

Corporate Health & Safety Procedure

Personal Safety Guide 1
An Introduction to Personal Safety

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1. What is Personal Safety?

In July 1986 a young woman named Suzy Lamplugh went missing. Suzy worked for a firm of estate agents on commission and was good at her job. She was young and attractive and in the 80's when things weren't quite so "pc" as they are now, her desk was deliberately placed in the window of the firm, the thinking being that she would attract customers in.

It became known after her disappearance that Suzy was being harassed by a man who was telephoning her (possibility from the café opposite) and sending flowers and chocolates. Suzy didn't tell her employers about this because she didn't want to be moved further back in the office which would possibly affect her commission. She did tell one person though - her mother Diana Lamplugh - and on the day she disappeared had told her mum that she was going to meet with this man and tell him to stop. Suzy was never seen again and it remains unknown to this day what has happened to her.

In the months following her disappearance Diana Lamplugh realised that both Suzy and her employers made several disastrous errors which if addressed could have resulted in a very different outcome –

Suzy's errors were that she -

- didn't tell her employers where she was going
- only recorded the man's name in her diary
- didn't log herself in/out of the workplace
- didn't share her concerns with her employer
- thought she could cope on her own

Suzy's employer's errors were that they -

- didn't have policies and procedures in place
- didn't have call in/call back arrangements including what to do if the worst happened
- didn't know where their employees were during the hours they were responsible for their health and safety

As a result in December 1986, Diana Lamplugh founded the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and since then, this organisation has worked with local authorities and other agencies to promote and raise awareness of the problems of violence and aggression in the workplace.

These problems and issues are what have come to be known as the collective term "personal safety". Most of it is good old common sense – however – common sense is not common practice.

Personal Safety is just what it says – "personal" to you. All staff have differing levels of tolerance and what one person would perceive as violence or abuse, another person may accept as just part of the job.

North Yorkshire County Council has well developed policies and procedures but these cannot guarantee the safety of every individual in every situation – nor do they remove the responsibility of every individual to take care of themselves and ensure their own safety as far as possible.

Most people tend to operate from a basis of expectations and assumptions that most other people will behave within a set of certain norms. When situations are, or become confrontational or violent, the initial feelings generally include surprise and shock because the violent behaviour is unexpected. In many cases though, looking back, victims of violence can identify the signs or signals that led up to the outburst. It follows then that knowing how to recognize the danger beforehand and act on the recognition is what is really useful in keeping safe.

It is difficult to strike a balance between being cautious and being suspicious, and between consciously assessing the risks and always expecting trouble.

It is possible however to develop skills, behaviour and ways of working that will help you recognise and avoid danger, based on awareness and confidence rather than paranoia. Here are some suggestions:

2. Self awareness

Feelings

Feelings and emotions rarely seem to be welcome in the workplace and its rarer still to find people that are encouraged to acknowledge them and talk about them, let alone act on them, however being conscious of the way you feel can help to keep you safe.

Either

- Directly because you acknowledge feelings of fear or concern

Or indirectly

- Because you acknowledge feelings of anger or tension in yourself that may trigger or escalate the behaviour of others

Consider whether or not you recognise and pay attention to your feelings and instincts.

Dismissing or disregarding any feelings of fear, concern or apprehension as “foolish” or because acting on them may seem silly, is the **least** safe way to behave.

Instead, acknowledge these feelings and take a bit of time to establish why you feel this way and what action you should take?

For example – is the creepy feeling you experience in the car park when leaving the office after working late when it's dark in the winter months really silly? You should acknowledge that the feeling is triggered by anxiety and fear of what may be lurking in the darkness and adjust your behaviour and working patterns so you do not feel so at risk – don't work so late and/or leave with other colleagues or move your car nearer to the building when the majority of people leave at 5pm and spaces become vacant.

Use your feelings to help you decide what makes you feel safe and confident and then do it!

Ways of working

Many of us do our jobs the way we always have without ever taking the time out to consider whether we are putting ourselves at risk unnecessarily.

Here are some of the things you should consider when assessing the possible risks in the way you work –

- does anyone know where you are?
- if you change your plans – do you inform people?
- do you check or vet people that you go to meet alone?
- can you be contacted?
- is there a check in system and do you use it?
- do you think about where you park – is it safe?
- do you use the quickest routes or the safest?
- do you carry money or valuables?
- are you alone at work at all?
- do you carry an alarm? Do you know how to use it?
- would anyone miss you?
- how long would it be before you were missed?
- could you be found?

Physical well-being

Your physical well-being can also have a significant impact on your personal safety and not just how fast you can run away!

If you are unfit, overtired or very stressed you are less likely to be aware of what is going on around you, less likely to take the precautions to ensure your own safety, less able to deal with difficult people or situations and more likely to escalate difficult situations into dangerous ones.

Consider your own physical well-being: learn to recognise when you are feeling down, sluggish, overtired or over stressed and take action to alleviate these symptoms so you can stay alert and concentrate fully on the job at hand.

Messages you give

People's perceptions and understanding of other people comes initially from the conscious/unconscious messages we all give out. Research into victim psychology and the types of people who are mugged or attacked suggests that the messages we give out can have an effect on the likelihood of becoming the subject of other people's violence.

People who convey by their posture, movement, demeanour and behaviour that they are confident are less likely to be victims.

Think about your own appearance and demeanour – do you think you appear confident, assured, pleasant and competent or are you likely to be perceived as nervous, uneasy, uncomfortable or unsure?

Some ways of conveying self-assurance and confidence include:

- standing up tall and straight rather than hunched
- walking steadily maintaining a rhythm rather than stumbling along
- holding the head up and looking ahead not down at the feet
- paying attention to surroundings – if you look alert and aware you are less vulnerable – avoid looking nervously around
- knowing where you are going – avoid looking lost or disorientated
- avoiding eye contact with other people
- looking calm and serious as if knowing what you are about and in control
- avoiding giving the impression of being tense or nervous by wringing your hands or fidgeting/fiddling
- keeping yourself balanced by having your weight evenly on both feet; you will look and feel steady and secure

3. Awareness of others

Relating to other people

Like everyone else you will form first impressions of people and make certain assumptions about them. These are very immediate and may be right or wrong and may change or not as you continue to interact with the other person. The same impressions and assumptions can sometimes help you to make judgements about your own safety and help you avoid danger. In some ways it does not matter if you are right or wrong or doing the other person an injustice because, when it comes to your own safety, it is better not to wait to find out how accurate or fair you were.

However, impressions and assumptions can be based on prejudices and generalisations that sometimes bear little resemblance to reality. The danger is that your behaviour towards other people (body language, tone of voice, eye contact, manner) based on assumptions, prejudices or stereotypes, can trigger aggression or violent reactions. This is particularly true if the other person is already upset for some reason, has come to make a complaint, has feelings of frustration and believes they are set for a battle with bureaucracy in order to have their needs met.

Examples of behaviour that can trigger aggressive or violent reactions could include:

- talking down to people
- patronizing them
- telling people they are wrong to feel the way they do
- standing on your own official dignity
- trivializing people's concerns or problems
- using the wrong form of address or the wrong name
- using certain words or phrases
- expressing assumptions (eg women can't understand technology)
- ridicule
- using organisational jargon

Think about the way you behave towards other people. Are there things you do or say that could trigger a reaction from them. Try and put yourself in their place and imagine how they are feeling to enable yourself to gauge appropriate responses.

Signs and Signals

Someone who is potentially violent can give off warning signs and signals. When out and about there are some very obvious warning signs that should alert you to possible danger are if someone is

- following you
- lurking ahead of you
- shouting at you
- high on drink or drugs
- staring at you
- trying to catch your eye
- trying to make conversation

In circumstances where you are already interacting with another person, signs to look for include –

- agitation – fidgeting, handwringing
- tapping the table with fingers or a pen
- speech becoming progressively louder – or quieter
- muscle tension in face, hands, limbs ie clenching fists
- drawing in breath sharply
- colour of face – pale is dangerous meaning the body is ready for action: red is likely to indicate a bark worse than bite, but this could change
- finger wagging or jabbing
- inability to be still – pacing about
- swearing
- staring eyes
- sweating
- rapid mood swings
- oversensitivity to suggestions or ideas

Assess the risk of violence before you enter any situation by asking the following questions –

- Does the person have a history of violence?
- Has the person verbally abused you or any colleagues in the past?
- Is the person likely to be drunk or on drugs?
- Is the person likely to be dealing with high stress levels of their own?
- Could the person see you as a threat to their liberty or family?
- Could the person see you as an obstacle to them not getting what they want?
- Has the person got unreasonable or unrealistic expectations of what you or the County Council can do for them?

Ask yourself also

- Do I feel confident to handle the situation?
- Have I got back-up?
- Can I summon help quickly and easily?
- Have I got a plan of how to approach the situation?

4. Awareness of the environment

In addition to developing an awareness of others, being aware of the environment can help you to recognize potential risks and ways of avoiding them. To do this you need to take positive and active notice of your surroundings. Environment here means the workplace, which includes travelling on business, and working in other people's homes and premises.

Taking notice of your physical environment means taking notice of what and who is around you including –

- Access – who can get in and out?
- Egress – how can you get out? Take notice of exits, escape routes, routes to well lit or populated areas.
- Isolation – can you make contact with others, see them or be seen?
- Alarms – how can you raise an alarm or summon help?
- Lighting – at night especially – is your route, car park, meeting place well lit?
- Hiding places – are there corners, or bushy places not properly visible or badly lit where people could hide?
- Situations – are you likely to be affected by heavy concentrations of people for example football crowds?
- Locations – are you conscious of areas of higher risk in the town or city – particularly risky locations such as parks, underpasses, alleyways etc?
- Weapons – are there things around you that could be used by others as weapons?
- Precautions – are you aware of the physical forms of protection available to you, if any, and do you or could you use them properly?
- People – do you take notice of other people around you, where they are or what they are doing, so that you could recognise risk such as being watched or followed?

5. Working with your P.L.A.N.

A simple acronym using the word PLAN summarises some of the issues covered about and the focuses the mind on key things to remember to help keep you safe as you go about your duties -

- P** = prepare yourself
- L** = look confident
- A** = avoid risk
- N** = never assume

The next page contains a format staff can print off or copy to display in their workplace or immediate work station

P

Prepare Yourself

- Wear sensible clothing which does not constrict and allows freedom of movement if required
- Know your route, check it on a map if necessary, ensuring less need to stop and ask for directions
- Tell someone where you are going, what for, and how long you expect to be
- Assess the risks of the journey and visit
- Do you have to go alone?
- Are there any records or reports available?
- Carry a mobile phone – ensure it has credit and is fully charged
- Carry a separate record of telephone numbers and change to allow for poor signal areas where you may have to use a call box?
- Check what the area being visited is like – secluded, busy, inner city, rural?
- Check your vehicle is in good working order, so it will get you there and back

L

Look Confident

- Be alert and appear to have a sense of purpose
- Stand tall, confident and alert – use body language
- Radiate non-vulnerability
- Carry an alarm
- Be aware of your surroundings – don't listen to music on headphones
- Know where you are going and how to get there

A

Avoid Risk

- Decline offers from strangers
- Keep to familiar places if at all possible
- Do not make spur of the moment decision, no dangerous short cuts
- Do not go into unlit areas if possible
- Keep at least one hand free – don't laden yourself down with bags
- Watch body language all the time
- Do not enter if the client is aggressive or drunk
- Take with you only what you need
- Make sure you have an escape route to the front door
- Look and see how the front door is opened
- Look for other escape routes, study your surroundings
- Ask for animals to be placed in another room, pretend to be allergic to them
- Remain alert at all times, watch for changes in mood
- If you feel at risk, leave as soon as possible

N

Never Assume

- That it won't happen to YOU!
- It's only a short journey or walk
- That people look "OK"!