

SAFETY TIPS FOR LIVING BRAVELY

M E G S T O N E

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Other people's violence is not your fault. But that doesn't have to mean there is nothing you can do about it. There are strategies that can keep you safer that don't perpetuate stereotypes or stigma. You don't have to restrict your life or diminish yourself to use them.

There are smart, practical actions that each of us can take.

And when I say be "smart," I don't mean "do what I say or else the violence you endure is your fault."

I mean, actually be smart.

Think critically.

Ask questions.

Make thoughtful decisions that work for your life.

Question and challenge authority.

START WITH YOUR VALUES AND YOUR RISK TOLERANCE.

Like any other type of risk, some people tolerate more and others tolerate less. Some people zip line, or bungee jump, and some people absolutely won't. Some people wear masks all the time, while others only mask when they're sick.

Maybe you need to feel alert when you're on public transit or walking through a crowded city, so you would never wear headphones. Or maybe you're autistic so if you didn't use headphones to cancel out noise, you'd be overwhelmed.



KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DANGER AND STIGMA.

A lot of us get told that someone who is homeless or having a mental health crisis or intoxicated on the street is a threat to us. But if someone is not blocking us, yelling at us, getting too close to us, or trying to touch us without our permission, then our fear is likely driven by stigma and not actual danger.

Also, some of the people who harm us the worst are well-dressed, charming, and clean. So focusing on people's behavior rather than their appearance can make us safer.

COMMUNICATE YOUR BOUNDARIES AND PAY ATTENTION TO HOW PEOPLE REACT.

One of the most powerful tools we have to assess whether people are trustworthy is to say what we want and don't want. If someone ignores or dismisses you, it could mean they are capable of serious harm. Not everyone who disregards our limits is capable of violence, but a lot of people who abuse start by eroding smaller boundaries.

This is not just about your individual life (or it doesn't have to be). Speaking up and communicating boundaries (either yours, an organization's, or a community's) is a way to prevent abuse. Holding leaders accountable, insisting on transparency, all of these are steps that undo the absolute authority and silences that make sexual abuse thrive in institutions.

DESCRIBE THE BEHAVIOR THAT ALARMS YOU. BE SPECIFIC.

You're getting too close to me.
I said 'No' and you didn't stop.
You're blocking my exit.



Statements like these can clarify what line is being crossed.

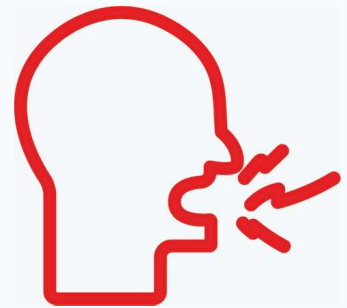
Much abuse and violence requires secrecy. A person who tries to hurt us wants us to be too embarrassed or afraid to call attention to what they're doing. Naming the specific behavior makes it harder for this person to hide or deny their actions. For social change (and our own safety) it can be useful to do this even in non-emergency situations.

KEEP IT SIMPLE. KEEP IT LOUD.

We don't owe someone who is harassing or threatening an explanation. Use simple phrases that state what you want: **"Leave me alone!"** or **"Don't come any closer!"** or **"Stop!"**

It's OK to repeat yourself.

If there's a bystander around who might be inclined to help, yelling simple, descriptive phrases helps that person understand what's going on.



If we are being recorded—by a person with a smartphone or an unseen surveillance camera—using phrases that make it clear that we don't feel safe can help us later if we need to establish that we acted in self-defense. Also, if you keep it simple and repeat yourself, you're not wasting energy on a complicated argument, energy that could be better used for making sure the person doesn't get too close to you.

FIGHTING BACK WORKS.

National Crime Victimization Survey and other data show that forceful resistance is more likely to stop an attempted sexual assault than non-forceful resistance. Using a strong voice can also call attention to a situation.



If physical resistance is your best choice – or your only choice – strike a part of the body that is vulnerable on everyone like the head, eyes, or groin. If the person trying to hurt you is bigger or has more muscle, striking a vulnerable part of the body can equalize these advantages. The goal is not to be the ultimate fighting champion, it's to cause enough pain to end the threat.

KNOW WHEN TO DE-ESCALATE.

If someone is angry but is not treating you like prey, the strategies are different. Listen to the nuance when people yell.

Are they threatening you with violence or are they feeling wronged? Are they yelling at you because they're in the middle of their own crisis? If someone is agitated, the situation could still become violent, so do what you can to avoid being too close to them.

But also if they are posing a threat to you because they are scared or frustrated, shutting them down may not be effective or ethical.

If they're escalated because they're trying to start a fight, use a calm and assertive tone and say, "I don't want to fight."



Focus on keeping your distance, so they can't reach you. Be aware of the exit and give yourself a clear path to it, also try to avoid blocking their path to the exit. If they're escalated because they are struggling with a crisis, offer empathy and do what you can to help. Listen to what they have to say. Some people become calmer if they feel like they're being heard.

IF SOMEONE GIVES YOU SAFETY ADVICE, ASK QUESTIONS.

IF THEY DON'T HAVE AN ANSWER, IT COULD BE BASELESS.

If you're told not to go to the mall alone, ask if there is a documented increase in violence at the mall and if so, what types. Be critical of "common sense" if it's really just attempts to make your life smaller.