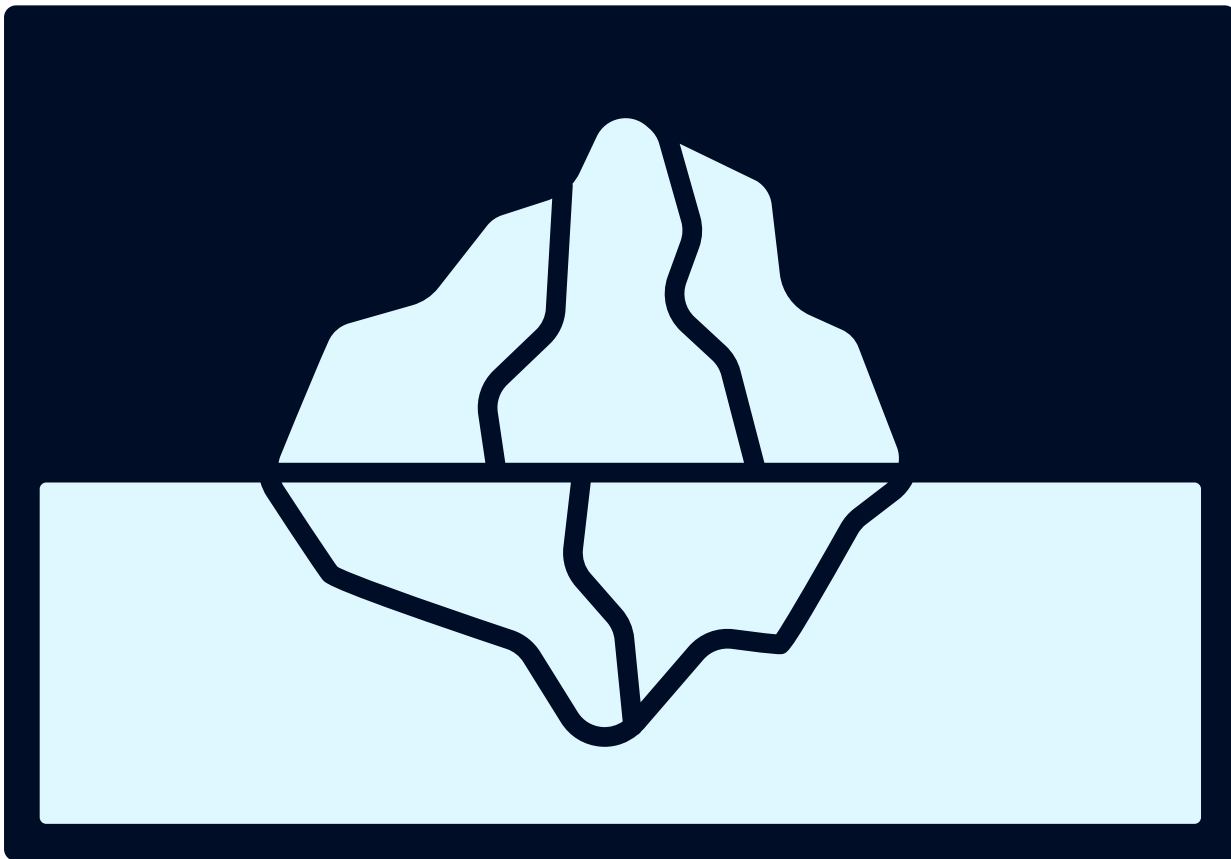

PLANNING FOR SAFETY

A Risk Assessment Tool for Community Programs

Designed for community-based programs supporting older adults
Developed through the Senior Wellness Initiative



CHSSN

The Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN) was formed in 2000 to support English-speaking communities in the province of Québec in their efforts to redress health status inequalities and promote community vitality.

Through a series of projects and partnerships that link community and public partners, the CHSSN is working to strengthen networks at the local, regional and provincial level to address health determinants, influence public policy and develop services. Begun through the efforts of four founding organizations, the CHSSN now has more than 60 member organizations and is involved in over 150 projects and partnerships in the areas of primary health care, community development and population health. Their aim is to contribute to the vitality of English-speaking communities of Québec by building strategic relationships and partnerships within the health and social services system to improve access to services.

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Québec 

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect those of the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise.

Acknowledgements

This tool was developed as part of the ongoing commitment of the Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN) to strengthen risk and quality management practices across the Senior Wellness Initiative (SWI). It reflects the collective experience of SWI organizations across Québec and is intended to support safe, inclusive, and responsive programming.

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Using this Tool in your Community Program

Supporting safe, inclusive, and person-centred programming.

This Risk Assessment Tool is designed for community-based programs supporting older adults. It offers a practical framework for identifying potential risks, understanding contributing factors, and selecting appropriate strategies to reduce those risks.

This tool is informed by practice within the Senior Wellness Initiative (SWI) and reflects the realities of delivering community programming across diverse settings. Its purpose is not to eliminate all uncertainty, but to support structured, thoughtful decision-making that promotes safety, inclusion, and responsiveness.

Use this tool to:

- anticipate and address risks before a new season of programs
- strengthen safety and inclusivity during activities
- support smooth transitions and follow-up after programs
- ensure staff and volunteers feel prepared and supported during activities

The tool is designed to be flexible. Use the sections that best support your work and return to it as programs evolve or as new needs emerge. Examples throughout the tool are drawn from community-based programs across Québec and reflect the realities of urban, rural, and remote communities.

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Phase 1: Before the Activity

Planning, outreach, registration, participant selection, space booking, and coordination

Use intake, needs assessment, and consent processes during participant registration or pre-program outreach to ensure needs, expectations, and permissions are clearly understood and documented.

Domain	Possible Risks	Examples in Community Programs
Participant Factors	Health, mobility, sensory, or cognitive needs not identified; unclear expectations; anxiety about new activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A participant with balance issues registers for a walking program without staff awareness • Someone with hearing loss attends a lecture where audio is not accessible • A participant with mild cognitive impairment registers independently but cannot follow directions
Staff / Volunteer Factors	Staff or volunteers not trained for specific populations; unclear roles; insufficient staffing for activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A volunteer leading chair yoga has no training in fall prevention • Staff assume a group is low-needs, but several participants require additional support • A single staff member is expected to manage a large group outing
Environment Factors	Physical setup unsuitable; accessibility barriers; unsafe routes; poor signage; limited parking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Room too small to accommodate mobility aids • Meeting space has dim lighting that increases fall risk • Icy walkways around a community centre
System / Program Factors	Registration breakdowns; miscommunication; lack of emergency information; partner misalignment; data security issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event is promoted inaccurately to participants • Double-booking of rooms • No emergency contact information on file for a participant

Phase 2: During the Activity

Program delivery, real-time engagement, movement, transitions, and safety supervision

If a safety, behavioural, or medical incident occurs during the activity, document it using your organization’s incident reporting process.

Domain	Possible Risks	Examples in Community Programs
Participant Factors	Fatigue, emotional distress, confusion, skill mismatch, medical events, fall risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant becomes emotionally distressed during discussion-based activity Someone with arthritis struggles to engage in an activity requiring fine motor skills A participant becomes disoriented while navigating to the washroom
Staff / Volunteer Factors	Difficulty managing diverse needs; unclear roles or boundaries; insufficient supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff unsure how to support a participant who is repeatedly interrupting Volunteer provides advice beyond their role or training One facilitator is responsible for too many participants during an activity
Environment Factors	Hazards related to noise, crowding, heat, ventilation, or accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loud environment overwhelms participants with anxiety Chairs without arms provided for individuals requiring additional stability Outdoor walking path is uneven or uneven
System / Program Factors	Gaps in safety procedures; technology failure; unclear roles; documentation gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No clear process for responding to a fall Technology failure during a hybrid or virtual program Uncertainty about who is responsible for leading different parts of the activity

Phase 3: After the Activity

Follow-up, wrap-up, transitions, documentation, referrals, and evaluation

Address risks that may emerge after the activity, including during follow-up with participants, transitions home, or through ongoing communication. Ensure that any concerns are documented and that appropriate follow-up actions are taken in line with your organization’s processes.

Domain	Possible Risks	Examples in Community Programs
Participant Factors	Difficulty transitioning home; misunderstanding next steps; unmet or emerging needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant returns home emotionally activated after a challenging discussion Participant forgets a mobility aid at the activity Participant misunderstands a follow-up recommendation or referral
Staff / Volunteer Factors	Burnout; missed follow-up; lack of debrief; emotional impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff are emotionally impacted after supporting participants in distress No debrief occurs following a challenging incident and follow-up actions are missed Staff feel pressure to provide support beyond their role or program scope
Environment Factors	Risks related to travel conditions, fatigue, or unsafe exits following the activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants travel home in low-light conditions (e.g., after dark) Temperature drop following the activity creates icy conditions Scheduled transportation is delayed or does not arrive
System / Program Factors	Gaps in documentation; unclear reporting processes; lack of continuity; partner miscommunication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A safety concern is identified but not documented or communicated through appropriate channels A referral to a partner organization is not followed up Staff turnover disrupts continuity of support for participants

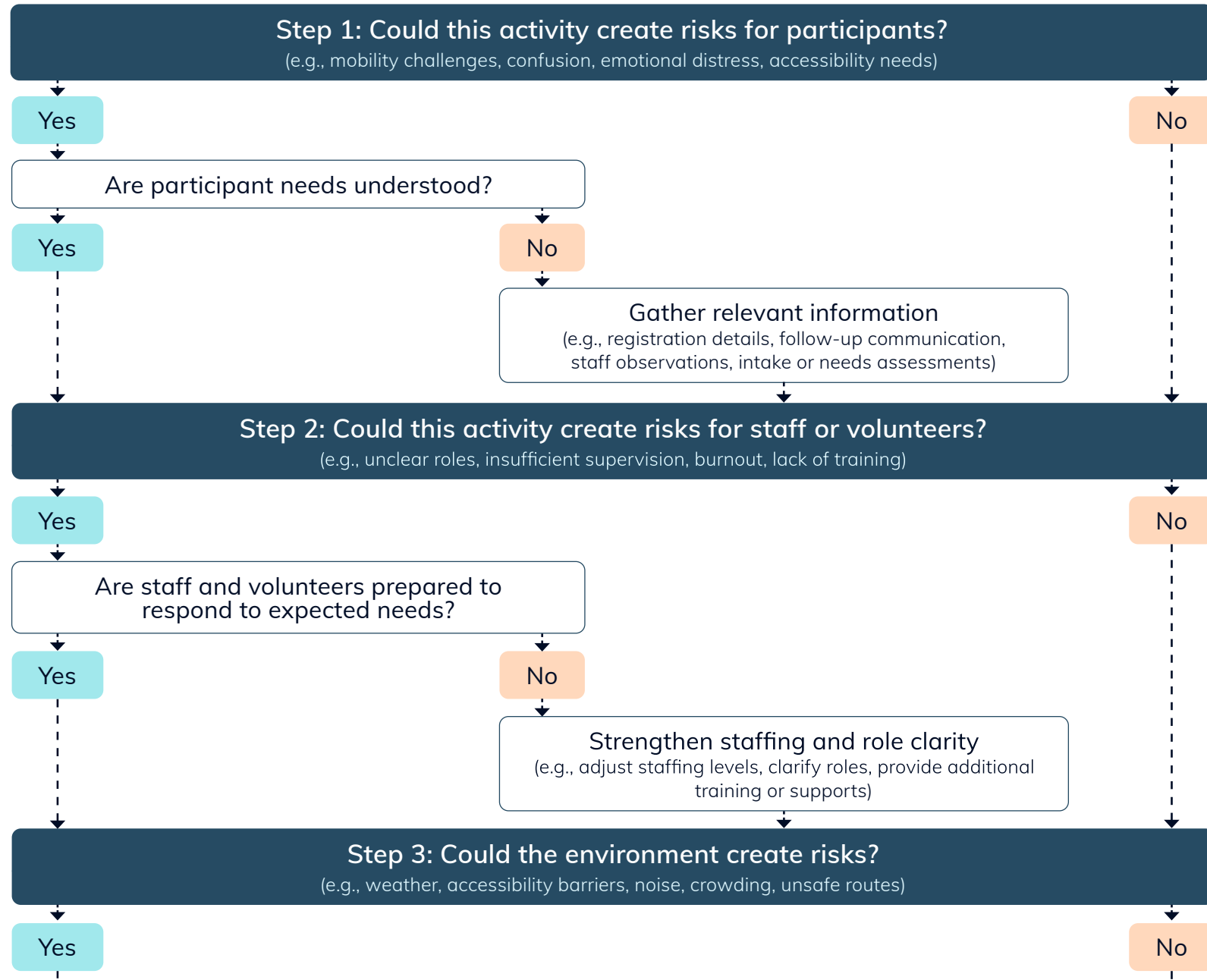
Note: The Phase 1, 2, and 3 framework is informed by the Haddon Matrix Model, as well as systems-based and risk management approaches commonly used in injury prevention and public health, adapted for use in community-based programming.

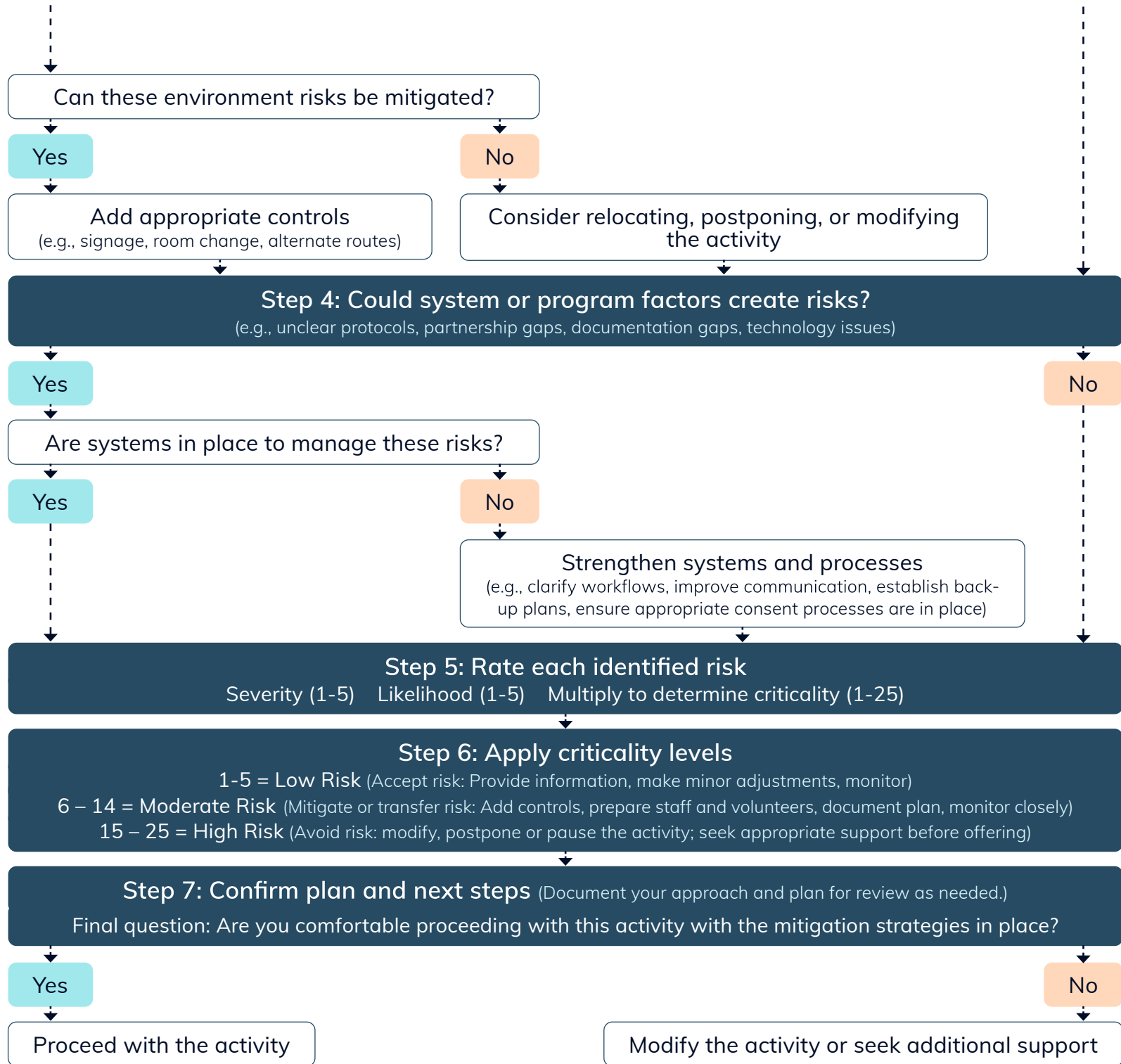
Activity Risk Assessment Flowchart

A step-by-step guide to identifying and addressing risks before and during activities

Program / Activity Name: _____

Date: _____





Severity Scale

How serious would the impact be if this risk occurred?

Severity Level	Description	Examples in Community Programs
1 = Minimal	Minor inconvenience; easily corrected	A brief delay or minor confusion that is quickly resolved.
2 = Low	Mild discomfort or disruption	Participant experiences minor discomfort (e.g., room temperature); minor miscommunication
3 = Moderate	Noticeable impact on safety, participation, or emotional well-being	Participant becomes overwhelmed during a discussion; fatigue affects participation during an activity
4 = High	Significant safety or well-being concern; requires active staff response	A participant becomes disoriented or distressed; mobility challenges increase risk of a fall
5 = Critical	Immediate risk of harm; urgent response required	Medical event; missing participant; severe disorientation; unsafe environment



Likelihood Scale (1-5)

How likely is this risk to occur under current conditions?

Likelihood Level	Description	Examples in Community Programs
1 = Rare	Unlikely, but possible	Isolated or one-time incidents; unpredictable issues
2 = Occasional	Occurs occasionally (e.g., a few times per year)	Participant misunderstanding instructions
3 = Intermittent	Occurs periodically (e.g., monthly)	Participant becomes overwhelmed during a discussion; fatigue affects participation
4 = Regular	Occurs regularly (e.g., in many sessions or unless mitigated)	Challenges related to mixed ability levels; recurring confusion about logistics
5 = Expected	Highly likely to occur	Seasonal or predictable risks (e.g., icy conditions in winter); recurring participant needs



Criticality Score (Severity x Likelihood)

How serious is the overall risk when considering both impact and likelihood?

Criticality Score	Meaning	Recommended Action
LOW (1-5)	<p>Minimal concern.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential impact is minor • Existing procedures already address the risk • Additional mitigation would be disproportionate 	<p>Accept risk: provide information, make minor adjustments, and monitor as needed</p>
MODERATE (6-14)	<p>Requires attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional planning, communication, or environmental adjustments can reduce the risk • Some risks may be shared or supported by partners 	<p>Mitigate or transfer risk: add controls, prepare staff and/or volunteers, document the plan, and monitor closely</p>
HIGH (15-25)	<p>Significant concern.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a high risk of harm or distress • Environmental or contextual risks cannot be adequately mitigated • Available staffing or supports are insufficient • Participant needs exceed what the program can safely provide 	<p>Avoid risk: modify, postpone, or pause the activity; seek appropriate support before proceeding</p>

Risk Response Strategies

These definitions support consistent decision-making when determining how to address identified risks in community programs.

Strategy	Definition	When to Use	Examples in Community Programs
Accept Risk	Acknowledge that the risk exists and is low in likelihood and/or impact. No additional controls are required beyond monitoring and providing information.	With a LOW criticality score of 1 – 5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants arrive a few minutes late due to weather • Minor room temperature discomfort
Mitigate or Transfer Risk	Take steps to reduce the likelihood or impact of the risk or share responsibility for managing the risk with appropriate partners (e.g., partner organizations, trained volunteers).	With a MODERATE criticality score of 6 – 14.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add an additional staff member to support a mixed-ability group • Communicate clear expectations with partners or co-facilitators • Provide reminder calls or check-ins for participants who may experience anxiety
Avoid Risk	Do not proceed with the activity as planned because the risk is too high and cannot be reduced to an acceptable level through reasonable controls.	With a HIGH criticality score of 15 – 25.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cancel an outdoor activity due to extreme weather • Postpone a program if required staffing levels cannot be met • Pause an activity if multiple participants are showing signs of confusion or distress

Note: The risk response strategies and criticality scoring approach are informed by established risk management frameworks, including approaches commonly used in public health, safety science, and organizational risk assessment (e.g., accept, mitigate, transfer, avoid). These concepts have been adapted to support practical, context-sensitive decision-making in community-based programming.

