

Tips for Guarding Your Personal Safety on Home Visits

This PSHSA Fast Fact is intended to help community care workers, supervisors, managers and JHSC members become more aware of what workers can do to help protect themselves when working in other people's homes.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), enforced by the Ministry of Labour, requires that employers and employees work together to identify hazards and develop strategies to protect against workplace injury and/or illness. While most home visits are routine, non-threatening experiences, there is always a possibility that a confrontation may arise during a visit.

General Tips

- Gather as much information about your client as possible before you go to his/her home.
 - Pause for a few seconds when entering someone's home to assess the situation and plan a response.
 - Observe the environment for signs of used syringes, odours, clutter, other people present, etc.
 - Do not allow yourself to be cornered. Always leave an exit route or situate yourself between the exit and the client.
 - Sit where you have a good view of the bedrooms or the hall to the bedrooms. Listen for anyone coming in from an outside door.
 - For an interview, stay in the living room or dining room.
 - Sit in a hard-backed chair. You can get up faster from a firm chair than from a soft sofa.
 - Adopt a defensive sitting position. Sit with your strong leg back and your other leg forward. This will allow you to get out of your seat quickly without using your hands.
- Leave your shoes on. If a confrontation arises, you need to be able to leave in a hurry. If you do have to leave your outdoor footwear at the door, carry an extra pair of shoes for indoor use. If your client doesn't want you wearing shoes, mention that you have to wear them because of your employer's health and safety policy.
 - Don't carry a purse. Leave it at home. Locking your purse in your car is not recommended since someone may observe where you put your valuables.
 - Carry a briefcase for an interview. Place necessary valuables in your briefcase.
 - If you need to carry valuables outside your briefcase, wear a jogger's pouch. Try to turn it so it is not visible.
 - Be sensitive and aware of the first signs of a change in your client's behaviour or the behaviour of others in the home.
 - Report any unusual incidents to your supervisor.
 - If you are not issued with a work uniform, don't wear clothes that could easily get hooked or be grabbed by somebody and avoid wearing revealing clothes.

When Someone is Venting

- If your client or a family member is angry and begins to vent, stand up. You don't want to be dominated by this person.
- Watch your body language.
 - Stay calm.
 - Stand facing the aggressive person with your feet slightly apart.
 - Keep your arms at your sides with your palms up. This is less threatening and the individual can see that you do not have a weapon. Never clench your fists.

- Keep your voice calm. Don't argue with him/her. Speak slowly using simple, precise words and be polite.
- Don't make eye contact. Some people find this a threat or challenge.
- Let the person know you are listening. Restate what he/she said in your own words.
- If possible, move away from the person, so there is about six feet between you. At this distance, it will be more difficult for him/her to hit you.
- Watch the person's body language, including shaking or clenching fists, or a change in posture. He/she may be ready to do something physical.
- If the person is quietly looking off into space after a period of venting, he/she may be considering some action to take against you. You should say something out of the ordinary to get the person's attention.
- If you think you can divert the person, try to give him/her something to do in another room (e.g., ask for a glass of water).
- Leave the house if you think the person is going to lose control.

Things to Remember

- Report hazards and potential hazards to your supervisor.
- Report every incident, however small it may seem, to your supervisor. If you are nervous, ask for someone else to accompany you on your visit.
- Your employer should have policies and procedures for you to follow if you encounter a violent or potentially violent situation. These procedures should include a "buddy" system and should give you directions on when to involve the police. Be familiar with these procedures.
- Ensure that there is an adequate assessment of the home environment prior to the first visit. Use a letter of agreement or service contract with the client to ensure all parties understand the behaviours and situations that will not be tolerated.
- Attend training sessions on topics such as personal safety or dealing with aggressive behaviour to increase your awareness of preventive measures.

**Constable Diane MacInnis of the Metropolitan Toronto Police provided Information for the original version of this Fast Fact.*