



SEPS

the situation determines the solution

MODULE 8 - SEPS WOMEN'S PERSONAL SAFETY PROGRAM

Some people, especially if you have been the victim of violence, may find some of the subject matter contained in this article disturbing or traumatizing. If you are still in the process of recovering from violence and abuse, you may want to consult with a mental health professional before reading this content. The subject matter is also intended for an adult audience, and so if you are under 18, you should have an adult read the material first (parental guidance is advised for people under 18). This article addresses the subject matter head-on, so reader discretion is advised.

SYNOPSIS

It is not only predatory individuals with pre-meditated plans to harm you that you need to be able to protect yourself from. Violence and aggression can erupt "spontaneously" due to situational factors e.g. you spill a drink over somebody, inadvertently take someone's parking space, talk to the boyfriend of a jealous lover, etc. Some of the people you will end up dealing with may be completely reactive in the way that they respond, so that is they react in the moment to the situation, without having any goal or end game in mind. Such situations have the potential to be dealt with using verbal de-escalation, avoiding the need for any physical resolution.

SPONTANEOUS & PRE-MEDITATED ASSAULTS

Not everyone who may want to harm you is a predator who has orchestrated a situation in order to be able to assault you; not all aggression and violence is pre-meditated. Sometimes, your behaviors and actions themselves may cause somebody to become aggressive, and possibly violent e.g. if you jump in front of somebody in a queue, bump into them and/or step on their foot, etc. Not everybody who ends up in a fight leaves their house in the morning with the intent of becoming violent, but things that happen to them cause them to spontaneously erupt. If you are identified as the cause or reason for them to respond this way (rightly or wrongly), you will become the focus/target of their aggression, and unless you are able to physically disengage - which is not always possible - or verbally de-escalate the situation, you may be forced to respond physically. The good news is that if the situation

has occurred spontaneously, you should be able to de-escalate the conflict and resolve it without violence.

DE-ESCALATION & CONFLICT RESOLUTION

If you've ever told somebody to calm down only to have them yell back at you, "I AM CALM!!!!" you'll understand that de-escalation involves a lot more than simply instructing the person to be calm. In fact, telling somebody what to do, however calmly you say it and however justified you are to say it, is almost always going to have the opposite effect. Telling somebody to calm down is effectively "fighting talk".

Our brain works on three levels. We have a "Reasoning Brain" which allows us to understand problems, make sense of complex issues, and operate rationally. We also have a "Limbic" or "Mammalian Brain" that understands things from a more animal perspective e.g. it interprets language/behavior as being posturing, or submissive; in the same way that a dog would interpret the actions of other dogs, etc. We also have a "Reptilian" or "R-Brain" that works on a very simplistic and primal level, giving us instructions to "fight or flight" when presented with a threat. As a person becomes more emotional, they give up the use of their Reasoning Brain, and start to interpret things using either their Mammalian/Limbic System Brain (posturing/submission), or, if extremely emotional, their Reptilian Brain (fight/flight).

You should understand that an emotional person is not able to understand reasonable requests rationally; they will interpret them in one of four ways, either as: submissive behavior, aggressive posturing, backing away, or preparing to fight. Telling somebody to calm down is telling them what to do; to the emotional person, you are aggressively posturing - trying to take control of the situation away from them, and explaining their place in it and how they should behave and act. This is unlikely to calm them down, and instead make them more aggressive towards you.

The first thing to understand when trying to de-escalate a situation is the degree and level of the person's emotion - if they are already at the fight or flight stage, it will be almost impossible to verbally dissuade them from one of these actions. The quickest and easiest way to assess somebody's emotional state is to talk with them, or more specifically ask them a question e.g. if you have knocked somebody's drink over them and they get irate, ask them what you can do to sort the situation out - if they are able to comprehend what you are saying, and can answer you, then you know you can communicate with them (they still have part of their Reasoning Brain functioning). If, on the other hand, they just keep saying "look what you've done, look what you've done", etc., and don't actually respond to what you are saying, they are moving into fight or flight mode.

If they remain quiet and unresponsive, or look at you blankly, take this as a definite warning sign that

they are preparing to assault you, as when the body prepares to engage in a physical fight, there is no longer a need to communicate verbally.

Asking open-ended questions, to check on your aggressor's ability to respond verbally is also a great tool for de-escalating a situation. For a person to process information and formulate responses, they must use their Reasoning Brain; if you can get them to think about the things you have said, process the information, and then make a response based on that information, they will now be thinking about non-physical solutions to the situation, and will be in a less emotional state. This isn't to say that they will not reconsider the use of physical violence, but rather that as they think about alternatives, their level of emotion will be lowering.

Another simple way to verbally de-escalate a situation, is to ask the person you are dealing with to slow down their speech - this is very effective if you ever have to deal with an irate or angry person on the phone. It's also a good way to stop somebody shouting, as it is very hard to shout loudly if you have to shout slowly. Talking slowly means that your aggressor has to hear what they're saying and consider their words before saying them, rather than just letting their mouth run away with them. Any way you can get an aggressor to consider what they are saying, will get them using their Reasoning Brain, and if you can get to a place where you can reason with an aggressor, you stand a good chance of de-escalating the situation.

ACKNOWLEDGE A PERSON'S RIGHT TO ANGER

If you take the parking space of someone who had been patiently waiting for it, their aggression will likely develop over several stages. Firstly, they will feel a sense of disbelief over what has just happened, then they will feel a sense of injustice and identify you as the cause of this, they will then consider the alternatives open to them; if they are beginning to get to an emotional level where their rational mind has switched off, they will be thinking in terms of posturing and fighting, etc., rather than in practical terms such as finding an amicable resolution. You may honestly not have seen that they were waiting, and when they aggressively approach you, shouting and pointing at you, you may be completely baffled as to the reason why someone has targeted you.

Your first inclination may be to go on the defensive and justify whatever it is you're being accused of, even if you don't know what this actually is. This should demonstrate why posturing to someone will normally lead to more posturing, etc. If you become aggressive with people, however justified and in the right you may feel you are, they will, in all likelihood, behave aggressively back. The most important thing is to find out what the problem is. In this case, you had taken the parking space a person was patiently waiting for. You've not committed any crime, however you know that it probably wasn't the morally right thing to do - or perhaps you believe that where driving is concerned, the law of the jungle wins it, and it was this driver's fault for being too slow to capitalize on his opportunity.

If you fail to acknowledge the driver's grievance and his right to be angry, you will not be able to begin to de-escalate this situation. A clear apology would be a good starting point, to not do this would be akin to making a statement that the aggrieved driver is in the wrong and has no right to be angry with you. Apologizing often gets confused with backing down and losing face, however in this situation you are asking the person who has actually lost out to you to back down and lose face, if you don't apologize. The simplest thing to avoid further conflict would be to state, "I'm very sorry, I didn't see you waiting there, let me move my car so you can have the space. I personally hate it when people do that and I certainly don't want to be seen as that person." These types of statement which acknowledges the person's right to be angry, and provides a solution and shows your aggressor that you can see things from their perspective and have experienced the same thing(s) is an extremely good way to disarm them of their aggression. In fact, 9 times out of 10, when you take control of a situation in such a way you will end up receiving an apology from your aggressor, who recognizes that their aggressive behavior was unnecessary in the situation.

RESPECTING YOURSELF

De-escalation isn't synonymous with being pushed over or adopting the role of the victim - this doesn't necessarily mean you can always press the role of the person who is in the moral right, even if this is the case; some people see the world differently to us, and believe it operates in a very specific way - if you try to deal with them as if they are working to your rules and values, you will not be able to de-escalate the situation. We refer to these people as having alternate realities e.g. you go into a basically empty restaurant and take an empty seat at the bar - a short time later, a man comes in and tells you that you are sitting in his place. You tell him that you were sitting here first and that he should find another seat (you are telling him what to do, which if he is at all emotional, may be interpreted as posturing/fighting talk). He tells you that he's been coming to this bar for 20 years and he always sits there, that where your sitting is HIS seat. In your world, seats are allocated on a first come, first served basis - in this person's world, seats come with and are subject to a history of usage. For all intents and purposes you would be right to stay in the seat, but doing so would not resolve the conflict. In fact, it would probably only escalate it, as your continued presence in the seat would only go to further enraging this person. If he continued to stay at the bar and drink, he would probably drink himself into a fury, and you may be forced later on to confront a drunk who feels slighted and is now carrying a grudge against you.

When somebody sees the world operating to a different set of rules to you, and the rest of society, you "standing your ground", is not really about you standing your ground, because the person you are dealing with won't be able to recognize the principle and point you may feel compelled to make. They will only see your behavior as being deliberately confrontational and aggressive. There are times to

respect yourself and set boundaries, but when you are dealing with someone who exists in an alternate reality, your boundaries may not be applicable or relevant. The person who believes chairs are allocated according to previous usage is not threatening you, they are explaining how they see the world. It is unlikely that in the course of a conversation with them you will convince them that they are wrong to think this way, and that they should adopt your way of thinking.

The person in this example gave you a reason as to why they saw the chair as belonging to them, they didn't simply tell you that this was their chair, and they don't need to give you a reason as to why you shouldn't sit there. Although it may not appear so, this person is showing you a level of respect. If this is the bar that they've been drinking in for 20 years, there are probably other locals there who will be waiting to see what they do and how they react. If a person feels that they have expectations to meet, they will feel a level of performance pressure that will make the stakes much higher for them. What for you is a matter of inconvenience - moving to another chair - may be an issue of identity and honor for the person you are dealing with; for them it is not about a seating arrangement, but how they define their identity. Don't necessarily see you and the other person in the dispute as having the same to lose or gain - you may be dealing with someone who has much more to lose or gain than you do, giving them a much greater investment in the conflict.

Everybody knows the phrase, "the straw that broke the camel's back". The news often carries stories of people who have engaged in sprees of violence that were triggered by something that was seemingly innocuous and trivial, whilst failing to report on all of the incidents that preceded and lead up to it. At the moment in time that the final straw was being put into position, it had become a lot more important and significant than the person engaged in placing it had envisaged. We don't always know how significant a particular event or incident is to someone and your ignorance can easily put you in the position of having to deal with a response or reaction that is far out of proportion to what you might naturally expect.

Although you may need to concede on an issue, it doesn't mean that you should lose your dignity doing so, or send out the message to anyone else in the environment that you are an easy target - you don't want to appear submissive to another person's posturing, rather you should appear disinterested. In wolf packs, there is an Alpha Dog (the "Top Dog") and the Omega Dog (the one at the other end of the spectrum); in between are a selection of dogs, all vying for status in relation to the Alpha Dog i.e. they want positions, two, three and four, etc. These dogs are insecure and fight over everything, and rise to every challenge, looking for the other dog involved in the conflict to behave submissively towards them. The Alpha dog isn't interested in petty disputes; if another dog wants to take his/her bone that's fine, the potential dispute isn't worth his/her time. Showing disinterest whilst seeking resolution sends out an unexpected message to the other party. For them, they have a lot invested into the dispute; the person who is asking you to find another seat is expecting a conflict - they are expecting you to be as invested in the chair as they are. By confidently

saying "sure no problem, there are plenty of places I can sit", whilst smiling and being polite is the quickest and easiest way to avoid a conflict, and show that you are actually in control of the situation (you have shown respect without compromising dignity). You are behaving as an Alpha, refusing to be drawn into the disputes of those who need to demonstrate their social position. What you may at first see as backing down, is in fact a demonstration of your position within the pecking order, without being drawn into challenging the other person.

Any time you attempt to resolve a conflict through de-escalation, you should look to do so with a confident and unapologetic manner. In certain situations, an aggressive individual may be looking for your help - fear as well as anger can cause people to become aggressive - and trying to act overly submissively will cause them to become more aggressive, as they will begin to realize that they will not be able to find a peaceful resolution with you. If you spill a drink over them, they may want your "help" in finding a face-saving way out, and if you continually back down and don't offer any possible resolutions i.e. try to help them, they may simply become more and more aggressive. Continually backing down and acting overly-submissive to an aggressor, can be as bad as posturing to them.

DON'T EXPLAIN THE SITUATION

People use explanations to validate their position. If you try to "explain" to an angry person, it will be taken in two ways: one, you are telling them that if they actually understood the situation, then they will see that you are right and they are wrong (basically, you are posturing to them) and two, that they have no right to be angry - where you should be respecting their right to be angry, you will actually be invalidating that right.

You don't need to explain what has happened to an angry person, they know. It doesn't matter if they are a million miles off the mark - to them, they know what has happened. It may be that even in a non-emotional state they would understand a situation differently to you i.e. they work to and live in an alternate reality, where the rules that they believe everybody lives by are different to the ones that you believe everybody lives by. Trying to explain something to a person who views the world differently to you, will be taken to mean "I am right, and you are wrong."

Remember, you are not dealing with rational people when they are emotional, and the fact that they have become emotional is due to the fact that they believe they already understand the situation, and your, and their, relative places in it. It is their understanding of the incident you have to work with in order to de-escalate, not yours.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

It was not that long ago that a stranger entering a village or settlement, could expect to be met with hostility and aggression, based purely on their status as an outsider - regardless of any particular actions and/or behaviors on their part. There are still such towns and villages in existence today in the US, UK and Europe, etc. The truth is, we naturally trust people who are like us, and distrust those who aren't. This is a basic human condition, and one that can be used against us (see the section on sexual predators and grooming) as well as one that we can use to help us de-escalate aggressive and potentially violent situations.

Picking up on accents, noticing football shirts, and commenting on tattoos are all ways in which we can create common ground between ourselves and our aggressor(s). Exchanging names is another very simple one. It is easy to be aggressive towards a complete stranger, harder when it is somebody with a name, and therefore, an identity. The more we can present ourselves as another person, similar in all regards to our aggressor(s) the more common ground we are able to share.

Establishing common goals is another way to achieve this. Stating facts like, "it looks like you've had a hard day and just want to kick back, I'm looking to do the same", is an understated way of saying I know how you feel, without claiming that you know how your aggressor feels, which when explicitly stated is basically a form of posturing i.e. you're telling the person how they feel and they are therefore entitled to act. If you can turn the actions and behaviors your aggressor is objecting to and project them on to an "unknown" third party, you will be able to claim solidarity with them and join their camp e.g. in the example where you inadvertently steal a parking space, if you state that you hate it when people do that (and offer to move), you will have built some common ground between yourself and your aggressor.

PRESENT SOLUTIONS

When the FBI first set up its Hostage & Crisis Negotiation Program in the 1960's, their understanding was that somebody who took a person or group of people hostage would have a very clear idea of what they wanted to achieve and gain, and that these demands would provide the basis for the negotiation. What they found was that most hostage-takers had little or no idea of what they wanted. Although in our minds, we may always think of hostage-taking as being politically motivated, the majority of hostage situations involve partners and ex-partners taking their wife, girlfriend, or family hostage, or criminals who are disturbed when committing a crime, panicking and taking anyone in their environment captive. Hostage-takers, on the whole, are working with their Reptilian Brain and are in pure survival mode; they are not thinking rationally and/or working to a plan.

This is an emotional state which is very similar to that of people who become spontaneously aggressive (and violent) i.e. they feel that a wrong has been committed against them, they are justified in behaving aggressively, and they need to do something to deal with their perceived loss of self-respect and control, and to resolve the situation in their favor. The problem is, they're not thinking rationally and so they behave in aggressive and potentially violent ways. If you can present a solution that rights the wrong, retains their dignity, and looks to resolve the situation in their favor, you are doing the job of their Rational Brain for them - something they left behind as they became more emotional.

The important thing to remember about people who become spontaneously aggressive due to factors/components within the situation e.g. having someone not hold a door for them, push in front of them, spill a drink over them, etc. is that they don't actually know what it is that will resolve the situation for them - this is why they have become emotional and aggressive. If they were behaving rationally, they would simply inform the person who pushed in front of them in the queue to go to the end of it, rather than start shouting and acting aggressively toward them, etc. If you are that person, by simply providing a solution, such as telling them you didn't realize there was a queue and now that they've informed you, you'll take up the correct position, you have taken away their right/justification to be aggressive, and at the same time acknowledged their control of the situation.

One of the main reasons people become aggressive is due to a lack of options i.e. they don't feel they have any other way to behave, that all avenues are closed to them. The ex-partner who takes his former spouse and children hostage does so because they feel there are no other options left to them - there may be plenty, they just haven't considered them, or at the time none of them may have seemed viable. If you can present an alternative path to your aggressor, that doesn't end in violence, then you will have a good chance of avoiding a physical conflict.

If you ask an emotional and aggressive individual what you can do to sort the situation out (a question that should engage their Rational Brain), and they just keep saying, "look what you've done", or repeating the injustice you have committed, your next step will be to start offering potential solutions e.g. "I can see why you're upset (don't use the word 'angry'), if I bought you another drink, and paid for your dry cleaning would that help to apologize?"

Often aggressive individuals will get into a loop of stating and re-stating the injustice committed against them. This constant restating is a tool that our fear emotion uses to prepare us to move into fight mode. There is no posturing here, just the person internally ticking off their reasons to fight. This needs to be interrupted quickly, or the person is liable to become physically violent.

If you don't get a response to any solution(s) you present, your final question to them should be "what do you want of me?" this is a very different question to, "what do you want me to do?" as you are now

moving things beyond the situation, to find out, and possibly "wake up" your aggressor as to what their intentions towards you are. After trying to de-escalate the situation, with no success, you now need to find out what your aggressor intends to do to resolve it.

AGGRESSIVE PERSONALITY TYPES

There are individuals who have personality types/disorders that will cause them to become aggressive at actions and behaviors that you may engage in, which you wouldn't ever consider would elicit such an emotional response. Some of these people you may know as friends, family and acquaintances, others you may meet as strangers. If you can understand why and how different people become emotional and aggressive (and sometimes violent), you may stand a better chance of not initially triggering such reactions, as well as dealing with them when they occur.

ADULT BULLIES

Bullying is something we would like to believe is restricted to the schoolyard, that when you leave high school, the risk of running into a bully disappears. This is not the case. Whilst social immaturity is a major reason for childhood bullying, not every adult grows up. There are many myths that continue to be purported about bullying, most of which exist to make the victim feel better about themselves, rather than to teach people about the bully. Firstly, ignoring bullies doesn't make them go away; they need to confirm their status in the world they see, and will continue to act in this way and bully, in order to convince themselves that the world recognizes their rightful place in it. This leads us to the second myth: bullies don't suffer from low self-esteem, they suffer from an extremely high sense of self-esteem that they sometimes feel the rest of the world doesn't recognize (we shouldn't feel sorry for bullies, we should recognize them for who they are).

Bullies are angry people - most even have an awareness of this and despise themselves for it - however they always feel that their anger is justified, and more importantly, are addicted to the adrenaline rush that their heightened emotional state brings. Whereas most people head towards the submissive and flight end of the adrenal spectrum, bullies default to the posturing and fight responses. When a bully looks at you they are not seeing you, they are seeing a problem, or somebody who is questioning their status and dignity. As far as they're concerned, you have gotten in the way of whatever they are doing and they're not going to be pushed around by you - that's how the bully will interpret a situation in which you cross paths.

Bullies care little for how you respond to them as long as you either: cower, or fight back. These are the two responses that show that you recognize them for the important individual that they are. If you are aggressive back to the bully, they'll take this as an acknowledgement that they occupy a position of power that others feel a need to challenge. If you back away from the bully, they'll take this as recognition and confirmation that they are the superior person/being and your submissive actions recognize this.

This is why it is important when attempting to de-escalate a situation that you don't act in an overly submissive manner, because if you are dealing with a bully they will identify your behavior not as an avoidance of violence, but as a confirmation of their position in the social pecking order - with you sitting a long way beneath them. Not responding in a submissive or posturing fashion, but taking the third route and behaving as the Alpha in control and who has little or no time for the conflict is one of the best ways to deal with the bully, whether it's dealing with an aggressive manager at work, or an angry individual in a bar.

EGOTISTICAL NARCISSISTS - THIRD PARTIES WHO MAY GET INVOLVED

The Narcissist's greatest fear is of being ordinary and unspectacular, and in order to deny this they are ultra-competitive in areas where they know the decks are stacked in their favor and they have a good chance of winning. They will never engage in a fair fight, but make sure that all the conditions are there for them to win. These are often the third parties who come to help their "friend" who is involved in a dispute or argument. We've all seen these individuals at work, taking on the role of the concerned and indignant friend who intervenes, or adds their involvement to the situation - their goal is not to help resolve anything, but to demonstrate to themselves and others how spectacular and important they are. They don't even care if they are making the situation worse for their friend, this is a stage upon which they can perform and applaud themselves. Don't be fooled that every person who comes to the assistance of someone you are involved in a verbal conflict with is there to back up their friend - most are working their own agenda.

These "important individuals" can't be ignored, and they will be more than happy to take center stage, and the person who you were initially dealing with may be happy to let them do so. These individuals will be taking the stage to prove to themselves and those around them that they are able to take control, be recognized as authority figures, and force an agenda. Their concern will not be to resolve the situation, itself. Whilst acknowledging their input e.g. "You're a good friend who obviously looks out for others..." you should try to focus back on to the person your behaviors and actions have caused distress to, "...but like you I'm concerned about making things right with your friend, and finding out what I can do to sort things out with them."

Anytime you have to de-escalate a member of a group, who has members who are happy to verbally engage rather than observe, you must be prepared to concede and give far more than you may have intended or wanted to, if you want to de-escalate the situation e.g. rather than simply replacing the drink you spilt, you may have to offer to buy the group a drink for spoiling their "collective evening" etc.

THE STEPS OF DE-ESCALATION

The first thing to do when dealing with any aggressive individual is to ask yourself the question, "Did

this situation occur spontaneously, or was it pre-meditated?" If you believe the situation was pre-meditated and planned then it is unlikely that you will be able to de-escalate the situation, as your aggressor already has a defined outcome in mind.

If you believe the situation did occur spontaneously, you will need to assess whether the person you are dealing with is able to verbally reason, or whether they are so emotional that they are working entirely with their Reptilian Brain. Getting them to respond to the question, "What can I do to sort this out?" will show them that you respect their right to be angry, whilst at the same time get them to start working with their Rational Brain.

If they are simply repeating their injustice or complaint in a loop, offer up a potential solution to see if they pick up on this. If they don't, ask them what they want of you.

Throughout this entire process you should adopt an interview stance and control range, whilst being ready to strike preemptively, or block, strike, and disengage.

SEPS (Situation Effective Protection System) is a framework, for understanding how violent situations occur and evolve, along with the motivations behind them, so that it is possible to predict, identify and avoid them. The system was created and developed by Gershon Ben Keren and Andy Rallings. This handout is part of the SEPS free women's personal safety program developed by Gershon Ben Keren. For more information and other course modules, please go to www.womensselfdefense-seps.com.

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