Reference Text: **The Social Work Practicum: A Guide and Workbook for Students, 2nd Edition** by Charles R. Horejsi and Cynthia L. Garthwait, copyright 2002 by Allyn and Bacon

**Dealing with the Potentially Violent Client**

* Remember that past behavior is the best single predictor of future behavior. Before meeting with a client that you do not know and who may be dangerous, consult agency records or the local police in search of information that my help you assess the risk.
* Be very cautious when dealing with a person who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs, even when you know the person fairly well. A person under the influence of chemicals should be viewed as inherently unpredictable.
* Be cautious when around persons who may be involved in illegal activities and may, therefore, feel threatened by your presence or by what you have seen. They may be willing to harm you in order to protect themselves from discovery by police.
* Remove all potential weapons from your office when dealing with a potentially dangerous client, including scissors, staplers, paperweights, and other small but heavy objects.
* Leave your office door partly open during an interview with a potentially dangerous client.
* Notify others if you are planning to meet a potentially dangerous client in your office and arrange for a way to signal for help. Arrange your office so that you are closest to the door. Place a desk or other barrier between you and the dangerous client.
* Avoid meeting clients when you are alone in the office. If you must have the meeting, turn lights on in other offices and lead clients to believe that others will be coming into the office.
* Remember that worker attitudes play a role in either controlling or provoking threatening behavior. Maintain a positive, nonjudgmental attitude toward clients.
* Recognize that both increased structure and decreased stimuli may help clients to remain calm and gain self-control.
* Remember that clients use threats and violence when other forms of communication fail them, so utilize skills that facilitate communication and help clients to express themselves in words.
* Address the person by name. Do not argue with or criticize an angry person. Avoid doing anything that might be perceived as ridiculing or embarrassing the person.
* Trust your instincts. Assume that you have a built-in unconscious mechanism that can recognize danger more quickly than your rational thought processes. If you feel afraid, assume that you are in danger, even if you cannot clearly identify why you feel this way.
* Remember that an attack by a client is almost always the reaction of someone who is afraid and feeling threatened. Thus, strive to speak and act in ways that lessen the client’s need to be afraid of you. Demonstrate empathy and that you understand the reason behind their anger and fear.
* Avoid standing above others. If possible and safe, take a sitting position. Standing is more authoritarian and threatening than sitting.
* Attacks by clients are most likely when they feel trapped or controlled, either psychologically or physically. To the extent possible, give clients options and choices. Your location in a room should be one that allows the client to escape without having to come close to you.
* Be alert to signs of an imminent attack such as rapid breathing, teeth grinding, dilated pupils, flaring nostrils, choppy speech, clenched fists and bobbing and dipping movements of the body.
* Allow angry persons to vent their feelings. Most angry persons will begin to calm down after two or three minutes of venting or name calling. While this is going on, it is usually best to listen respectfully and allow them to express their feelings. However, some people are stimulated by their own words and grow even angrier because of what they are saying. If that occurs, the level of risk is increasing.
* Do not touch an angry person, especially if they may be under the influence of a drug. Do not move into their personal space. Remain at least four feet away from the person.
* An angry or dangerous person is more likely to attack someone who appears weak, insecure, and unsure. Therefore, present yourself as calm, composed, and self-confident, but not haughty.
* If an individual threatens you with a gun or other weapon, assure him or her that you intend no harm and slowly back away. Do not attempt to disarm the person. Leave that to the police who have special training.