

From Chapter 6, “Know Thyself:”

We don't usually think about tools when we think about sexual assault prevention, but some of our most important tools aren't carried in a purse or backpack. They exist inside us and can make a big difference in a moment of risk. Some of these tools are part of our personality and we don't have to work for them at all. Others don't exactly come naturally. The good news is that humans are adaptable creatures, and our brains have the capacity to learn new information and acquire new skills almost magically; it just takes a little focus and determination.

Here are some of the most important internal tools we carry:

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- Common sense
 - Gut instinct
 - Affect manipulation
 - People perception
 - Communication

Most of these tools are well-known, and by the time we are teenagers, we probably have a sense of just how equipped we are with any one of them. Still, some are not as simple to understand. Take *affect manipulation* for example. The best way to describe this is to tell a story my friend Caroline shared with me.

Caroline was in her early twenties when she spent two weeks in Spain traveling around, looking at the beautiful coastal towns of the south, and eating large quantities of fresh fish that had been caught from the sea and grilled that afternoon. It was a lovely adventure, and for the most

part, she felt safe. There were a couple of times, though, when she had to *manipulate* her affect while walking through a public space. Like many countries, it is considered normal in Spain to cat-call women, stare, and/or make crude jokes. At least, it was when Caroline was there.

One day, the behavior went on a little longer than she was comfortable with, and a group of men began following her down the street. She started to get scared, but before anything else happened, Caroline turned around and yelled as loud as she could in Spanish, “Hey, jerks! If you take one more step to follow me, I will call the police!” The gang snickered at her, but they did not go any farther. Of course, there are many other tools one could use in this situation, but for Caroline, she knew she had to get tough to let that group know they couldn’t walk around threatening her by their presence, and her tactic worked.

Other times while traveling, young people are encouraged to manipulate their affect even when not in a threatening situation. If you’re walking down the street with your chin up and your shoulders back, assuming an air of “don’t even think about messing with me,” people will notice. Again, it isn’t designed to guarantee safety, but it’s a great start. Usually, people find that even if they have to “fake it ‘til they make it” with copping a tough attitude, the more they do it, the tougher they feel. In short, attitude matters, and we all have the capability to manipulate our outer appearance so that we *look* much less vulnerable than we may at times *feel*.

So, how about *people perception*?

Have you ever gone to a party and met someone who rubbed you the wrong way? Maybe you couldn’t quite put your finger on it, but something about that person gave you the creeps. Your people perception skills were working in your favor to create a “cringe” response. While it’s true that our people perception may not always be accurate, it’s worth listening to that inner voice that says, “I’m not comfortable with this person.” Sometimes, these reactions can occur with people that are supposed to be “safe,” like a family doctor, a youth

group leader, a priest, or a coach. If you feel a high level of discomfort with any of these individuals, chances are your people perception skills are warning you something may not be right. Then, it becomes necessary to communicate how you feel. A parent or teacher may be able to intervene to create a different outcome in the situation. Bottom line: there is never a time when being uncomfortable means you have to suck it up and continue to place yourself in a circumstance that doesn't feel safe to you. The best way to be safety-minded is to use multiple tools simultaneously. Often, tools like *people perception* are combined with tools like *gut instinct*, and we don't even know we're doing it.

Youth and *common sense* don't usually get equated together, but there are ways the new generation has more common sense than their elders (as many in my generation can attest to). Still, there is a value to lived experience. For example, I had to learn as a young person, that I had every right to let loose when out dancing, and that didn't mean, "come touch me." Once I figured that out, I was able to have more fun. My friend group grew closer and I discovered how to trust my instincts about strangers I met on the dance floor. I learned that sometimes, happy people like to be around other happy people, and those are the moments when safe strangers can become great new friends. When I had the opposite instinct, however, I learned not to waste any time sending mixed signals.

Here are some *common sense* practices that allow you to exercise the power of your free will and still enjoy yourself:

1. Never allow yourself to be alone with someone who makes you uncomfortable or is threatening you.
2. Stay in proximity to your friends if going to a party or club.
3. If someone you don't know well is texting you provocative images, block them and consider reporting it.
4. Don't let someone you just met buy you a drink. If you enjoy

talking with them and the gesture feels genuine, *you* can order and have the bartender serve you, then *they* can pay the tab.

Gut instinct (or intuition) is a tool that is so important, it's worth checking in with several times a day. Ask yourself, how is my gut responding right now to the situation I'm in? Since our cognitive "muscles" work much like our physical muscles, the more we use them, the stronger they get. This is especially true with gut instinct. Practice checking in with yourself on what your intuition is saying. Use your gut instinct to improve your *people perception*, and let that inform your *affect manipulation*. Most important: *communicate* with the people in your life exactly what your gut instinct is trying to say. You will improve your flight skills so much that being safety-minded will become second nature!

Here are some helpful questions to get you thinking about your inner safety tools:

1. How often have I been in a situation where someone rubbed me the wrong way, but I didn't say anything about it to anyone?
2. Would I describe myself as having good common sense? If not, what are some specific areas of development that I can work on?
3. Have I ever tried to look tough even when I felt scared? Did making myself look tough actually help me feel tougher?
4. How often do I tell my friends when I have a gut instinct reaction to something?
5. Do I trust my gut instinct or intuition? If not, what do I need to do to work that response mechanism so I can use it if I'm in an unsafe situation?

Your answers provide helpful information about managing your internal safety tools. If your answer to question one was "often" or "many

times,” don’t sweat it! You have everything you need inside you to begin doing things differently; it’s just a matter of practice. If your answer to question two was “no,” same thing! Becoming an observer of people and places will help you build your common sense. If you don’t think it’s very strong yet, that just means you haven’t had a chance to develop it. Be patient and start to play out certain scenarios with your power group or with yourself. What would each of you do if you were on a date and your date started giving you the creeps? What would you all do if someone was invading your space at a frat party? What happens when you try looking tough in a new situation or when you’re walking down an unfamiliar street? And most importantly, how connected do you feel to your intuition? This is the most important safety tool you can use when meeting new people.