

Feeling Safer

If you are a survivor of sexual or physical assault you might experience fear and anxiety around issues of safety. This is a normal and appropriate response to what has happened to you. Talking about these fears and worries with your counsellor, friends and family will help you deal with these feelings. This information sheet talks about some strategies you might use to help you to feel safer and to build your self confidence. You can use this information to build on your own intuition and knowledge about safety so that you can deal with the world on your own terms again.

Sometimes, reading about self protection can create a sense of guilt. Survivors may think “why didn’t I do this?” or “I should have done that”. Remember that the responsibility lies solely with the offender. You had no way of knowing that you would be assaulted. No matter what you did or didn’t do, the offender is solely responsible for the assault on you. Reading through this information might initially increase your feelings of fear and anxiety. This information is here for you to add to your own resources for dealing with potentially difficult situations, not all of the suggestions will suit your individual needs.

Assertiveness

Although it may seem difficult right now, many people have increased their own confidence by asserting their rights. This means insisting on;

- ✓ Your rights as a person
- ✓ Your rights to privacy
- ✓ Your rights to respect
- ✓ Your right to feel safe

Assertiveness is something many people have to learn. Often offenders will use the survivors’ passive nature, along with fears, against them. Being assertive, developing a firm manner and learning to stand up for your rights may help to avoid a potentially dangerous situation. If you think it’s unfair to have to think about your safety like this, then you are right. It is unfair! But it is important that you feel as safe as possible. The key words in self protection are awareness and assertiveness. You may want to talk to your counsellor to help you find what ways best suit you to protect yourself.

Self defence

Self defence might assist us to recognise potentially dangerous situations. It can teach us a variety of responses (physical, emotional, verbal) to a range of situations. It may enable us to respond appropriately to coercion, verbal or physical harassment etc – whether it is from a stranger or from someone we know.

Self defence is about;

- Learning how to manage fear and anger so that these feelings do not immobilise us
- Learning to be verbally assertive
- Understanding that we have the right to say no, to name what is happening and not be silenced.

Learning to fight back is about increasing choices for people if they are being attacked. Social conditioning, fear of retaliation or fear of further harm can make people feel incapable of resisting an attack. In some cases, this is undoubtedly a good survival strategy. Fighting back is not something that comes easily to us, so it needs to be learned and practiced in a safe and supportive environment.

Choosing a self defence course

There are many different types of courses so check carefully what is available in your area. A course should run for at least 10 weeks and should leave you feeling much more confident in your ability to be verbally assertive and to fight off an attack. Learning self defence is a physical and psychological process. It’s important to choose a class that teaches techniques that do not rely solely on physical strength. If you do decide to try a course, being actively engaged in counselling might help you to deal with any fears that might arise.

You may never need to use the self defence techniques that you learn, but you will feel more empowered by learning them.

Self protection strategies

Whether or not you were attacked in your home, you may not feel safe there. Many people who have been assaulted share this feeling. Some people find it helpful to stay with a friend or relative until they feel less frightened, or until they are able to move or make their homes safer. Talking to a counsellor can help you decide what options are available to you. Putting extra locks on the doors and windows can help you to feel safer, but if the offender was someone you know, you need to explore other options to increase your sense of safety.

If you do know the offender and you are worried that they might approach you again, you can apply for an intervention order. An intervention order restricts the offenders' movements, forbidding them from contacting you, your family and friends. You can find more information about intervention orders here: www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/interventionorders.htm or you can speak with your counsellor or the Police.

Many survivors experience a loss of personal safety outside of the home. Through self protection and safety planning, survivors can feel safer and more in control. Listed below are some ideas that you might find relevant or useful.

Safety at home

- Installing dead locks on all doors (making sure that the door frames are solid)
- Installing window locks. You can buy special locks in hardware stores, or you can drill holes through overlapping window frames. When a thick, strong nail is put into these holes, windows cannot be opened more than a few centimetres.
- Changing the locks on your doors and windows
- Installing a peep hole in your front door so that you can see who is there before you open the door. If you can install a peep hole, you could pretend that you are not alone in the house by calling out someone's name (i.e. "Joe, someone's at the door") before opening the door.
- Knowing which of your neighbours you can rely on in an emergency is helpful.
- Before opening the door to anyone, ask for their identification and check the ID by phone.
- If the person argues or tried to pressure you in any way, do not be intimidated. If necessary, call the Police.
- If a stranger asks to use your phone in an emergency, it might be safer to make the call yourself while they wait outside.
- Teach children not to open the door to anyone and not to tell phone callers where you are or where you will be.

If you are renting your home, the landlord has an obligation to make sure your house is 'reasonably secure'. They are also responsible for making sure that areas such as hallways and courtyards are well lit. For more information you can contact legal aid www.legalaid.vic.gov.au or tenancy advice Victoria www.tuv.org.au

Safety on Campus

- Always lock your door when home or away.
- Don't admit anyone into your residence hall.
- Report any suspicious persons or activity to University Police.
- Call for a walking escort when you are without one.

Party safely

- Attend social activities with friends. Agree to look out for one another and leave as a group.
- Know your sexual intentions and limits. You have a right to say "NO" to any unwanted sexual contact.
- Communicate your limits verbally. Don't assume the other person knows your feelings or will get the message from your body language.

- Listen to your gut feelings. If you feel uncomfortable or threatened, leave the situation and go to a safe place.
- Eliminate or limit your alcohol intake. It interferes with your ability to communicate your limits and identify risky situations.

Take precautions to protect yourself against date rape drugs;

- Only drink from unopened containers or drinks you've seen poured.
- Never leave your drink unattended.
- Avoid group drinks like punch bowls.
- If you feel really tired or really drunk and don't know why, you may be feeling the effects of a drug. Tell a friend and get to a safe place.

A word on cyber safety

The internet allows us to connect with many different people. It is important not to share your personal details with people over the internet (such as address/full name/place of employment etc). If using a webcam, be mindful of what the viewer is able to see behind you (can they see a work ID, school bag etc that can give them info about you).

For more detailed info on web safety and safer partying see www.secasa.com.au or www.secasayouth.com.au

Safety on the street

Research suggests that people who stand straight, walk with a firm step, look ahead and act purposefully may be less likely to be targeted. It is not necessary to stop and be polite when a stranger approaches you with a question. It's ok to answer 'I don't know' and keep walking, or to ignore them completely. Here are some more ideas;

- Think about what you are carrying down the street (bags, books etc). Can you move easily with them? Could you carry less or hold them better? Could anything be used for your protection? (Some people have used a book or a bag to throw/hit an attacker)
- Are you wearing shoes or clothing that might restrict your mobility? (i.e. are you wearing shoes that you can run in, if necessary)
- If you think you are being followed, turn around and check (if you can). Crossing the street, yelling, running to the nearest well lit place or populated area are possible options.
- If someone in a car asks for directions, remember that it is ok not to reply or to reply from a safe distance.
- Think ahead about places that might make you feel unsafe and work out if there are ways you can make them feel safer.
- If your intuition tells you that something is wrong or if you feel threatened, you could try any of the following;
- Ignore them, yell, make a 'scene' in public, change your plans or directions to avoid, confront them verbally, run, ask someone for help, or try to fight.
- If you are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or if you are distracted/upset, your ability to read situations and to act self protectively may be impaired. Whatever action you do take, be assertive.

A note on weapons

It is not uncommon for some survivors to want to carry a weapon. If you feel like this, consider;

- Your weapon may not always be close at hand if you need it. You may be overpowered whilst reaching for it
- Having a weapon does not mean you are physically or emotionally able to use it. Many survivors are attacked by someone they know.
- Owning/carrying particular weapons are criminal offences.
- Consider carefully the consequences of owning, carrying or using prohibited weapons.
- Remember that self defence classes can help you learn how to use your body for self protection.

Safety in your car

- Leave your car in a well lit area when possible
- Have your key ready before you approach your car
- Check the front and back seats of your car before getting in
- Change the place you park from time to time
- Keep your car doors locked when you are driving

If you think you are being followed, don't drive home to an empty house. You could drive to a police station or well lit/populated place to get help.

If your car breaks down, phone for assistance. If you become worried for your safety, you can stay in your locked car. If you are unable to call for assistance, put the bonnet up and stay in your locked car and await assistance. When someone stops, you can stay in your car and ask them to call roadside assistance for you. If you feel threatened in any way, you could tell them that someone stopped earlier and has already called the Police, who are on their way.

Safety on public transport

- Always wait in well lit areas of the platform
- Most trains/trams/buses are fitted with security cameras, ensure that you are visible
- Avoid carriages that are empty or with few people in them (where possible)
- Sit near the aisle so that you can leave the seat easily if you want to
- If you get the same train/bus/tram every day, you could vary your route home/stops so that it is less predictable.

Safety in taxis

- If travelling alone in a taxi, some precautions you could take include;
- Don't hail a taxi from the street, book them by phone. If you are concerned about the taxi driver and company knowing your address, arrange to meet them somewhere else (e.g. a shop/cafe)
- Take note of the taxi company, time of journey, number plate and ID number of the driver (this should always be displayed on the taxi driver's dashboard)
- Sit in the back of the taxi especially when travelling alone
- Be assertive about your rights. Don't engage in conversation with the driver if you don't want to. Tell the driver if their behaviour is offensive to you. If you don't feel safe tell them to stop the cab and get out. If they do not stop, wait for a red traffic light and then get out (making sure you do not endanger yourself on the roads)
- When getting dropped off at home, ask the driver to drop you a few doors down so that they do not know which house is yours
- You have the right to make a formal complaint to the taxi company about the driver's behaviour
- It's your choice to share a taxi. It is ok to refuse if you don't feel safe.
- Personal safety is an issue for everyone. By reporting incidents and notifying employers about certain drivers, taxis may become safer means of travel.

Hopefully this information sheet has given you some ideas/tips/strategies for what might work to help you regain a sense of safety and control. Remember that not everything in this sheet may be relevant or useful for you. Talking to your counsellor about some of these things might help you to decide what would be most useful for you.