

Safe Dating Tips:

A guide for trans, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary people

Considering the large number of people who have met online for sex and dating, the occurrence of violence is relatively low. But there are some people who cruise with intention to harm. If you are targeted by one of these people, it is important to know it is NOT YOUR FAULT. Nobody has the right to violate your boundaries or commit violence against you. The following tips may help you identify when someone you are meeting has negative intentions.

Trust your gut:

When meeting up with someone new, if you get a feeling that something isn't right, trust your instinct and exit the situation. If you are afraid of offending the person, you can do so politely.

But what if I am overreacting? Sometimes I feel uncomfortable but can't actually name a reason.

Trust your gut! It has gotten you this far. Sometimes, we get a feeling of discomfort or fear based on cues that we can't identify at that time. Our survival instincts sense danger faster than our logical mind. You may not be able to identify what made you nervous until later.

Get a face pic and phone number before meeting them:

A picture is better than simply a physical description. If they send you a picture, but the person who shows up looks nothing like it, that is a sign that you should probably exit the situation. If the person knows you have their photo in your email inbox, it could make them wary of doing something to harm you. A phone number allows you to talk beforehand (more on this below) and is another piece of information you can leave around or give to a friend.

If/When you decide to meet someone in person, meet in public:

If you are only conversing online, you may not have enough information to assess someone's intentions. If you agree to meet up with only one person, but multiple people show up, do not leave with them. If you meet up and the person doesn't look like the picture, ask them about it. If they don't have a satisfactory answer, exit.

- Meeting up in a well-lit place is best -- a café or restaurant with other people around.
- If you would rather meet at a bar or a club, remember to get your own drinks. If you drink at all, drink in moderation. Intoxication may be seen as a vulnerability and may impair your ability to think logically.
- If someone insists on getting your drink for you, tell them no. If they still don't respect that, please do not accept their drink and consider ending your time with the person.
- Another advantage of meeting in public is that you can bring friends with you. They can watch your back and they can let you know their impressions of your date.
- If you decide to leave with the person, get the address of where you'll be and their phone number. Introduce them to the bartender, friends, or acquaintances before leaving. Let them know you gave info to your friends so they know where you are for safety.

But why meet in public if we are meeting up for sex only?

To be safe, meet in public close to your destination, and spend a few minutes talking about what you want to do (and what you don't want to do) sexually. This gives you some time to get a sense of this person with others around.

Meeting in private:

I really don't want to meet in public. Is it safer for me to host or for them to host?

There are safety advantages and disadvantages to both.

If you host:

- Leave all valuables out of sight, locked away, or with a trusted friend.
- Keep items that could be weapons out of sight (scissors, knives, bats, etc).
- Stay awake the entire time the person is there - no sleepovers the first time. Items can disappear while you are asleep and your safety could be in jeopardy.
- Generally speaking, it is better not to host if you don't live in a secure building. Remember, after one visit, the person knows where you live.
- Keep your cell phone charged and close to you at all times*. If someone refuses to leave when you ask them, some options include using command type language (i.e. "Get out of my house now"), calling police, calling a friend, or activating your silent alarm (more below). Do what makes the most sense to you.

***The police or your friend(s) can't be there immediately after you call.** This is a good safety measure to employ, but don't count on it being your only one.

If they host:

- PLEASE tell at least one person the exact address where you will be and for how long.
- Set up a silent alarm (more on this below).
- Bring your phone and keep it charged.
- Do not accept drinks, even water, at the person's home unless you observe the drink being poured. Date rape drugs have no odor or flavor even in water.
- If somebody else is at the home when you get there, exit. Most people hosting a guest will ask roommates to clear out.
- If at any point you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, leave immediately. **You don't have to give an explanation.** If someone prevents you from leaving, firmly re-state your intention to leave. More under the "Use your Voice" section below.

Isn't it rude to leave? What if we haven't 'finished?' Shouldn't I finish what I started?

No. You have the right to change your mind and cease sexual activity at any stage. Your emotional and physical safety comes first. **Consenting does not take away your right to stop.** If someone doesn't respect a boundary you set, no matter how small, this is a sign that they may not respect other boundaries as well. You deserve to be respected at all times. Leave if they do something you ask them not to. You will find other sexual partners.

Asserting Your Boundaries:

Use your voice:

Will someone really stop if I tell them to? What if I just make them angry?

One should always take verbal threats seriously, but know that verbal self-defense is a great first line of defense. Resistance breaks the assailant's script and places doubt in their mind about their ability to commit the crime. Note: there is a difference between being aggressive and assertive. Being aggressive is often perceived as confrontational and threatening. To de-escalate a situation, it is important to criticize the behavior, not the person. **We can exercise our rights without denying the rights of others by choosing to be assertive.** Below are steps to assertive communication:

- Maintain confident body language- Stand/sit tall, keep your head up, shoulders back.
- Make eye contact.
- Respond firmly and quickly.
- Speak in a steady, calm voice.
- Use clear, command-type language, and use "I-statements" (i.e. "I feel uncomfortable when you talk to me that way and I want you to stop").
- Be specific as to what behavior it is you want stopped.
- Send a clear and consistent message with your words, voice, eyes, and body language.

More verbal techniques:

Name the Behavior that the person has just done or said that has made you feel uncomfortable (i.e. "Stop touching me after I've asked you to stop.").

Broken Record Technique involves repeating your command. This is especially useful when someone appears intoxicated or is indecisive on what to do next. (i.e. "Leave my apartment now. Leave my apartment now!")

Make a Scene and Enlist the Help of Others strips the person of the power of secrecy and sends the message that you are not ashamed to call attention to the situation in public. It also lets others around you know what is happening. To enlist the help of others be directive (i.e. pick a person out of the crowd and address them directly with commands such as "Call 911!")

Reasoning or Negotiation will distract an assailant. They are expecting things to go a certain way, and you responding differently throws them off. Negotiation may include asking the assailant to use a condom, put a weapon down, or to move to a different location. THIS IS NOT THE SAME AS GIVING CONSENT! You may decide at any point to resist, escape or comply. All are options for survival.

Making Yourself Human/Distraction violates the assailant's expectation you will be fearful and silent. When you are active, you become real and not necessarily what they expect. It is more difficult to hurt someone who is seen as a human being rather than an object.

Use your technology:

What is a Silent Alarm?

There are numerous ways to use your cell phone as a safety tool. Arrange a silent alarm with a friend. Beforehand, tell your friend the address of where you will be and make three agreements:

1. A codeword -- NOT "all is well," "I'm fine," etc. -- that tells the friend that all is well and the alarm is disarmed. The codeword could be a color or a flavor of ice cream or a fruit, for example.
2. What the friend should do if you do NOT call or text by the specified time (for example, call you).
3. What the friend should do if you contact them but do not use the code word (for example, call the police).

I really don't want to tell my friends that I am cruising online. I am embarrassed about it. Plus, I don't know if any of them would even do this for me.

TONS of people meet online. It is nothing to be embarrassed about. But even if it's not possible to confide in someone, it is possible to set up the alarm without telling them exactly why. If you really do not want anyone to know, or you don't feel like you have time to set one up, leave the picture of the person you are meeting open on the desktop of your computer and leave your computer on, with the person's name, e-mail address or chat name, phone number, and address of where you'll be written down nearby and easily visible. You can also use a commercial app available at <http://www.safecallapp.com/> that will contact someone only if you do not check in with the system.

A few other reminders:

- Set up an anonymous e-mail account if you plan to communicate outside of a dating site.
- Do not publish your address, phone number, or e-mail address in personal ads.
- Ask lots of questions when chatting, but don't necessarily take every answer at face value. Remember online, you cannot read nonverbal, body language cues.
- If someone is abusive to you online, block them right away.
- If you decide to meet in person, do not rely upon your date for transportation and do not provide transportation for them.

Should I tell my date I'm transgender? And if so, when?

There is no absolute right or wrong answer to these questions. Such a decision is very personal. Above all else, remember it is your right to choose if or when to discuss your gender identity, your genitals, or any other part of your body. If someone insults or attacks you because of their expectations about your body, that is NEVER YOUR FAULT.

Do I have to disclose the fact that I am trans to my partner?

No. Plenty of non-trans people do not have discussions about their gender or their bodies prior to having sex. However, while you do not owe it to anybody to talk about your genitals prior to a sexual encounter, it may be safer to do so. It may also be less awkward or uncomfortable in general. You may want to have a conversation beforehand about the type of sex you would like to have, and this may be a good time to talk about your body. If this is simply not your style or not an option, that is okay.

In terms of safety, there are advantages and disadvantages to disclosing in various situations. Your decision may be different depending on the person you are talking with and how sensitive or aware they seem.

Disclosing in a personal ad:

The advantage of this is that you have a better shot at weeding out people who are unfamiliar with trans people, which may mean not having to endure as many annoying questions on a date. Another distinct advantage is attracting people who are specifically attracted to your gender identity and/or your body type. Disadvantages? You may also attract people who eroticize trans people in a non-respectful way. If you feel any discomfort from the language someone uses with you in an e-mail, feel free to tell them so and/or ignore or block them.

Disclosing in an e-mail or chat:

If you are responding to another person's ad, disclosing at some point during the chat or e-mail exchange is an option. Again, you have the advantage of getting the conversation at least started before you meet in person and if there is a negative reaction, you don't have to deal with it face-to-face. A possible disadvantage could be that if someone responds negatively, they could potentially forward your e-mail or publicly 'out' you online or otherwise invade your privacy. This is why it is good to create an anonymous or secondary e-mail account for dating sites.

Disclosing over the phone:

Privacy violations or public outing are probably less likely to happen this way if someone responds negatively. Also, being able to hear someone's tone of voice and gauge their language use in real time can be helpful. E-mail and chatting can easily be 'rehearsed' and can be less authentic. A phone conversation can give you a more realistic impression of how sensitive or knowledgeable someone is about trans people.

Disclosing when cruising in person:

Some trans people, when meeting potential dates or sex partners in person, choose to disclose information about trans identity/history and/or body before a sexual encounter. Unlike an online conversation, you will be able to read body language and other nonverbal cues. Often times, discussions about trans identity can be accompanied by discussions of what the two of you do and do not want to happen, as well as discussions about sexual safety.

Disclosing on a date:

A date can be an ideal time to talk about gender identity/history, since general discussions about your lives, background, family, etc. will likely be happening. If someone responds in a way that makes you uncomfortable, you will be in public. Again, it can be brought up in the context of a safer sex discussion, or in the context of your past.

Disclosing during a sexual encounter:

Some people choose to have gender identity, genitalia-related, and/or safer sex discussions at this point. It may feel like having the discussion prior would be assuming too much or that the opportunity just wasn't there. Waiting until this point does in fact allow you to be certain that a sexual encounter is desired. One potential disadvantage however is that you may no longer be in public at this point if the person responds in a threatening manner. Also, sexual conversations can actually sometimes be *less* awkward when they are brought up in a non-sexual setting, like a public place. Sometimes it can actually be harder to talk about personal, sexual topics after sexual activity has already begun.

These are safety tools that have been useful for some people in some situations. You are never responsible for the actions of someone else, so you are not to blame if following some or none or all of these tips doesn't prevent an attack.

*Tips like these can sometimes feel silly or paranoid, but they can often be helpful when meeting strangers. **Use the ones that fit best for you. Follow your instincts, and remember that you do not deserve to be mistreated.***