

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet is for people of all ages.*

How to feel safer after sexual assault

Following a sexual or physical assault you may feel fear, anxiety and never completely safe. These are normal and appropriate responses after what's happened to you. Talking about these worries with your counsellor, friends and family will help you. Also, this fact sheet gives you some strategies you can use to feel safer and build your self-confidence.

Do not blame yourself

Sometimes reading about how to keep yourself safe can give you a sense of guilt. You may think *"Why didn't I do this?"* or *"I should have done that"*. The responsibility of the assault lies solely with the offender. You had no way of knowing that you would be assaulted. No matter what you did, or did not do, the assault was not your fault. It was not you who abused your power or authority to manipulate the abuser into sexually assaulting you.

Some of these strategies may not be easy for you

Reading through these strategies may increase your feelings of fear and anxiety. Also, not all the suggestions will suit you. However, it's good to know there are other ways to increase your feelings of safety as and when you're ready to hear about other options

Assertiveness

Increase your confidence by asserting your rights. Insisting on:

- your rights as a person;
- your rights to privacy;
- your rights to respect; and
- your right to feel safe.

Assertiveness is something you may have to learn. Offenders often target someone's passive nature or use their fears against them. Being assertive, standing up for your rights and developing a firm manner may help avoid a potentially dangerous situation. If you think it's unfair that as a woman you have to assert yourself like this, then you're right. It is unfair! But it's important that you put your safety before your indignation. Talk to your counsellor if you find being assertive difficult. They can help you find ways to protect yourself that you're comfortable with.

Self defence

Self defence can teach you a variety of responses (physical, emotional and verbal) to a range of situations (coercion, verbal or physical harassment). The key words in self-protection are awareness and assertiveness.

Self defence is about knowing:

- how to manage your fear or anger so those feelings don't immobilise you;
- how to assert yourself verbally (to name what is happening and not be silenced); and
- knowing that you have the right to say no.

Choosing a self-defence course

Learning self defence is a physical and psychological process. It's important to choose a class that teaches techniques that don't rely on just physical strength. If you do start a course, seeing a counsellor during the same timeframe will help you deal with any anxiety that might surface. You may never need to use the techniques you learn, but you'll feel more empowered by learning them. There are many different types of self defence courses so do some research. A course should run for at least 10 weeks after which you'll feel more confident in your ability to be verbally assertive and defend yourself against an assault.

Feeling safe in your home

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're able to move or make their homes feel safer. Putting extra locks on the doors and windows can help you to feel safer, but if the offender was someone you know, you may need to explore other options. If you're worried the offender may 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.

For more information about intervention orders, speak to your counsellor the police, or Legal Aid:

www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/interventionorders

Ways to make your home safer

- Install dead locks on all doors — making sure the door frames are solid.
- Install window locks. Or you can drill holes through overlapping window frames. When a strong nail is put through these holes the window cannot be opened.
- Change all the locks.
- Install a peep hole in your front door.
- Know which of your neighbours you can rely on in an emergency.
- Before opening your door pretend that you're not alone by calling out someone's name. For example, "Joe, someone's at the door".
- Before opening the door, ask for the person's identification and check their ID by phone.
- Call the police if the person at your door will not leave.

Renters

Landlords have an obligation to make sure your home is 'reasonably secure'. They're also responsible for making sure that common areas such as hallways and courtyards are well lit. For more information contact Legal aid: www.legalaid.vic.gov.au or tenancy advice Victoria www.tuv.org.au

Safety on university campus

- Always lock your door — even when you're in your room.
- Don't admit anyone into your residence hall that you don't know.
- Report any suspicious people or activity to University Police.
- Walk with friends if you can.
- If there are walking escorts available, ask for one. Don't be too proud.

Party safely

- Go to social activities where you know your friends will be.
- Agree to look out for one another.
- Leave as a group or with another friend (plan in advance how you're getting home).
- Listen to your gut feelings. If you feel uncomfortable or threatened, leave immediately.
- Know your sexual intentions and limits.
- You have the right to say no to any unwanted contact.
- Do not assume the other person knows your feelings or will get the message from your body language.
- Communicate verbally. Speak up. Say no!
- Limit your alcohol intake. It interferes with your ability to identify risky situations.
- If someone is pressuring you to drink more alcohol that you would like remove yourself from their presence.
- And drugs are illegal!
- For more information on safer partying see www.secasayouth.com.au

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.
- Never drink from 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 security or a friend and go to a safe place.

A word on cyber safety

Never share your personal details with strangers over the internet. If using a webcam be mindful of what the viewer is able to see behind you. Does it reveal any personal information such as a school bag or where you work. Please have a read of the Department of Education and Trainings website:

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/cyberbullyingcampaign

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. If a stranger approaches you with a question you do not have to stop and be polite. It's ok to answer *'I don't know'* and keep walking, or to ignore them completely. Some other factors to consider are listed below.

Think about the bags you're carrying. 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.

Weapons

It is not uncommon for some survivors to want to carry a weapon. However, you should not assume that a weapon will keep you safe.

- Owning or carrying particular weapons are criminal offences.
- Consider the legal consequences of owning, carrying or using prohibited weapons.
- 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 will be physically or emotionally able to use it. Many people who have been assaulted have been attacked by someone they know.
- Self-defence classes can help you learn how to use your body for 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're being followed, don't drive home to an empty house. You could drive to a police station or well-lit or populated place to get help. If your car breaks down, phone for assistance. If you become worried for your safety. Stay in your locked car. If you're 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're feeling threatened, 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.
- Most trains, trams or buses are fitted with security cameras. Ensure that you're visible.
- Avoid carriages that are empty or with few people in them.
- Sit near the aisle so that you can leave the seat easily if you want to.
- If you get the same train, bus or tram every day, vary your route home so that it's less predictable.

Safety in taxis and ubers

- Don't hail a taxi from the street, book one or an uber in advance. If you're concerned about the driver or company knowing your address, arrange to be picked up from somewhere else.
- Take note of the taxi company, time of journey, number plate and ID number of the driver.
- Sit in the back especially when travelling alone
- Be assertive about your rights. Don't engage in conversation 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 and get out. If they don't stop, wait for a red traffic light and get out — making sure it's safe.
- When getting dropped off at home, ask the driver to drop you a few doors down so that they don't know which house is yours.
- You have the right to make a formal complaint to the 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.

Who should I contact if I have concerns and need help?

- Call 000 if you're worried about safety, or anyone else.
- Sexual Assault Crisis Line (www.sacl.com.au) — 1800 806 292
- CASACV (casaCV.org.au) — 5441 0430
- Victoria Police Sexual Offences Child Investigation Team — 5444 6752
- 1800Respect (National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line) (www.1800respect.org.au) — 1800 737 732