



Protect Yourself
Personal Safety Guide
for Realtors

What are the risks for **REALTORS®?**

Unfortunately some professions are more risk-prone than others. REALTORS® are one group who face certain dangers due to the nature of their business. It is a profession that involves meeting strangers, better known as prospects or clients, in unknown locations, working well into the evening and often driving alone at night.

It is a sad fact that over the years many REALTORS® who have gone about their regular day's business have been the victims of physical and verbal assaults, robberies, sexual assaults, and in some cases, even murder. And though the incidents are few compared with the numbers of REALTORS® who have been problem-free, it is not acceptable that REALTORS® should be at risk for their personal safety, simply by doing their job.

This personal safety guide was created specifically to help our Board members be aware of where and when the risks to your own personal safety exist, and take the necessary steps to protect yourself.



Protect Yourself

Personal Safety Guide

Safety tips for REALTORS®

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Bad things happen to good REALTORS®

REALTORS® interact frequently with total strangers, and often work in potentially dangerous situations such as showing vacant properties or entering a property that is suspected of being a grow house. It's natural to think, "nothing will happen to me". However, it can and it does.

A female REALTOR® was attacked in Vancouver in June 2003, while showing a property to a man who identified himself as a potential buyer. The man had called the REALTOR® in advance to arrange a viewing of a specific property. When she called back to confirm the time, the call was unanswered. Later, she realized he likely gave her a payphone number. Once inside the home, the man pulled a knife and forced the REALTOR® onto the floor. He bound her hands and legs, gagged and blindfolded her. He stole her valuables and credit cards.

In August 2004, a female REALTOR® in Vernon, in a similar situation, tried calling to confirm an appointment, and got no answer. She became suspicious and called the RCMP. The RCMP sent a female member to the house posing as a REALTOR® and posted another member in a back room. The police found electrical tape in the man's pocket and he admitted to thoughts of holding and abducting the REALTOR®.

Although these examples involved female REALTORS®, men must take their personal safety just as seriously. In 2001, a Seattle-area REALTOR®, Mike Emert was brutally murdered at a house showing. His murder remains unsolved.

Test your S.I.Q.

Think you're pretty street savvy? Try this quiz and find out your S.I.Q.
(Safety Intelligence Quotient.)

1. Before entering an elevator you notice a person inside who immediately makes you uncomfortable. The two of you are alone.

What do you do?

- a. Enter the elevator anyway.
- b. Make conversation with the person to ease the tension.
- c. Walk away from the elevator toward the exit and return later.

2. You meet a prospect who desires to see a property, but he/she declines to give you personal information (such as a license plate number) claiming such information is too private.

- a. You explain that personal information is necessary and a policy of your office. Without the necessary information such as a license number, etc., you cannot attend the showing.
- b. You explain that personal information is a requirement, but agree to take the prospect to the showing and get the information later.
- c. You take the precaution of taking a colleague with you to the showing and explain on the way to the location that personal information will be required if he/she is interested in more showings.

3. You are alone with a client in a house, and he/she seems quite uninterested in learning anything about the property. You sense something 'fishy'.

- a. Continue with the showing and hope the potential client develops an interest in other properties.
- b. Find your way to the front door and tell the client you have another urgent appointment but you will be able to show them other properties another time.
- c. Call your office immediately and give your warning distress signal.

4. A client is friendly and seems genuinely interested in the property you showed. Later he/she asks personal questions about your life, your marital status, and where you live. How do you respond?

- a. Try to steer the subject away from yourself and on to the subject of real estate.
- b. Tell the client that you are available for further showings, but that you have a professional policy of not discussing your personal matters with clients.
- c. Use the client's attraction for you to your advantage in selling him a property, but let him/her think you are married.

5. Before or during a showing, you notice your prospective client seems very distracted and nervous. You are alone with the client, and feel uncomfortable and fearful.

- a. Yell 'Help' in a loud voice.
- b. Pretend you are calling home and phone your office to give them a distress warning call.
- c. Immediately make an excuse to return to your vehicle, lock yourself in, and call for assistance.

6. A client well known to you makes a physical approach that is inappropriate. What do you do?

- a. Since you know the client well, you are unafraid, and say nothing about it. You simply pull away and make an excuse to go home.
- b. You say that you are very flattered they find you attractive, but that physical touching is not right.
- c. You tell the client that you are not available for an intimate relationship, and you cannot work with them if they approach you physically ever again.

? Quiz answers are located inside the back cover of this guide.

Safety rules to live by

Your first responsibility is your personal safety. Feeling self-conscious or too impatient to take preventive steps is a mistake. For instance, ever find yourself facing an individual who makes you uncomfortable, even frightened? How about a client who just gave you the ‘willies’. Did you go with that person anyway? Were your first instincts wrong, or were you just lucky that day?

Next time, make an excuse and clear out. It’s not worth a moment of social awkwardness to put yourself at risk. What does it matter if you appear cautious and guarded? Your aim is to stay healthy and alive.

Remember: no one is ever entitled to harm or threaten you. A key factor in staying safe is to believe that you are in charge of your own safety. This means you use your common sense, and your instincts, and if necessary, your physical abilities to avoid problems and escape dangerous situations.

Two golden rules of personal safety.

1. Don’t assume anything.
2. Never take anything for granted.

Using your fear

Fear can be your enemy or your best defense. Fear can create uncomfortable feelings, both mental and physical: panicky sensations, pounding heart, sweaty palms. As a potential shield, the fear response is a warning from your brain to your nervous system that you could be in jeopardy. People have demonstrated great strength during times when they were the most fearful, due to the adrenaline rush in the body, and the effects it creates—the classical ‘fight or flight’ response.

It is also true that fear can work against you. If you are fearful and unresponsive, you are vulnerable, and less able to act when you need to. Learn how to use fear for your protection. Believe that you are strong, capable, and confident and you will more likely develop the skills you need to stay clear of trouble.

Taking a self-defense course will help you tremendously to develop those mental and physical skills. Most communities offer such courses on a regular basis. Contact a continuing education program through a local school district, or try a women’s or social service organization. Another way to increase your defence is to exercise. Both men and women can benefit by getting in shape at a neighbourhood gym.

Become street smart

When you are meeting up with a prospect, leave his license plate number and car description with your office.

Do not put personal information on your car/house/office keys such as your name, phone number, or address. If you leave your car at a garage for servicing, only leave the car key, not your home or office keys.

Never carry so much in your hands, such as purses, briefcases and documents, that you are unable to move or act freely and quickly. Have at least one hand free to protect yourself with—even if it is to open your car door, blow a whistle, or dial a phone for help.

Public meeting places can be safe to meet prospects, but make sure they are appropriate. Busy restaurants are far preferable than a quiet cocktail lounge, or parking lot.

Carry an extra cellular phone battery, invest in a car plug-in for your cell phone, or carry enough small change to make several emergency telephone calls.

Arrange a special distress signal with your colleagues, or family or friends. Use that signal whenever you feel nervous about a situation or person and use it without hesitation. It might be a certain phrase you have rehearsed that includes your location. Indicate you've contacted the police if you are threatened or attacked.

Strive to project **confidence**

Always try to carry yourself with confidence and purpose. Hold your head up, and be aware of your surroundings and who is around you. Often attackers are less likely to victimize someone if they think that person will fight back. Projecting confidence and strength, especially for females, could help prevent trouble.

Dress in comfortable clothing and sensible shoes. This enables you to run from a bad situation if necessary. Also, you are less likely to appear physically vulnerable that way.

Trust your intuition. If something feels wrong about a person or situation, there is usually a reason for it. Heed your instincts and err on the side of safety. This is the one piece of advice that nearly every police officer and self-defense expert emphasizes consistently.

Be guarded with strangers who question you about yourself, and your personal life. No one is ever entitled to get information about you unless you consent to it. Don't be tricked into saying more than is required to conduct your business with a person.

Screening prospects

When you are introduced to new clients, meet them in your office, preferably in the presence of an associate. Request to see their driver's license and photocopy it, noting the client's car make and license number. Ask them to complete a client identification form. Verify their identity. This may mean calling references and contacting the client's place of employment. (NOTE: Read about Privacy laws on page 15.)

Most importantly, let the client know that you are taking these steps. A would-be criminal will go to great lengths to dodge suspicion, and certainly does not want to risk being identified by your colleagues after committing an offence. So, the greatest value of these inquiries is to send the message to the would-be client that if he has intent to commit a crime, he will likely get caught—an effective deterrent.

If the client questions these measures, explain that it is standard protocol for all new clients. If he resists sharing this information, you may be dealing with a disreputable person. Any serious client should understand that there are guidelines in an agent/client relationship, and any reasonable person should respect them. Legitimate clients will not mind that you take these measures and if they do—it is a red flag.

Public vs. private places

You should be able to meet in a public place without too much concern. But make sure it's a highly public place in a safe and reputable neighbourhood. A restaurant is fine, but avoid bars, parking lots, and out of the way streets and dead-ends.

Avoid private meeting places unless there are plenty of other people there too. If you are going to a showing, use the precautions suggested in the Showing Properties section that follows. Don't assume that meeting at someone's home or office is necessarily safe ground. You might find yourself alone with a stranger, and unable to make an easy escape if need be.

Privacy guidelines

There are new protocols for collecting and using personal information in BC and Canada. Real estate boards require new measures to protect themselves from accusations of abusing third party information. Use your board resources and/or your office broker to find out your responsibilities as a REALTOR® in order that you comply with both the provincial and federal laws on privacy.

However, do not let privacy laws deter you from collecting a prospect's personal information that could save your life. Just know the rules and follow them.

Showing properties safely

✧ Before leaving the office to show properties, tell colleagues in the office what you are doing, your general schedule, and a list of the properties where you are going.

✧ Program speed dial on your cell phone for 911 and use it if you feel at risk.

✧ If you are showing several properties, phone your office occasionally to check in. If you are suspicious or fearful of someone you are with, use these calls as an excuse to return to the office immediately and say or do whatever is necessary to feel safe. Never be deterred by fear of social awkwardness or losing a potential client. It's not worth your personal safety.

✧ After hours, let a family member or co-worker know where you are going and what you will be doing—take someone with you if possible.

✧ Always use your own vehicle or take separate cars. Never ride in a prospect's vehicle.

✧ When showing a property, unlock the door and allow the prospect to enter first. Keep them in front of you throughout the showing. This will make it difficult for them if they intend to trap you.

✧ If an open house is held in an isolated or questionable location, hold the open house with another real estate agent.

✦ Ask a friend to join you at a showing if a client makes you somewhat uneasy.

✦ If you must hold one by yourself, have someone from your office call periodically.

✦ Keep the door locked and limit the number of visitors you admit at one time.

✦ Pre-plan escape routes from each level of a home, before you show it. When you show it, don't let yourself get into small rooms such as attics and basements.

✦ Let the client go first.

✦ Limit the amount of personal information you share about yourself with a client. Avoid talking about your personal life such as whom you live with, or whether you are single or married. Do not give out your home phone but offer your office or cell number instead.

✦ Ask prospects to sign a guest registry and request business cards from other salespeople.

✦ Don't advertise a listing as vacant.

Car security

- ❖ Keep your license plate number and car description with your office.
- ❖ Maintain your car in good working order so you won't experience unnecessary and dangerous breakdowns that leave you alone out on the road. Keep an extra quart of oil, a gallon of water, a flashlight, a car-jack, reflectors, flares, a blanket, matches, an umbrella, and a spare tire in your trunk, for emergencies.
- ❖ Never let your gas tank run lower than one-quarter to reduce the chance of being stranded.
- ❖ Always lock your car and take your keys with you, even if you plan to be away for just a moment.
- ❖ Always have your keys ready as you approach your car.
- ❖ Always check the front and back seats of the car before entering. If you suspect someone is hiding in your car, leave at once and call for help.
- ❖ Never leave valuables visible in the car. Lock everything in your trunk.
- ❖ Registration papers and garage door openers should be carried with you, not left in your car.
- ❖ Always drive with the doors locked and the windows rolled down just enough to let in fresh air, but not enough to allow someone to put their arm through.
- ❖ If you are in a questionable area when a tire goes flat, keep driving until you get to a safe place.

✦ Even when nothing is wrong with your car, someone may try to 'flag' you in an attempt to get you to stop. Simply wave a 'thank you' and drive to a safe location before getting out to check for possible problems.

✦ If you think another car is following you at night, instead of going home, drive to the nearest police or fire station for help. Try to get the license number and a description of the occupants.

✦ If your car breaks down, call for help and stay inside the vehicle with your doors locked and windows closed. If you are approached by someone who offers to help, roll down your window just enough to ask him or her to call a service station or motor vehicle association for help. Do not get out of the car when they are there.

✦ If someone approaches your car, and insists on helping and will not leave, begin to honk your horn in short blasts and don't stop until the individual leaves.

✦ If you notice a stranded motorist, note the location, vehicle make, and license number and call for help on your cell phone or at a public phone elsewhere.

✦ Never pick up a hitchhiker.

Office security

❖ Not all offices have safety policies for the people who work there. If not, request a meeting to discuss the issue and devise one with your colleagues.

❖ When working in the office alone, always keep the door locked, even during regular business hours.

❖ Most offices today have security systems. Make sure all co-workers know how to use your system and that it is always re-set when you leave.

❖ Consider installing a panic button in the reception area that triggers an alarm in the manager's office in the event a suspicious-looking person enters the office.

❖ When opening the office in the morning, have your key ready as you approach the front door.

❖ Always check the front and back door when entering and leaving.

❖ As you enter, if you suspect a burglary has taken place, leave at once and call the police. Do not look around, as the intruder could still be there.

❖ When you leave the office after dark, walk in pairs to the parking lot and see that you're both safely in your cars and the engines started up before driving away.

❖ Ensure the parking lot, building exterior and office are well lit.

❖ Before or after business hours, keep all office doors locked. If you are alone in the office and someone comes to the door for a copy of a real estate newspaper, use your discretion. It's preferable to slip the paper through the mail slot.

What to do when threatened

- ✦ Do not resist a robbery. Give up your purse or wallet without hesitation.
- ✦ Never resist a robber who has a weapon or is with other accomplices. Your chances of escape are small and you might only make the thief angry by fighting.
- ✦ Use a loud shriek alarm or a whistle on your key chain. If you ever need to use your personal alarm, make sure to throw it away from yourself and the attacker or the attacker may try to stop it from shrieking which will give you time to get away. (Check your alarm battery regularly.)

Fighting off an attack

✧ Run away quickly, if confronted by an attacker. Fight with any means you can. Make every effort not to be taken to a secondary location. Always run toward safety: a well-lit or busy street, an occupied home or office.

✧ Yell “Help” or “Fire.” This is one of the most effective defence strategies.

✧ If you have to face your attacker, always fight to win. This is no time to be timid. Use any weapon you can find to fend off the attack and escape. Even keys or an umbrella could help you. Be prepared to use anything you can to prevent or stop the attack, and then rapidly make your escape from the situation.

What if the worst happens?

✦ Note your assailant's height, weight, clothing, age, hair and eye colour and any distinguishing features and/or scars.

✦ If you are sexually assaulted, do not shower or change your clothes. Call 911 immediately.

✦ Report the details to the police immediately so that you can prevent the same crime from occurring again. By reporting a sexual assault you can receive necessary services, such as police protection, hospitalization and counselling.

✦ Find a support group. Contact local victims' support groups, community health agencies, or a rape crisis centre. Being sexually assaulted or mugged is a traumatic experience that can leave emotional scars if not dealt with through counselling and support.

Quiz Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. B and C both apply 4. B 5. C 6. C

For more information, check out additional REALTOR® safety materials on both the Fraser Valley Real Estate Board and British Columbia Real Estate Association home pages on REALTOR Link®.