

Defensive Behavior: Safety Tips Just for You

You might not think of your job as being dangerous, but it can be if you're not careful. A self defense instructor shares some important lessons on safety.

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Christine Vyborny, a broker with Century 21 Country North in Roscoe, Ill., has always followed her hunches. At an open house several years ago, the sudden arrival of a group of boisterous men and women suddenly made her uncomfortable. She promptly walked outside and stood on the lawn until the crowd left.

"I felt outnumbered — simple as that," Vyborny says. "It was an intimidating situation."

That same protective instinct emerged again a few months ago when a man showed up at the tail end of an open house. He proceeded to amble slowly through every room, apparently unconcerned about the late hour. Forty five minutes later, he finished his tour on the back deck, where Vyborny was waiting. She decided not to walk back inside with him.

"I didn't know if he was a bad person, but since I was by myself I didn't want to take any chances," says Vyborny. "It's terrible to think like this, but it's precautionary."

Would something bad have happened in either of those scenarios if Vyborny didn't follow her instincts? Luckily, she'll never have to find out. Self defense experts say she did just the right thing by quickly removing herself from the risky situations, which could have turned ugly if she wasn't paying attention to her surroundings.

Defensive Behavior Saves Lives

"The majority of people working in this field are women, and they have to take strangers in their cars and meet people at vacant homes," says Joe Rosner, a second-degree Black Belt in karate who teaches a safety course for real estate professionals in Woodstock, Ill., near Roscoe.

Men, who comprise 41 percent of REALTORS®, also can't afford to let their guard down. After all, no one is immune to crime. In 2005, five real estate professionals died as a result of "assaults or violent acts," according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's about the same annual rate since the beginning of the decade.

And 25 percent of respondents in a NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® survey indicated that they had been involved in unsafe "incidents or harassing situations" while working. "Not everyone you meet is a menace, but things can happen," Rosner says. "No sale is worth risking your life."

9 Must-Know Safety Rules

Vyborny credits her defensive behavior to never being a victim of a crime in her 30-plus years in real estate. She joined other real estate practitioners in August to sharpen her safety skills at one of Rosner's workshops.

Here are some of the potentially life-saving tips she learned.

1. **Know your prospects.** Never meet a first-time prospect at a property based only on a phone call. Meet at your office first. Tell the prospect that it's company policy to make a copy of a driver's identification of all customers. (Download a customizable prospect identification form.) Also, introduce that person to at least two other people in your office. Criminals are less likely to take action if they think they'll be recognized.
2. **Create a distress code.** When you feel threatened, you can use this seemingly benign verbal code in a phone conversation to your coworkers, friends, or family. The code is a tip-off that you're in danger and need help. For example, your distress code may be the phrase "red file." If you're in trouble, you would call your office and say something like "could you see if there's a RED FILE on the property?" The person on the phone would then know to call 911 or take another action you've agreed upon.
3. **Don't be too flashy.** Wear conservative clothing and avoid ostentatious jewelry that could make you a target for theft. Real estate professionals often market themselves with photos, which can be risky, as perpetrators have been known to scan real estate photos looking for victims. Make sure your business photos are professional, not sexy, so that you don't attract unwanted attention. Also, don't reveal too much personal information in your ads or in conversations with customers.
4. **Be in the driver's seat.** Always use your own car when showing a property so you stay in control. If a client insists on driving, let him take his own car and follow behind you. Also, remember to lock the doors whenever entering or leaving your vehicle to prevent criminals from attacking after you're in the car, or waiting for you in the car while you're running errands.
5. **Don't get stranded.** Always keep your car's gas tank filled above a quarter-tank. Also, keep the following safety tools in the car: A charged cell phone, a battery jumper, a spare tire, and a roadside emergency kit that includes a flashlight and flares.
6. **Carry pepper spray.** Have a pepper spray dispenser easily accessible on your key chain at all times. Pepper spray is a chemical that causes temporary pain and even blindness when sprayed on an attacker. It also can be used against aggressive animals.
7. **Keep an eye on the exit.** During home showings, never walk into a room first. Instead, allow potential buyers to explore areas of the home on their

own, with you following behind to answer their questions. Avoid escorting prospects into basements or other secluded areas, where you can become trapped. Always position yourself between the customer and the exit.

8. **Check in often.** Let your office and family know when, where, and with whom your appointments will be and when you expect to return. Make it your policy to check in every hour when you're with clients. If you don't call to check in, the office should call you right away.

9. **Never say you're alone.** If you encounter an individual while working late at the office, never indicate to that person that you are by yourself. Say something like, "My supervisor will be right with you and should be able to assist you." Likewise, if you're meeting a customer at a home for a showing, never say anything about the home being "vacant." Make it seem as though other people may be there.

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