Clues

Recognising signs that someone is vulnerable and understanding why individuals may hide it

First published 18 November 2021

Written by College of Policing

Clues - guideline introduction

Officers and staff should be alert to and understand the clues that indicate vulnerability-related risk, including exploitation and abuse. They should understand the reasons why individuals may not disclose their vulnerability. These include:

- fear, bullying or coercion
- disempowerment
- dependence
- lack of recognition of abuse
- cultural and societal influences
- perception of authority
- past experience
- feeling blamed or not believed
- impact of trauma

Evidence summary

There is good evidence on some of the main barriers to the disclosure of risk and vulnerability. Knowledge of these barriers may help the search for and revelation of clues relating to the presence of vulnerability.

The research identified barriers to disclosing abuse that were related to wider contextual factors, rather than the victims' direct experience of abuse. These concerned:

- cultural influences
- general perceptions of the police and other agencies
- past experiences of engaging with agencies

The research also highlighted barriers to disclosing abuse directly related to the victims' experiences of abuse and its impact. These included:

- shame and stigma
- fear and dependence
- self-blame

Interviews with practitioners identified similar themes as being important barriers to disclosure.

The studies in this guideline

The evidence was based on 110 studies. Of these, 35% were based in the UK and 73% were based on interviews with domestic abuse and serious sexual offences victims.

The 110 studies included in this guideline originate from the following thematic evidence summaries: fear and coercive control (74 studies); internal barriers to disclosure (72 studies); external barriers to disclosure (69 studies); being believed (57 studies). Numbers may not add up due to an overlap of studies across multiple themes.

Empirical evidence
Good

Practitioner evidence
Available

Understanding the barriers to disclosure and looking for clues

Vulnerability-related risk may not always be obvious when responding to incidents. Identifying vulnerability can be difficult. The barriers to the disclosure of risk and vulnerability may manifest as clues, typically associated with an individual's behaviour that officers and staff should be aware of. In particular, these clues may be informed by an awareness of why an individual:

- may not want to disclose their vulnerability
- may not see themselves as having vulnerabilities

The evidence review highlighted a number of behaviours used by perpetrators and the effect of these behaviours on victims' ability to disclose their experiences and seek help, including using coercive and controlling behaviour. **Coercive control** is a range of abusive behaviours intended to keep a victim subordinate and create a state of entrapment. Coercive and controlling behaviour can be present across all areas of vulnerability and is not just restricted to domestic abuse cases.

Awareness of behaviours will therefore help responders to identify potential vulnerability-related risk. These can include:

- fear
- disempowerment
- dependence
- recognition of abuse
- perceived cultural and wider societal influences
- perception of authority
- experience
- feeling blamed or not believed
- impact of trauma

Fear

Victims frequently displayed fear of their abuser, and a consequent reluctance to disclose abuse or seek help. This fear may be based both on threats and other abusive behaviours. Threats may be wide-ranging and aimed at the victim either directly or indirectly.

Responders need to be aware that both threats of and actual violence are designed to put the victim in a state of dependence or suppression, which may make them less willing to disclose their abuse.

Disempowerment

Clues that a victim is disempowered may include lack of confidence, low self-esteem, depression and feelings of worthlessness. This may stem from an abuser's manipulative behaviour, for example:

- presenting the victim as mentally unstable

- telling the victim that the police won't help
- playing on the victim's fears and lack of self-confidence to discourage them from seeking help
- speaking for a victim who can't speak English
- not allowing the victim to speak with police or other agencies by themselves

Dependence

Victims discussed their dependence on the perpetrator as a barrier to disclosing abuse. Dependence can take a variety of forms, for example:

- financial
- housing, transportation, family relationships
- childcare or as a carer
- immigration status – particularly those with 'uncertain status', where they have entered the UK on a work, spousal or partner visa and loss of employment or ending of a marriage could create fear of deportation to be exploited by a perpetrator
- debt bondage or not wanting to return home (human trafficking)
- loss of access to goods and services in a community or community support

Abusers can also restrict a victim's movements by discouraging or preventing them from contacting family, friends and agencies, leading to isolation.

Recognition of abuse

Victims may not see what they have experienced as abuse or as something that is legitimate to report to the police. Reasons why victims may not recognise that they have experienced abuse include:

- uncertainty about what has happened or lack of recognition that behaviour that seems routine and 'normal' is unacceptable
- being unsure or unaware that the experience qualified as a crime – for example, unfamiliarity with the criminal justice system, exploitation or an experience that wouldn't be considered a crime in a different country
- uncertainty whether the abuse is 'bad enough', especially in relation to non-physical abuse – for example, controlling behaviour, lower-level physical abuse such as pushing, shoving and slapping, or sexual offences perpetrated by someone who is known to the victim

Perceived cultural and wider societal influences

Responders need to be aware that in some situations, abuse may be regarded as customary, common or acceptable in a specific cultural context.

They need to be sensitive to a victim's potential fear of being criticised for not respecting the cultural norm of family privacy, or for bringing shame or unwanted attention to the relationship, family or wider community. Others may fear breaking up the family, or believe that seeking help represents failure. They may fear insensitive responses, being ostracised, or that their victimisation reflects badly on them.

Perception of authority

Pre-existing negative perceptions of authority figures, including a lack of trust in the system and fear of the police, can make an individual less willing to disclose abuse or harm. Victims may also be reluctant to disclose for fear that nothing would be done about their abuse.

Responders should be aware that perceptions of the legal system more generally may also impact decisions to disclose. Some victims may not understand the process, may lack faith in the criminal justice system, or feel the time, energy and resource required to pursue legal action is not worthwhile.

Experience

Victims may be hesitant to trust police and feel that additional disclosures would be harmful rather than helpful. Negative experiences can affect future decisions about whether to approach the police and may extend to experiences with the wider criminal justice system as well as other professionals. For example, healthcare providers, social services, and friends or family.

Feeling blamed or not believed

Feeling believed was reported to be one of the most important aspects of the interaction for victims as it confirms their experience and that they were right to disclose. Fear of not being believed was consistently cited as a barrier to reporting and victims reported experiences of police appearing to doubt their accounts.

Victims' perceived reasons for being doubted included:

- knowing the perpetrator or being unwilling to leave the perpetrator
- having their credibility questioned due to the circumstances of the offence, for example, if alcohol was involved
- their life circumstances or characteristics, for example, age and mental health
- being uncertain of specific details or inconsistencies in their accounts
- police placing more trust in other people's accounts than theirs
- being accused of exaggerating or being hypersensitive
- being questioned as to why they didn't fight back
- being told they would be charged if found to be lying
- perpetrators giving false accounts or manipulating the police
- their behaviour not being considered appropriate, for example, if they have a calm reporting demeanour
- reluctance to go to the police immediately

Police were seen to demonstrate belief in the victim's account:

- directly, through verbal reassurance
- indirectly, by how they treated the victim more generally and how thoroughly they investigated the report

Impact of trauma

Responders need to be aware that trauma may affect victims' responses in different ways. For example, how they present to officers and staff, whether and how they display emotions, and possible impact on memory and recollection. These factors may impact on them and can lead to inconsistencies in their account.

Responders may need to access specialist services to help understand the impact of trauma in greater depth.

Vulnerability assessment framework

The vulnerability assessment framework (VAF) was considered useful by practitioners to guide their identification of vulnerability.
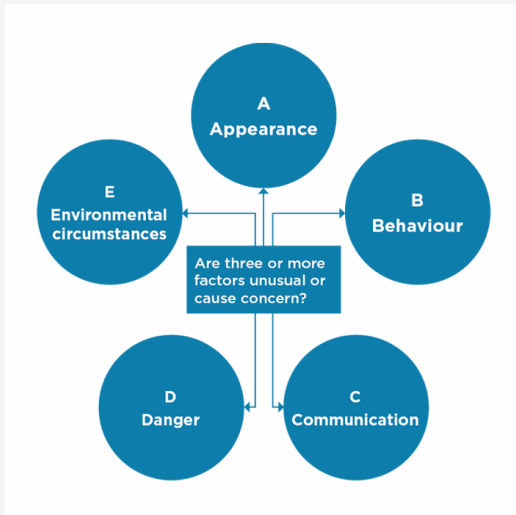
Flowchart demonstrating factors in the vulnerability assessment framework

Appearance

This can include visible injuries, the state of the individual's clothing and their body language.

1. Is there something about their appearance that is unusual or gives cause for concern? Do they look ill, injured, unsettled or anxious?
2. What can be observed immediately about the person in distress?
3. What is the demeanour of the person?

Behaviour

This can include aggression or denial, or an individual being emotional, nervous, scared or shocked.

1. Is there something about their behaviour that is unusual or gives cause for concern?
2. Are they excitable, irrational, manic, slow or furtive?
3. What are they doing and is it in keeping with the situation?

Communication

For example, consider cadence, sentence structure, type of language used, vocabulary, pattern of speech, tone of voice, asking questions and active listening.

1. Is there something unusual about the way they communicate that gives cause for concern?
2. Is their speech slurred, slow or fast? Are their eyes glazed, staring or dilated? What is their body language and are they displaying any subtle signs of stress or fear?
3. Do they understand your questions?
4. Does the person appear to have capacity or are there any identified or noticeable issues?

Danger

For example, consider whether the individual is in immediate danger, their physical location and what time of day it is.

1. Is there a risk of danger or harm to themselves or another?
2. What is the time of day? Where do they live? Can they get home?

Environment

For example, consider the company they are keeping, who they are hanging out with and whether there are provisions in the cupboards.

1. Is there something about the environment that is unusual or gives cause for concern?
2. Has the incident they are involved in significantly affected their circumstances?
3. What are the circumstances? Are they unusual or out of the ordinary? Does anything give cause for concern?

Other factors

Practitioners identified other additional factors that they felt were important when considering someone's vulnerability. These included:

- protected factors – for example, age, disability, gender, mental health, religion, sexuality
- substance abuse
- homelessness

The use of the VAF can be enhanced by gathering as much information as possible, knowing whether partner agencies are already involved and using information sources such as:

- computer systems
- force checklists/frameworks/policies
- lessons learned
- history/priors
- local knowledge

The VAF was developed by academics at the University of Central Lancashire and is included in Authorised Professional Practice. Go to **Mental health emergencies: using a structured assessment framework** (Wright, McGlen and Dykes, 2012) for more information.

Tags

Vulnerable people   Risk   Evidence-based policing