to Staff:**

**Risk to Others:**

**Risk to Environment:**

**Ethical Considerations:**

**Estimate the likelihood that the behaviour will occur:**

**Estimate the frequency with which the behaviour will occur:**

**Describe the possible seriousness of consequences associated with the behaviour:**

**Estimate the timeframe that that the behaviour may appear:**

### Scenario 3

Eduardo is a 27 year old male who likes playing with children. He will often go to the playground or shop at the Disney store so he can interact with kids under the age of 5. There have been complaints made by the store manager and people on the playground that he ‘stares at the children in a creepy way.’

Using your own words, try to address the areas below. If you have the opportunity, use PDD’s tool ([Risk: How to Evaluate It, How to Manage It](#)) to help with your answers.

**Risk to Self:**

**Risk to Staff:**

**Risk to Others:**

**Risk to Environment:**

**Ethical Considerations:**

**Estimate the likelihood that the behaviour will occur:**

**Estimate the frequency with which the behaviour will occur:**

**Describe the possible seriousness of consequences associated with the behaviour:**

**Estimate the timeframe that that the behaviour may appear:**

## Key Things to Remember

- A RISK ASSESSMENT is about assessing if an individual is at an increased exposure to danger because of their behaviors/ environments/relationships. It is not about determining the person's worth as a citizen.
- A PERSON'S RISK changes. Although past behaviors are important to take into consideration, many things can create a change (increase or decrease) in risk. Monitoring risk is an important part of protecting the individual's rights and ensuring they have the right supports.
- NATURAL TENSION exists in developing a risk assessment. It is difficult to find the right balance between respecting an individual's right to choice while responsibly caring for an individual and protecting others. It is normal to experience differences in perspectives.
- PERSONAL REFLECTION is important. Different people have different levels of tolerance for risk. Recognizing your own values and how they appear in your work is part of providing ethical quality support. Sometimes the 'right thing to do' doesn't always seem fair. Living with this conflict can be personally and professionally challenging.
- A COLLABORATIVE TEAM approach is important. In addition to values, each person has different insight, experience, education, and professional training. A Risk Assessment is important and best done as a team. Differences in opinions between staff, family and/or the qualified person should be identified and documented as part of the risk assessment.

## Conclusion

A risk assessment process is necessary to ensure the safety and protection of individuals receiving support, their caregivers, and the general public. When used effectively, it can be a helpful part of the overall planning process.

In closing, it is important to remember that risk assessment is part of planning for an individual with complex needs and challenging behaviours. There are other tools such as person centered plans and service plans that help offer insight into the individual's dreams, strengths, and relationships.

## Resources

### Books/Readings/Research Articles /CDs/DVDs

NADD Bulletin Volume XI Number 3 Article 1: Supporting People at Risk of Unlawful Behaviour. Marc Goldman, M.S.  
<http://thenadd.org/nadd-bulletin/archive/volume-xi/>

Developmental Disability, Crime, and Criminal Justice: A Literature Review  
Criminology Research Centre Occasional Paper #2003-01. Shereen Hassan and Robert M. Gordon.  
Criminology Research Centre Simon Fraser University Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6 Canada  
(604) 291-4127 FAX: (604) 291-4040 [crc@sfu.ca](mailto:crc@sfu.ca) [www.sfu.ca/crc/](http://www.sfu.ca/crc/)

J. W. Jacobson. (2010). *Handbook of intellectual and developmental disabilities*. Springer.

L.A. Craig, W. R. Lindsay, & K. D. Browne (2010). *Assessment and Treatment of Sexual Offenders with Intellectual Disabilities: A Handbook*. John Wiley & Sons.

### Important Legislation & Policies Associated with Risk Assessment

*Alberta Health Act*

*Alberta Mental Health Act*

*Alberta Health Professions Act*

*Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act*

*Canadian Criminal Code*

<http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-46/>

### Assessment Tools for Agencies

Persons with Developmental Disabilities Alberta

PDD's policies regarding support for individuals with complex needs are located at

<http://humanservices.alberta.ca/disability-services/pdd-central-risk-assessment-best-practices.html>.

- [PDD Risk Analysis Form](#)
- [PDD Risk Assessment Guide](#)

The Health and Safety Committee (Rhode Island Statewide Quality Consortium) – Safety/Risk Assessment and Planning tool. [www.bhddh.ri.gov/ddd/pdf/DDDRiskAssessment.pdf](http://www.bhddh.ri.gov/ddd/pdf/DDDRiskAssessment.pdf).

### Assessment Tools for Clinicians

There are two clinically focused Canadian tools associated with risk assessment that are appropriate for using with individuals with developmental disabilities and complex needs. The START is a good resource for predicting short term risk (immediate to a month or so), while the HCR-20 is good at predicting longer term risk (a month to approximately a year). Please note these are not for use by the general public.

1. *Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability (START)*
  - a. Webster, Martin, Brink, Nicholls, & Desmaris, 2009
  - b. A 20-item clinical guide for the dynamic assessment of seven risk domains (violence to others, suicide, self-harm, self-neglect, unauthorized absence, substance use, and victimization).
2. *HCR-20: Assessing Risk for Violence (Version 2) (HCR-20)*
  - a. Christopher D. Webster, PhD, Kevin S. Douglas, LLB, PhD, Derek Eaves, MD, and Stephen D. Hart, PhD

A 20-item checklist to assess the risk for future violent behaviour in criminal and psychiatric populations. The HCR-20 includes variables that capture relevant past, present, and future considerations and should be regarded as an important first step in the risk assessment process.