

SAFETY STRATEGIES FOR FEMALES

By Susan Higley, community education coordinator, Overlake Hospital Medical Center

As teens and young adults return to high school and college campuses, it's a good time to talk with them about personal safety as they spend more time away from home and parental supervision. Young women are especially vulnerable and need to know how to avoid potentially dangerous situations. But rather than let the possibility of crime frighten or immobilize us, we need to take the initiative and regularly talk with our daughters about commonsense safety strategies.

Teens and young adults tend to become targets of crime because they are more often distracted and unaware of what's really going on



around them. Admittedly, our high-tech toys keep us busy multitasking throughout day. Whether we're walking and talking with friends, texting on cell phones, plugged in to music players or just preoccupied with our hectic schedules, these distractions seem harmless enough, but they reduce our awareness of our surroundings and make us easier targets for criminals.

All experts agree that being aware of our surroundings at all times is paramount to personal safety. What this means is to fully engage in the moment. Take note of the people around you and what they are doing. Do they seem out of place? Are you getting a bad "vibe" from anyone? We can usually sense if something isn't quite right by a person's body language. Do you have a plan to get out of an uncomfortable situation if needed? Pay particular attention to those behind you, as this is most often the direction a perpetrator will come from. This blind spot is also called your "six o'clock" and is the most important area of which to be aware. Take a look over your shoulder occasionally or look at the reflection in storefront windows to see who is behind you. This takes away a would-be perpetrator's element of surprise and makes you a more difficult target.

Another important safety rule is to obey your instincts. Gavin De-Becker, a well-known safety expert and author, describes instincts or intuition as "knowing without knowing why." Learn to trust and honor your instincts, whether you have a concrete reason to do so or not. Just because you can't identify exactly why you're getting a bad feeling from someone or some place, don't discount your gut feelings as irrational or silly. Instincts are almost always right. If the situation feels wrong, leave as quickly as possible.

Another way to avoid becoming a victim is to avoid situations

that leave you isolated and alone. Isolated places create more opportunities for someone to commit a crime without being seen. Generally elevators are safer than stairwells, open parking lots are safer than underground garages, and well-lit city streets are safer than park trails and so on. Just because you're familiar with a store or neighborhood during the day, remember that it may become a more dangerous spot on a Sunday at midnight when no one is around.

Larry Kaminer, an instructor for one of our women's safety classes, emphasizes the importance of always having a safety strategy in place. Let others know where you are going and when you will be back. Call and check in with your parents or a friend and let them know that your day is going according to plan. Know who or what could be of help to you if something were to come up such as a vehicle breakdown at night, or if you need a ride home from a party where you no longer felt comfortable. If you plan to study at the library, be sure to buddy up and walk home with a friend. There is always greater safety in numbers. The same holds true for a jog in the neighborhood and especially out on trails. The best practice is to bring your cell phone and leave the music and headsets at home.

Avoiding crime and potentially dangerous situations is always the best way to stay safe. Equipping our daughters and ourselves with some simple strategies can help us to do this. Safety instructors remind students that the mind is always the best weapon. Use it to maintain awareness of your surroundings, always trust your instincts and build a simple safety plan into all your activities. Empowering young women with this knowledge can help them enjoy their independence and avoid becoming victims.

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