

practical self-defense tips

There are steps we can take that increase our safety -- even though we cannot completely control what happens to us. We offer these as suggestions for you to think about. Try out what makes sense for you and your life. It is a lot of information, so it may make sense for you to focus on just a few steps that you could take to be safer in different areas of your life.

GENERAL REMINDERS

- Be alert and active.
- Trust your instincts. They are usually correct.
- Be aware of how you present yourself: if you are depressed or lost, try not to show it. Carry yourself with awareness: keep your head up so you can see your surroundings. Think about other nonverbal signals you send. Work to present strong eyes and confident body language.
- Examine your environments: where you sleep, where you work, other places you spend time, as well as frequently traveled routes. Think about potential dangers and ways you might decrease them.
- Talk to anyone with whom you live, work, or spend a lot of time to share experiences and strategies for being safe together.
- Speaking up can often put a stop to someone who is annoying you. Try to use short statements to cut off conversations that you don't want to continue (e.g. "I don't want to talk to you.") The broken record -- saying the same short statement over and over again -- can be an effective tactic.
- If you feel threatened, making a scene can sometimes prevent things from getting more dangerous. It's okay to hurt someone's feeling, seem paranoid, or even be wrong. We are usually right when our instincts tell us that something doesn't feel right about a person or a situation.
- Yelling is one of the best defenses. It breaks the "victim role," attracts attention, distracts the attacker, and puts you in touch with your power and anger. When outside, yelling "Fire!" attracts more attention than yelling "Help!" or "Rape!"

- Act in unexpected ways: Attackers expect certain responses, and anything different may put them off for a few seconds--seconds you can use to your advantage. People have pretended to know someone nearby, faked illness, or acted in bizarre ways. Think what feels easiest for you to try.
- Plan ahead. If you are going out, especially at night, and may be impaired later—drunk or high, or just tired—think about how you will get home or if you can stay with someone you trust. Do you have enough money for a cab or car service? It's best not to wait until you can't think clearly to deal with these issues.
- If you are being sexually harassed or bothered by anyone—for example, your partner, relative, doctor, teacher, caseworker, or people you work with—it's a good idea to talk about it, get support, and—if appropriate—report it. It's very likely that other people have experienced similar problems with this person. We increase our power and options when we reach out for support and help.

ON A FIRST / BLIND DATE

- Meet in a public place with people around when you are getting to know someone new. Picking a mutually comfortable meeting place alleviates tension and gives you an out, should you feel uncomfortable. If you want the date to continue into the evening after the initial plans, keep it going in a public place. If possible, plan for the first half of the date to be at a place that is close to other potential date spots, e.g. if you have dinner, try to eat at a restaurant that is in walking distance to the next place you might end up, like a club, coffee shop, mall or movie theater.
- Tell someone where you are going and who you are going with. Someone should always know where you are in case you do not return when you are expected. Be as specific as possible, and think about giving your date's phone number or email, in case you can't be reached. This may help someone to track you down in the event that something bad happens and you cannot be located.
- Know your limits with alcohol and drugs. Allowing yourself to become intoxicated or high not only hinders your judgment, but it hinders your ability to stay alert, pick up warning signals, and make good decisions.
- Map an escape route. This may seem extreme, but it's always a good idea for everyone to plan an exit or visually identify an escape route in every situation (club, parking lot, bodega, etc.) In a situation where you have to act fast, knowing an escape route can buy you valuable seconds. After your date, take a route other than your normal way home, should your companion attempt to follow you without your consent, or intend to do you harm.

- Know your date's sexual history. The best way to protect your body (remember: HIV and syphilis are still serious and possibly fatal diseases) is to know the status of your sexual partner. Some people lie about their HIV status. Warning signs are refusal to answer the question; ambiguity about the date of their last STD tests; ambiguity about the number of partners they have been with; and/or unwillingness to have sex with protection. Protect yourself by assuming your partner is positive until proven otherwise.
- If you have a cell phone, consider scheduling a "check-in" call or text with a friend who knows your full, legal name, and under what circumstances you'd want police involvement. Set a time for a friend to call or text you, and decide on a reasonable response time before the friend takes next steps. (e.g. if you don't answer the phone or respond to the call or text within 20 minutes, or if you do respond and you indicate that something is wrong, the friend will then begin to call emergency numbers, will come to meet you at a designated location, etc.)

ONLINE

- Take things slowly while getting to know strangers online. Take time to get to know the person and ask as many detailed questions as possible before committing to meet. Sometimes the person on the other end of the computer may not be who they say they are. Watch for inconsistencies or strange behavior.
- Protect your identity and personal information. For your own protection, never disclose any personal information that a stranger could use to possibly take advantage of you. Think very carefully before putting personal information on the internet, because once it's out there, you can't take it back. It's not necessary to always use a fake name, but be wary of giving out your address, place of work or other sensitive information.
- Prior to meeting, be sure to get a photo of your date. Ask as many detailed questions about the picture as possible, including the date it was taken. Save the picture in an accessible place on your computer or email it to yourself.
- Talk on the phone first. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they communicate. After a few conversations, you may pick up on a bad vibe, or realize that you may not be a good match after all.
- If you decide to meet up with someone in person, be sure to make your first meeting in a public place. This protects you from someone who may be masquerading under a false identity online in order to meet you and possibly harm you.

GOING OUT, IN GENERAL

- In any public place—movie theater, club, bar, classroom—look around to locate exits. Try to find at least two. Check them to make sure they are really exits, if you can.
- If someone is bothering you, it helps to speak up strongly, loud enough for someone else to hear. Responding strongly can prevent a situation from continuing or escalating.
- It's okay to tell someone “no,” even if they're giving you compliments that you like, buying you drinks, or making other gestures of friendship or attraction.
- Try not to leave your drink unattended. People can put drugs in a drink when no one is watching.
- If possible, carry enough money with you to take a cab or car service if needed, if these are available in your area.
- Consider carrying some form of ID. We recognize that this can be problematic for transpeople, as having state-issued ID that doesn't match current gender can often trigger bias, harassment, and discrimination. If possible, try to carry money and identification on your person and not in a bag or coat pocket.
- Try not to leave possessions where they can be snatched, like on the back of a chair or on the floor. Try not to carry lots of money with you, or if you do, keep it in different places so you will still have some if you are robbed.

GOING HOME / BACK TO WHERE YOU'RE STAYING

- Have your keys ready before you get to the front door -- people have been attacked in doorways and hallways as they hunt for their keys.
- If someone you don't know seems to be following you or loitering by your door, walk around the block, or go into a store or other public place. If necessary, wait there and borrow the phone to call for help.
- Window gates on windows that open onto fire escapes or on windows that are accessible from the outside can keep intruders out. Be aware of scaffolding or other changes that may make windows newly accessible. Use window locks or wedge windows closed (so they will only open so far).
- If you return and there are any signs that something is wrong (the door is ajar, the locks aren't how you left them, different lights are on or off than you remember), don't go inside alone. Get a neighbor to go in with you, or call the police (from outside your home). It's okay to disturb someone or call for help - even if it turns out nothing is wrong or no one is there.

- If you return and find an intruder or intruders where you're staying, don't block their exit. If possible, leave immediately yourself.
- If you live with a violent partner or relative, try to create a safety plan (places to hide, ways to escape, where to go, etc.) that may decrease the chance or severity of injury. People have arranged signals with neighbors, hid in locked rooms, escaped through a fire escape, etc. Also think about hiding a bag with important documents, clothes, and money in case you need to leave quickly. You may also wish to keep copies of important documents with a friend.
- Attacks by strangers are rarely spontaneous. Instead, an attacker may watch someone's habits over a brief or extended amount of time. Window shades or curtains keep people from seeing what is going on inside. Leaving the lights on when no one is in can confuse someone trying to figure out your habits.
- Consider household objects that can be used as weapons or shields: pen, fork, glass, shoe, book, pot or cup of hot liquid, chair, lamp, etc. Try not to leave knives or other obviously dangerous objects lying around.
- Talk with friends and neighbors about any dangerous, unusual, or odd occurrences. The best self-defense is collective. And it's good for people to have information about anything that's going on in the neighborhood or the community so they can be extra alert.

ON THE STREET

- Be aware of your environment at all times, even during the day when lots of people are around. Look around to check out your surroundings. Be aware of doorways, spaces between cars, and other areas someone could hide.
- In order to find an easier target, attackers may "screen" potential victims by asking for directions, a light for a cigarette, or the time of day. You don't have to answer. If you choose to answer, do so briefly, assertively, and if possible, make eye contact.
- If two or more people are walking towards you, try not to walk between them: move to one side or the other (preferably the side that offers more options for getting away.)
- Do not approach a car to give directions. If you want to help, yell from a distance. If they claim they can't hear you, don't go any closer to the car.
- If a car is following you, turn around and walk in the opposite direction. It will take the car longer to turn around. Find someplace where there are other people, like a store. Or walk the opposite direction on a one-way street.

- If you think someone is following you on foot, check it out by changing your pace, crossing the street, looking at reflections in windows, or watching shadows. Stay under lights. Even go into the street if you can do so safely. Think of a safe, populated place where you can go, like a store or firehouse. Don't lead the person where you are going. If you feel someone is too close behind you, turn around and confront them with a glare, a sharp statement, or a yell that may throw them off guard.
- Think about routes that you take frequently. Look for safe havens, such as stores that are open late and well-lit or heavily populated areas. Consider also potentially "dangerous" spots like empty lots, abandoned buildings, long stretches of unpopulated areas, etc.
- Try not to show money or jewelry, or other tell-tale signs of desirable possessions, such as expensive phones or tablets.

IF ENGAGING IN SEX FOR MONEY

- You have the right to refuse a client. Trust your gut/intuition.
- If you do something that you wish you didn't, don't beat yourself up about it.
- Try not to work in isolation. Call someone before being with a client and after.
- Go indoors and off the street whenever possible; keep in mind that getting into cars puts you at risk. Try to negotiate a space to work that is safer or familiar to you.
- Share resources with others who work the streets, e.g. renting space together.
- Try to stay away from pimps, who often take on many of the same characteristics of an abusive partner in a relationship. Many start out as "boyfriends" (or "girlfriends") promising to protect you, but it will soon become clear that this is not their intention. Leaving this sort of relationship can put you at risk, so be aware of the inherent danger and create a safety plan for leaving and seek support as needed.
- Do lower risk activities when possible—a massage, for example, versus full service.
- If possible, avoid advertising as full service; doing so could put you at heightened risk.
- Know your rights around police. Police who arrest are supposed to work in pairs, so there is a witness to the arrest.
- Practice safer sex whenever possible, including checking clients' genitalia for signs of disease.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE STOPPED BY THE POLICE

This section is based on the document “What to Do If You’re Stopped by the Police” by the American Civil Liberties Union.

- Consider carrying some form of ID, as police have been known to arrest people when they are not carrying ID. However, showing ID may be especially problematic for transpeople, as having state-issued ID that doesn’t match current gender can often trigger bias, harassment, and discrimination. While showing ID does pose that threat, it’s important to know that you may risk arrest if you do not carry it.
- Think carefully about your words, movement, body language, and emotions. See the handout on this website called *De-Escalation Skills*. www.safeandproud.org
- Don’t get into an argument with the police. Remember that anything you say or do can be used against you and can lead to an arrest.
- Don’t touch any police officer, unless you are trying to protect your head or body from blows.
- Keep your hands where the police can see them. Avoid making sudden movements. If you need to get something or they ask to see your papers, tell them before you reach into your pocket or bag. Police are worried about concealed weapons; if they think you’re going for one, they may become more violent.
- Don’t run. Don’t resist, even if you believe you are innocent.
- Don’t complain on the scene or tell the police they’re wrong or that you’re going to file a complaint.
- Don’t make any statements regarding the incident.
- Ask if you are under arrest. If you are, you have the right to know why.
- Ask for a lawyer immediately upon your arrest.
- Police may pat down your clothing if they suspect a concealed weapon. Don’t physically resist but verbally make it clear that you don’t consent to any further search. If the police want to search your bag, say, “I do not consent to a search,” but don’t resist.
- Remember the officer’s badge and patrol car numbers. Write down everything you remember ASAP. If you are injured, take photographs of the injuries as soon as possible, but make sure you seek medical attention first.

- If you feel your rights have been violated, you may wish to file a written complaint with your local police department's internal affairs division or civilian complaint board (in NYC <http://www.nyc.gov/html/ccrb/html/home/home.shtml>), or contact the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) website <https://www.aclu.org/affiliates> or hotline at 877-6-PROFILE.

If You're Arrested or Taken to a Police Station:

- You have the right to remain silent and talk to a lawyer before you talk to the police. Tell the police nothing except your name and address. Don't give any explanations, excuses or stories. You can make your defense in court later, based on what you and your lawyer decide.
- Ask to see a lawyer immediately. You have the right to a free one and should ask the police how the lawyer can be contacted.
- Don't say anything without a lawyer. You have the right to make a local call: to a lawyer, relative or other person.

What if I'm Not a U.S. Citizen?

- Whether or not you are a U.S. citizen, you have the right to remain silent. Always carry the name of an immigration lawyer and any papers such as a green card, I-94, or work authorization. If you do not have papers, have a family member or friend fax or bring you this information.
- Individuals who are not U.S. citizens have the right to a lawyer before answering any questions. Immigration officials must show you a list of free or low-cost legal service providers.
- Once you have shown evidence of immigration status, you do not have to talk to officers further.
- You have the right to a hearing before an immigration judge to defend yourself against deportation charges.
- You can call your consulate. Your consulate may be able to help you find a lawyer or other help.

CLOTHING AND BAGS

- Be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of what you wear and what you carry with you. Can you move comfortably and see what's around you, or will your clothing/bag restrict your movements?

- High heels, tight skirts, hoods, and heavy bags can restrict your movement. Practice using what you wear or carry as a weapon or a shield. For example, high heels can be used to step on attackers' feet.
- Attackers may try to grab long hair, dangling jewelry, or neckties. Also be aware of any hairstyle or item of clothing that restricts your vision.

MONEY

- Wallets and valuables that are kept in back or outside pockets are more vulnerable to getting lost or picked. Inside and front pockets are safest.
- Carry money somewhere other than a bag or purse, especially if you are carrying a lot of money. Keep it on your person, preferably placing smaller amounts in several places.
- Try to carry your keys somewhere different than where you carry your ID.
- Don't count or display money in public, on the street, in the bank, or any place where there are people around you.
- Hold your bag or purse close to you. Hang onto it when riding public transportation. Don't hang it over the backs of chairs in public places. Make sure your bag is fully closed at all times.
- Keep in mind that it is often worth it to give up money or other items of value in order to avoid or minimize bodily harm. An attacker may be more willing to end a conflict non-violently if they feel they have "won."

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

- It's safest to sit near the driver on a bus. On the subway, it's safest in the middle car with the conductor, or in the front with the driver. The last car is the least safe.
- When waiting for a bus or train, be aware of who's around you. Try to wait in a lit area, near the station agent or exit.
- If you are uncomfortable, trust your intuition. Change cars or get off and wait for the next train.
- If someone is standing too close to you, or touching you, you can make a scene ("Get your hands off me!" "Look out! This person's hand is on my butt!"), or move away. If someone is touching themselves, you may want to get others' attention, yell, or leave.

ELEVATORS

- Don't feel you have to get on an elevator with a stranger. Trust your instincts.
- If there are mirrors in the elevator, use them to look inside before you get on.
- Stand near the buttons. If there is trouble, press as many floors as you can, including the alarm. Don't press the "STOP" button if you are on the elevator with someone who is trying to hurt you, as this will shut down the elevator, trapping you with them until help arrives.

TELEPHONES

- Don't give out information about who you are, where you live, who you live with, when you are home, etc. to callers you don't know.
- If a caller has dialed a wrong number ask, "What number are you calling?" instead of telling the caller your number.
- To stop an obscene or prank caller: try yelling loudly, blowing a whistle into the receiver, or just hanging up.
- If you are receiving harassing calls or texts, do not delete the messages: if necessary, they can be used as evidence for the police.
- If you use a cell phone, have emergency numbers programmed into your phone for easy access. You may also want to save phone numbers for cabs or car services in your phone.

WEAPONS

- Carry a weapon only if you know how to use it, have practiced with it, and understand the consequences of using it. Remember that it could be taken away and used against you. You could also be prosecuted for using it against someone, even if you were defending yourself.
- Everyday objects that can be used as weapons or shields can be useful to have near you or on you: pens, keys, canes, umbrellas, food, sprayers filled with hair spray or ammonia, a cup of hot coffee, garbage from the street, coins to throw. Use your imagination and what feels right for you. When you are on the street or somewhere you feel uncomfortable, keep something in your hand.
- Watch our video on how to defend yourself physically when an attacker has a weapon.
www.safeandproud.org

If a stranger or someone you know attacks you, remember: *IT IS NEVER YOUR FAULT.*

Try to get help and support from friends, family, rape crisis programs, domestic violence programs, counselors, or other services. **Contact Safe Horizon** for information about available services at 1-800-621-HOPE (4673) or the **LGBT Anti-Violence Project** at 212-714-1141. They will accept collect calls from anywhere.