By Us, For You
A Personal Safety Guide

During 2020 and 2021, artist Ali Baskerville collaborated with Multistory to work with women*, girls and non-binary people in Sandwell to create a feminist survival guide. The project both responded to an urgent need for personal safety initiatives that focus on empowering those who, due to structural oppression, are most at risk of violence, and provided an opportunity to explore some of these issues through sharing and creativity.

Please note: some sections of this publication address sensitive and difficult adult subject matter. Project participants have not been named to maintain confidentiality.

* This term is inclusive of all who identify as women, including trans, cis and femme.
The project was informed by ROAAAR, a personal safety initiative for women, girls and non-binary people that focuses on nurturing emotional and physical resilience through online and in-person self-defence workshops. Multistory worked with ROAAAR to co-create a programme of workshops for local residents, incorporating their self-defence practice and creative storytelling as a means of exploring what it means to be safe.

This manual includes contributions and stories from people who took part in the workshops and some photographs of them which you will find interwoven with other content. There are written pieces by local creatives; an instructional guide to practical survival skills written by Ali Baskerville and Fatima Ben; resources from local community organisations; and hand-drawn illustrations by Byng. Throughout the manual there is space to write, draw and annotate.
“Every woman should be safe and never give up— for other women, girls, for yourself. Find yourself! Because life is beautiful. Make sure you have free time for yourself and for going outside. Now that we have the pandemic, make your day busy. I want to say to women, Don’t stay at home, crying and angry. Talk with other people because this one is really really helpful. And I want to also say to them, Don’t care about your age - never! (laughs); never give up, never.”

— Sozan

Introduction

Hi, I’m Ali and I want to welcome you to By Us, For You, a personal safety guide created by a fierce group of women and non-binary people based in Sandwell and the Black Country. We came together to create this guide to share information and help you to create your own personal safety model that is centred around your unique and wonderful identity.

Where, or what, makes us feel safe is different for all of us and, unfortunately, it’s impossible to be 100% safe all of the time. However, over my many years of military service and working in conflict photography, attending self-defence training and my own challenges with my mental health, I have gathered some general advice that I would like to pass on to you in this guide.

All of these experiences led to the creation of ROAAAR - a personal safety collective combining experienced people who are interested in the overall safety of women, girls and non-binary people and driven by the belief that everyone has the right to feel safe in their own skin.
We don’t want to base this on statistics, as these can often be used to keep us afraid and victim-like rather than independent and able to make choices that aren’t solely based on fear. However, from the statistics it’s clear that the problem of violence against women, non-binary and trans people is endemic and we are nowhere near where we need to be for everyone to feel safe when existing in their own skin.

From my own view and experiences, the violence is a consequence of the pervasive and systemic dominance of the patriarchy and it is important for us to be aware of the layers of privilege that can come with a person’s gender, race, class, sexuality and identity. We need to be united in the effort to realise our collective liberation from the oppression of the patriarchy. It harms us all and is not something we can dismantle alone. We ALL deserve to feel safe in our own skin.

In 2020, Multistory invited me to run personal safety sessions and creative workshops with groups of women and non-binary people across Sandwell. This guide brings together some of the contributions from the people involved as well as personal stories and advice from our community.

Due to Covid-19, we adapted the programme to work digitally and many of the stories reflect this. Over the past year we have faced so many challenges and being online together has offered us some silver linings. We’ve been sharing advice and images of our objects of safety as well as heartfelt and moving experiences about life in the pandemic and beyond.

Though this guide has been created with women and non-binary people, the skills in it are universal. It is downloadable as a free PDF so you can share it with your friends, family or anyone who could find it helpful. We don’t have all the answers but we hope you’ll get some tips and ideas here to get started!

Ali Baskerville
Society has, for a long time, made assumptions around gender and still maintains the outdated notion of the gender binary which says that there are only two genders, male and female, and that this is the same as the sex you were assigned at birth. However, the gender and biological sex that were assigned to you at birth may not necessarily feel right for you.

Often, people will grow up feeling uncomfortable in their assigned gender and may actually associate to a different gender, or not conform to any gender at all. You may find that on any different day, you feel more ‘masculine’ or more ‘feminine’.

Pronouns
Pronouns communicate our gender identity to others and are a very helpful tool to let people understand how we want to be spoken to. They are an intrinsic part of who we are and, for this reason, it is important that you respect people’s pronouns!

So if someone says *my pronouns are she and her*, people know that their gender is female and that they’re comfortable with that. If someone’s pronouns are gender neutral, for example they/them, ze/zir, it means that they’re non-binary and they don’t assign to any specific gender.

Using pronouns correctly is liberating because it acknowledges that a lot of people don’t fit into the strict categories that heteronormativity has created. It normalises and raises visibility for diverse gender identities, a crucial step towards a society that refuses to see non-binary or trans people – or anyone who’s not on the heteronormative spectrum – as being different or unusual. Respecting someone’s pronouns is seeing and loving them for who they are.

What Makes You Feel Safe?

We wanted to start by sharing how we shaped the ROAAAR self-defence sessions that informed this guide, with a little practical exercise you can do. This came from a technique used by Kate Porterfield, a friend of ROAAAR’s who works with survivors of trauma to help them feel grounded at the start of a session.

Draw around your own hand on the next page. Inside the outline of your hand, write all the things, places, smells, sounds, people that make you feel safe. Outside of your hand, do the same but this time with things that make you feel unsafe.

Across the following pages you will find some examples from the people we met in our workshops. Are there any overlaps with yours?
What Makes You Feel Safe?

Space to draw around your hand as part of the activity on pg. 11
Unsafe:
- empty public spaces
- weapons
- alcohol/drunken people
- animals
- verbal abuse/nasty people

Safe:
- home
- comfortable shoes
- learning
- some family members
- knowing your area/maps
- my bed
- financial stability
- the gym
- good music
- dance/parties
- climate change

Not being accepted.
- Public places.
- Being alone.
- Reading
- Writing
- Public speaking
- Music
- Writing
- Being safe
- friends
- trusting others
- family
- needles
- animal

New people
- human muscle
- big job/2023
- quiet hour
- art
- anime
- 2023
We are all unique and our sense of safety is affected by our identity, environment and factors such as our mental and physical well-being. Sometimes we may feel more vulnerable than others due to existing or extra pressures and it’s important to be aware of this.

Self-awareness can be your first line of defence in many ways because if you believe in who you are as a person, then you will be more likely to stand up for yourself. Self-awareness is knowing what is and isn’t acceptable to you. It’s like having a built-in sense of your own values around how you want to live your life.
It’s also understanding what your personal triggers* might be, based on your lived experience, and being compassionate to yourself about those. Knowing your triggers enables you to create an environment to live in where you are looking after your physical and mental well-being.

This includes knowing there’s certain environments that you might go into where those triggers could be activated, which helps you not to sit in what we call the ‘boiling frog syndrome’, where you’re under pressure and you feel deeply uncomfortable. In this situation, you may be criticising yourself for how you feel – because you think a ‘normal’ person should be able to cope – but there isn’t any such thing as a normal person!

While building self-awareness is an important tool in self-defence, it’s also important to call out abuse towards women or non-binary people. We’re in a period of time where there’s a lot of resistance to bad behaviour and to make sure this continues we need to stand in solidarity with each other, so that abusers are not allowed to continue acting the way they do.

“If something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t right is it? Just be aware that you can say, I’m not happy with this. Can I change it? Make sure you have somebody you can rely on. Especially now, during the pandemic, which can be quite isolating can’t it? It’s great if somebody checks up on you, or you check up on that person.”

— Jackie

* **Triggers** - a trigger is an experience, comment, sensory experience or even a thought that brings a person back involuntarily to a physical state of fear or distress from a traumatic event or events in their past. Kate Porterfield
Triggers

“My triggers are:

Spending time with my family.
Going outside.

If I talk about my childhood with someone who can show me love and physical affection or has emotional eyes that I can settle on, then I’m ok. But if I talk about it with my family it just feels as bad as before. Then I have to wait to calm down and then I can say to my Mum, When we talk about that my trauma comes up and my body shuts down and then I worry about being grumpy. She says, Well maybe you could say, ‘can we not talk about it’ and I say, Yeah or if you hugged me that would be good as well. Then she tells me how she gets anxious or she starts to talk about something else but I know she cares and I pretend I got hugged.

I think I’ve got developmental trauma and funny attachment styles. When it hits, my body shuts down and my head tightens. I start talking to myself and anyone interrupting or speaking to me feels stressful.

My voice becomes monotonous and agitated and my answers become short and I find it hard to look people in the eye. It is like acid being poured into my brain causing a fizzing chaos but there are no nerve receptors so I can’t feel the pain. There is a heaviness behind my eyes and I want to escape but there is nowhere to feel safe and alone.

Sometimes being alone triggers me and I have to fight the feelings because being with people would feel better if I relaxed and let them in or maybe was honest about my state.

I am learning that my trauma is pretty much constant so instead of thinking each new thing has stressed me, I know it’s just developmental trauma and that’s why it is constant. So instead of looking for it, and analysing the daily causes, I can look for the treatments and what helps alleviate it.”

— Kate
Letter To My Younger Self

“When you are in a stressful situation take the time to breathe – 7 in, 11 out. It physically relaxes you. Your body just relaxes itself for you. Not many people will notice you are doing it so don’t worry.

Learn as much as you can about your body. The more experiences you are open to the more possibilities for change you have. Find meditations for accepting difficult emotions. It will help you face them and comfort yourself rather than lying flat and stressed for 10 minutes in your ruminations.

There are some vital tools around emotional management, empathy and respect that you haven’t learnt yet. Start looking up psychotherapists who talk about healthy and unhealthy communication.

This is only a small segment of your life and it will pass. You will change it when you have the strength to, so just relax for now, when and if you can. But try to find active ways of relaxing.

You have learnt to withdraw and face away. Start facing forwards if you can. Nothing will be perfect but you can learn to accept that and start to make choices.

You always have the choice to not do something unkind. Whether you like it or not.

I’m sorry you feel like this. I love you. Trust the loving, confident, satisfied feelings you have. Don’t trust the obsessive anger and fear. Un-learning what you’ve been taught is hard work.

Take breaks when you need to.”

— Kate

*I would suggest counselling-directory.org.uk or free therapy through the Birmingham LGBT Centre. I got diagnosed with a Social Anxiety Disorder by my counsellor which we are using CBT to treat and the NHS offers free CBT courses. The NHS service involves a lot of worksheets which can be overwhelming, so if you can get someone or find a way to help you understand how your body and mind work, the sheets can become less impersonal and more of a helpful routine.
Write A Letter To Your Younger Self

This can be any moment in time. Whatever age or point in your life when you feel you could have done with some advice from your future self. What would you say? How would you talk to yourself? Any advice or tips you’d give, things to look out for, or encouragement? How would you sign it off?

Write the letter on a sheet of paper. Once you’ve done this, store it somewhere safe (or throw it away if you need to). If you keep it, it can be helpful to come back to it in a few months’ time to reflect on what you wrote.

Red Flags

“Mine are someone denying your emotions and feelings, when they present a reality that is different from what you feel and what you think. Then slowly taking control, asking you where you’re going, why you’re going, who are you speaking to. I’m particularly wary of people who are controlling.

When they are trying to keep you under control and then you start slowly moving away from your family and friends because you want to be loyal to your partner, this is when the red flag should come.

In order to feel good about yourself, it is very important to surround yourself with people who have no hidden agenda, who are encouraging you and supporting your resilience. Those who can boost your self-esteem and those you can truly trust. Easier said than done but, overall, this is what we should all be aiming for throughout life.”

— Dorota
One of the first elements to becoming situationally aware is developing an understanding of our built-in survival instincts. By now you will have made your hand diagram and be starting to have a better understanding of where your safe places are — physical and emotional — and also understand places where you don’t feel safe.

We can build on this by looking at our environment and how our awareness of what’s around us goes some way to keeping us safe.
We all have an intuitive and physical response to fear. It’s part of our brain and takes the form of the amygdala – a tiny almond shaped part of the brain that’s like an emotional reactor that is also known as the limbic system.

We need this system to help us when we face danger. It sends messages to the liver to start creating adrenaline which helps pump red blood cells to our major muscle groups which, in turn, speeds up our heartbeat and sharpens our focus.

Sometimes it’s hard to notice risks when we’re distracted and this is a factor which influences our level of awareness. Sometimes we use distraction to help with anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed. Often we may need our favourite playlist in our ears to ground us. But there are occasions where it may be good to turn it down or pop one of the earplugs out. While we don’t want to be on high alert all the time, it’s good to be aware of our situation so that we notice if something is unusual.

Side note – we don’t want you all walking around looking over your shoulder every five seconds either.

There’s a balance between being aware and being hypervigilant*. Those of you who have symptoms of PTSD** or anxiety will know that this feels like and it’s good to know what your triggers are in this instance.

When we mention trauma there is no sliding scale and please remember that trauma has many different shades and shapes and affects each person differently. If you experience trauma and it has affected you, that is a valid experience. It’s not about you feeling that you have to stay silent if you perceive someone else’s trauma as worse than yours.

* Hypervigilant - hypervigilance is an exaggerated fear of danger seen with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety, mood, or personality disorders.

** PTSD - post-traumatic stress disorder is caused by a traumatic experience.
Gut Feeling

Listening to your gut is a good exercise; start to practice and the more you do, the more you’ll start to notice it without trying. Your gut feeling tells you something is different and, for whatever reason you may feel afraid if it’s something that threatens what you’re used to. Maybe it’s a loud noise; maybe it’s a crowded place; maybe it’s a car going really fast; maybe someone doesn’t feel safe to be around.

There’s something about your gut feeling that can go beyond the immediate survival instinct. You know that no matter what you’ve got in front of you, no matter how much you’ve thought about it or rationalised it in your mind, something still feels wrong. You don’t have to explain that to anyone, you just need to keep tuning into your intuition.

If you’re starting to ask yourself lots of questions about something, it’s probably coming from your intuition telling you to investigate it a bit more, to ask people questions because something feels off about it.

“A feeling above all other feelings, one you can’t quite place where it comes from, but you know you should act on.” — Louise

Don’t be afraid to ask those questions or investigate further! Intuition is something that people who have had a lot of challenging experiences have had to rely on because they didn’t have a support system around them. People with early childhood trauma often have a much better developed sense of intuition and instinct because they’ve had to use it more. Think of intuition and instinct as skills.
Can you think of a time you’ve had a gut feeling?

We invite you to express it here in any way you like, such as through writing, drawing or collage.

“It’s a reaction, that might be strong or could even be a quiet voice at the back of your head, communicating something to you. The gut feeling might go against what your mind is telling you – for example, you could be telling yourself It’s okay, nothing bad is going to happen, but your body is saying, no – this really doesn’t feel safe or good.

Sometimes you can get bad gut feelings around certain people or situations. It can take some time to learn how to zone into the gut feeling. I think that a good way to learn is by asking yourself in situations – how am I really feeling here? Is there nervousness? Tension? What is my body trying to say to me? And then not to feel pressured into being polite or nice when someone doesn’t feel safe – you don’t owe anyone anything!”

— Anon
“Well, when I reflect on what I used to do when I was 16, 17, when I was partying and taking a night bus, then coming back home, not worrying about anything! I wouldn’t do that now – there’s no way I would do it – and I realise I used to feel safe. So, wherever you go, you need to have your eyes and ears open. A lot of people are just sticking their faces in their phones, which means they are completely vulnerable. Also make sure wherever you go, let someone know where you’ll be whether you’re going to a party, or dating online. It can be for sex, it can be for anything but you never know who you’re going to end up meeting.

It’s good to gather some information before you go out on an online date – check their profiles, check their Facebook and their Instagram to get an idea of who they might be and then set up the date, preferably in a public place for the first time.”

— Dorota

“There was a guy in the park, just running past us and mouthing off, and I had this thing in my head – if he comes around again and gives us more jib, I’m going to say something. So I did. And my Mum chipped in as well and was like, go away.

I was aware that if he had turned round and come back and decided to get physical that would’ve been a vulnerable position to put me and my Mum in, but it was because he made us feel like how dare you come out the house. I thought, I got away with something there. I’m glad I did call it out but, at the same time, I was lucky that he just kept going, but that’s not something I really thought about ‘til afterwards.

And I feel like that’s what you’ve got to try really hard to do sometimes, is find that place between sticking up for yourself and not making yourself more vulnerable. He would have just carried on because he just wanted to mouth off and feel superior rather than get into a debate about it. So, he was never really going to come back. But I did sit there thinking, What if he had though?”

— Lorna
How To Walk
by Jasmine Gardosi

It’s simple. When walking alone:

— make yourself tall; look confident;
  don’t appear vulnerable
— make yourself small; inconspicuous;
  don’t invite interest

— if it’s late in the night and you don’t feel safe,
  get in a taxi
— if it’s late in the night and you don’t feel safe,
  get out of the taxi

— defend yourself; carry pepper spray
— it’s illegal to carry pepper spray

— always trust your instincts
— don’t be so paranoid

— wear bright colours
— don’t attract attention

— pretend to call your dad
— put your phone away

— take the quickest route
— don’t cut through the alley

— pick up the pace
— don’t make them chase you

— walk the tightrope home;
  there is a gravity to each journey
— feel the threat whichever side you tilt

— don’t look around when a driver honks;
  do not give him the satisfaction
— look around when a driver honks;
  do not get run over
— don’t respond when you hear a voice on your
  neck whisper nice legs
— but don’t just say nothing, right?

— learn a martial art
— don’t use it

— wear the dress
— don’t wear the dress
— wear the dress
— but don’t wear that dress
— wear the dress to that event; the women’s
  empowerment event; you love that dress;
  wear the goddamn dress
— okay - you shouldn’t have worn that dress

— get into a habit of taking pictures when they whistle; they hate that; see – there – take a photo of the man who said hello to you
— okay delete the photo of the man who said hello to you; he was just wishing you a good day

— don’t stand your ground with the man in Victoria Square who says he will knock your teeth out; you will not serve him right; you will not make him think twice next time; instead, look to the men in the hi-vis jackets for help
— okay don’t look to the men in the hi-vis jackets for help; they will stand there and watch you both because it’s only their job, they say, to guard the barricades

— when the man who has been chasing you down the street with compliments asks for a fist bump, give it; just give it

— stabilise the feeling inside of you that you are doing something wrong by saying nothing
— stabilise the feeling inside of you that you are doing something wrong by saying something
— do not slip your footing; tip the other way to be safe
— no, the other way; there is a balance somewhere, there must be, I swear

— HEY ARE YOU MARRIED? YOU SHOULD BE when the man with the glass bottle shouts in your face, cross the road in a hurry to get away
— DO NOT CROSS THE ROAD IN A HURRY TO GET AWAY; the Landrover nearly hit you
— you can’t walk away from this; not every single time
— but don’t walk back to him either

**don’t** — **don’t**

— don’t yell at him
— don’t tell him he’s a grown man
— don’t make a fist
  and push him in the chest with it
when your knuckles press against his sternum and his face changes
and he reaches around for something in his waistband
walk away, like you should have done the first time
a knife?
walk faster. he’s catching up
ask for help from the two men walking ahead: the ones who got off the same coach as you, yes, those two; about your age, with the smart coats
ask them for help; it’s okay to ask them for help
okay don’t ask them for help; they’ll pretend they cannot hear
when a man with scars on his face jumps over a barricade, runs across two roads and an island to rescue you, let him
when the lone woman with blue hair and a giant rucksack catches up from behind, accept her offer to walk with you

the two of you, with your heavy travel bags, tread the tightrope home; put heel to toe along the tense wire of the road

in your head, analyse your false step; how clumsily you handled your own load; how you tipped the wrong way; how you lost your equilibrium; how you let this happen

pass the same two men, with smart coats, who pretended they could not hear; hear them complain: 30 seconds into Birmingham and already there’s this sort of bollocks going on

wonder what they understand of the gravity of a journey; of the centre of their mass; of the pull of their own weight
“When you’re from a big family, my safety mechanism is this: we walk knowing the fact that, if you touch me, you have to deal with my family! That’s how it was when we went to school. When we started high school, I could freely walk anywhere because I have older sisters and we had older cousins as well. So just walked knowing we had their backing because they would hundred percent look after you.

That was in West Bromwich at George Salter school. We were taken care of because of who we were and because there weren’t that many Black people when we were kids. We stood out. In school, in my year, there were only a few of us. So, it was a way of making sure we were okay.

I remember this image as a child, walking down the street and there was a South Asian girl walking in front of us. And on this street, if you weren’t White you were not safe. And you know what, they attacked this girl because, she was South Asian. That was when I was in the first or second year of high school, in the early 80s. And it wasn’t safe being Black or South Asian walking in certain areas.

It’s not the same on that street anymore, cause there’s a lot of Black and South Asian people living there now, but it still depends on where you live.

My brother was offered a house in an area where there’s not a lot of Black people and he says, *Are you kidding? No chance.* As a Black person, we are aware of these things more. And so, you just wouldn’t go. It’s just not safe to put a family there, no. When you just get on with it, you’re fine. But if you make a point of anything, you’ll find out what you’re really worth!”

— Pauline
Take Some Time To Breathe

Start by settling into a comfortable position and allowing your eyes to close. Take several long, slow, deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling fully.

Allow your breath to find its own rhythm and invite your full attention to follow your breath as it moves in and out of your nostrils and stomach. As you sit here quietly breathing, start to take notice of your surroundings. What can you hear? What can you feel beneath you? What can you smell? Spend some time focusing on these sensations, while continuing to breathe deeply. If any thoughts pop into your head, acknowledge them and let them float away, returning your attention to your breathing.

Spend as long as you like doing this exercise. When you’re ready, slowly allow your attention to expand to be aware of your entire body and the space you’re in. Open your eyes and become fully aware of your surroundings.

Collective + Self-Care

Be wary of how self-care is presented to you, as it has become just another thing that gets commodified and turned into something to buy. Self-care is not just based on consumption and buying yourself lots of things or spending money on ‘pampering’ yourself (although this can be nice sometimes!)

The aim really, for self-care, is to be in a good enough place to be able to connect with other people, which then feeds into the idea of collective care. The only way systems of oppression, extraction and violence change is through collective action.
If we don’t look after ourselves, we can’t be part of those movements that create positive change. We can’t be part of anything, really, because we’re just trying to manage ourselves. So self-care and collective care work in harmony with each other.

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.”

— Audre Lorde

“Baking is my connection to Mum who was well known in the area for baking. She can’t do that now, because she’s in the later stages of dementia. So I need to do things that relate to family and relate to Mum. I’m going to bake a banana cake later. We always put seasonings in. You can’t have food without seasoning, that’s not food at all mate!”

— Pauline
“The most important thing is that we are alive and we are well. It gives me hope. Funnily enough, I love to grow things and to sew. It gives me peace. I’ve not been able to garden because I don’t have space in my house. For now, I just focus on my sewing. I also love to cook! Nigerian doughnuts are so nice, so sweet. And Nigerian bread is lovely! I can make all of that.”

— Esther

“When I feel bad, or when I’m confronted by the memories of the past, I think of all my children growing safely here and going to school and I can go to college and study. I start planting, which makes me happy. I think about what I have here and what my children have and ignore those bad memories.

Gardening is very nice; it makes me feel very good, and young! My plants are like my children; I love watering them, feeding them! I feel them with my hands when I’m sad and that makes me feel good. I don’t have a garden and I wish I had more space to grow more things.

It was one year ago when I talked to the GP about my depression and anxiety. I was really depressed for more than three years. I didn’t want to use pills but since I started meeting with my friends and joining clubs I feel really happy. They inspired me to start painting and drawing and gardening and it makes me feel good!”

— Khalida
Creative Workshops
Workshop facilitator Danni Ebanks-Ingram

“Safety is often linked to physical protection; of self or others. Daily, we repeat our rituals and navigate the world so much with our hands, we use them to express, to hold, to share and in some cases protect. When I was invited by Multistory to lead a creative workshop, I wanted to start to deconstruct what protection and self-preservation looks like.

The group was exploring objects of safety within this workshop, so I wanted to expand on the work that they were already doing. Some of it was centred around collages that expressed what made them feel safe and the process of casting the hands allowed the group to move through the idea of our bodies being our own objects of safety.

Unfortunately, our society centres on structures that take away the agency of young womxn and anyone who doesn’t fit into the gender binary from a very early age.

I wanted the group to have the cast of their hands, decorated with words from their collages as a tangible reminder of their own resilience and also the resistance it might take to preserve themselves in a society that can be emotionally and physically unsafe. The session felt like a refreshing space where young womxn were able to explore what centring care looks like.”

— Danni
Think Of A Time You Wish You Spoke Up

Think of a past moment that you feel safe to explore where, for whatever reason, you found it hard to speak your mind. Some examples might include something said at the dinner table that you wished you’d replied to, or something you saw or heard in public, or any other situation where you didn’t feel safe letting your voice be heard. Use a sheet of paper to say exactly what you wish you’d said. This can be in the form of a poem, a speech, drawings or just your thoughts.


Hello. I am Fatma. My scarf is my safety object. Wherever I go I take my scarf with me. If I am cold I get warm with it. When I am praying I use it as a prayer mat. It makes me feel peaceful.

my doc marten boots - grounded, strong

my friends

lavender - relaxes me
lavender pouch - It calms me down when I feel anxious
“I was bullied at work. You couldn’t see it, so no one would believe it. My advice would be:

1) talk to someone who you feel comfortable and safe with, who you know will keep what you are saying confidential.

2) Collect evidence i.e. write down the incidents when they happen so you have proof.

3) Don’t give up.

In my case I was fighting an army and, unfortunately, due to lack of help and support, it affected my health and that’s when I walked away. I walked away knowing I did the best I could and decided it was time to make a fresh start. It wasn’t easy but with dedication and determination I got there in the end.”

— Bally

“I’ve been reading a book about Pagan gods - Slav Pagans - the stories are amazing you know. Women were respected and had power and the meaning behind it is just to be a decent human being and not be an asshole to one another. That’s all that the multi-god idea was about and Christianity just wiped it all out. I don’t know whether you know what’s happening in Poland? I was participating in the protests in Warsaw in the Summer and there was a huge issue about LGBTQ all of a sudden.

I want to go back; I want to continue to be a part of it, because it’s something I feel strongly about. It’s the perfect timing because there are so many people protesting for LGBTQIA+ rights right now out on the streets, and that continues now, during the lockdown. So people are really pissed off; there is a strong sense of common fight, so I may join a party!”

— Dorota
“As a big family, we would have just enough so, if someone came to the house, Mum would give them her meal. So having just enough, is enough. We don’t need all that ‘whatever’. I have a connection with Careshare Foods. He’s just dropped all these fruits and vegetables at my Mum’s house and the first thing we do, all the people in our area and along the street who we know, we will give food to them. Then, what’s left, I take to the food bank.

We always make sure that the people we know are all okay first. At the food bank, there’s a lot of people who would normally never come but they’ve lost their jobs. There was one guy a couple of months ago who had lost his job and his housing because he lived in a pub. And the look on this poor guy – he’s in a bit of a daze, like thinking what am I supposed to do? I more or less told him it was going to be okay and to hold on. He needs some kind of hope, for someone to say this black hole’s going to end soon.

And two other women were crying to me because their benefits have been changed. To change benefits at this stage means you don’t get any!

This woman rang up and said, Can you bring food for my 18-month old baby? Don’t worry about me, I’ll survive just as long as you give me food for the baby.

I replied, No no no, I’m sending food for you as well and she said, No it’s okay! As long as the baby stays alive with some food."

— Pauline
“A year ago, before Coronavirus, I was working with my MotherShip project and every week we met as a group of women from different countries, different cultures – Sudan, Somalia, Egypt. We chatted and sewed and I learned many things and I am so happy. So when lockdown came, we had Zoom every Monday with the same women.”
Every week we do different things and we meet new artists. I do embroidery, sewing, painting and with a lady named Madeline, we made cards. When we learn via Zoom, I feel safe and better because at the beginning I had no friends. Every week I was so excited and interested in doing new things.

Then I became angry, scared: you can’t go outside because there is no-one and everyone is scared of you if you cough or sneeze. At home, I’m safe, my kids are with me. My husband, he can go outside because he’s working in a factory, while me and my boys, we couldn’t go outside. So my project made me feel better when I was sometimes angry because I’m scared of Coronavirus.

In the news, every country – not just in the UK – in every country many people, they are dying, they are scared, feeling like me. But when I did the Zoom with my friends, I was comfortable. I was happy talking and chatting with people, Hi, how are you? I feel better and safe. Making friends, learning about new countries, new cultures, that makes me happy and comfortable.

Life is changing. Last week, I had Coronavirus and I needed to stay at home. Two weeks, we did not go outside at all. So I’m not just worried about me, it’s also other people. I want to save other people; I don’t want to spread the virus to other people; I’m scared for them. My husband was for two weeks at home before being able to go to the factory where he works. My husband felt better than me. I was very bad. The next day the ambulance came to my house, they gave me advice do that, do this because my chest was bad and I couldn’t breathe. So they came fast, very fast. And believe me, the NHS, they called us every day. Do you need anything? Do you need any help? They care about the people you know, the NHS.

When my friend brought me flour, I was so happy. My husband’s friend brought us – you know in Arabic we say naan, which means bread, but the circle one. They put it in front of the door and then went away very fast (laughs)! Our friends said you should have food. I had many oranges – my friends brought us so many. Sometimes they bring funny things like tissues and a big pan full of rice!”

— Sozan
“Four of our libraries are open and we do about 75% of our hours in the library and the rest working from home. But even working in the library isn’t the same; we’ve got a security guard on the door and the staff are in a different room.

It’s a shame because people just want to talk and tell you their experiences of living through Covid and that’s what we do – we’re a public service. Lots of people go to the library not for the books, just to say hello and tell you about their little grandson and what they did last night, because they’ve got nobody else that they see. Staff don’t have any training for things like that. But they see that person one day, and they say D’you want a cup of tea? You know, it’s just little things like that.

It’s not belittling people when they’ve got something that worries them. To them, the smallest of worries is such a big burden and to someone else it isn’t because it’s different personalities. And it’s, oh gosh, she’s always moaning… but it isn’t moaning to them, it’s something that’s really important. It’s being understanding of others isn’t it? If you try and understand other people, you can try and be a better person then, can’t you?
Make sure you have somebody you can rely on. Especially now, during the pandemic; you can be quite isolated, can’t you? Somebody checks up on you, or you check up on that person.”

— Jackie

A Survivor’s Guide To Covid-19

— Forage your house for a clear space to clutter with your happiness.
— Take shelter in your actions.
— Signal for help when you feel yourself tighten.
— Signal for help to someone who you trust and admire.
— Survival is like washing the dishes.
— Hunt down the anger you have ignored.
— Venture outdoors to practice absorbing energy.
— Improvise a life raft out of the air in your lungs.
— Survival is the art of imagining who you want to be.
— Resilience is a matter of negotiating the things.

“One thing I always wear is a gold toe ring my brother bought me when I was 16. I lost my brother sadly eight years ago. It's actually embedded into my toe because it's never been taken off. But sometimes after I've been swimming, I still check that it's there. It’s a toe ring, so it seems silly but it was something that was bought for me by him, so it’s a memory and a connection. It’s got footprints engraved on it, so it’s obviously come from footprints in the sand which, having lost my brother, means more than when he bought it me. Many years ago the footprints didn’t mean anything but now we’ve lost him, it means so much more. It makes my feet look pretty too!”

— Kelly

“The thing that’s made me feel safe is baking! I’ve been baking all the way through lockdown and I’ve been giving it away to a nursing home because I thought if my Grandma was here, at least she would have a nice piece of cake. I’ve got this nice white bowl that used to be my Mum’s, who’s got dementia now, so can’t do it. That’s probably another reason why I do baking and I try and do a lot of things that Mum would do, because she can’t.”

— Pauline
“Outside of work I normally do things like bootcamps and I go to the gym. With all good intentions! Part of the reason why I do the fitness is the friends that you make. In lockdown, I thought right, I’m going to do all these online things and, of course, you don’t!

And all the people who were going to do knitting and things like that, oh no I never did anything! My dogs love me and I spend a lot of time with them going for long walks. Normally you’re at work all day working full time, so you don’t always get that chance. I take myself off for a walk when I think I need some headspace. I just walk and walk and walk.”

— Jackie

“I absolutely don’t feel safe – no, safe is not the right word, it’s maybe ‘secure’. I don’t feel secure at the moment, unless... (laughs) this sounds really strange but unless I’ve got a spare bottle of milk in the house! And the reason is because I love a cup of tea and because I can’t get out myself. If I’ve started one bottle of milk I start to panic how I’m going to get the next.

There’s always an unopened one in the house so I know I can have a cup of tea. People who know me fairly well will also know I love a glass of wine. But my milk!”

— Sandra
“Back at home in Poland we have this little summer house with a bit of soil to play around with, so I’m already planning what I’m going to plant. I find it amazing! That’s the best, it’s my earth meditation. I just love it to bits. You can envision planting something within yourself and then nourishing it.

Planting that self-care, investing in yourself, working around your needs. I find therapy very helpful as well because it allows you to look from a distance, to step out from the situation and actually give yourself tips on how to feel better about yourself!

And this is where the strength comes from. Everything else will come as a result of that. Sense of humour – Jesus Christ, we need to laugh! Without laughter, you’re dead, basically. I’ve got a really strong, dark sense of humour. It’s a great tool to survive.”

— Dorota

Staying Safe Online

by Ela Stapley, Digital Safety Advisor + Founder of Siskin Labs

It’s never been easier to connect with others. The internet has opened up a world of possibilities allowing us to create new communities, connect with strangers and be in touch with family and friends. But this ease of communication also comes with risks. Information that you post online can be used against you. This could include someone stealing your identity; identifying and contacting members of your family; or finding out your location. There are, however, some simple things that you can do to protect you and yours. Below are seven tips to help you be safer online.
Keep Your Personal Data Private

Understanding what information is safe to post online and what information is best kept private is key to protecting your privacy. Online abusers and criminals are highly likely to look you up online and search through your social media accounts for your personal data. They will be looking for information that can be used to locate or contact you as well as data that can be used to verify your identity, such as a date of birth.

It’s a good idea to avoid posting information such as your home address, your phone number or documents that can be used to verify your identity, such as your driving licence. All this data, when collected together, can be used to create a profile of you and your movements.

Look Yourself Up Online

A good way to protect you and your family is to regularly look yourself up online. Search for your name on several search engines and make a note of what information comes up.

Different search engines produce different results so it is important that you don’t just stick to Google. Create a list of any information that you are unhappy having online and where it is located. Set calendar reminders to do this on a regular basis. How often you check your online profile will depend on your risk. People who are regularly targeted by online harassers might check their online information every week to see if anything new has been posted. Others might be happy to check their data every couple of months. It is a good idea to set Google and other alerts for your name as well as other information, such as your address. This will alert you every time this data is posted online.

Remove Information

Once you have located information that you want to take down you should take steps to remove it. If this data is located on your own social media feeds then you should delete the content. If information is stored on the social media of friends and family then you can ask them to remove it.
Data that is stored on third-party sites, such as public databases or websites owned by other people, can be more complicated to take down. You normally have to contact the owner and ask them to remove it and it is at their discretion whether they do so.

If you sign up to vote, ask your local council to make your address private instead of having it be available on a public-facing register.

If you are setting up a company you will need to register it at an address. This address, by law, has to be available to the public and will appear on Companies House, the UK Government registrar of companies.

If you own your own company, avoid putting your home address and instead ask your accountant if you can register your company at their address.

However you go about removing information, it’s important to know that nothing is ever truly deleted from the internet; a copy of the data is likely to exist either in the accounts of others or on internet archive sites such as the Wayback Machine.

Manage Your Online Photographs And Videos

It’s common to have photographs and videos online that we posted years ago and have forgotten about. These can give an intimate insight into someone’s life as they give away a lot of detail about daily routine, favourite locations and information about partners and children. Think carefully about the images you put online and the information you are sharing.

If you do post them on social media, you may want to limit who can see them by adjusting the settings. If you are happy for the photo to be public, ensure there is nothing in the background that can identify your home, workplace or school. Be careful posting pictures of pets online as they can contain a lot of information about the layout of homes and gardens and can give away details about regular places you visit, such as parks and cafés.
Manage Your Social Media Accounts

Think about why you are using your social media accounts. Is it to connect with family and friends? Are you using it to promote your work? If you don’t need your account to be public then it is a good idea to make it private. Adjust the privacy settings so you can control who can see the information in your feed. Try to avoid mixing work and personal information on your social media accounts. Separating out your data online makes it harder for online harassers and criminals to find out information about you.

Secure Your Accounts

People may try to hack your accounts to find out more information about you or to take over the account and control it. Ensure that your accounts are as secure as possible by turning on ‘two-step verification’. This is an extra layer of protection for your accounts found in the settings section, and involves being sent a code either by SMS or via an App to your phone.
It’s also important to use a long password for your accounts with a mix of numbers, lower and upper case letters and perhaps one special character. It should not contain any personal information that can be found online, such as your date of birth, and it should not be reused on more than one account. It’s hard to remember passwords so you can either write your passwords down in a secure place or use a password manager. However, don’t write your passwords down if you feel unsafe in your home or if you travel a lot, as this means somebody could gain access to them.

Speak With Family And Friends

Speaking with family and friends can be an important part of protecting your online information. Explain to them what type of information you are happy for them to post and what information you would prefer to keep private. It can be helpful to let them know why you are making those decisions, for example, telling them that you are concerned about people looking at pictures of your children.

Find Out More

The guides below will help you learn more about digital safety.

— net-aware.org.uk
— internetmatters.org
— nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety
— womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/onlinesafety
Physical Self-defence

by Ali Baskerville from ROAAAR and Fatima Ben from Blossoms Self-Defence

There will be times where we may need to use our bodies to protect and defend ourselves. Here at Blossoms we’ve created our own ‘street smart’ overview of tips and tricks to get you started and we encourage you to come to our sessions if you’re in the West Midlands. There are other local and national self-defence workshops that are women and LGBTQIA+ friendly. Do please reach out if you have a space where we can run a session for you or contact me at Blossoms Self Defence and I’ll be able to share more about this with you. My details can be found at the end of this manual.
We want you to keep smart on the streets, whilst having fun and being able to have the confidence to walk freely. Firstly we want to make it clear that it shouldn’t be the responsibility of individuals to keep themselves safe, it’s everybody’s responsibility to not harass or assault others! Despite this, we hope the following information can provide some tips to navigate this current world. We’ve developed a three-step system of physical moves that we hope are memorable and helpful. Before we get into anything physical, there’s a few things to think through beforehand.

Remember we’ve already talked about self-awareness and how we respond to fear. This awareness will help us to be kinder to ourselves as our body may not react in the way we hoped it would because a very powerful part of our mind is going to take over – the amygdala.

Before you leave the house / work / park, it’s good to have a check-in with yourself to see how you’re feeling. Make a little plan if you’re a little low in energy or mood. Maybe you need to take a few breaths and ground yourself; maybe you just need a nice snack or to get hydrated.

In this section, you will work towards getting into your mind and body and understanding what keeps you on course.

Much of the way we react to fear is instinctive and often intuitive and so we need some very simple strategies in place that are quick and easy to remember. The key to a lot of physical self-defence is to practice!
The Golden Circle

This is a good exercise to begin visualising what personal space means for you. Imagine what your golden circle of protection is. How far away is someone to you before you start to feel uncomfortable? Draw an imaginary circle around yourself and visualise it as a circle of golden light. We recommend an arm’s distance.

When Faced With Potential Danger In A Public Place

When we walk into / experience a fear-inducing situation our body can go into survival mode. It’s important to feel what your body is telling you. Connecting your body and mind helps you to get into your breath and get out of that ‘fight, flight, freeze, appease’ reaction, so that you can think about what to do next.

At this point you may be aware of an exit and an opportunity to make space, change direction or avoid. The key thing is that physical self-defence is the last, not the first, line of defence.

There’s no order to self-defence as situations vary but it’s important to have some tools to fall back on that are simple and easy to follow. The following pages aim to provide some of these tools.

Make sure you can practice these and remember to warm up beforehand; wear your everyday clothes.
Tips For Being Out And About

We can’t eliminate all the risks but we can have a few strategies in place to help ourselves. If you’re going to a new place then do some research. Google it, check public transport times and also whether taxis or buses operate 24/7 or what time the last service is.

Also, on a practical level, keep a charger cable or a battery pack in your bag. Always make sure your phone has a full charge before you leave home. Keep your essential belongings, such as bankcards, separate. You can tuck them into your underwear or use a bum bag (really handy when you’re out and about). This keeps them safe and allows you to get on public transport to get home.

Familiarise yourself with the range of motion allowed by your outfits. For example, heels, what damage can they do? A skirt may allow limited range for your legs but you know that your arms are free, etc. Dance around, swing your arms and notice how much you can move. Don’t dress for safety. Dress for your authentic self and use what you wear to support you but not diminish you.

Position

It’s amazing how a change in a position can affect your view. For example, when walking round corners, try not to stay close to the building, that extra space gives you a chance to see something as you turn the corner. If you’re in a crowd and you start to feel anxious or you feel uncomfortable then move to another spot. There are times where we feel obliged to stay put but you always have a choice to move. Reflect on what it was about that situation that made you move? Were you triggered or is it something that made you feel anxious and your instinct told you to move? Whatever it was, it’s ok. You are your own best thermometer when it comes to danger.

Being Approached

Most people have an agenda when they approach you - not all of it is bad! Try to keep calm and remain open minded until that gut instinct kicks in and tells you something is ‘off’.

If the person is overstepping a boundary, then try not to engage in too much conversation.
You can tell them *no* to their question in a firm but polite manner, whilst also looking for a way out. If they persist, continue to use closed, one word answers. They are trying to close the distance while talking to you and possibly thinking about their next move. Don’t let the story turn in their favour and if your fight or flight mode is activated and you feel in danger then look for busy, well lit places and ask for help. In the next few pages we’re going to talk about what to do physically if you need to.

**Trust Your Intuition**

Most people who experience forms of emotional and physical violence had a feeling that something bad was about to happen. If you feel something is wrong on a physical level and is an imminent danger don’t hesitate to either call a trusted friend or, if you feel safe to, call the police (you can use the 55 option when prompted to let the call centre person know you’re not able to speak). If possible, give your location but all the while be aware of your surroundings. If you have anything that can be used as a weapon, keep it to hand but hidden, only to be used as a surprise if they get too close.
How You Can Intervene Safely

Sometimes we want to help others and may not know how to. Remember that survival instinct can flood us and it’s often why people disassociate and are unable to react.

If you see someone else struggling with another person think about creating a distraction (but follow the advice listed below). A lot of active bystander interventions have changed the course of an incident. We all have some agency to change something.

— Assess for safety: if you see someone in trouble, ask yourself if you can help safely in any way. Remember, your personal safety is a priority – never put yourself at risk.

— Be in a group: it’s safer to call out behaviour or intervene if you are in a group. If this is not an option, report it to others who can act.

— Care for the victim: talk to the person who you think may need help. Ask them if they are OK.

The Four Ds

When it comes to intervening safely, remember the four Ds – direct, distract, delegate, delay.

Direct Action

Call out negative behaviour, tell the person to stop and ask the victim if they are OK. Do this as a group if you can. Be polite. Don’t aggravate the situation – remain calm and state why something has offended you. Stick to exactly what has happened, don’t exaggerate.
Distract

Interrupt, start a conversation with the perpetrator to allow their potential target to move away or have friends intervene (but remember your personal safety is the priority). Or come up with an idea to get the victim out of the situation – tell them they need to take a call, or you need to speak to them; any excuse to get them away to safety. Alternatively, try distracting, or redirecting the situation.

Delegate

If you are too embarrassed or shy to speak out, or you don’t feel safe to do so, alert someone else if you can and ask them for help.

Delay

If the situation is too dangerous to challenge then and there (such as if there is the threat of violence or you are outnumbered) walk away to a safe place. Report it when it’s safe to do so – it’s never too late to act.

Fighting Back

So what if you need to fight?

Preparation
Get into your defence position: imagine there’s a square on the floor. Put your stronger leg behind and the other leg will be diagonal to this. Back straight, hands down, but out in front of you to appease. See figure 1 overleaf. We call this a balanced stance. When you’re moving, try and stay in your defence position as much as possible.

Even before we start to use our bodies there is always a chance to appease and in the few seconds you have there may still be a chance to de-escalate or avoid.

A good way to remember what to do next can be broken down into the ‘three-step system’, which is:

1 — Distract
2 — Escape
3 — Finish off
Figure 1 — appeasement at a safe distance (two arms’ length) in a balanced stance.

Figure 2 — arms up to protect your face.

Keep looking for an escape and use what you can to create space. Either by moving back or throwing the thing that they want, if that’s their intention. The closer the person gets the more you lift your hands to protect yourself. If you have reached a point where the person is in your circle of protection, you need to react quickly!

Use your voice! Breath out and in and then shout loudly and roaaaaaaar! This will also help you to start breathing again and will often shock someone out of their intention.

After we’ve used our voice, we have options for strikes and to use our arms and hands to protect ourselves.
Figure 3 — stance and guard for strikes. As everything’s happening fast, you want to have a set stance for a strong guard*

*We use the term ‘guard’ to describe an action to protect your face and head from strikes or objects. You can use your arms to protect your face and head, often referred to as ‘keeping your guard up’.

Figure 4 — this illustration shows what parts of your own body you want to protect, as well as aim for! with your strikes.

**Strikes**

We can use any of the strikes outlined below to distract, to help us escape, and to finish off if we have the chance to. The aim is to use a strike to distract and escape BUT you may need a few moves. What you use depends on the situation you are in and what you feel most able to do.

**Making A Fist**

To make a proper fist curl your fingers into your palm then lock your thumb over the first two fingers. Drop your wrist slightly to align it with your forearm so you don’t injure your wrist when you punch. The two knuckles on your middle and index fingers are your impacting tools. See Figure 5 overleaf to help you practice.
Figure 6 — this is a long range strike using the fist. The fist covers less surface area and not everyone knows how to punch, but it might be all you have time to do in the moment.

Slaps

Figure 7 — Palm heel strike. Here you are targeting the sides of the head. Execute without opening up guard and deliver with power through twisting / pivoting the foot on the same side as the hand you’re using.

From your guard position twist your body to ‘wind up’ then release your hand forward and back round, building momentum with the twist. Allow your palm to hit on its natural angle. Anywhere on the face area is OK.

When you’re practicing the palm heel strike, let your hands fit the target naturally.
Hammerfist Strike

Figure 8 — a diagonal strike on target with the side of your fist is a safer way to use your fists. Always use your back foot to twist round for power (this allows the use of the whole body).

Headguard

Figure 9 — if the opponent gets too close and attempts to deliver blows to the head, get your hand round like you’re combing through your hair for ultimate defence. This is a great set up for an elbow or hammerfist strike.

Elbow Strike Down

Figure 10 — this can follow from a head guard. The aim is to strike with the elbow hard down to the nose. Notice the other hand can either be in closed guard or open guard (maintaining space between you and the target).

Side Elbow Strike

Figure 11 — cutting across the face leads on to a backfist if distance allows (you can create distance by shuffling back). Twisting from the ball of your foot as always for power. Keep the elbow tight for stability of the strike.
Backfist

Figure 12 — like the name indicates, a strike with the back of the first. Make sure you twist into it with the same leg as the hand you are striking with. It will give you momentum and power using the full weight of your body.

Long Range Strike
To Eye Gouge

Figure 13 + 14 — striking with heel of hand to centre of face and holding onto face with fingers pressing them into the opponent’s eyes. Allow the hand to strike in its natural curve (don’t force it straight or your wrists could get injured).
Simple Eye Gouge

Figure 15 — hands on the side of the head, pressing thumbs into eyes for distraction.

Figure 16 — position for both simple eye gouge and knee thrust. Creates a bubble of protection for your face. Ensure your grip is inside theirs as it assumes control of the situation.

Knee Thrust

Figure 17 — pull target down whilst thrusting hip forward and raising knee aiming to get their head to your knee.

Push knee upwards and create a point by pulling heel of kneeling foot towards back of the leg. Next grab the back of their head and pull them in the direction of your knee, while pulling your elbows back towards your ribcage as the closer your arms are to your body, the stronger you are.
Stamps

Figure 18 — ideally executed to a dangerous / soft part with support (against a wall or holding onto the person). Flex your toes and strike with the heel.

Remember

All martial arts are the same in that they don’t prepare you for the street but they do help build confidence and strength. You might want to join a self-defence school and do invest time in your physical and emotional well-being. Repetition for muscle memory is key. You need to practice these moves and they will give you a good foundation.

Consent

When we talk about consent, we’re not just talking about sexual consent. Consent is about giving your permission for something to happen and, in the case of interactions between people, whether you agree or not for people to come into your personal space. It can also be about the way someone speaks to you or the things that they ask of you. So consent has to work in line with your own personal boundaries because everyone has different levels of how much personal space they need.
Consent is absolutely non-negotiable when it comes to any kind of physical intimacy. Whether it’s someone reaching to hold your hand, someone putting their arm around you, or whether someone touches a part of your body that you’re not comfortable with.

If anyone touches you physically and you haven’t agreed to it, or you haven’t discussed it, this is a breach of consent. You have the right to say no to something that is happening to you. Even if you gave consent initially, you have the right to change your mind at any point, no matter what the situation is.

If you’re in a position of witnessing consent being broken down for someone else, then you could help them to enforce their boundaries as an ally by calling it out, so long as you do not put yourself in danger.

**Autonomy + Desire**

“This year was the year that I did the best thing I’ve ever done for myself, so far, about my anxiety about being intimate with men in a sexual way. I had massive hang-ups and I got it in my head that it wasn’t something that was ever going to happen for me because I had such major trust issues.

So, basically, this year I orchestrated an experience where I was in control. I paid an escort and I spent the night with them. It’s been a massive game changer because I finally had the experience that I felt I should have had the first time round – I felt in control and I felt seen and listened to and I had autonomy and my desire meant something.

The big thing for me, and I think for women out there, is I always knew deep down that it doesn’t matter how much tantric dancing and meditation and getting in tune with my body I did, I was always going to be in this distorted thinking and closed down, *leave me alone* mind-set ‘till I could give myself the experience I should have had. It didn’t occur to me for a long time that I could actually make that happen.
I was worried that I’d open the door and he’d be there and he’d be a dick. He’d be like, Hey baby, I’m here to fix all your sexual hang-ups with my massive dong. Y’know, I thought, What if he’s that guy? but he was totally the opposite. We were quite similar in temperament. I’ve seen him again. After this experience I thought, Oh brilliant, now that I’ve fixed sex I’ll go out and do it with everyone, everywhere, and then I thought, Actually… I need more of this with you. It’s like I’ve only just scratched the surface.

What was really wonderful is that I found myself realising that I’ve unlocked this person that I knew I’d been all along. I met my sexual self for the first time and it’s like, Ooh hello! Hello, sassy sexy Lorna!, this big aspect of my personality that I’d just repressed and repressed and repressed. I don’t think I could have done this with the escort until I’d done a lot of work on myself.

Do as much work on yourself as possible, until you feel that you have power and you’re in touch with your sexuality and your body first.

And then it’s about how you want to bring someone else into that on your terms. It’s being very honest with yourself; it has to start with you, rather than thinking you’ve got to go and find someone to fix it for you.

For a whole week afterwards, I was walking around in my body feeling like, What’s this? Why am I feeling all floppy, why do I feel stoned? My body had released a good 20 years’ worth of sexual tension and numbness and pain. You don’t realise how much you carry in your body; it starts to become a subconscious thing, where your body is being affected in ways you don’t even understand. So I finally felt this lovely connection with my body.

My school sex education was completely inadequate because what they don’t talk about, along with other things such as pleasure and sexual autonomy, is they don’t tell you what happens when things go wrong. I didn’t realise that what I had was a validated, medical, psychosomatic condition.

Until a few years back, I had vaginismus where your muscles contract in response to any kind of penetration. It’s literally like, nothing’s going up there because there’s nowhere for it to go, because somewhere along the line your brain and your body decided, no! in reaction to something.
And there was no mention of these sorts of things going wrong in sex education. They spoke about how sex works mechanically but they never said, *If ‘this’ happens, that’s not because you’re a freak or whatever.*

The whole vaginismus thing, and how I felt that I’m not a sexually alluring person, people don’t fancy me so therefore I’ll just not bother, that whole mindset came from a really negative experience from the first time I had sex. He made me feel like I was just a hole really, I was just functional. I didn’t even have the language to articulate what I was feeling.

I was feeling used but I was letting it happen because there’s this social conditioning to just get it over with, it doesn’t matter that he doesn’t want to kiss you, or he doesn’t fancy you; it doesn’t matter – just get it over with. And there we go, at least we’ve done it.

Whereas at the time, my system was going *make it stop, you don’t like this.* And that’s the big thing with sex education; the patriarchy doesn’t give you the language to articulate what you’re feeling.

If you can’t be honest, if you don’t have the language to communicate this sense of, *I know I said ‘yes’ but for whatever reason I now don’t want to continue, I need you to stop,* if you’re conditioned to think that virginity is something you just need to get over with, just let happen and that it’s all about the guy’s pleasure. That does so many fucked up things to so many parts of you.

Ask yourself how you feel first? Particularly as a woman getting confronted by a man in a situation where you feel unsafe. You can think, *It’s my fault, I have to appease or navigate.* And I think in a lot of instances that is the best tactic to take, to appease rather than aggression. Caitlin Moran said the best way for young women to get into their bodies is to learn to kill a man with their bare hands! Which is great advice (laughs). But yeah, if you don’t feel that you can do that (laughs again) and you do go with appeasing, it’s your survival instinct, it’s you putting your safety first. Whatever your response is, don’t pick it apart afterwards thinking, *I should’ve done this and I should’ve done that.* You did whatever you felt like you had to do, whatever your instinct told you to do to get out of that situation safely.
One of the reasons I’ve been so open about this, and want to write a theatre show about it somewhere down the line, is that it was such an amazing experience, and it kind of fixed sex for me.

I want to help normalise that experience for women like me. I know we’re out there but the thing is we don’t talk to each other because we’re ashamed, so we can’t find each other. So I want to say, come find me! I did this and it was good for me, it could be good for you too.”

— Lorna
While safety is undoubtedly circumstantial, it can also be a state of mind, or a feeling. There are material objects that can be associated with this feeling of safety that provide protection or remind us of good memories and the people we care about. Here we refer to these as ‘objects of safety’ and you can read about people’s objects below. They can vary from a very practical object to a sentimental one but all have a way of grounding us.
Firstly, there are some objects that are specifically designed for personal safety that would be useful for you to know about.

— An alarmed doorstop – these are great for putting on the inside of a door as they set up a loud alarm if someone tries to push it open.

— Wear large rings. It’s important to have defensive objects that are part of your daily routine. Items which are specifically made for self-defence are often helpful but if you’ve put one in your bag, left it in the car, bike bag or at home it’s of no use. Rings are something we often wear so having a chunky one can be helpful if you need to fight your way out of a situation.

— There are gel sprays you can use that will leave a stain on a perpetrator for up to 24 hours which are easily available online. But, as we’ve already mentioned, you need to have it with you all the time whilst out. An alternative is to carry a small can of hair spray (which you may have anyway). Remember, you just need to create a distraction whilst you make an escape.

“’My object of safety is a little gadget: bone conduction headphones that I can listen through and take a call, and still hear the traffic because I’m hearing through my cheekbones, not through my ears. To me they’re a bit of a lifesaver. I know that no one’s going to have access to my phone because it’s packed away and I feel safe with them on, as I can still hear the traffic or people coming towards me. Also, there’s a button on the headphones so if I fall or anything, I can press the button three times and it goes to last number redial. So I always make sure it’s my daughter’s or my chap’s phone number on there, so they can get me help if I need it.”

— Trish
“Jangles my guide dog makes me feel safe because I feel like I can get from A to B with her, relatively safely. A lot safer than I would with a cane. I also feel safe with her because I feel like if I get lost, I can talk to her without people thinking, *what’s that woman doing walking along the street talking to herself?* Also I feel that it gives me an element of safety in that maybe people would be less inclined to accost me. Well – they do in a way because if they’re kind and nice, they always want to stroke the dog, but anybody who’s got nasty thoughts in mind might be a bit worried that she’d turn on them – though I doubt she would! But it’s the reassurance really of having another living thing with me. And at home too, especially now in isolation. She’ll be ten on the 1st of January, and I’ve had her since she was 18 months old. So eight and a half years together, pretty much.”

— Sandra

“My scarf is my safety object. Wherever I go I take my scarf with me. If I am cold I get warm with it. When I am praying, I use it as prayer mat. It makes me feel peaceful.”

— Fatima
“My Dad’s jumper, it keeps me warm and even though he’s not here it smells like him.”

— Leonie

“I rarely feel completely safe when I’m out of the house. I always have to have my handbag with me, and I always have to have it on my knee. I know somebody could pinch it but somehow I’d feel lost if I haven’t got it. If we’re out in the street or something, being in my wheelchair, I feel very, very vulnerable, because the traffic always sounds so close. If it’s quite busy, I don’t know how much space is around me. Steve, my husband, or whoever I’m with will be behind me pushing me, but somehow I still feel vulnerable.

Sitting in my chair where I am now, I feel safe. I always sit in my chair here, because it’s more or less just inside the door from the hall, and it’s by the telephone, and that’s something else you see.
If Stephen’s not in the same room as the telephone he doesn’t hear the phone ring. So if I’m near I answer it. It’s my space. Once I’m sitting in my chair, I think right that’s it, whatever needed doing, I can forget about it, I’m just comfortable then."

“This is my OM necklace that my sister gave me, and it’s got one of my favourite kind of stones, a moonstone. When the light hits it in a certain way, it makes a kind of rainbow effect. I used to wear it all the time but I’ve noticed that it’s starting to get a bit tarnished cause it’s only sterling silver. So I don’t wear it all the time now, just at strategic times when I need it. It taps in for me that whole kind of spiritual aspect. This might sound a bit hippy but I have moments where if I feel sort of anxious or overwhelmed, I touch it and have my little it’s okay, be in the now moment. I do feel like something shifts."

— Lorna

“My house is safe and warm. I made a model of it out of wood and glue.”

— Assma
“The cane itself, it’s the most important thing. Some people have guide dogs but, for me the cane is an asset. Not only is it there for me to make sure that I can feel the edge of the pavements and get to grips with the width of the road, the changes in terrain, anything that you might be approaching, e.g. if there’s a bin in the way, but also people know to give you room. It’s quite important for them to see me, for their safety as well as mine, so the cane is quite a statement really and, because it’s pink, it stands out even more! ”

— Perm

“My car. It gives me my independence. Thinking of it now, during Coronavirus, it’s even more so. Gradually, our libraries have been reopened. Some staff are going into closed libraries to get them ready, but we’ve still got a lot of staff that are too nervy to go anywhere other than where they can walk. They don’t want to catch a bus – and I understand that. But for me, I can just get in my car, and I can work anywhere. And if that protects someone else because it means they can work closer to where they live and I can work bit further away, then I feel like I’m doing my bit for them as well, to keep them a bit safer.”

— Jackie
Resources

There are a number of Sandwell organisations who can provide help and advice.

Brushstrokes

Brushstrokes supports refugees and migrants across Sandwell, West Birmingham and beyond, helping them to rebuild their lives and settle into new homes, education and work.

brushstrokessandwell.org.uk

MotherShip

A community arts organisation based in Smethwick that works with women, particularly mothers and those that are newly arrived, to tackle isolation and build relationships through creative projects. Their projects build a sense of community for participants who may feel isolated owing to cultural and language barriers and may be restricted in what they are able to engage with owing to their parenting commitments. The projects look to build lasting links between participants and the local community, increase confidence and enable greater access to existing family provision.

www.mothershipprojects.org.uk
info@mothershipprojects.org.uk
Sandwell Libraries

Libraries provide access to services and resources in your local area and will have free access to computers, and some of them have children’s activities. They also provide a safe space to sit.

www.sandwell.gov.uk/libraries

Sandwell Asian Mental Health Group

Where men and women come together and talk about mental health and wellbeing issues. The overall aim is to connect, support and signpost.

samhg171@gmail.com

LGBT in Sandwell

Twitter handle: @sandwelllgbt

Other Organisations

Black Country Women’s Aid

Formerly known as Sandwell Women’s Aid, an independent charity which has supported survivors of abuse and exploitation in the West Midlands for 30 years.

www.blackcountrywomensaid.co.uk

Blossoms Self-Defence

Self-defence for women.

facebook.com/BlossomsSelfdefence
b.selfdefence@gmail.com

Chayn

Support for victims of domestic violence, with online chat.

www.chayn.co
If you need to secure your devices or clear your browsing history after accessing support, take a look at Chayn’s DIY online safety guide.

[link to Chayn's DIY online safety guide]

Join Chayn’s online chat telegram channel:
[link to Chayn's online chat]

Hope Projects

Offer comprehensive support to newly arrived individuals.

[link to Hope Projects website]
[contact information]

Kings Heath Action for Refugees

The sister group of Bearwood Action for Refugees. They run monthly Welcome Walks for newly arrived families and individuals in Initial Accommodation Centres.

[link to Kings Heath Action for Refugees website]
[contact information]

LGBT Sparkle Wolverhampton

A local group offering a safe place for friendship, laughter and encouragement from the comfort of your own home.

[link to LGBT Sparkle Wolverhampton]

LGBT Black Country facebook group
[link to LGBT Black Country facebook group]

National Domestic Abuse Helpline
0808 2000 247

[link to National Domestic Abuse Helpline]

Refuge National Helpline contact form:
[link to Refuge National Helpline contact form]

Safe Lives

Shared resources to help support anyone living with domestic abuse.

St Chad’s Sanctuary

Offering help and support to newly arrived individuals in Birmingham.

www.stchadssanctuary.com
info@stchadssanctuary.com
0121 233 3127

Women’s Aid Online Chat Service

Open 10am - 12pm, Monday – Friday.

chat.womensaid.org.uk

X2Y LGBT Youth Group

A LGBTQAI+ group based in Wolverhampton with two groups, one for individuals aged 11 to 17 and the other for 18 to 25 year olds. The 11 to 17 group meets every Saturday and the 18+ group meets once a week too.

facebook.com/x2ylgbt
info@x2y.org.uk
07847 421795
Credits

Thanks To Our Fantastic Collaborators

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**ROAAAR** is a personal safety training initiative that gives basic and easy to use tools to help you feel safe. Founder, Ali Baskerville, set up ROAAAR to provide basic personal safety sessions to women, girls and non-binary people. They develop and deliver personal safety workshops to communities across the UK.

roaaar.co.uk  
info@roaaar.co.uk  
Social media: @__roaaar

**Multistory** is a community arts organisation. We have been based in West Bromwich in the borough of Sandwell for 15 years and the people and place shape our work. We build meaningful connections between local communities and artists to produce creative projects that tell stories of everyday life. We believe in the power of art to reflect the times we live in and tell stories to bring people together. Our programme of participatory arts projects, artist commissions, workshops, talks and events takes place in libraries, community centres and indoor and outdoor public spaces. The stories told through our projects have a local resonance but are also seen by audiences far beyond.

multistory.org.uk  
info@multistory.org.uk  
Social media: @multistory
**By Us, For You** is a feminist survival guide created by women*, girls and non-binary people from Sandwell in The Black Country, UK.

It contains their contributions and stories about what it means to be safe and an instructional guide to essential self-defence moves.

It is informed by a creative programme delivered during 2020 and 2021 by ROAAAR, a personal safety initiative that focuses on nurturing emotional and physical resilience, and Multistory, a community arts organisation.

*This term is inclusive of all who identify as women, including trans, cis and femme.*