



# NORTH AMERICAN CENTER FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT AND TRAUMA RESPONSE

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## Level One Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) Overview and Course Outline

The North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR) Model is referred to as Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA). It is a broad Model that draws from a number of different disciplines that transcends the early focus of practitioners on individual pathology only, and instead, includes our pioneering work on the “dynamics of violence”. It builds on the early United States Secret Service research around Threat Assessment (TA) where they studied individuals who were moving on a pathway of violence towards a single target (e.g. political figure) which they called “targeted violence”. The VTRA Model also enhances the field of General Violence Risk Assessment (RA) which is often centered on violence prediction and the process of trying to determine if a person of concern may pose a risk of violence to members of society in general.

However, if you ask most clinicians not trained in VTRA what the difference between TA and RA is, they will say “nothing” or “I don’t know” or “aren’t they the same thing”. What is referred to as Stage I VTRA (“data collection and immediate risk reducing interventions”) is more of the case specific data (CSD) in targeted threat assessment cases that general violence risk assessment tools were not developed to identify. It is the combination of TA and RA variables that makes for a more comprehensive assessment and more useful interventions. We have seen under-reacting by some professionals who erroneously use general violence risk assessment tools as the standalone measure to determine risk of violence of a threat maker not understanding that some individuals may not pose a risk for general violence yet may be moving rapidly on a pathway of violence towards a particular justifiable target only.

Serious violence is evolutionary but it is contextual as well. The VTRA Model highlights both traditional and non-traditional risk enhancing variables overlaid with a human systems based contextual assessment that allows Multidisciplinary VTRA teams to make an actual determination of current risk for harm to self or others and plan a comprehensive data driven intervention based on the case specific data.

Trained VTRA teams work from the perspective that “serious violence is an evolutionary process” and therefore no one “just snaps” and that pre-incident data is often available that can help identify and prevent serious violence. Yet, not everyone moves along the same evolutionary pathway. Some individuals have clear escalating patterns of violent offending so that when they “finally” kill someone those who know the perpetrator are not surprised. Others, however, can shock their entire community by seemingly going from a model citizen to killing their spouse, coworker, or classmate. In the latter example, it may be that those close to the perpetrator were simply not aware of his or her history of violence.

Some perpetrators evolve behaviorally with increasing frequency and intensity of violence over years while others evolve cognitively and emotionally wherein the frequency and intensity of their thinking and feelings (fantasies) about violence evolve over months and years until their first violent act. Whatever the pathway, most people give signs and indicators that VTRA Teams are trained to look for that allow for both early intervention and identification of rapidly evolving individuals of concern.



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## **The Evolution of Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA)**

The 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the 'National Training VTRA Protocol' presented in the Level One VTRA Training is the first truly "Community Protocol". In the past, prior editions had a primary focus on school related cases and thus the word "student" was frequently used as the focus of inquiry. In this edition, we use the terms student, subject, client, patient, etc. as interchangeable terms. Because many cases over the years have also involved parents/caregivers, faculty, staff and others, who have become the subject of a VTRA, we will more frequently use the term "person of concern" to denote the broad application of the VTRA Model.

The modern application of VTRA recognizes all formal signed protocol partners as equal. This means that any signed partner can activate the VTRA Protocol and appropriate partners related to the case at hand will assist them. Some of the most compelling cases across Canada have been when police, mental health, child protection, health care providers and other agencies have activated the protocol.

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, York Region, Ontario and Lethbridge, Alberta have all led the way over the past few years with including Post-Secondary Institutions in their "Community Protocols." Now several VTRA trained agencies are applying the process internally for staff members, former staff and clients who engage in threat-making or threat-related behaviours.

The British Columbia Government has supported VTRA Training and protocol development formally through the ERASE Initiative. The Saskatchewan Department of Education and others have likewise assisted in ensuring that all regions of the Province are VTRA trained. In Surrey, B.C. the VTRA Model is the foundation for the highly successful Surrey WRAP youth gang prevention initiative. The recognition that many young people who are becoming radicalized are similar to the school shooters in that most have no histories of violence and are easily understood as "Empty Vessels" has led to the development of our new training in "Criminal Radicalization."

Additionally, the current political climate in North America and beyond has contributed to an intensification of "hate-related" VTRA cases towards human differences such as race, religion and gender, as well as sexual and gender minorities. Societal anxiety is high and we state "the higher the anxiety the greater the symptom development". Therefore, both a broader application of the VTRA Model and a higher level of multi-agency collaboration is essential at this juncture of our world's history.



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## Level One VTRA Training Outline

### DAY ONE - MORNING

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#### 1. **Serious Violence is Evolutionary – No One Just Snaps**

- a. Evolutionary Process
- b. Justification Process
- c. Commitment
- d. Snap Theory
- e. Pathway to Violence
- f. Cry for Help
- g. Under – Reaction

*Case Studies*

#### 2. **Threat Assessment vs. Risk Assessment**

- a. Threat Assessment
- b. Risk Assessment
- c. Worrisome Behaviour

*Case Studies*

#### 3. **Traumatic Events System (TES) Model**

- a. Theoretical Foundation
- b. Background
- c. Crisis vs. Traumatic Event
- d. Critical Periods

*Case Studies*

#### 4. **Other Potential Warning Signs**

- a. Dehumanization
- b. Frequency/Intensity/Recency
- c. Empty Vessels
- d. Imitators vs. Innovators

*Case Studies*

#### 5. **Human Target Selection and Site Selection**

- a. Human Target Selection
- b. Site Selection
- c. Unidimensional Assessments

*Case Studies*



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## DAY ONE - AFTERNOON

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### 6. Offender Typologies

- a. Traditional High Risk Individual, Predominately Cognitive Type
- b. Traditional High Risk Individual, Predominately Behavioural Type
- c. Mixed Type High Risk Individual
- d. Non-Traditional High Risk Individual
- e. Priming
- f. Baseline Behaviours

*Case Studies*

### 7. Fluidity

*Case Studies*

## DAY TWO - MORNING

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### 1. Human Systems Theory

- a. Naturally Open Systems
- b. Naturally Closed Systems
- c. Traumatically Open Systems
- d. Traumatically Closed Systems

*Case Studies*

### 2. Three Phase VTRA Model

- a. Protocol Development
- b. Protocol Maintenance
- c. Determining When to Activate the VTRA Protocol

*Case Studies*

## DAY TWO - AFTERNOON

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3. Working With Cultural Diversity
4. Individuals with Special Needs/Disabilities – DSM V & ICD 10 CM Diagnoses
5. Responsible Sharing Of Information
6. Violence Threat Risk Assessment: Evaluation
7. Violence Threat Risk Assessment: Managing Beyond The Initial Threat
8. Anonymous Threats: Assessment And Intervention

*Case Studies*