

## introduction to self-defense when attacker has a weapon

### OVERVIEW

There are several options for practicing self-defense when an attacker has a weapon. Even though it can feel frightening to even think about facing this kind of situation, it is very important to have a plan. Most important of all: **Stay active so that you can think and strategize.**

- The primary strategy when dealing with an attacker with a weapon is to use verbal self-defense and negotiate with the attacker. It is important to find out as soon as possible what the attacker wants from you. It may be something that you can give up, or you might be able to negotiate and give up something you feel like you can part with, and the attack might end there.
- CAE does not advocate fighting against a weapon, except as an absolute last resort. We stress the difference between attacks against your person and your property. We do not advocate fighting to protect property. However, like everything in self-defense, you make your own decisions.
- It's a good idea to think ahead about what you'd give up, and what you wouldn't. For example, if an attacker has a gun and demands your money, what would you do? And on to harder choices, involving sexual assault and other kinds of physical attacks. Sometimes, you don't have options or alternatives: an attacker may overpower you. You may feel you have to do exactly what the attacker says because you fear for your life. Remember: self-defense is anything you do to survive. Cooperation (or submission) is not consent. This means that even if you go along as a strategy to stay alive or avoid being injured it does not mean that you agreed. You are choosing a strategy that seems best at the time, to try to make it out of the situation alive.

### BASICS

Many of the same principles that apply to defending yourself against an attacker *without* a weapon still apply:

- Breathe.
- Be aware of your environment: Who is around you? Is there anyone who may be of help? Anyone who should be avoided? Are there ways of getting away, or areas to avoid?
- Think: "What can I do?"

In addition, try to determine exactly what the weapon is (for example, is it a knife or is it a screwdriver?), and where it is. If the weapon is not visible, there may be options, but generally trust your gut feeling about whether the attacker really has a weapon, and for maximum safety, trust that the attacker has what they say.

## IF AN ATTACKER IS USING A WEAPON AS A THREAT

- Breathe.
- Think.
- Talk: For example, “What do you want?” Also, talk to make yourself a person, a human being, and to try to have some human contact. People have asked questions about the attacker’s family or interests, or kept chatting about whatever enters their minds. Others have made conversation about unrelated topics to divert attention. It’s useful to practice this form of verbal self-defense.
- Negotiate: For example, “I’ll do anything you want, but I’m not getting in that car,” “I’ll do what you want, just put the knife down.” (You’re under no obligation to stick to any statement you make, or keep a promise.)

### **Other verbal strategies include:**

- Distraction: “What’s that noise?”
  - Assertive refusal: “No, I won’t go up to the roof.”
  - Going along: Again, cooperation does not mean consent; it’s a *survival strategy*.
- **Wait for or create a moment to strike or escape.** Situations change from moment to moment. Try to be alert for opportunities that may come up.
  - **Don’t make sudden movements** unless you have decided to physically resist. It’s best not to have your back to the attacker, so you might say, “I’m going to turn around,” to let the attacker know that you’re going to move.

**If you physically resist an attacker with a weapon**, you usually don’t want to strike immediately. Wait for a moment of distraction, and then strike hard to primary targets—eyes/nose/throat/knees, the parts on another person’s body which are vulnerable to pain and/or lasting damage. However, if you feel the situation is escalating, you may want to act sooner rather than later.

**If you are able to get the weapon away from the attacker**, there are several things to consider: if it is a gun or knife, our advice is to throw it as far away as you can. In any case, do not just hold the weapon as a threat—it may be taken from you and used against you.

**Be aware of your environment at all times**, so you know how to leave quickly and can find something to use as a shield to protect your body and/or to hide behind. When scanning a room, look

for: exits, places to hide, and weapons/shields.

## IF THE ATTACKER IS ACTIVELY USING A WEAPON

**Someone is shooting a gun at or around you:** Get out of range, get down, and get coverage: run in a zigzag. Duck or hide behind objects if you can. Try to get a least 30 feet away; at that distance it takes a good shot to hit a stationary target and a *very* good shot to hit a moving target.

**Someone has a knife and is coming at you from a distance:**

- Get out of range.
- Throw anything you can (change, garbage, food) toward the attacker's face and especially the eyes.
- Use objects like jackets, large bags, or a small chair to shield and to keep distance between you and the weapon. Try making a "Figure 8" motion with a jacket, bag, or belt to keep the attacker from getting in on your body. See the demo video of this on our website [SafeandProud.org](http://SafeandProud.org).
- If there are no covering objects around, protect your vital organs and sides of your neck with a Boxer's Block: hold both forearms vertically, making a screen in front of your head with the insides of the arms facing the body. Hold your fists about 5 inches from your face, next to your temples. Imagine your elbows are heavy; keep them pointed at the ground.
- Kick to the knees and/or strike for the eyes and throat. It's possible to get cut and still survive; there are parts of your body (like the outsides of your arms) that can sustain cuts better than others (like your trunk and major veins and arteries that run on the outside of the neck, and inside of the arms and legs.)

**Someone is holding a knife to your body:** Keep your mind active. Keep breathing and negotiate. Always be aware of your surroundings so you can make an escape, if you have the opportunity. People have also escaped by grabbing the knife and striking hard to primary targets: eyes, nose, throat, knees. In doing so, you may sustain injuries, but you may also be able to get away.

If you fight against a knife, know that you may be cut, but can still survive. If you know this is a possibility, you may not be as shocked if you are cut and you may be able to maintain your ability to strategize in the moment.

## AFTER AN ATTACK

**Seek support.** You do not have to deal with this on your own. When you're ready to talk, contact an advocate, counselor, mentor, or trusted friend. There may also be a support group in your community, which many survivors find to be a beneficial part of their healing process. You may also find it beneficial to take a self-defense course.

**Taking care of yourself is good self-defense.**

*Please see the Resources section of [SafeandProud.org](http://SafeandProud.org) for information about specific organizations offering services for survivors of violence. You can also contact The Center for Anti-violence Education in New York City, [ at (718)788-1775, for information about upcoming self-defense classes.*