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Understanding BTAM with School Age Youth

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This training is not intended to serve as legal advice and cannot substitute for legal guidance in specific cases. If needed, legal advice on specific issues should be obtained by legal counsel.

Learning Outcomes

- Gain an understanding of foundational concepts involved in conducting threat assessment to assist in threat identification and the level of concern.

- Understand the difference between students that pose a threat and make a threat.

- Become familiar with effective BTAM and intervention processes, including accurately understanding the situation, mitigating potential violence, and supporting struggling youth.

- Discuss potential options/strategies for threat management/plans of support.

- Identify intersections of school and court teams in the BTAM process.

What is Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM)?

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Rooted in Scientific Research
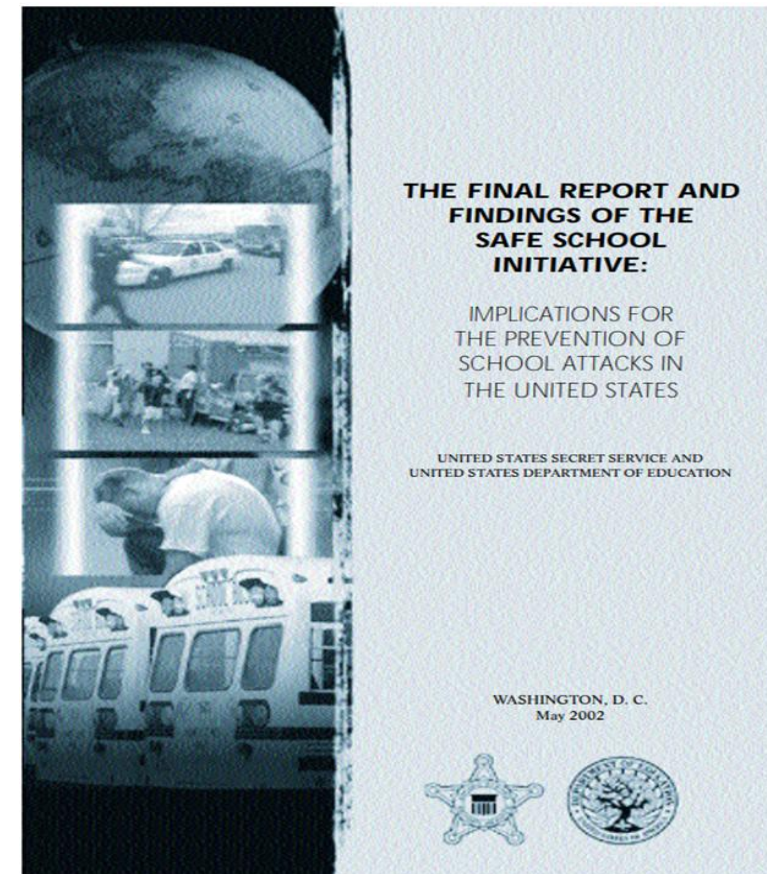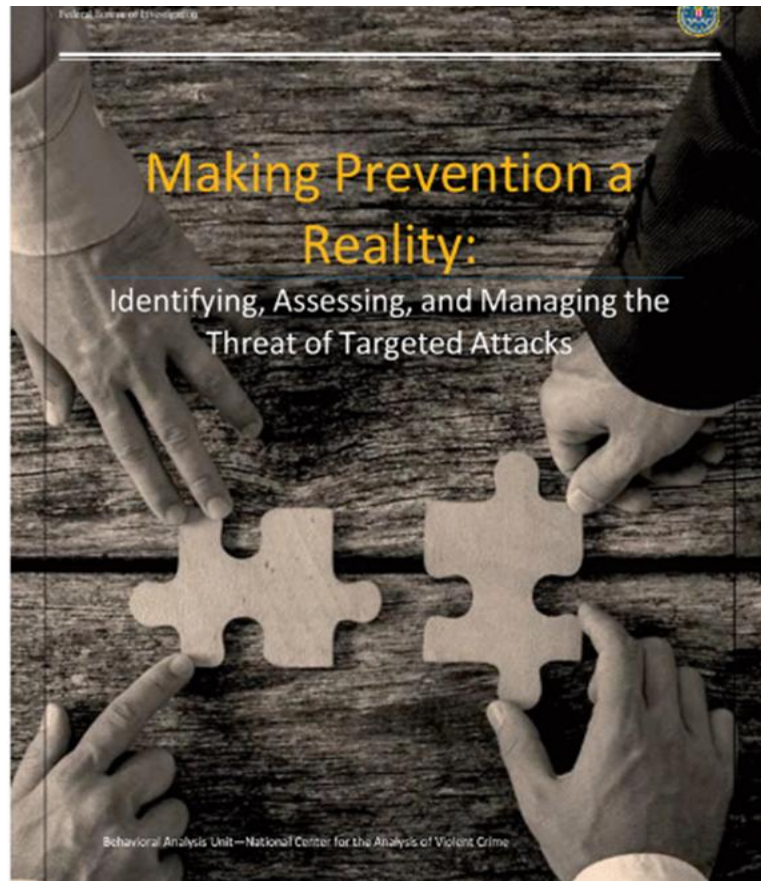
This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND

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- A systematic, fact-based method of investigation and examination that blends the collection and analysis of multiple sources of information with published research and practitioner experience

- Focuses on an individual's patterns of thinking and behavior to determine whether, and to what extent, an individual is moving toward an attack

- A beginning process that guides a course of action to mitigate a threat of potential violence

BTAM Defined

BTAM Model

What is Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management in Schools?

BTAM is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves assessment and intervention with students who have demonstrated a concern for violence and focuses on helping the student solve the problem with interventions and supports (Dr. Dewey Cornell, 2023).

Two Goals:
1. Prevent violence
2. Intervene, educate and support school aged youth

School Aged Youth: Psychosocial Maturation

- Sensation Seeking
- Heightened sensitivity to social exclusion
- Developing self regulation skills
- Receptive to interventions

Gathering Information for BTAM

Threat Assessment Inquiries

- Fact finding

- May or may not involve law enforcement

- Is there information to suggest this person is on the pathway?

- May lead to different types of referrals

Violence Risk Assessments

- Mental health focused

- Conducted by clinician w/ specialized training

- Is the person likely to act violently if not hospitalized?

- Uses risk assessment tool to determine risk of harm to self or others

Law Enforcement Investigations

- Gathers criminal evidence for prosecution

- May also result in protective or security measures

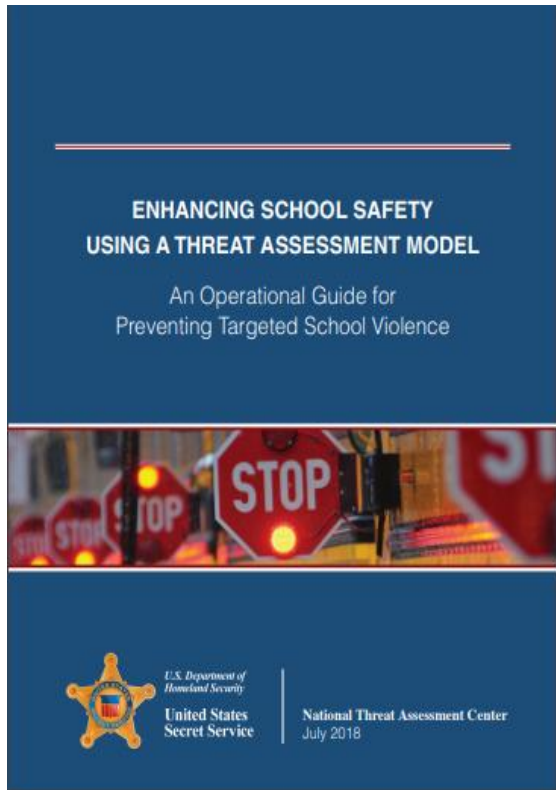- Can include a threat assessment related inquiry or violence risk assessment

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Adapted from: *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* – FBI

Prevention not Prediction

"We do not attempt to predict what the subject will do in the future, instead, we risk manage what he is doing now."

Dr. Reid Meloy

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Foundational Practice Considerations

Establish a Trained Multidisciplinary Team

ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY USING A THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL

An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
United States Secret Service
National Threat Assessment Center
July 2018

NASP NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF School Psychologists — **School Safety and Crisis**

Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) Best Practice Considerations for K–12 Schools

Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) is a fact-based, systematic process designed to identify, assess, and manage potentially dangerous or violent situations. School safety experts, law enforcement officials, and the United States Departments of Education, Justice, Secret Service, and Federal Bureau of Education (2017, 2018) have cited research indicating that before a student commits an act of violence on a school campus, warning signs are usually evident. Research and best practice guidelines provided by these entities also indicate that a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to behavioral threat assessment and management can identify effective interventions and supports that mitigate a potential threat and help the person(s) toward a more positive pathway.

Research has also shown that when BTAM is implemented according to best practices and implemented with fidelity, students on which a threat assessment has been conducted are more likely to receive counseling services and a parent conference and are less likely to receive long-term suspension or an alternative placement (Cornell et al., 2012). Preliminary research has also shown that, when implemented correctly, no disparities were found among Black, Hispanic, and White students in out-of-school suspensions, school transfers, or legal actions; thus, a threat assessment process may reflect a generalizable pathway for achieving parity in school discipline (Cornell et al., 2018). The primary goal of BTAM is intervention. Violence is preventable, and school threat assessment teams are a critical component to school safety.

- Critical prevention strategy/model practice
- Assesses whether student **poses** threat
- Provides varying perspectives, broader access to information and resources, flexibility, and collaboration
- Endorses collective wisdom vs group think
- Promotes consistent use of evidence informed protocol and procedures
- Preventative vs reactive
- Helps counter over and under reaction
- Decreases use of suspension and expulsion when used with fidelity

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Define Concerning and Prohibited Behaviors

- Behavior occurs on a continuum
- All behaviors addressed
- Understand difference between posing a threat and making a threat
- Response needs to be reasonable, measured, proportionate
- Cast a wide net/low threshold
- Promotes opportunity for learning and early intervention

Provide Options for Reporting Concerns

- Supports layered method for reporting concerns
  - Trusted adults
  - Central reporting system
- Promotes help-seeking over secrecy
- Provides regular and ongoing training to stakeholders (student, parent, staff)
  - What to report
  - How/where to report
- Harnesses power of bystanders

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Law Enforcement Involvement

- Report **serious concerns to Law Enforcement immediately**
- SRO as part of multidisciplinary team
    - May be involved in consultative or direct role
    - Select and train LE officer/SRO
- Specify when LE will take over an assessment
- Goal of involvement is not punitive in nature
- LE role is not disciplinary
- Cannot "arrest way out of it"

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Establish Assessment Procedures
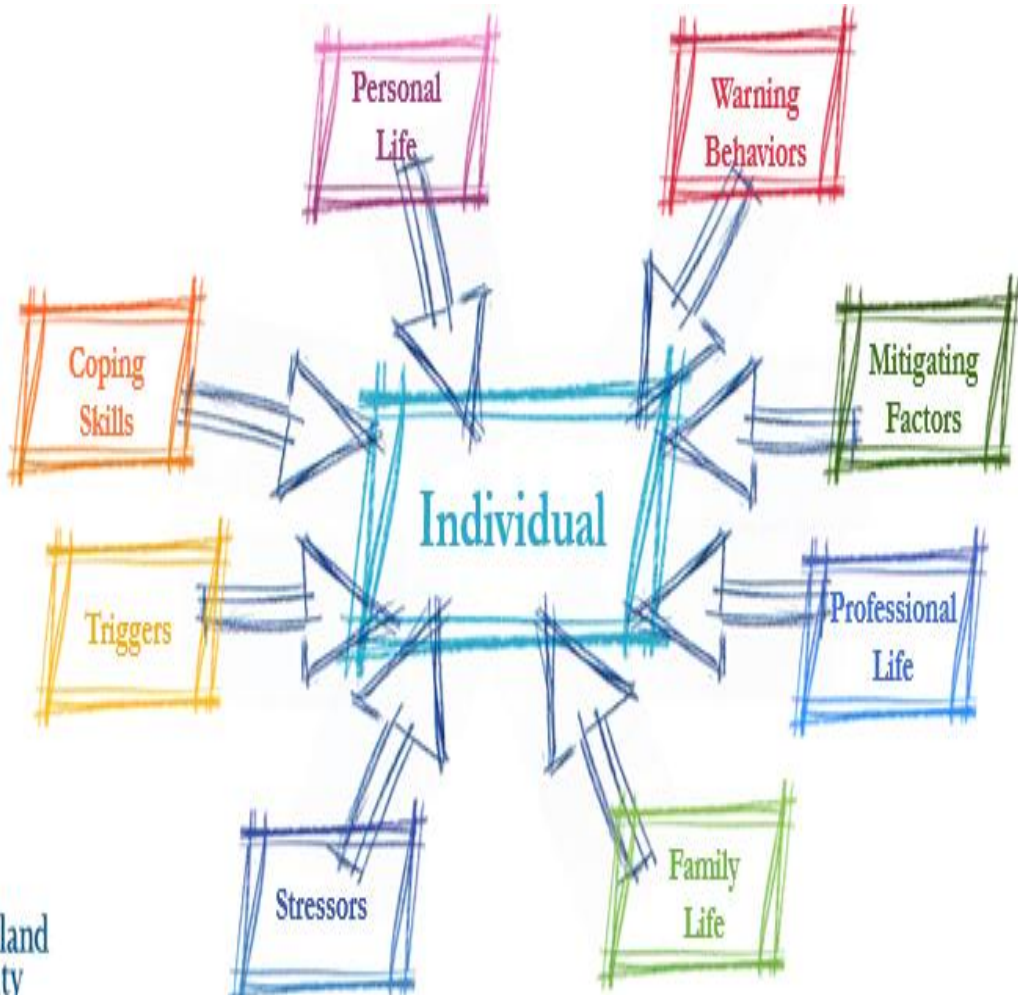
- Rooted in a scientific body of knowledge
  - Guiding Principles
  - Investigative Themes
  - Pathway to Intended Violence
  - Risk Factors and Warning Signs

- Team is trained in threat identification

- Uses a Structured Professional Judgement tool

- Gathers information from multiple sources

Threat Identification

Types of Violence
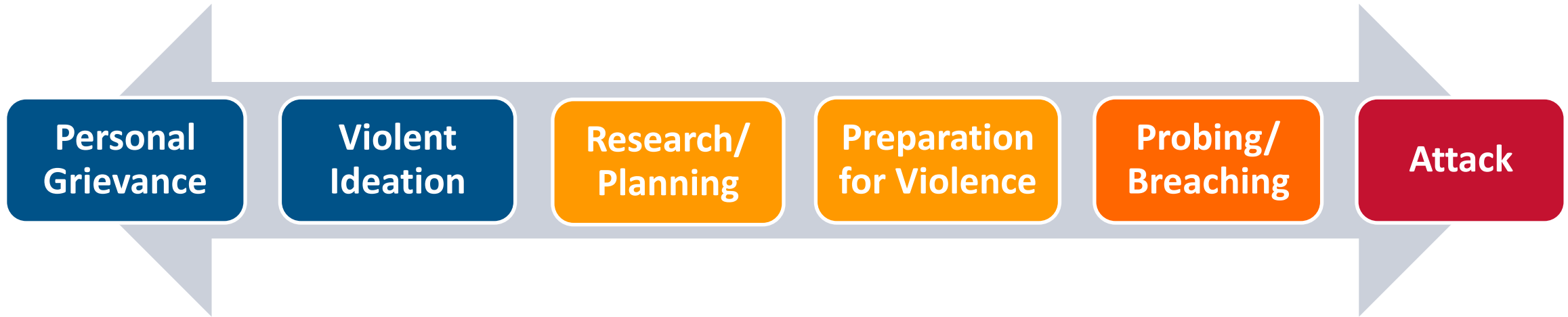
"Offenders Don't 'Snap'— They Decide"

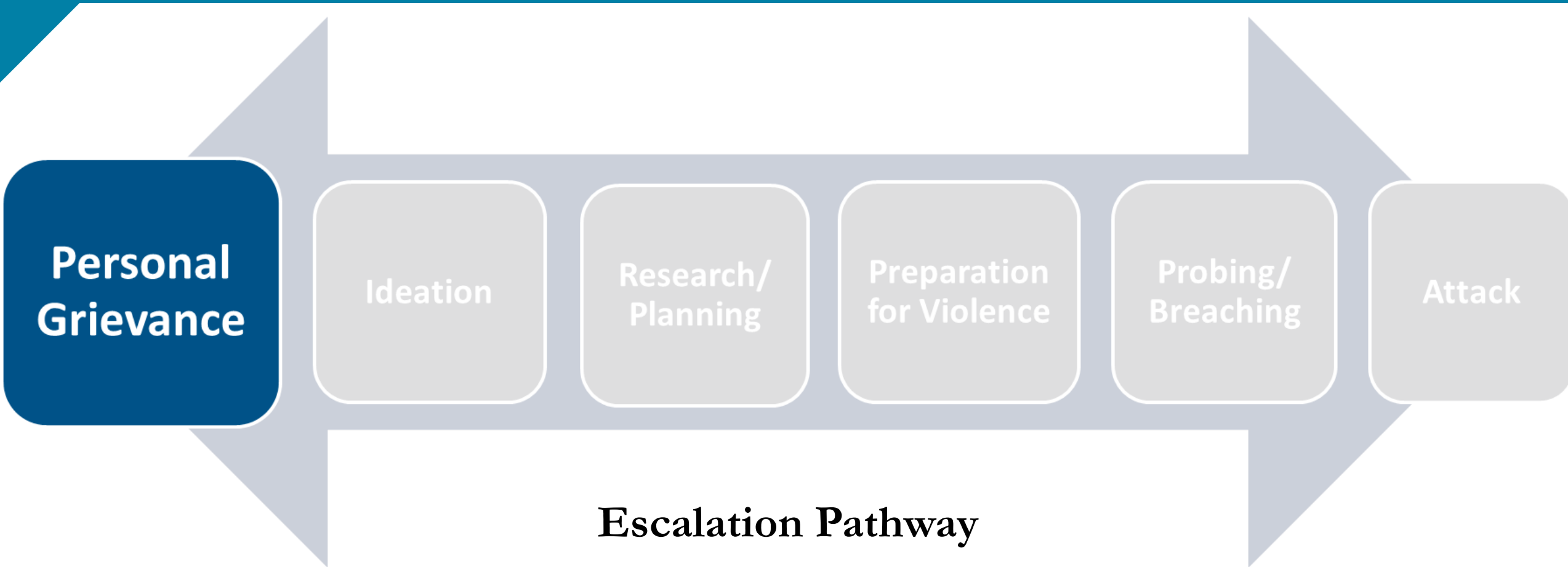| Impulsive ─── Reactive	• Emotional and impromptu • Frequently a defensive behavior in response to a perceived imminent threat
Predatory ─── Planned	• Premeditated and serves some purpose for those who plan and conduct violent attacks • All instances of targeted violence and almost all mass murders are premeditated • The planned nature provides an opportunity for the BTAM process to prevent an attack

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The Pathway to Violence Model

| Personal Grievance | Violent Ideation | Research/ Planning | Preparation for Violence | Probing/ Breaching | Attack |

- Helps trained professionals identify if someone poses a threat, regardless of motive

- Progression from thought to action presents intervention opportunities

Adapted from: *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* – FBI

Pathway to Intended Violence: Personal Grievance

Personal Grievance → Ideation → Research/ Planning → Preparation for Violence → Probing/ Breaching → Attack

Escalation Pathway

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Pathway to Intended Violence: Research/Planning

Personal Grievance → Ideation → **Research/ Planning** → Preparation for Violence → Probing/ Breaching → Attack

Escalation Pathway

Pathway to Intended Violence: Research/Planning

Personal Grievance → Ideation → Research/Planning → **Preparation for Violence** → Probing/Breaching → Attack

Escalation Pathway

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Pathway to Intended Violence: Probing/Breaching

Personal Grievance

Ideation

Research/ Planning

Preparation for Violence

Probing/ Breaching

Attack

Escalation Pathway

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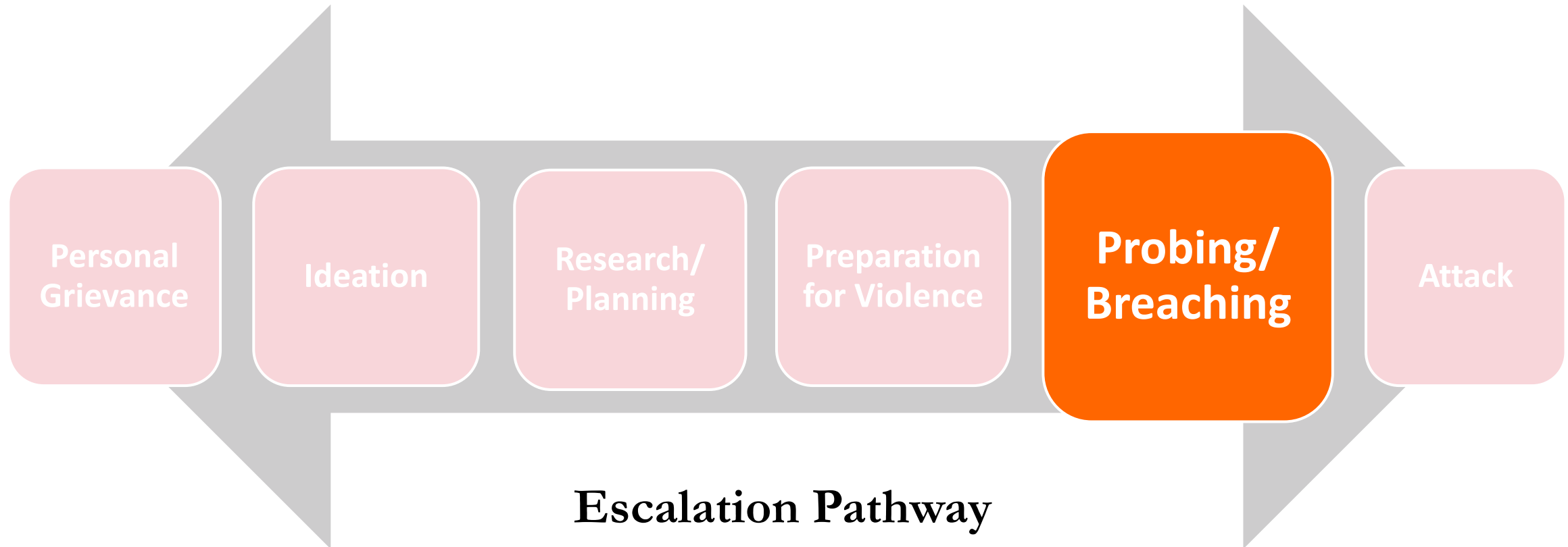
Pathway to Intended Violence: Attack

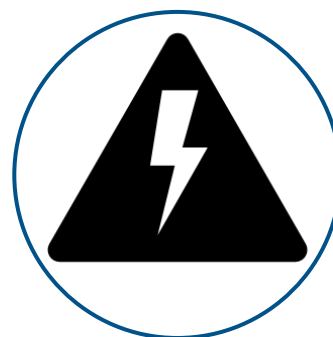| Personal Grievance | Ideation | Research/ Planning | Preparation for Violence | Probing/ Breaching | Attack |

Escalation Pathway

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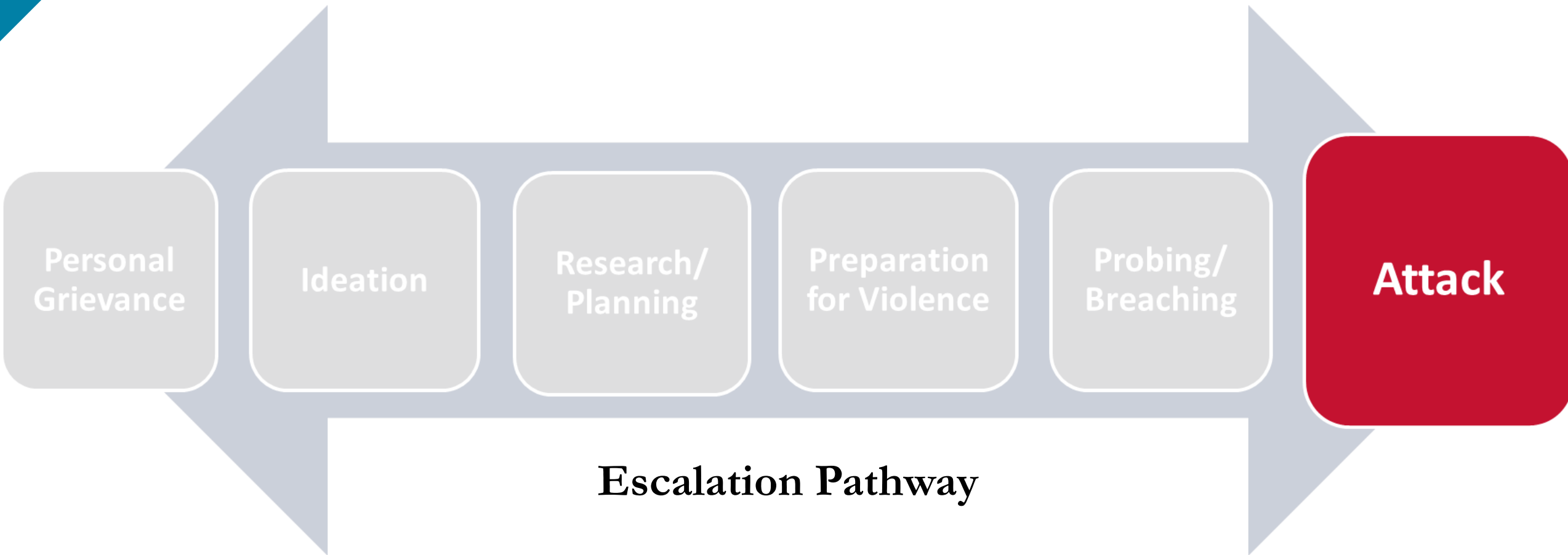
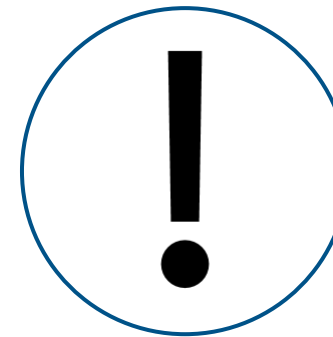# Threat Enhancers and Mitigators

Risk Factors

Triggers and Stressors

Warning Behaviors

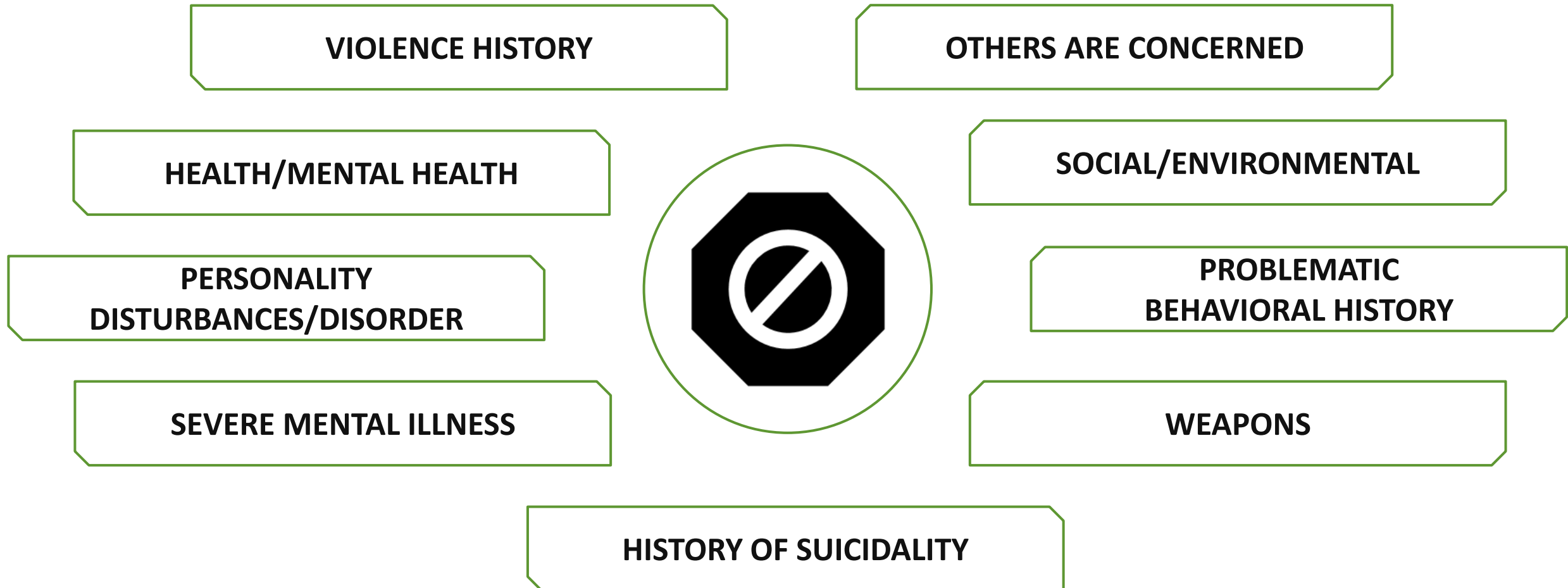**Warning Behaviors That Could Signal Imminence**

Mitigators

Risk Factors

Risk Factors

- **Risk factors** are existing realities about the individual that may increase the risk of violence they pose in a given situation.

- Risk factors are already present at the time of assessment and can be either **static** or **dynamic**.

- Understanding different categories of risk factors can help you organize the information you gather.

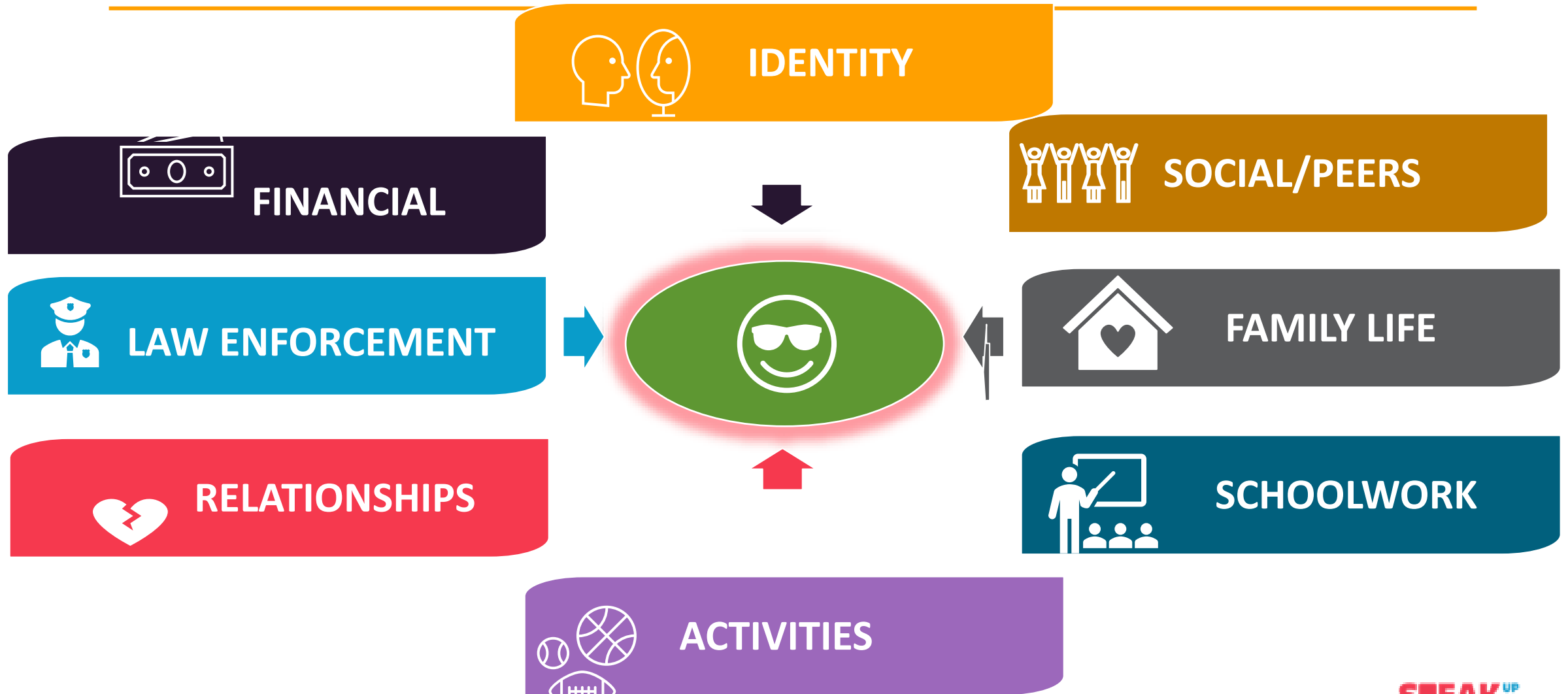- Remember to consider each individual factor within the totality of circumstances!

Adapted from: *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* – FBI

VIOLENCE HISTORY

OTHERS ARE CONCERNED

HEALTH/MENTAL HEALTH

SOCIAL/ENVIRONMENTAL

PERSONALITY DISTURBANCES/DISORDER

PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIORAL HISTORY

SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS

WEAPONS

HISTORY OF SUICIDALITY

Stressors

Stressors

- **Stressors** can be anything in the person's life that causes tension, anxiety, discomfort, or distress

- Stressors can amplify those social/environmental risk factors and produce or magnify grievances and move people down a pathway to violence

- Can be chronic or acute, mild or severe, or obvious or hidden

Source: *Mass Attacks in Public Spaces* – USSS, National Threat Assessment Center, Department of Homeland Security

Life Stressors

Triggers

Triggers

- **Triggers** can be understood as any specific event, or multiple precipitating events, that drives a person towards perpetrating an attack

- Can involve multiple precipitating events over a period of time until a **"last straw event"**

- Pay attention to **recent material, relational, or status losses** involving family, intimates/peers, occupation, self-image

- Attempt to identify upcoming triggers and precipitating events

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Triggers
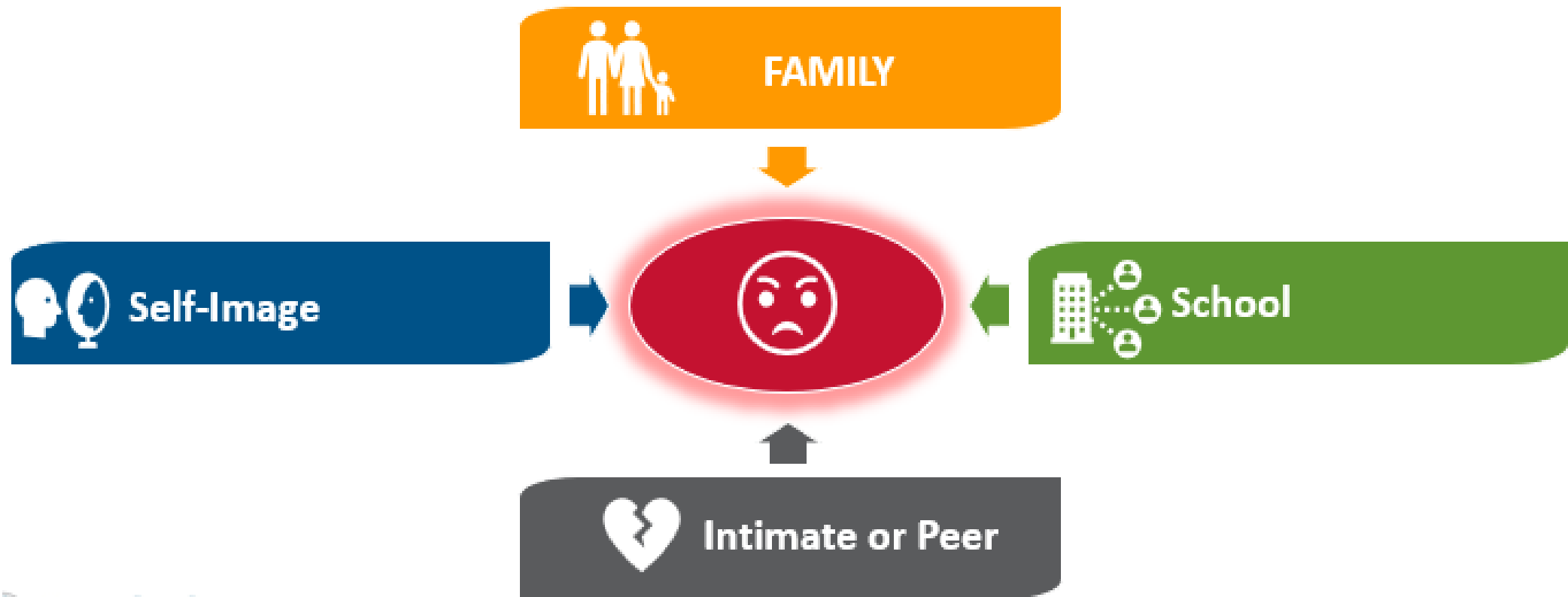
Warning Behaviors

IDENTIFICATION

DIRECTLY COMMUNICATED THREAT

FIXATION

APPROACH BEHAVIOR

NOVEL AGGRESSION

PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE WARNING BEHAVIORS

LEAKAGE

BEHAVIORS THAT COULD SIGNAL IMMINENCE

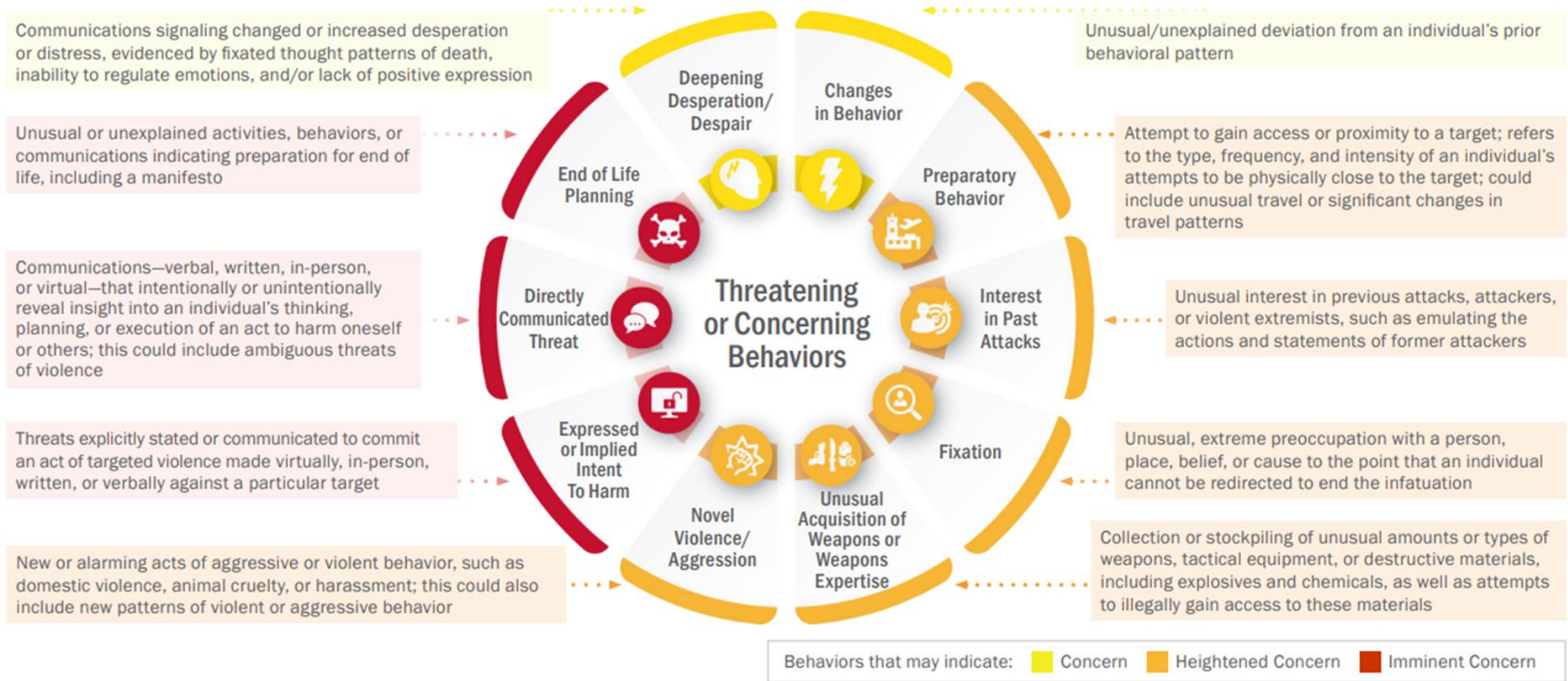# Warning Behaviors that Could Signal Imminence

Energy burst behavior

End of life planning

Last resort

Sudden withdrawal from life pattern

Sudden cessation of medications or other substance use

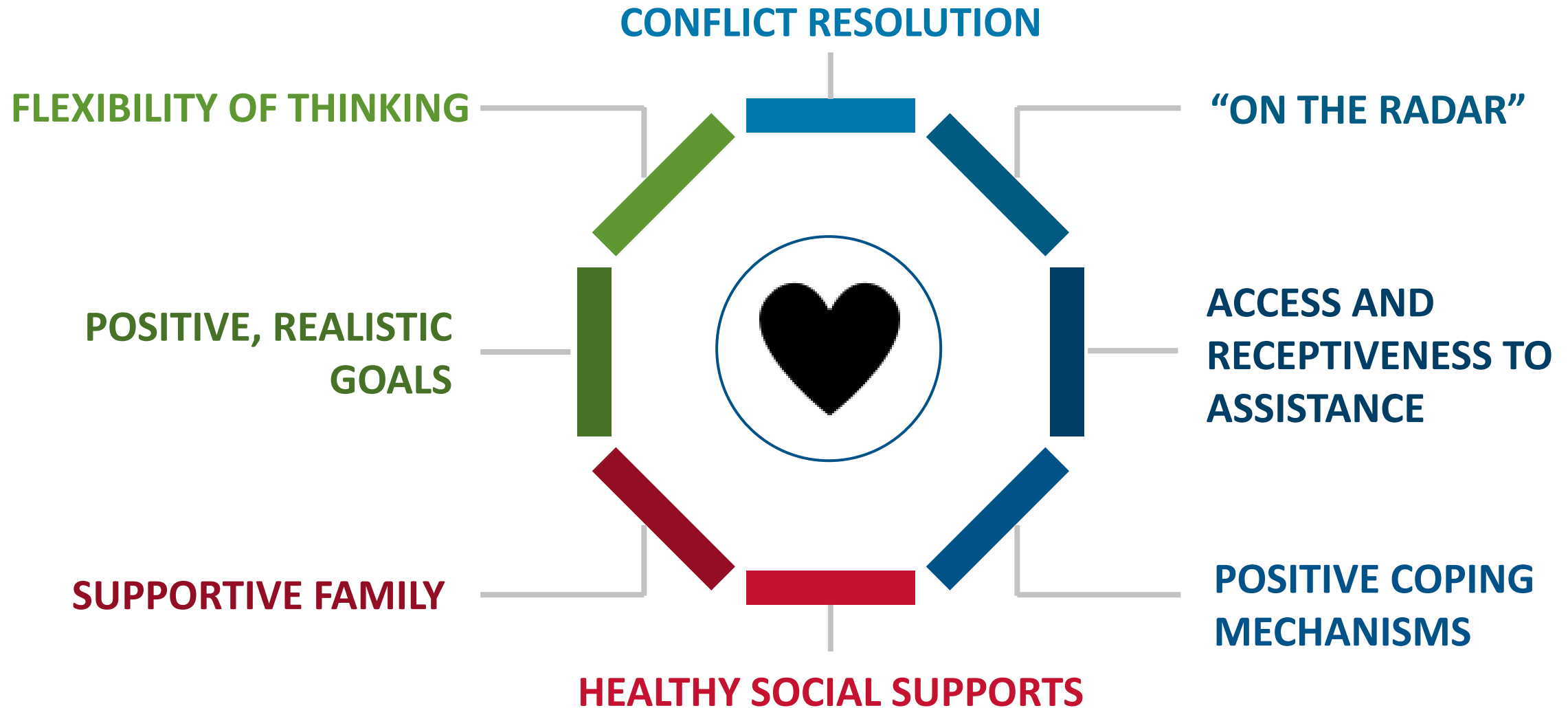# NTER Behavioral Approach: Identifying Threatening/Concerning Behaviors

Communications signaling changed or increased desperation or distress, evidenced by fixated thought patterns of death, inability to regulate emotions, and/or lack of positive expression

Unusual or unexplained activities, behaviors, or communications indicating preparation for end of life, including a manifesto

Communications—verbal, written, in-person, or virtual—that intentionally or unintentionally reveal insight into an individual's thinking, planning, or execution of an act to harm oneself or others; this could include ambiguous threats of violence

Threats explicitly stated or communicated to commit an act of targeted violence made virtually, in-person, written, or verbally against a particular target

New or alarming acts of aggressive or violent behavior, such as domestic violence, animal cruelty, or harassment; this could also include new patterns of violent or aggressive behavior

Unusual/unexplained deviation from an individual's prior behavioral pattern

Attempt to gain access or proximity to a target; refers to the type, frequency, and intensity of an individual's attempts to be physically close to the target; could include unusual travel or significant changes in travel patterns

Unusual interest in previous attacks, attackers, or violent extremists, such as emulating the actions and statements of former attackers

Unusual, extreme preoccupation with a person, place, belief, or cause to the point that an individual cannot be redirected to end the infatuation

Collection or stockpiling of unusual amounts or types of weapons, tactical equipment, or destructive materials, including explosives and chemicals, as well as attempts to illegally gain access to these materials

Deepening Desperation/ Despair

Changes in Behavior

End of Life Planning

Preparatory Behavior

Directly Communicated Threat

Threatening or Concerning Behaviors

Interest in Past Attacks

Expressed or Implied Intent To Harm

Fixation

Novel Violence/ Aggression

Unusual Acquisition of Weapons or Weapons Expertise

Behaviors that may indicate: Concern | Heightened Concern | Imminent Concern

Mitigators

- **Also known as:** "protective factors", "stabilizers", "buffers", or "inhibitors"

- Persons, things, or circumstances with sufficient value to the person of concern and can reduce the propensity to plan and carry out an act of targeted violence

- Facets of the person that enhance their ability to cope with life's trials

- External factors that can reduce the risk of planned violence

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Adapted from: *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* – FBI

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

FLEXIBILITY OF THINKING

"ON THE RADAR"

POSITIVE, REALISTIC GOALS

ACCESS AND RECEPTIVENESS TO ASSISTANCE

SUPPORTIVE FAMILY

POSITIVE COPING MECHANISMS

HEALTHY SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Threat Enhancers & Mitigators – Push & Pull

STRESSORS

- Parental Mental Health
- Parent-Child Conflict
- Abuse/Neglect
- Family Discord
- Parent Substance Use
- Poor Attachments with Parents
- Poor Supervision

- Social Skill Deficit
- Unhealthy Esteem
- Mood Dysregulation
- Personality Traits
- Poor Coping Skills
- Substance Use
- Fixation/Identification
- Lack of Belonging/Connection
- Shame

- Peer Rejection/Bullying
- Financial Hardship
- Housing Instability
- School Violence
- Community Violence
- Culture of Deviance
- Loss of Connections
- Access to Resources

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Family Structure
- Healthy Discipline
- Expressive Love
- Predictability
- Healthy Attachments

- Intrinsic Motivation
- Healthy Esteem
- Effective Coping
- Positive Connections
- Longitudinal Vision
- Locus of Control
- Good Insight
- Impulse Control
- Academic/Work Success

- Positive Mentors
- Physical and Psychological Safety
- Resources Available
- Positive Norms
- Accountability

STRESSORS / SITUATIONAL / INDIVIDUAL / ENVIRONMENTAL / **PROTECTIVE FACTORS**
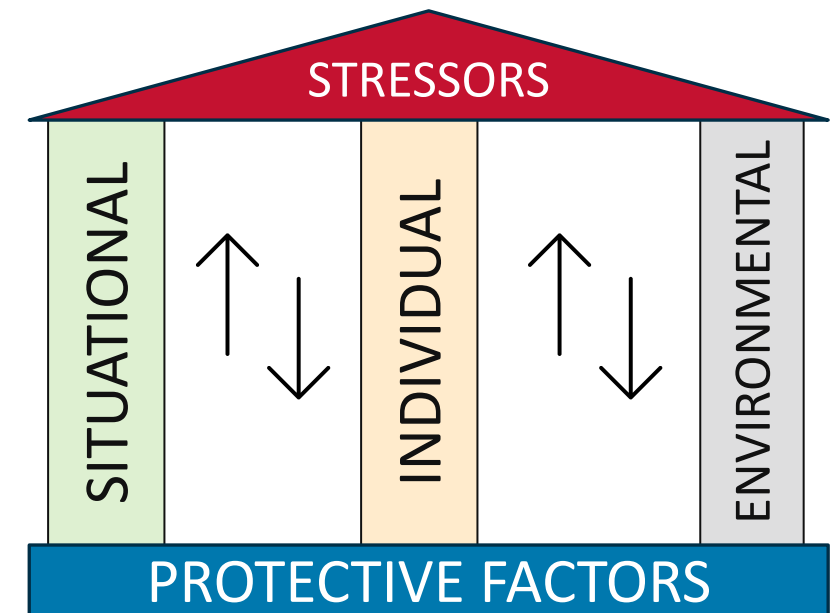
Adapted from: Dias and Talbot (2021)

Foundations of Targeted Violence

NEW eLEARNING MODULE

Foundations of Targeted Violence Prevention

The Department of Homeland Security, Office of Intelligence and Analysis, National Threat Evaluation and Reporting Office has partnered with the Wisconsin Department of Justice, Office of School Safety, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to release an eLearning module to educate the public on threatening or potentially concerning behaviors and where to report them, providing an opportunity for intervention.

Two versions of the training were created as part of the project. The Wisconsin version includes specific resources for reporting threatening or potentially concerning behaviors in state.

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BTAM Process

Bias

BTAM Process: Identify

1 Identify

2 Inquire

Individual

4 Manage

3 Assess
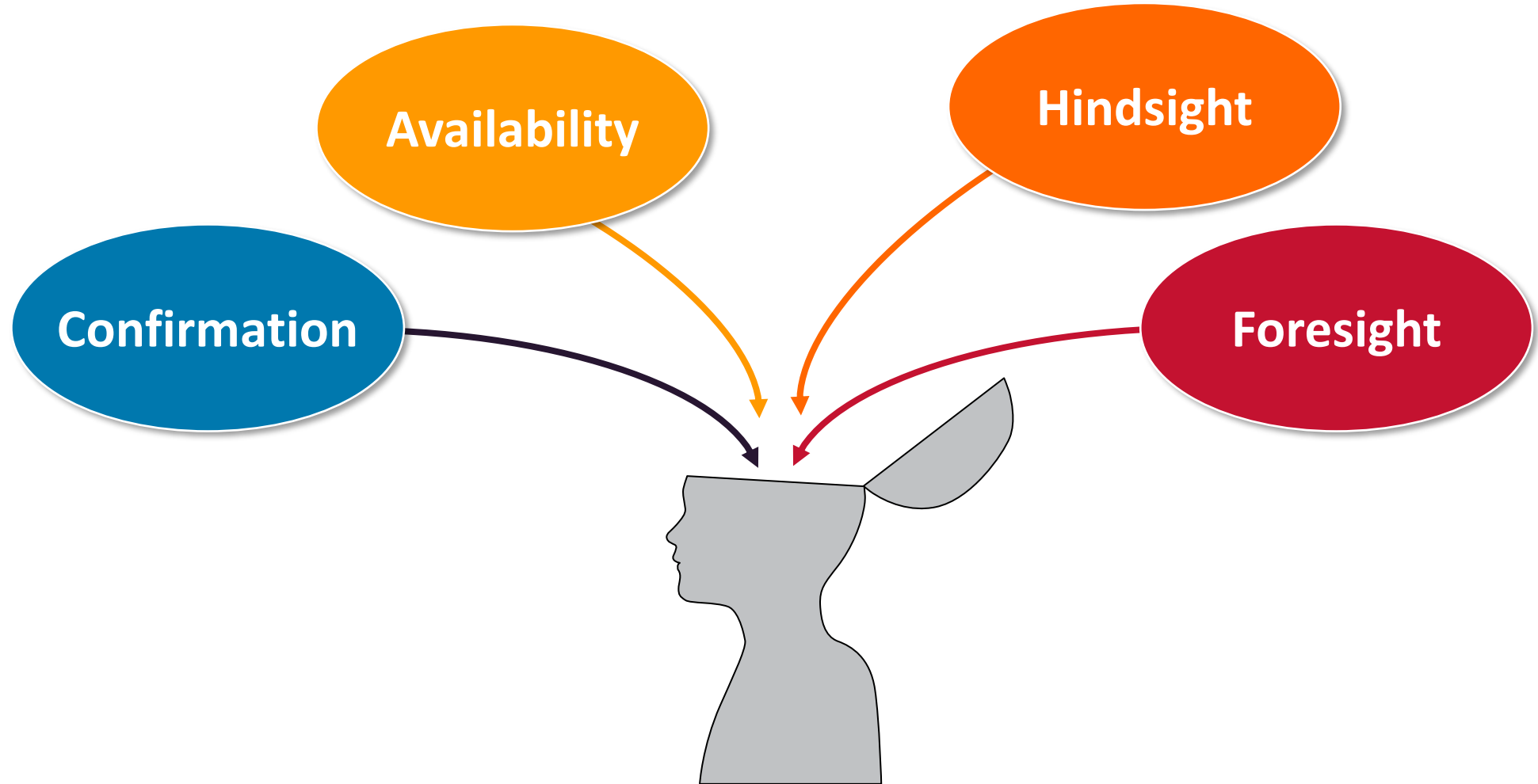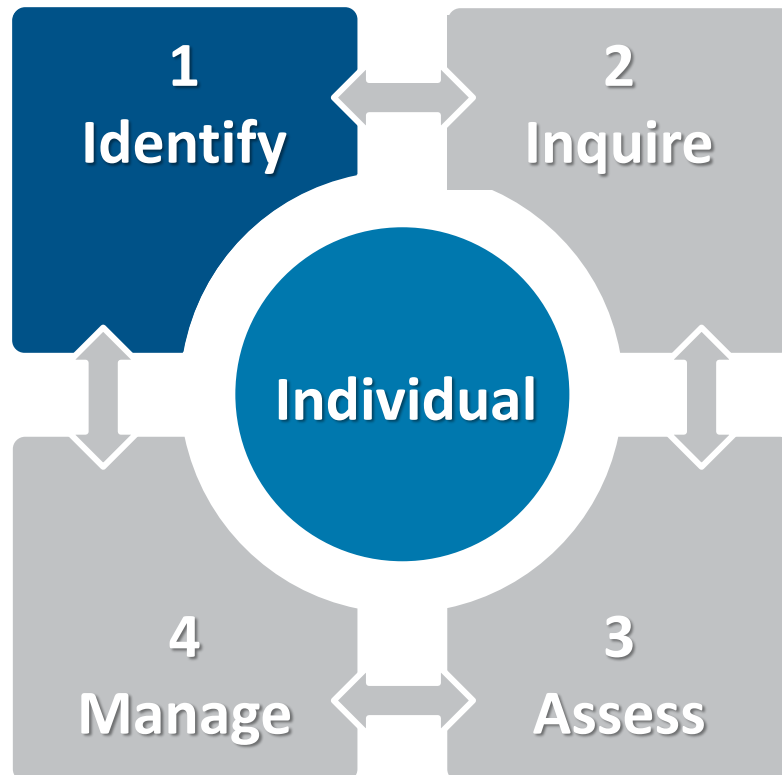
Trained team members use tips and leads that are being reported to identify threats or observable behaviors that may concern others and, if possible, an individual of concern.

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BTAM Process: Inquire
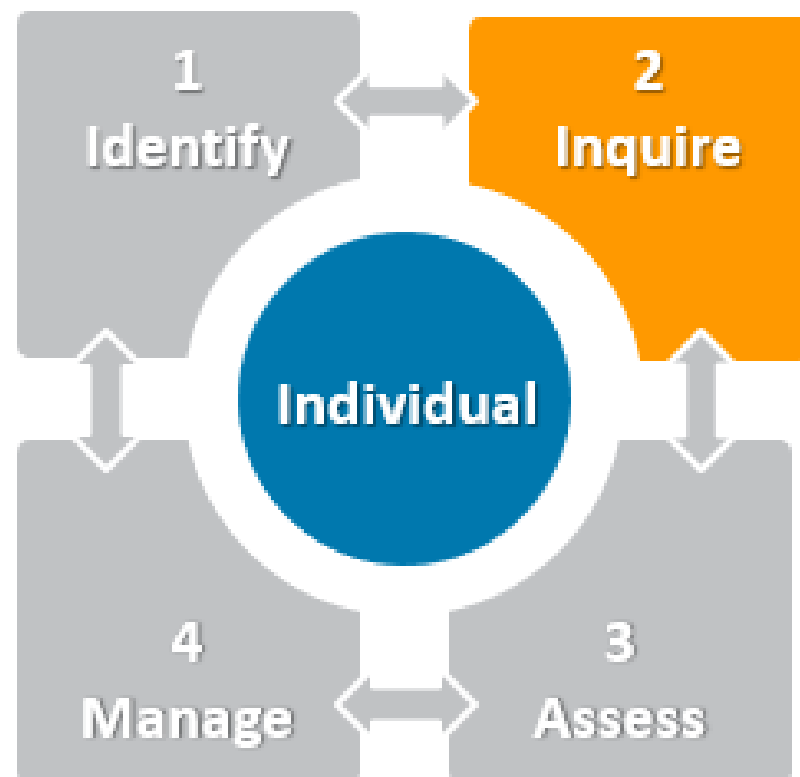
The purpose of the inquire stage is to "fact find" and gather the information necessary for a thorough threat assessment and for guiding individualized management plans.

GOALS:

1. Collect or corroborate information to use in conducting ongoing threat assessment.

2. Collect information to help determine the most effective threat management strategy.

Sources: Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Leite & Cawood, 2023

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Threat Assessment Interviews

Opportunity for person of concern to tell their story, be heard

Offer solutions, support, assistance

Redirecting person of concern

Confronting or deterring negative behavior(s)

Assess and monitor current risk of violence

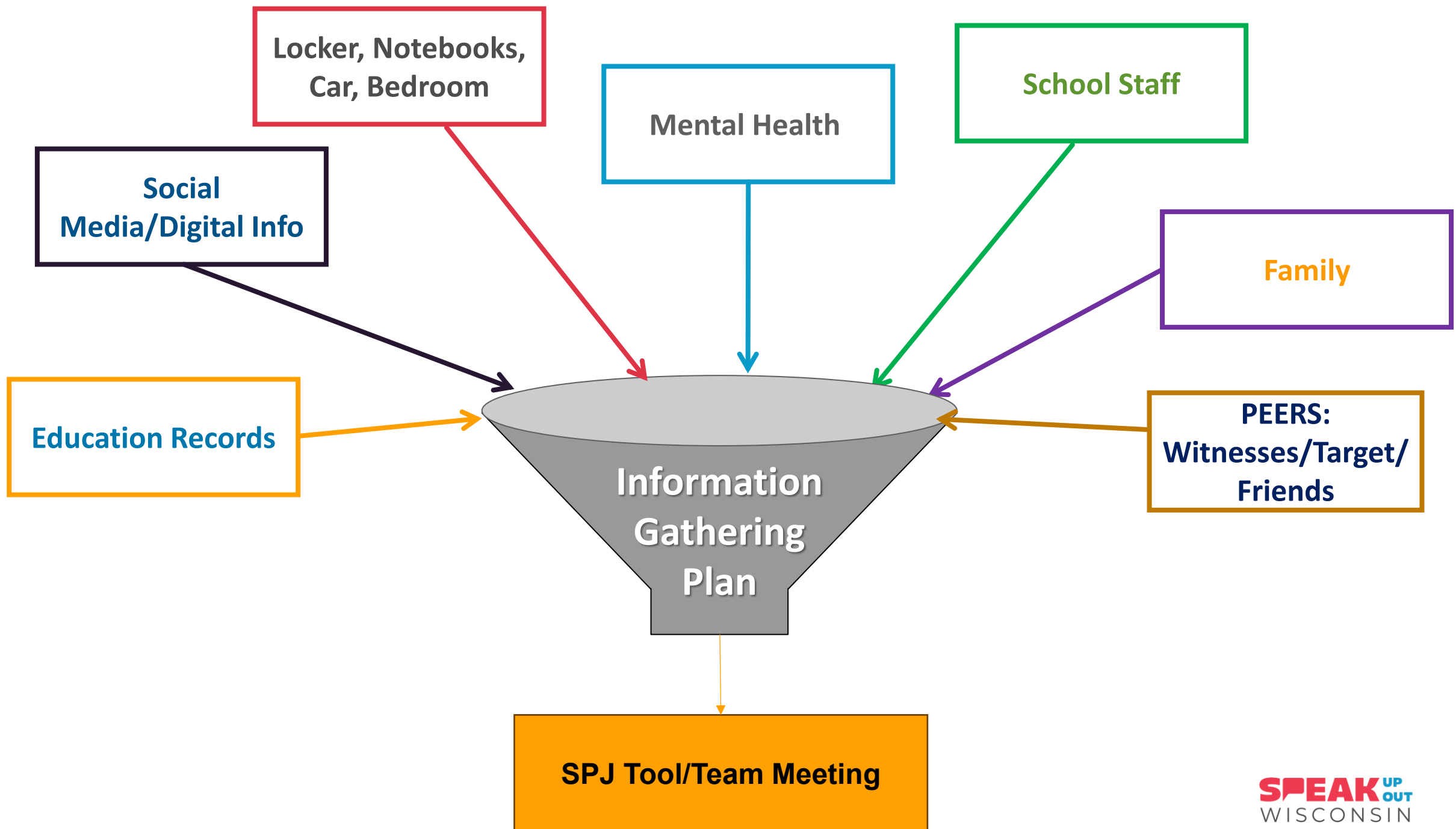**Identify mitigating factors**
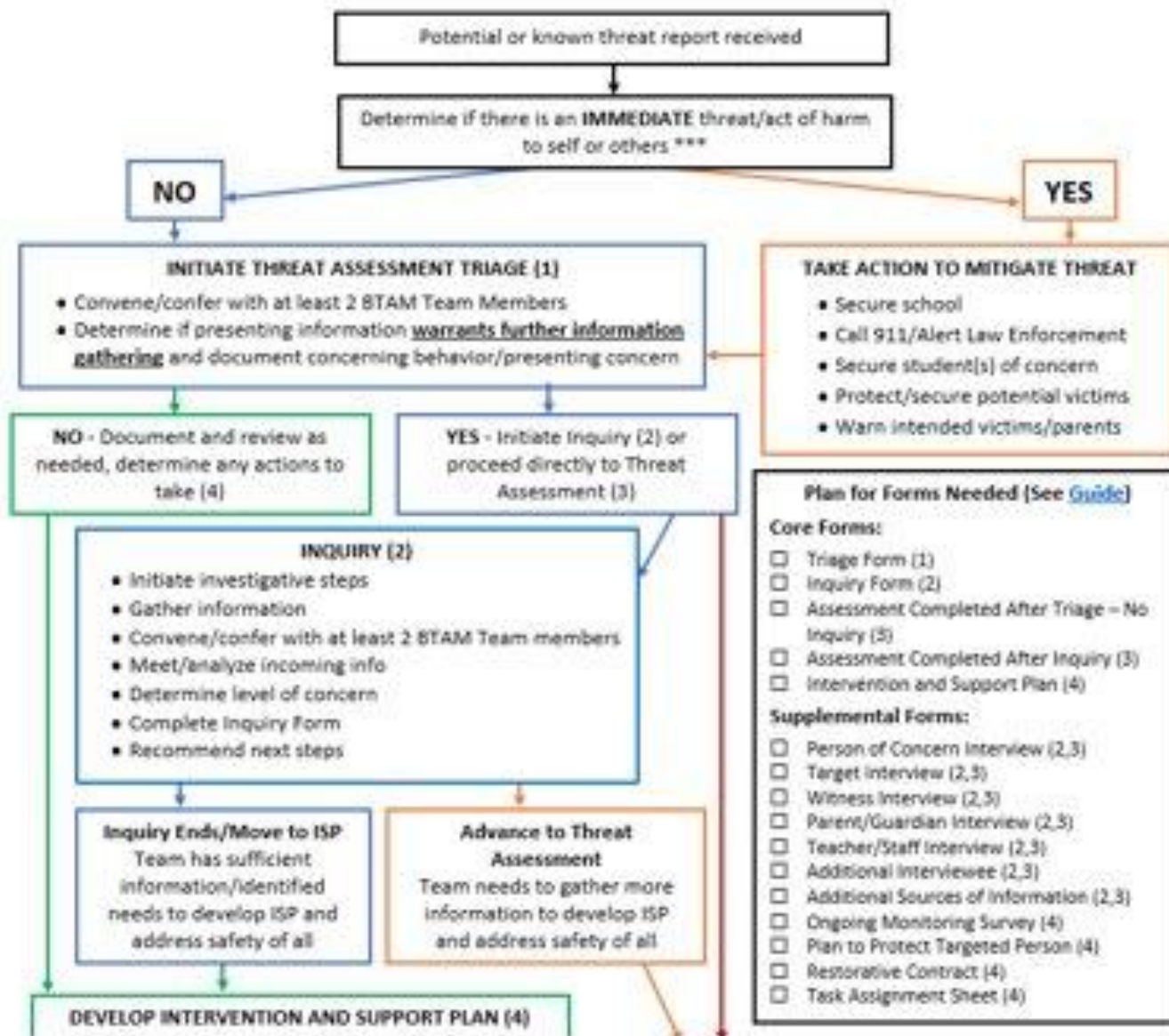
Intervention, including referral

Perceptions of World

Grievances & Motivations

Thoughts, Plans & Intentions

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Sources: Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Cawood & Corcoran, 2008; Calhoun & Weston, 2003

Totality of Circumstances
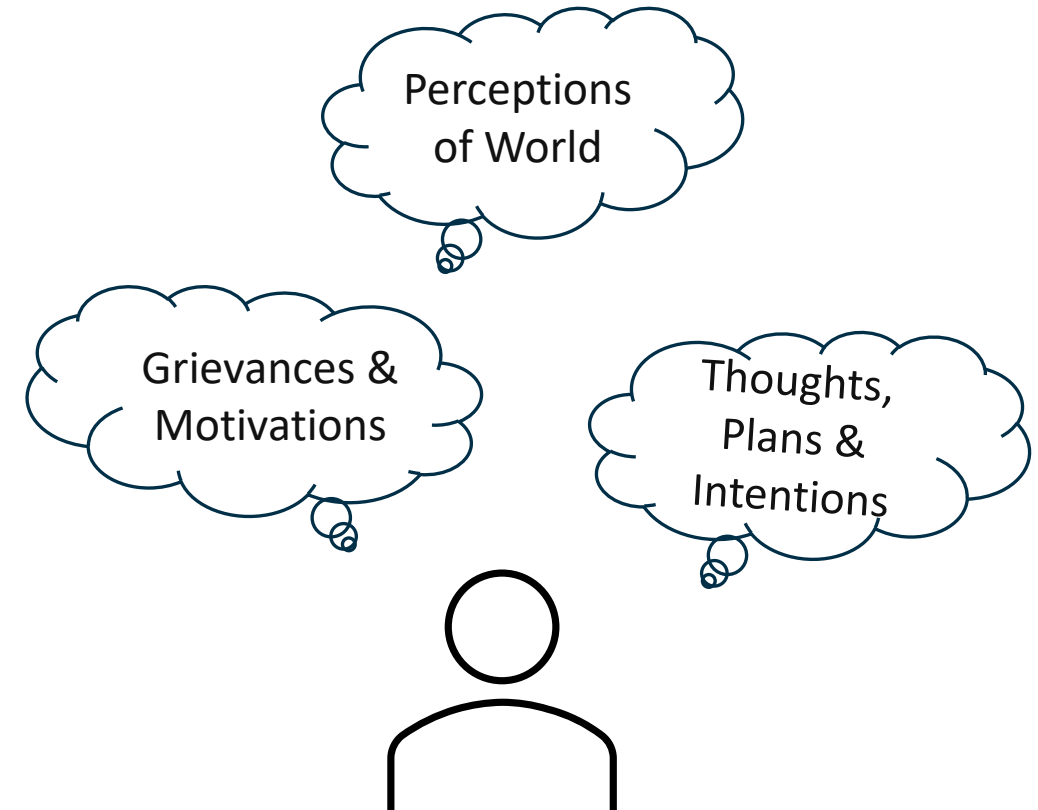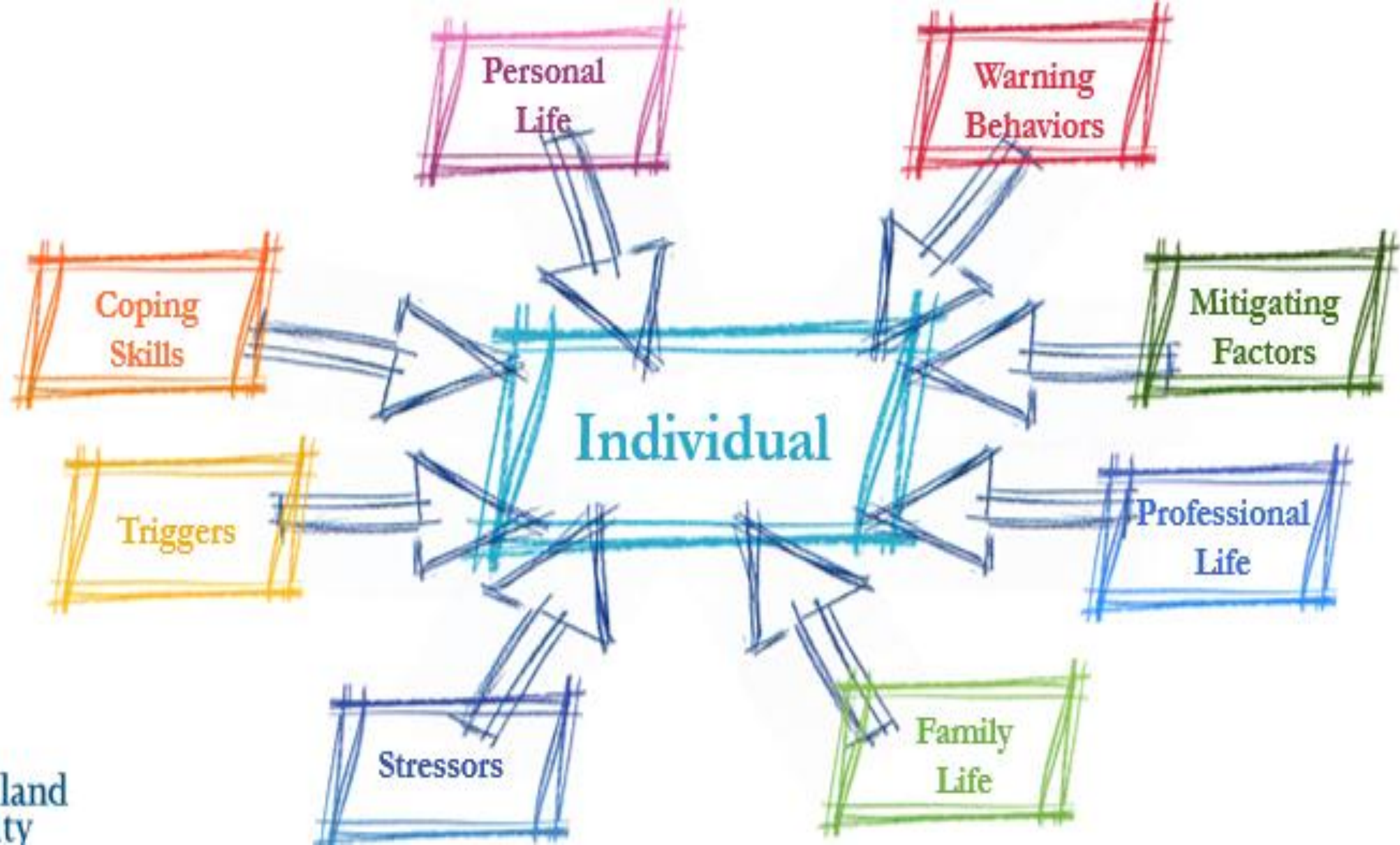
BTAM Process: Assess
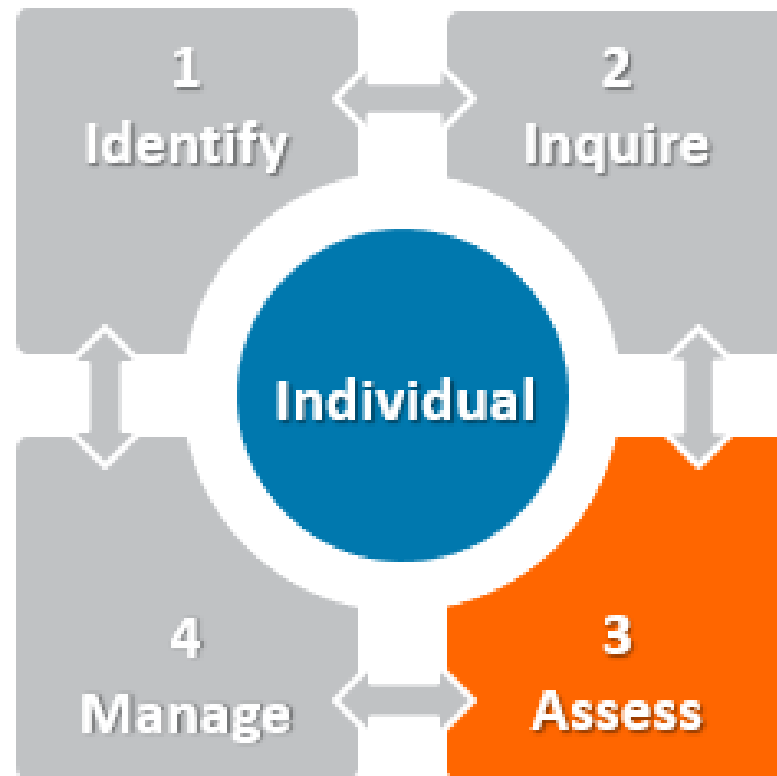
In this stage, objective decisions are made regarding whether an individual is on the pathway to violence and how, and how quickly, to best manage an individual away from violence.

GOALS:

1. Prevent future acts of targeted violence.

2. Develop a holistic view of the individual and their situation and environment.

3. Inform determinations about how to move a person off a pathway to violence.

4. Carefully weigh each known threat enhancer and mitigating factor.

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Locker, Notebooks, Car, Bedroom

Mental Health

School Staff

Social Media/Digital Info

Family

Education Records

Information Gathering Plan

PEERS: Witnesses/Target/Friends

SPJ Tool/Team Meeting

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# Structured Professional Judgement Tool

Establish Level of Concern

Considering the totality of circumstances and based on the information gathered through the BTAM process, the BTAM team assigns the following Level of Concern:			
No/Low ☐	Medium ☐	High ☐	Imminent ☐

Level Descriptions:

No/Low: Gathered information suggests insufficient evidence for risk of harm to others, or the individual/situation appears to pose minimal concern of engaging in future violence or other harmful behavior. Examples at this level may include concerns that: stem from misunderstandings, false reporting by peers; were vague or indirect, or lacking in detail; contain information that is inconsistent, implausible, or lacking realism; suggest the individual is unlikely to carry the plan out. The team determines that concerns and identified needs can be addressed using existing support structures and monitoring.

Medium: Gathered information suggests the individual's exhibited behavior/the situation shows there are moderate, ongoing concerns about the individual's motivation/continuing intent to harm, and the potential for harmful outcomes. Examples at this level may include concerns that: the threat is more direct, concrete and has the potential to be carried out; the individual has displayed some warning signs and risk factors; the individual experienced various stressors and encountered a triggering event; there is evidence of depression, social withdrawal, coping difficulties, bullying, intimidation or harassment of others; the threat includes veiled reference or inconclusive evidence of steps taken without specific details. Some stabilizing factors have been identified, however, the behaviors exhibited indicate a need for additional mitigation and intervention.

High: Gathered information suggests the individual or situation appears to pose a significant level of concern for engaging in violence or serious harm to self or others. Examples at this level may include concerns that: the threat is direct, specific, and plausible (likely, probable, possible without appropriate intervention); the threat suggests concrete steps have been taken toward carrying out an attack; the individual has acquired or practiced with a weapon, or has had the target under surveillance; the individual has displayed significant early warning behaviors and risk factors; the individual experienced various stressors and encountered a triggering event; there is evidence of depression, social withdrawal, coping difficulties, bullying, intimidation or harassment of others. The individual has displayed few stabilizing factors. Behaviors require implementation of a strong/active mitigation and intervention plan.

Imminent: Gathered information suggests a targeted attack can occur at any moment. The individual or situation appears to pose a clear and immediate threat of serious violence toward self or others that requires immediate action to protect potential victims and prevent violence.

Key Considerations

- Nature, severity, immediacy of the threat?

- Impact of the situation on target(s)?

- Level of interventions necessary to prevent or mitigate harm and impact?

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BTAM Process: Manage
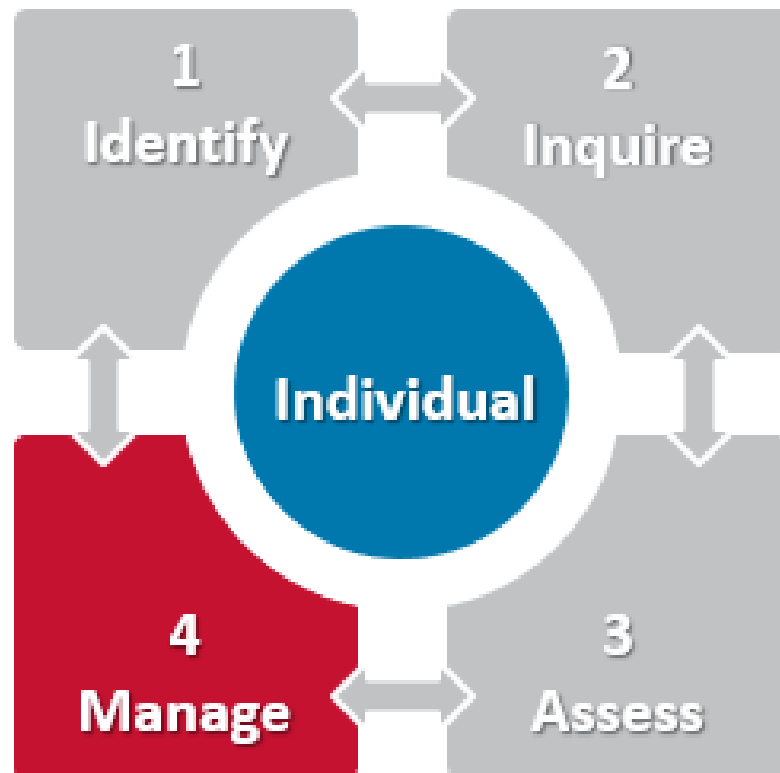
The process of developing and implementing individualized plans to mitigate the threat of violence based on information gathered during the inquiry and other known facts about the person of concern.

GOALS:

1. Protecting public safety.

2. Preventing a violent outcome.

3. Providing care, support, and guidance to help a person of concern.

4. Protecting, aiding, and strengthening possible targets.

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Adapted from: *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* – FBI; Calhoun & Weston, 2017

Guiding Principles for Threat Management

Keeps context/totality of circumstances in mind

Driven by a holistic assessment

Be prepared to reassess

Avoid causing or allowing a last straw event

No "one size fits all" solution

Treat persons of concern with respect

Fact-based, aligned w/ level of concern posed

Adapted from: Calhoun & Weston, 2015

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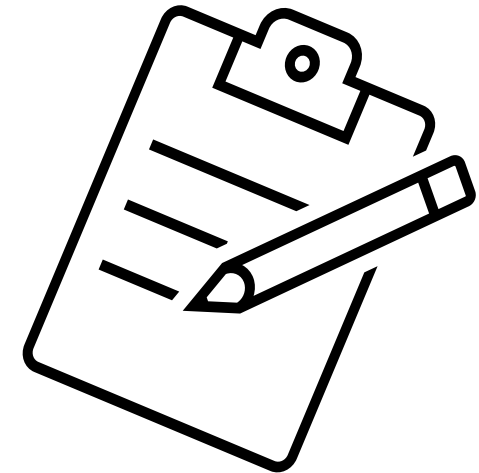
Dangerousness as

A State of Being

Management Options

- Developed regardless of the LOC
- Fundamental purpose of TA
- Informed by identified LOC and assessment findings
- Higher concern level = more directive & intense plan
- Not the same as discipline
- Low threshold for intervention
- Pathway to Health model

Countermeasures
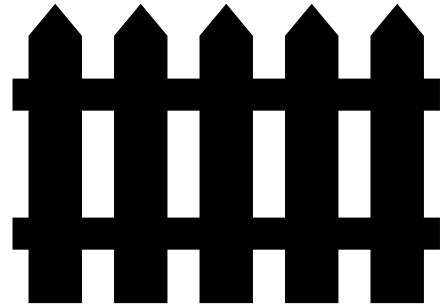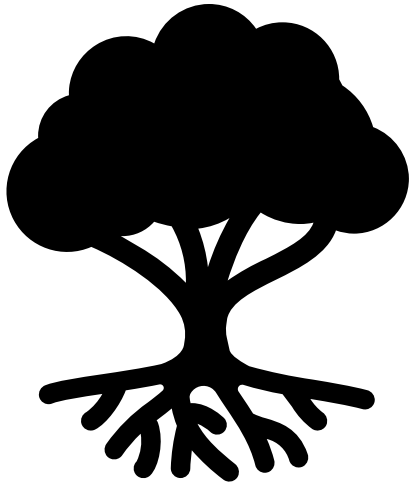
- Limit Setting
- Restrictions
- Consequences
- Increased Monitoring
- Questioning/Confronting
- Reduces risk

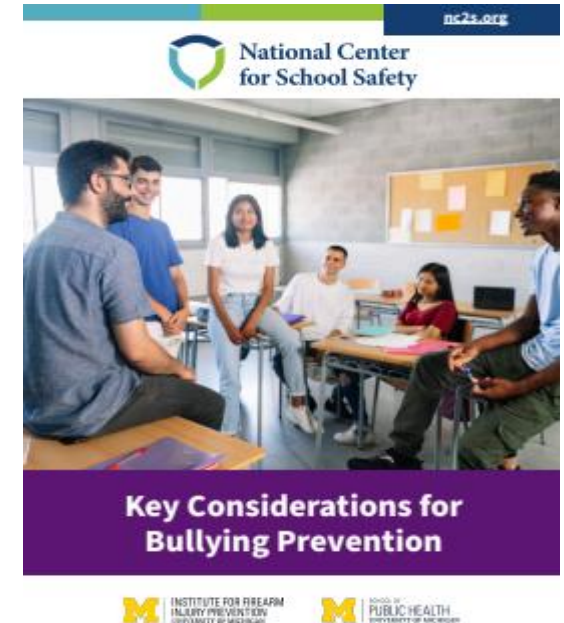SPEAK UP OUT WISCONSIN
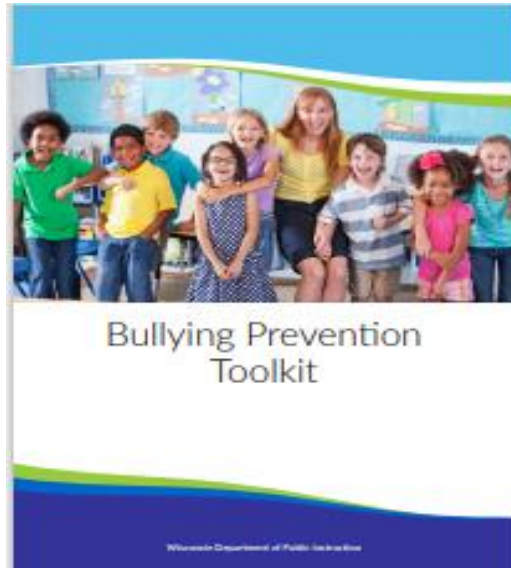
Stabilizers and Protective Factors

- Supports-Internal/External

- Mitigating/protective factors

- Strengths/Interests

- Improve skill deficits or identified needs

- Connection/relationship

- YRBS

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Restorative Practices

An Introduction to **Restorative Practices**
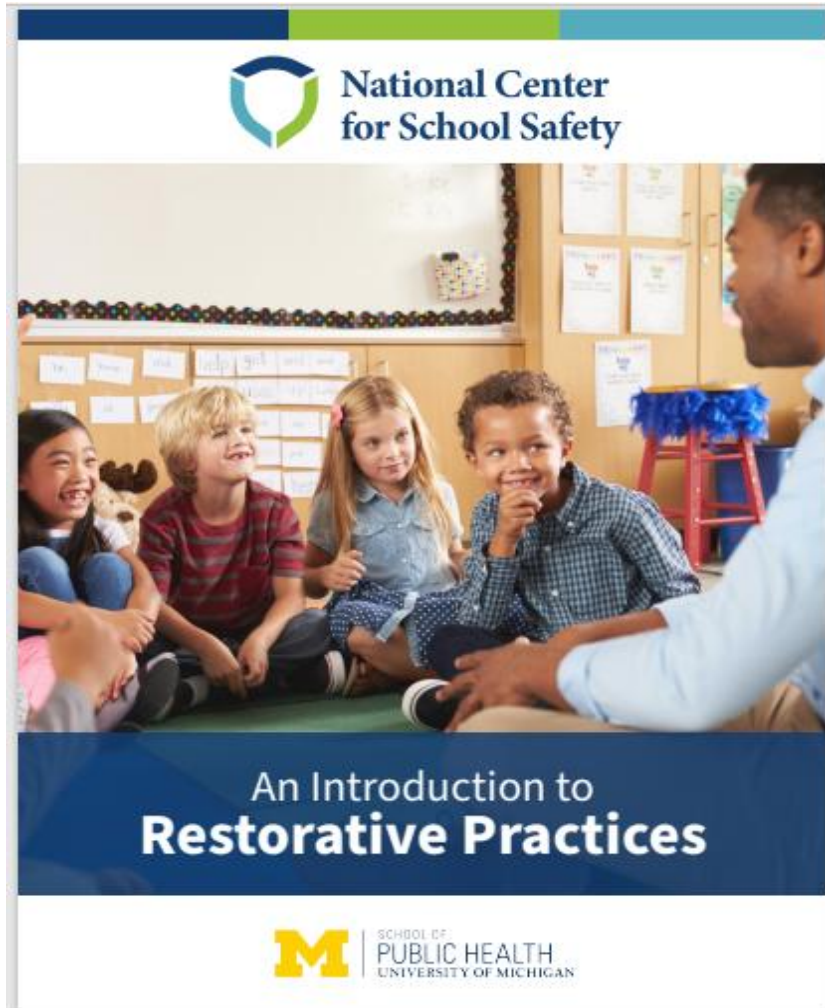
- Characterizes learning communities with a sense of belonging and strong relationships

- Promotes the idea that each person's unique, lived experiences shape their truth.

- Identifies conflict as an opportunity to improve and strengthen relationships.

- Develops accountability, cooperation, and problem-solving skills

Bullying Prevention-Resources
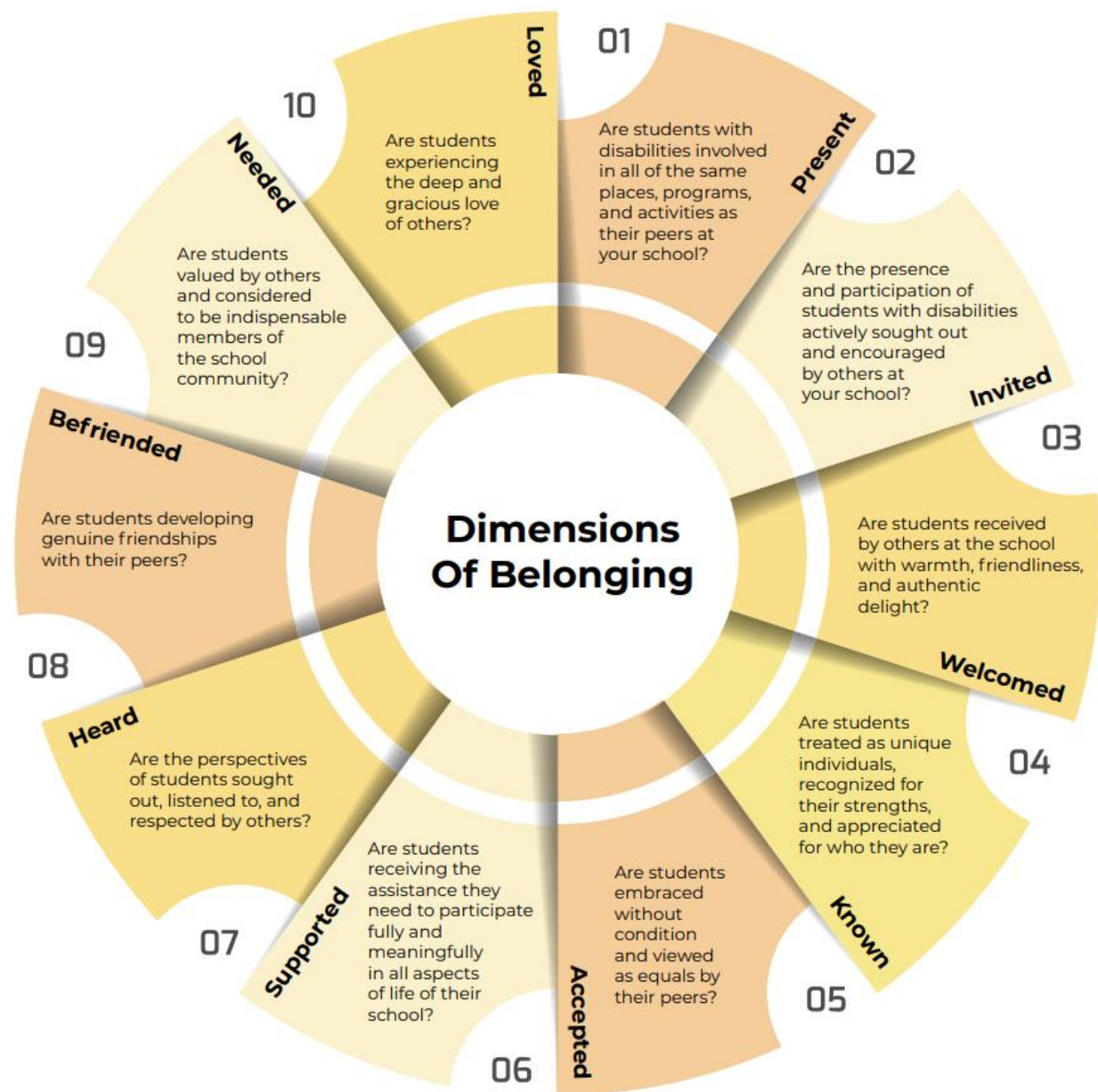
"The 10 Dimensions of Full Belonging at School"

3 Key questions about each dimension:
1. What are we doing well right now?
2. What could we be doing better or differently?
3. What should our school be doing next to spur change?

Dimensions Of Belonging

01 Loved — Are students experiencing the deep and gracious love of others?

01 Present — Are students with disabilities involved in all of the same places, programs, and activities as their peers at your school?

02 Invited — Are the presence and participation of students with disabilities actively sought out and encouraged by others at your school?

03 Welcomed — Are students received by others at the school with warmth, friendliness, and authentic delight?

04 Known — Are students treated as unique individuals, recognized for their strengths, and appreciated for who they are?

05 Accepted — Are students embraced without condition and viewed as equals by their peers?

06 Supported — Are students receiving the assistance they need to participate fully and meaningfully in all aspects of life of their school?

07 Heard — Are the perspectives of students sought out, listened to, and respected by others?

08 Befriended — Are students developing genuine friendships with their peers?

09 Needed — Are students valued by others and considered to be indispensable members of the school community?

10 Needed / Loved — Are students experiencing the deep and gracious love of others?

SOURCE: Adapted from Erik Carter's "10 Dimensions of Belonging" Used with the author's permission.
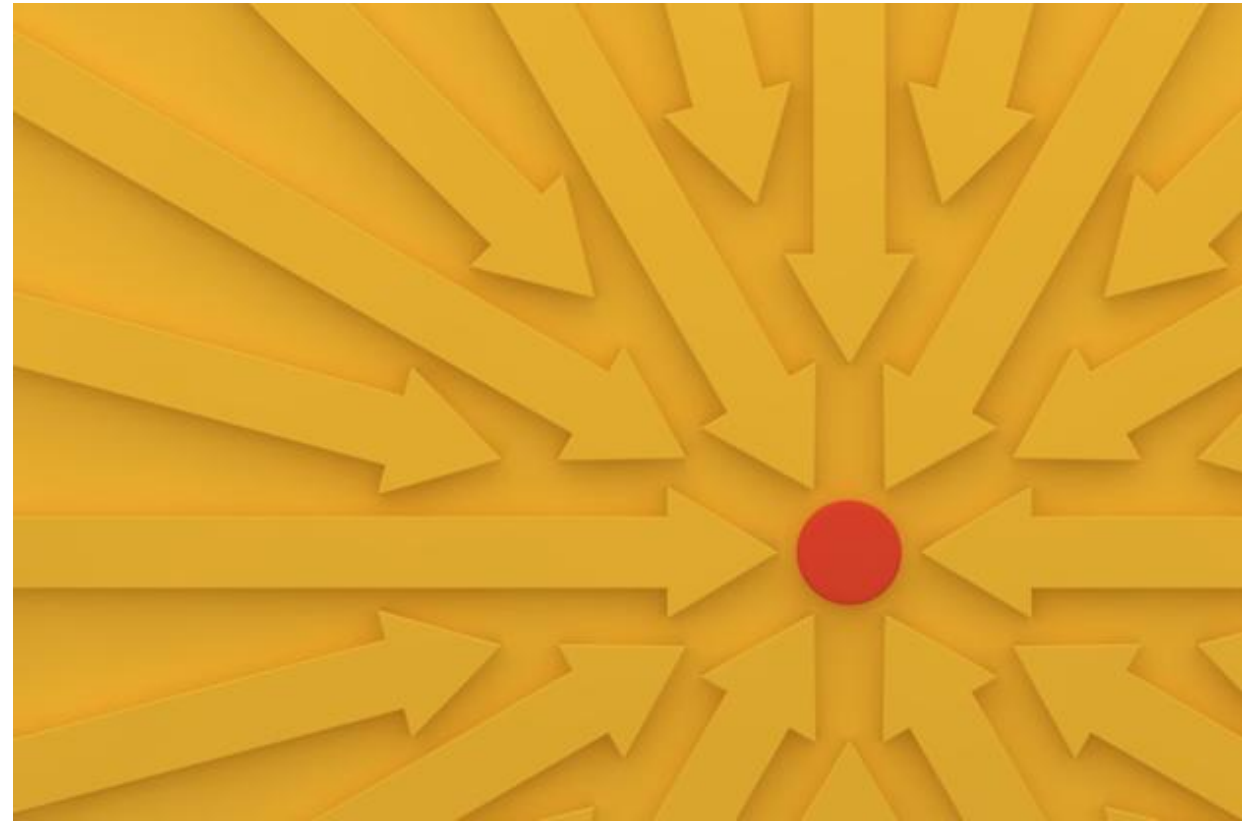
End Goals of Threat Management

Change and Improve the person of concern's behavior and pattern of thinking
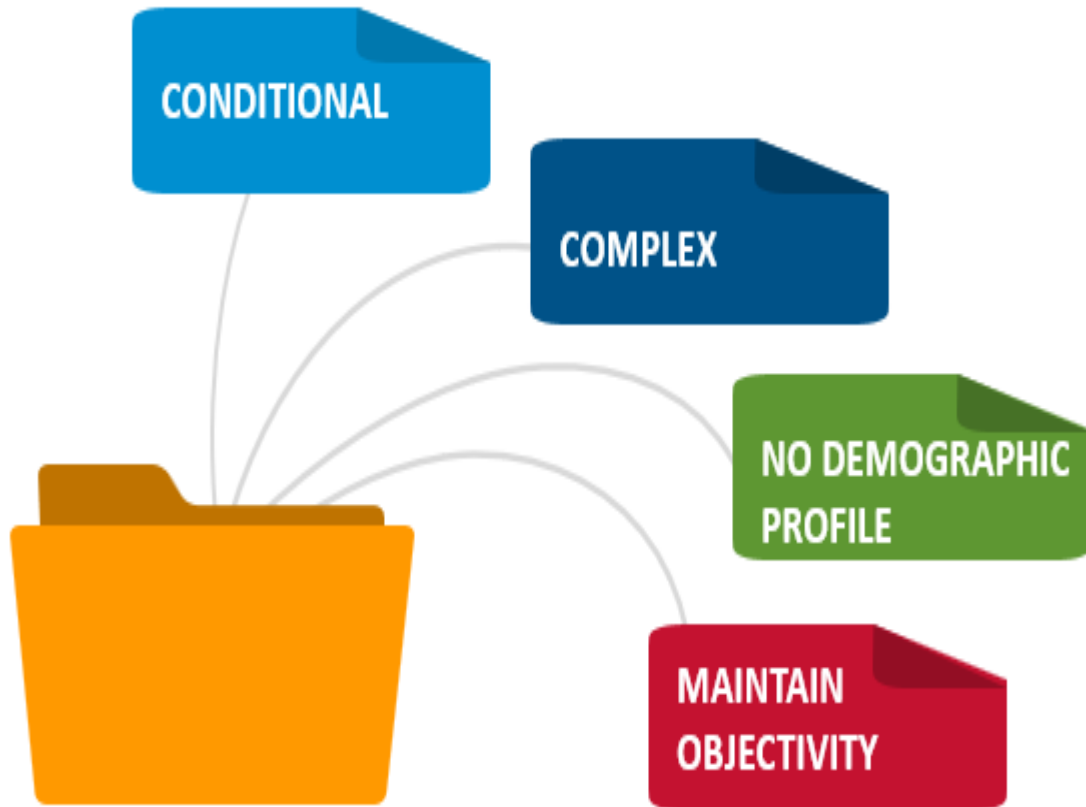
Prevent violence

Stabilize the situation

    Short term

    Long term

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BTAM as a Dynamic Process

CONDITIONAL

COMPLEX

NO DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

MAINTAIN OBJECTIVITY

Changes with new information or behavior

Monitoring

Management may influence subsequent assessments

Not a "one and done"

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School Related Considerations

IDEA

- Different Processes for Special Ed and BTAM

- Need to be aware of specific timeline requirements for Sp. Ed.

- May need to review and modify IEP/services taking the student's potential for violence into account.

- May need to conduct FBA and/or Manifestation Determination

- Decisions made as part of the threat assessment can inform the IEP process, but they do not override decisions made by the IEP team.

FERPA

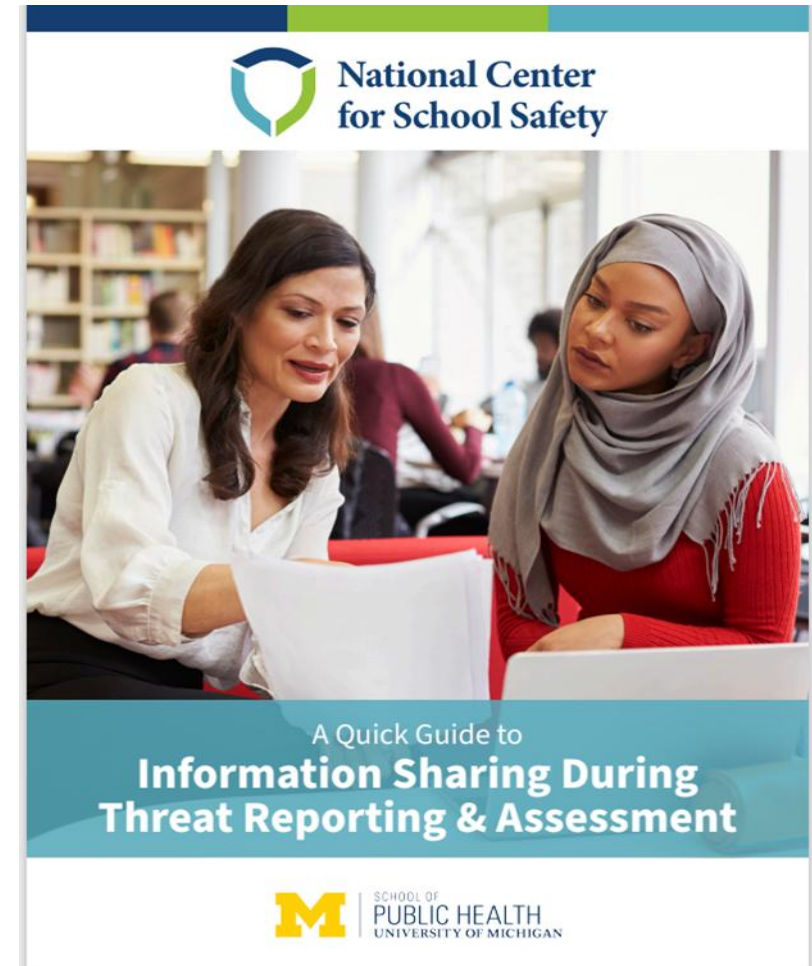|	Who must comply?	Protected information	Permitted disclosures [1]

The **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)** is a federal law enacted in 1974 that protects the privacy of **student education records**.
 	
The Act serves two primary purposes:
1. Gives parents or eligible students more control of their educational records
2. Prohibits educational institutions from disclosing "personally identifiable information in education records" without written consent
	• **Any public or private school:**
	  – Elementary
	  – Secondary
	  – Post-secondary
	
	• **Any state or local education agency**
	
	Any of the above must receive funds under an applicable program of the US Department of Education
		Student Education Record:
		Records that contain information directly related to a student and which are maintained by an educational agency or institution or by a party acting for the agency or institution
			• School officials
			• Schools to which a student is transferring
			• Specified officials for audit or evaluation purposes
			• Appropriate parties in connection with financial aid to a student
			• Organizations conducting certain studies for or on behalf of the school
			• Accrediting organizations
			• Appropriate officials in cases of health and safety emergencies
			• State and local authorities, within a juvenile justice system, pursuant to specific state law
			• To comply with a judicial order or lawfully issued subpoena

1. Permitted disclosures mean the information can be, but is not required to be, shared without individual authorization.

Adapted from: *Public Health Law, Health Information & Privacy: FERPA and HIPAA* - Center for Disease Control and Prevention

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Intersection of Juvenile Intake with BTAM

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Information Sharing

- Memorandums of Understanding (MOU)

- Release of Information (ROI)

- Interagency relationships

- State and Local laws & policies

- Training with LE partners

- Agency processes (i.e., info gathering checklist)

National Center for School Safety

A Quick Guide to
Information Sharing During Threat Reporting & Assessment

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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Reflection

- I came here thinking…and now I know…

- How will you apply what you learned?

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Questions?

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