

ACTION ■ PRÉVENTION



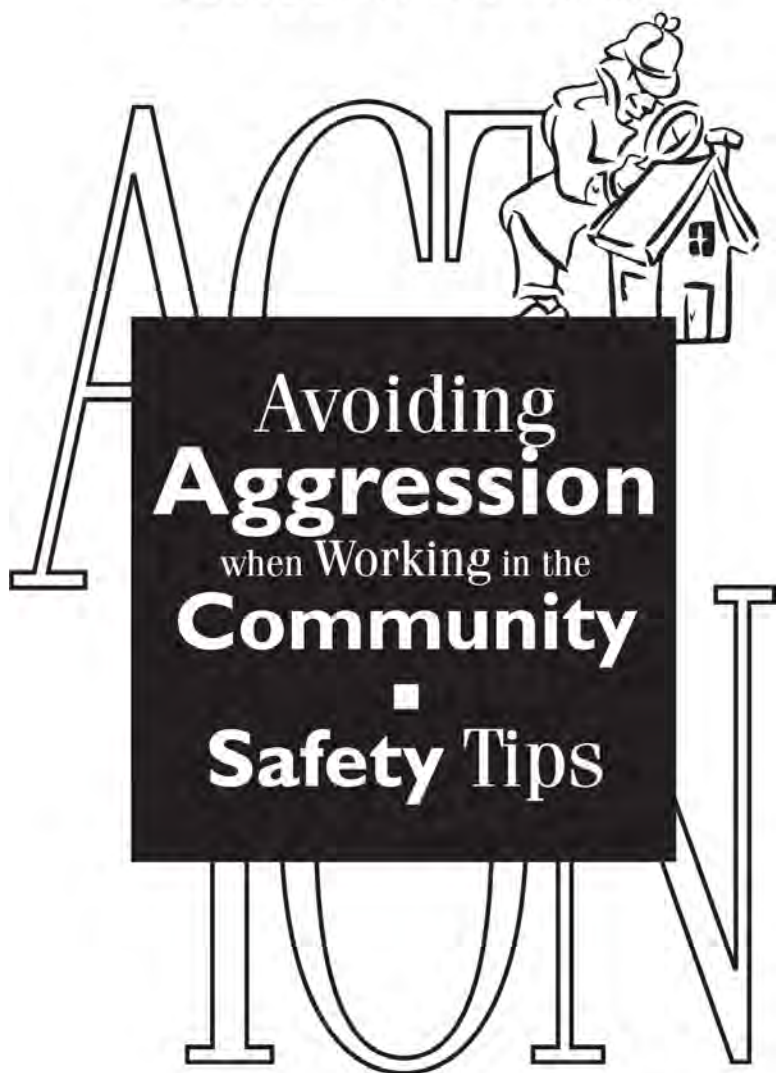
Avoiding
Aggression
when Working in the
Community
■
Safety Tips

ASSTSAS

des personnes et du travail
un monde à transformer

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The content of this brochure was submitted to the ASSTSAS Board of Directors' Violence and Mental Health Committee, which approved it unanimously on May 30, 2002. The members of the committee are: Hélène Caron, Yvan Foucher, Donald Gauvin, Suzanne Paulhus, Manon Perrault, Serge Saint-Pierre.

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Legal Deposit: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec (3rd quarter 2003)
National Library of Canada (3rd quarter 2003)

ISBN: 2-922036-83-9

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Code: 220-0703

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INTRODUCTION

*Evaluate, Anticipate, Protect Yourself (OMEGA training)**

Working with a patient or his family outside the physical confines of an institution can sometimes be intimidating or even dangerous. Given the current shift toward home care in the health and social services sector, there is an increase in the need for this type of service. More and more, workers are required to provide services without having any control over the environment in which they are working. They find themselves in the client's territory without being able to rely on their institution's security systems.

Many community workers have developed their ability to anticipate danger and have organized their own protection. The practices presented in this document are the result of years of experience acquired by social family assistants, nurses, social workers, educators, and street workers. Some require the cooperation of colleagues or the institution, while others are strictly personal, but they all respond to the same priority: keeping workers safe from violent attack.

This document does not claim to be exhaustive, nor can it replace personal judgement when facing a difficult situation. Some of the suggestions presented may not be relevant to your particular work situation, but they all correspond to the values and protection principles taught by the OMEGA program. They are all designed to anticipate danger and help the worker plan an escape or strategic withdrawal.

* Principles used in the OMEGA training program (violence crisis management).

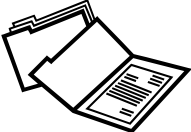


1 – WHO ARE YOU DEALING WITH?



“Information is power” (author unknown)

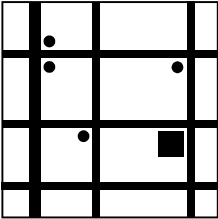

“Oh, if only I'd known....!”

(commonly heard when it's too late...)


SAFETY MEASURES	WHEN? HOW? WHY?
<p>Check the files and the latest reports.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To look for any indication of hazardous elements/risks presented by individuals or the neighbourhood. - When you don't know the client. - When the client is not stable.
<p>Consult your colleagues or liaison person.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Same as above.
<p>Phone to make an appointment.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To check the person's condition and level of cooperation. - To avoid wasting your time on a needless trip.
<p>Phone before going to the person's home.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Because the person's condition may have changed. - To avoid wasting your time on a needless trip. - To see if anyone else is present.
<p>Have a colleague go along with you for the first evaluation, or first visit.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you have any hesitations. - If no one knows the client or his environment. - If the client has not been referred by another institution. - If there is something unusual about the request for service.

2 – KNOWING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Take the time to study the neighbourhood and proceed step by step when approaching a client's home. This can avoid some unpleasant surprises.




SAFETY MEASURES	WHEN? HOW? WHY?
<p>Take a look around the neighbourhood.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If the area has a bad reputation. - If you are unfamiliar with the neighbourhood or the address. - To find a parking spot, to locate neighbours, stores, and potential shelter if there is a problem.
<p>Plan your route.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To avoid isolated or disreputable areas. - To stay in populated, well-lit areas.
<p>Carefully study the outside of the house.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To locate stairways, emergency exits or fire escapes, gates, fences, dogs, hazards related to a building in poor repair. - To identify undesirable visitors.
<p>Always enter through the front door.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be clearly identified by neighbours and the client.

SAFETY TIPS



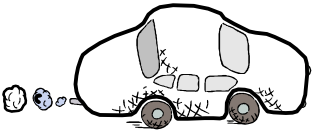
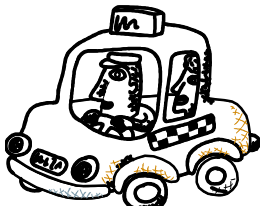
<p>Have a brief conversation with the client at the door before entering the house.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To check on his level of cooperation.- To see if there are other people in the house.- To avoid being attacked by the dog. 
<p>Wait until the client invites you in.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To make sure that he is cooperative; it is also good manners.
<p>Ask for a guided tour of the house.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- When it's your first visit – to locate all the exits.- To familiarize yourself with the premises and to assess its condition.- To choose the room you would like to work in (see “Get ready to go”).

3 – GETTING AROUND SAFELY



This section contains information on how to get from point A to point B safely, avoiding potential dangers on the street.

SAFETY MEASURES	WHEN? HOW? WHY?
<p>ON FOOT</p> 	
<p>Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes with non-skid soles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They're better for running. 
<p>Walk on the street side of the sidewalk or on the street.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At night, if you are alone, to avoid being grabbed and dragged into an alley or between two houses. - To be seen more easily.
<p>Walk against the flow of traffic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To see oncoming cars. - To avoid being grabbed from behind by an assailant sitting in the passenger seat of a car.
<p>Keep your keys in your hand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be able to unlock your car or house door quickly. - To defend yourself, if necessary.
<p>Make sure that you can easily differentiate between your house key and your car key.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In the event of an emergency, they should be easy to identify, even in the dark, by touch.

SAFETY TIPS

<p>Don't take shortcuts. Stay on well-lit streets.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To avoid isolation, unwanted encounters or ending up on a dead-end street.  An illustration of a person in a yellow shirt and orange pants running through a green maze. A purple figure is visible in the distance, suggesting a pursuer.
<p>Cross the street or seek refuge in a store.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- If you feel like you are being followed.- If you are approached by a disreputable individual.
<p>Carry a personal alarm.</p>  An illustration of a silver personal alarm with a keychain.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The loud noise will attract attention and discourage potential attackers.
<p>Avoid travelling alone at night. If you must, take a taxi.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To avoid taking unnecessary risks.
<p>BY CAR</p>  A simple line drawing of a car with a person inside. The car has some motion lines behind it, suggesting it is moving.	
<p>Use a company car, a rental car or preferably, a taxi.</p>  An illustration of a yellow taxi with a black and white checkered pattern on the side and a taxi sign on the roof.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To avoid having your own car identified.



SAFETY TIPS

<p>The car should be in perfect running order with a full tank of gas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To be sure that it will start reliably every time. 
<p>To avoid being alone in the car with a client, ask a colleague to accompany you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- It's hard to drive and deal with an agitated client at the same time.
<p>Ask your colleague to sit behind you, with the client to his right.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To watch your back.
<p>Choose a road where you can make an emergency stop easily at any time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Same as above.
<p>When you are with a client, drive slowly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- If you drive at the lowest legal speed limit, it's easier to make an emergency stop. 
<p>If you are alone with a client, have him sit on the front seat beside you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- If you are alone with a client, it is preferable to keep him where you can see him, not behind you.

4 – DON'T FLAUNT YOUR VALUABLES

In an emergency situation, you must be able to act without hesitation. Unfortunately, materialistic considerations can make people feel ambivalent and compromise their chances of escape. There are ways to avoid having to choose between “your money and your life”.



SAFETY MEASURES	WHEN? HOW? WHY?
<p>Carry only the bare minimum with you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you have to leave the client's house in a hurry, this limits your losses. If your hands are empty, it's easier to convince a client or visitor that you don't have anything that would interest him.
<p>Leave your wallet and handbag safely locked in the trunk of your car.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">  </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To avoid making people feel jealous of your possessions. - To avoid theft and vandalism. <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">  </div>
<p>Carry very little money with you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To limit your losses.
<p>Carry whatever you need to work with in a fanny pack.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you have to leave in a hurry, you won't forget anything. - You'll have both hands free to stop a blow or to open a door to escape.

SAFETY TIPS

Don't wear any jewellery or scarves.



- To avoid making people feel jealous of your possessions.
- To avoid giving an assailant something to grab onto.





Don't give your clients any personal information about yourself or your family.



- To avoid providing any opportunity for threats or harassment.
- To keep a professional distance.
- To be able to tell white lies (see "Good reasons and white lies").

5 – NEVER ALONE

Loneliness can be an uncomfortable feeling, but being truly alone dramatically increases your vulnerability an attack. Working in the community can be a real opportunity for teamwork, contrary to what many people may think.

SAFETY MEASURES	WHEN? HOW? WHY?
<p>Keep your department informed of your schedule and movements.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you have a problem, your colleagues or the police will know where to look for you. - You can also tell the hostile person that you are being monitored by your office.
<p>Always call the office or a colleague when you are at a client's house.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You can do this when you arrive or when you leave, or both. It is sometimes a good idea to do this in front of the client, to show him that you are not alone. A cell phone is a valuable tool because with it, you can make a call from any room in the house. 

SAFETY TIPS

<p>Arrange with your department to have them call you at the client's home.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- In a threatening situation, this call could create a diversion and you could report on the situation and ask for help. A pager or cell phone is helpful in these cases because with them, you are easy to reach.
<p>Set up an “emergency code” within your department.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To get help when you are in a dangerous situation, set up a code for immediate help. You should have a cell phone with you so that you can call from anywhere.
<p>Work with a colleague.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Arrange your schedule so that you can make the most problematic visits with another person. Some cases require formal co-intervention, if the situation is very complicated or if the client is not trustworthy (may accused you of theft, rape, harassment).
<p>Call on a natural caregiver, reliable neighbour or taxi driver.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ask them to be present while you are with the client. But first, clearly outline what you expect from them (act as witness, call for help...).
<p>Meet the client in a public place (restaurant, park, shopping centre or at your office).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- If it is likely that the home situation could be out of control.- If there are a lot of undesirables in the house.- If it is not necessary to check the home situation.

SAFETY TIPS

Ask a police officer to accompany you.



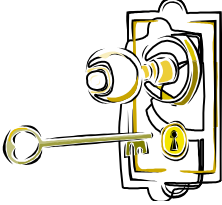

- If you suspect that you or the client are in imminent danger.
- When you have to intervene in an official capacity (e.g.: Youth Protection).

6 – GET READY TO GO

When things are going badly, your best alternative is to make a quick getaway. But first, you have to make sure that the way is clear, and that exits are free. Prepare for this situation as soon as you reach the house.

SAFETY MEASURES	WHEN? HOW? WHY?
Always let the client enter the room first.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To avoid being trapped in the room. - To avoid being attacked from behind. - To stay close to the door.
Keep your coat with you and keep your shoes on.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Especially in winter time, when there are winter boots to deal with. Ask if you can keep your boots on in the house or wear inexpensive rubbers that you won't miss if you have to leave them behind.
Choose to work in a room that is close to an exit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sometimes this is the living room, sometimes the kitchen, but rarely the bedroom or bathroom.
Always place yourself between the door and the client.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To maintain free access to the door. - To be able to leave without getting close to the client.

SAFETY TIPS

<p>Test the door to make sure that it is not locked.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- You don't want to have to fight with the door if you have to get out in a hurry. Make up a reason for asking the client not to lock the door (see "Good reasons and white lies").
<p>Park the car on the street, never in the driveway.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- To avoid having a visitor park behind you and block your exit.
<p>Park your car in the right direction for a quick getaway.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- If you have to leave in a hurry, you don't want to have to do a U-turn or a complicated manoeuvre to get your car out. 
<p>Keep your car keys close at hand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- If the situation seems very unstable, you can decide to take a preliminary look around, but make sure that you can get the car started quickly if necessary. Similarly, if you want your visit to be very short, keep your keys in your hand (it is a good reason).

SAFETY TIPS


Make sure that your vehicle has a remote starter with an automatic unlocking feature.

- To be able to start your car and seek refuge in it quickly, particularly if it's very cold outside.




7 – GOOD REASONS AND WHITE LIES




If you feel threatened, or you want to play for time, avert aggression, have a good reason to make a phone call or leave the house, you may sometimes have to use your wits and creativity and tell some half-truths (only your hairdresser knows for sure...). Preparing some options in advance can make the difference between escalating aggression or panic and a safe, strategic withdrawal.

SAFETY MEASURES	WHEN? HOW? WHY?
GOOD REASONS	
<p>“My boss is keeping an eye on me. He’ll come and get me if I’m late, or if I don’t call.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If the client doesn’t want to let you leave. - If the client is trying to prolong your visit.
<p>“The service contract does not include what you’re asking for. I’ll have to speak to my boss first.”</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">  </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When the client argues with you about the nature of the service provided. - When the client harasses you or is manipulative. - It is always a good idea to have a copy of the contract with you or in your car (see “Oops, I forgot...”) so that the client can look at it.
<p>“You aren’t satisfied? Would you like to make a formal complaint? Wait a minute. I have just what you need...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If the client blames you, is frustrated or threatens to make you lose your job, it’s always a good idea to have a complaint form or the phone number of the complaints manager with you. Offer to help the client with the procedure. This is a good way to divert his aggression.

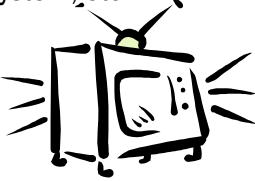
SAFETY TIPS

<p>“Do you have a permit for this weapon?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No? So please hide it so that I can't see it...” - You do? You really should keep it in a locked cabinet.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You are under no obligation to deliver your services with a gun under your nose... <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>
<p>“It's your decision, but here's what could happen...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If the client refuses your visit or his treatment. - If the client does not cooperate or adopts a dictatorial attitude.
<p>“You don't want to see me? Am I bothering you? OK, I'll come back later.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don't insist. After all, the client is in his own home. Go back to the office to discuss the problem with your boss or team.
<p>“I see you have company now – I'll come back later.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If there are a lot of undesirables in the client's home.

WHITE LIES

<p>“I am extremely allergic to (dogs, cats, parrots...) Could you please put it in another room?”</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;">    </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Everyone always thinks that their pet is very nice, friendly and wouldn't hurt a fly. But if an animal bothers you, a health reason is always better received than fear or dislike.
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SAFETY TIPS

<p>“I have a terrible headache today. Could you please turn down the television, radio, sound system, etc.?”</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noise hinders communication, adds stress to an already tense situation and forces people to speak louder, with a naturally more aggressive tone of voice. A reason citing physical discomfort is accepted better than a social issue.
<p>“Oops ! I forgot form (file, drug, dressings) in my car. I’ll be right back!”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A good pretext for leaving the house or convincing the client to unlock the door is extremely valuable in a dangerous situation. It doesn’t matter if you gain a reputation for being absent-minded or forgetful.
<p>“I’ll go get what we need from my car. I’ll be right back.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It’s up to you to decide whether or not to go back in.
<p>“Oh, there goes my pager. I have to call the office.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you set your pager on “vibrate”, you are the only one who knows if it really went on. Make sure to carry a pager. It doesn’t matter if it works or not.
<p>“I’m waiting for a call and I left my cell phone in the car. Excuse me for a minute. I’ll be right back.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you don’t have a cell phone, you’re telling a white lie. - If you’re not really waiting for a call, that’s also a white lie. - If you have your cell phone with you, that’s another white lie.

SAFETY TIPS

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- If you don't have a car, that's a white lie too. But they're all plausible reasons for leaving the house. You're the only one who knows the truth.
<p>"Hello, this is X. She's a trainee, new employee, my boss, and she's coming with me to learn, assess my work, etc."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- An elegant introduction to a colleague who is accompanying you in a high-risk situation.



CONCLUSION

Some of the suggestions in this booklet may seem strange, exaggerated or even ridiculous. But when push came to shove, they helped community workers escape from some sticky situations, kept violence from escalating or kept a lid on some explosive situations.

ASSTSAS would like to thank everyone who agreed to share their expertise with us on various occasions. We would like to congratulate them on their ingenuity, courage, common sense and professionalism in situations where there was no easy way out.

SAFETY TIPS



Notes

A series of 25 horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.



Avoiding
Aggression
when Working in the
Community
■
Safety Tips



The **Action ■ Prévention** series is addressed to workers in the health and social services field and focuses on their day-to-day activities.

Each of these humorous, fully illustrated booklets deals with a specific sector or job. For more information about these booklets, contact the ASSTSAS.



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