

Strategies for Dating Safely

At some time, most of us have experienced that initial bliss we feel when we have hit it off with someone new. With the exchange of glances, the racing heart and the hope that maybe this is "the one," we can easily lose ourselves in a whirlwind romance.

While listening to our hearts and ignoring our heads, sometimes we give people our trust long before they have earned it. By overlooking little things or ignoring small warning signs, dangerous situations can arise, such as a sexual assault or an ongoing, emotionally abusive, unhealthy relationship.

Trust Your Instinct

Many people who have survived attacks by someone they knew reported similar warning signals that they unfortunately ignored. Most reported feeling that something was wrong, but let it go because they could not quite put their finger on it. Attackers typically plan how their attacks will take place, so their efforts to act normal may not raise any suspicions.

If you are on a date and you have a bad feeling, even if you are not sure why you should act on your instinct. Get or stay in a public place where people are around; then find a safe way home, ideally with trusted friends. If you are already alone and begin to feel uncomfortable, do whatever you need to get where there are other people; insist on stopping for a quick bite to eat, or pretend you suddenly remember you are supposed to meet friends who will look for you if you do not show up. If necessary, assert yourself quickly and firmly to avoid potential danger.

Preventive Strategies

It is much better to have someone earn your trust over time while keeping your own safety a priority. Follow these steps for safe dating:

- Never get in a car with someone you do not know; instead, meet your dates in public places until you get to know them much better.
- Never let first-time dates know where you live. If they have your address, the potential for stalking is much higher.
- There is safety in numbers: until you know someone well, try to go out with friends.
- Stay away from secluded beaches and other private date spots until you know someone very well.
- Make sure at least one other person knows who you are with, where you are going and when you expect to return.
- Never take a drink that was out of your possession or sight, even for a moment. This decreases your chances of being victimized by a date-rape drug such as Rohypnol or GHB.
- Always trust your gut feeling: if things do not feel right, they probably are not.

Abusive Dating Relationships: When "The Right One" Is Not Right

Some of us want to be in relationships so badly or are tired of meeting a string of losers in the dating scene that we may be willing to overlook some red flags just for the sake of having romantic companionship. It is more important to feel good about yourself and to set boundaries the minute you feel uncomfortable with any behaviors from your partner. Realizing and accepting that you are better off on your own than in an abusive relationship can prevent any eventual physical or emotional abuse.

It is common for abusive partners to start out on extremely good behavior in an attempt to win you over. As your partner earns your trust, you may start to notice behaviors that you want to overlook for the sake of the relationship. Do not do this: they may indicate you are at risk for being in an abusive relationship. Be concerned if the person you are dating displays the following traits:

- They become easily jealous and possessive of you, will not let you have your own friends, check up on you or will not accept your desire to break up with them
- They try to control you by giving you orders, making decisions for you or not taking your opinions seriously
- There are threats or you are bullied into doing what he or she wants
- They have a history of violence or lose his or her temper quickly
- He or she abuses drugs or alcohol and pressures you to do the same
- He or she blames you for the mistreatment they give you, saying you deserved it or that you made them do it
- He or she is not accepted by your friends or family because they are worried about your well-being in the relationship

Finding Your Way Out of an Abusive Relationship

Once you recognize you are in an abusive relationship and have made up your mind to leave, you can take several steps to follow through and stay strong. It is very common to fall into a pattern of leaving and returning. You may miss the "good" times with that person, believing them when they say the abuse will never happen again, yet the cycle of abuse continues. Follow these steps to move on from an abusive relationship safely:

- Consider telling your friends and family about what is happening. They can help you by supporting your decision and looking out for your safety.
- If you decide to break up in person, rather than over the phone or by e-mail, do so in a very public place. Consider having a friend close by waiting for you and observing your actions;
- Try not to spend too much time alone. Instead, plan evenings with friends and family to keep your mind off of the situation and to encourage your safety through numbers.
- Change your routine: do not go the same way to work, stop at the same place for coffee or return home at the same time each day.
- Do not take calls from your former partner. Do not risk being talked back into giving them "just one more chance." You will feel stronger and healthier the longer you are away from the person.
- Make a list of the negative behaviors that you want to be eliminated from your life. If you are tempted to call or accept a call, review your list. Stay strong: an abusive relationship easily can escalate to physical harm if it has not already.

Healthy Dating

Dating can be fun whether you hope to meet many people to share a variety of interests or are hoping to find a life partner. Following dating strategies and setting boundaries for acceptable behaviors will help keep you safe during the dating process. Do not give out your trust too easily. Take your time to get to know someone new. Make the person earn your trust, and see if, over time, the person deserves your emotional investment.

Resources

- The National Women's Health Information Center, part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services: www.womenshealth.gov
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: <http://thehotline.org>
- Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN): www.rainn.org

Here when you need us.

Call: 855-511-9855

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: HN8876C

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