

**CHANGING FEELINGS OF VULNERABILITY TO ASSAULT AND FEAR FOR
WOMEN IN THE RETAIL INDUSTRY**

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Personal Safety Concepts and Women's Self Defence

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The Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association(Vic) in conjunction with Catherine Schnell, of Personal Safety Concepts have provided an innovative and successful personal safety and self defence program free of charge to female members of the SDA for the past 6 years. Over 1600 women have participated in approximately seventy, 10 hour courses presented in both metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria over four week periods. In 1995 the project was awarded a Certificate of Merit in the Australian Violence Prevention Awards.

The SDA Personal Safety and Self Defence training program presented by Catherine Schnell provides a unique opportunity for women to develop confidence and reliable skills in dealing with harassment and other personal safety issues in the workplace. The program initiated by Pauline Burgess was supported by the SDA as a pro-active response to the introduction of 24-hour shopping and the fears expressed by female retail workers regarding their personal safety. The evaluations by participants and ongoing enthusiasm by women to participate in the courses, illustrates major changes in reducing participants level of fear, and their improved ability to respond to situations of danger or inappropriate behaviour with more confidence and assertive strategies.

Introduction and Video Presentation (6 mins):

A short representation of women participating in a SDA Self Defence program. The video provides an insight into the positive and empowering aspects of the physical practice, and the obvious enjoyment the women experience while learning and sharing self defence strategies.

Program background and organisation:

Speaker: Pauline Burgess - SDA

The SDA Personal Safety and Self Defence program has been available to female union members for the past six years in Victoria, during that time over 70 courses have been conducted, attended by more than 1600 women. Twelve courses are scheduled annually between February and November, 6 in Metropolitan areas and 6 in Country Victoria. Numbers are limited to 30 to provide an individualised quality program. In 1995 the program was awarded a Certificate of Merit in the Australian Violence Prevention Awards.

The program was established to meet the needs of female retail workers, as a pro-active response to extended trading hours including 24 hours supermarket trading hours, workplace harassment, holdups, assaults in carparks, fear of using public transport late at night or on weekends.

Accessing car parks in shopping centre complexes are issues of real concern to women employed in the Retail Industry.

Courses are conducted on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday evening in a venue near where union members are employed. The duration of the course is 10 hours over a four-week period, ie. four consecutive Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings of 2.5 hours each week. Usual starting time is 7pm finishing at 9.30pm. Earlier starting times of 6pm or 6.30pm are also possible depending on members needs in the area.

The venue is carefully chosen taking into consideration a carpark with adequate lighting and clear access to the building. We hire a variety of venues: Multi purpose rooms in Primary & Secondary

Colleges, Local Council public facilities and motel conference rooms. It is a requirement to have a carpeted space with heating in winter and access to other amenities.

The program is promoted through notices advertising the date and venue of each course which are circulated to stores via union organisers and union delegates. Articles including feedback, photos and availability of the courses to members is regularly published in the union journal. Members receive written confirmation of their enrollment in the course.

The SDA covers the cost of hiring the venue, Catherine Schnell's fees as instructor, travel and accommodation expenses. Personal Accident Insurance is paid for each member attending the course. There is no cost to the women attending our 10-hour courses.

The SDA's Women's Bureau is supported by the Victorian Branch Secretary Michael Donovan and State Council adequate resources are allocated each year for the continuation of the program. Approximately \$25,000 is spent by the SDA each year to fund the course program.

When situations arise as it did in Box Hill last year where a women was shot in the shopping centre we responded to members concerns and had a course up and running within 10 days of the incident.

The SDA and Catherine Schnell provide a safe environment where women come to share, learn, be empowered with knowledge and strategies to improve their personal safety skills. Keeping in mind that half of each group has experienced some level of assault, harassment, stalking, domestic violence or sexual harassment. On the last night certificates are presented, group and action photos taken, photos are then distributed to the individual work places of the members who attend the course.

Personal opinion sheets are distributed to members, as we value their feed back.

A sample of member's comments are as follows:

Forest Hill Area:

Amazing skills were learnt, that I never thought I could do. Also a lot of psychological skills were taught. Confidence to cope with day to day problems dealing with the public as well as being attacked.

Geelong Area:

The combination of theory and practical work was most beneficial. I now have the knowledge to hopefully avoid possible dangerous situations.

Ararat Area:

Very enjoyable course, common sense approach to Self Defence, a powerful feeling knowing you have the knowledge to protect and defend yourself. My children will be told and taught the basics.

Frankston Area:

The course was fantastic and we all learnt simple ways to handle difficult situations. I particularly liked the idea that we have a right to be in a certain place. I now feel more confident in myself and feel like I know what to do, if I was in a compromising situation as I have been in the past. Catherine is a fantastic teacher, she made the course comfortable, informative and fun.

In addition, as a response to the focus of strategic directions in urban planning the SDA welcomes planning strategies that take into account the needs of employees working in shopping centre complexes. With improved planning and a common sense approach to car parking, exit and entrance doors, lighting and security, much could be achieved to reduce the fear and anxiety of women as employees and consumers.

Self Defence & Personal Safety course structure and approach:

Speaker: Catherine Schnell – Personal Safety Concepts

I am appreciative of the opportunity to work with the SDA and Pauline in providing personal safety and self defence courses to SDA members. The collaborative partnership over an extended period has given me the opportunity to provide a program that continues to develop and specifically respond more effectively to the personal safety needs of women in the retail industry. The following talk provides an overview of the course content and my perspective and approach to the application of personal safety strategies including the use of physical self defence techniques. (The written paper provides a more extended version than that presented in the workshop)

Overview of course components and structure:

Discussion Topics:

- Myths and realities of assault. Exploration of existing and popular concepts of resistance. Effects of socialisation on women and girls.
- Awareness, recognising early warning signs. Safety and Preventative Strategies.
- Psychological and physical responses to harassing, intimidating and threatening behaviour.
- Issues of fear, anger, assertiveness, increasing confidence, self worth.
- Availability of resources and crisis services.
- Self defence and the Law.
- Success stories.

Technical Instruction:

- Importance of: maximising efficient use of movement, co-ordination, posture (body language), breathing and use of voice. Maintaining balance and breaking an attackers balance, timing and

- spontaneity of response. Development of awareness and use of positive and assertive reaction.
- Application of appropriate and effective responses to varying situations. Ie. From harassment (physical/verbal/mental) to varying forms of physical and sexual assault.
 - Development and focussing of power through striking ie. Punching, kicking and other blows using padded bags.
 - Identifying and targeting vulnerable striking points of an assailant.
 - Breaking grips, holds and grabs.
 - Use of evasive and protective blocks.
 - Techniques against weapon attacks.
 - Defences from a ground position. Learning to fall more safely if knocked or thrown to the ground.
 - Role plays – developing and combining techniques for various situations.

Safety is maintained for participants by:

- Participants practicing with mutual care and respect for each other, with particular regard to the level of experience and physical ability of other participants.
- Confidentiality and respect for an emotionally safe learning environment.
- Warm-Up/Warm-Down Regime: In accordance with safe exercise practices, avoiding bouncing and hyper-extension of spine and neck.

Issues in Personal Safety instruction and responses to fear of assault:

Self defence and personal safety strategies assist us in responding more effectively to threatening or harassing types of behaviour and to a range of physical assault situations. By having more accurate personal safety knowledge and reliable skills in self defence we are better prepared to respond positively to a crisis situation, lessening the possibility of confusion and panic. The intent of a self defence program is to build on the knowledge that we already have, for example to run or to 'talk our way out', it provides us with more options or choices in dealing with an assaultive incident.

Importantly our personal safety relies on utilising preventative and awareness measures that reduce the opportunity for a physical attack. These strategies form a vital part of our self defence response. In the event of being confronted with an attack situation then our aim is to respond in a manner which will stop the attack as quickly as possible and enable us to get away. Ideally we want to avoid a physical confrontation with an attacker/s by limiting their ability to push, grab or hit at us. It is only in a situation where an attacker has got a strong hold, or where we are cornered in a confined space that we should need to use self defence techniques which involve striking the attacker. An effective self defence response should not be totally reliant on physical fighting techniques, while some knowledge in this area is important, it is essential to develop the ability to assess a situation, to have the capacity to think as clearly and strategically as possible under stress, and be prepared to respond appropriately.

Knowledge and Awareness of Assault

To assist in developing effective and realistic ways of maintaining our personal safety it is necessary to have an accurate understanding of the realities of assault for the environment in which we live, work and socialise. This information is usually available from police and other relevant government sources, security personnel, friends and work colleagues, unions and professional associations, and to some degree the media. This information enables us to recognise potentially dangerous situations early and to develop behaviours and practices that limit our vulnerability.

The course provides a comprehensive analysis and discussion of safety concerns and problems associated with the design of shopping centres, particularly non-retail or non-customer focussed areas where female staff members feel vulnerable and often report incidents of serious assault and harassment. Other concerns relate to restrictions on staff parking, such as being told to park in remote, poorly lit and insecure areas. These issues need to be addressed at the design level where planning and management respond more positively to the security needs of centre staff, particularly in 24-hour shopping complexes. Course participants are given a variety of strategies on how to operate in insecure environments and to become a 'harder target' through awareness, their use of space, how to move and respond assertively to a potentially dangerous situation.

Assaults can occur in environments where we should feel safe such as in our home or somebody else's home, our car or at work. In these environments we can be taken by surprise as we may not be aware, or as ready to respond as we might be if attacked in a public place. Assaults on women in environments such as the home and work are often perpetrated by someone that she knows and feels she should be able to trust. In considering who the attacker might be, it is important that we do not assume that the attacker is always a stranger. Our self defence strategies must also prepare us to deal with someone we know who may intend to harm us.

When referring to assault we should also consider other forms of behaviour which often precedes an attack such as menacing or intimidating behaviour, harassment including sexual harassment, inappropriate comments or physical conduct, rage, anger, swearing and threats to injure, rape or kill. Physical assault includes sexual assault such as indecent assault and rape. It is important that assault is viewed in this wider context, or as a continuum that includes more minor less threatening behaviour through to serious assault which can result in serious injury or death.

Situations of Sexual Harassment

Discussion around sexual harassment and intimidation issues for women in the retail industry is a major focus in the early part of the four-week course. Perpetrators can be other work colleagues but very often women report that customers while working are a problem, and when in other sections of large retail centres such as when coming to, or leaving work or during breaks.

Sexual harassment is unwanted and unwelcomed sexual attention. Sexual harassment is an act of aggression and an abuse of power. Behaviour and actions which constitute sexual harassment includes touching, comments or questions about a person's sex life; suggestive behaviour, staring, wolf whistles and jokes; offensive phone calls, suggestive pictures and objects; sexual

propositions; indecent assault, exposure and rape.

Women often feel intimidated and fearful in responding to harassment, often they blame themselves and feel that they are in some way responsible. As in other assault situations it is important to view sexual assault as a continuum ie. that 'mild' forms of harassment can be a precursor to a planned sexual assault such as rape. It is important to respond to sexual harassment in a positive and assertive manner with the intention of stopping the actions or behaviour of the perpetrator. Such as:

- Trust your intuition and 'gut feeling'.
- Set limits on inappropriate behaviour or comments and unwanted attention.
- Move away from the person (distance).
- Attempt to defuse the situation ie. don't use insults or 'put-downs' as this may escalate the level of abuse or violence.
- NAME THE BEHAVIOUR that offends you... *"Take your hands of my... I find that joke/comment offensive...."*
- Ensure you back up verbal defence with POSITIVE, STRONG BODY LANGUAGE, ie. use eye contact (not threatening), clear voice...
- State the consequences if they don't stop.
- Report the incident. (a range of options such as the union are advised)

Women often report an improved ability to deal with harassment more assertively and confidently following the sessions. The women also report a significant reduction in the level of harassment they experience ie. past perpetrators cease or the women feel more comfortable to act earlier to inappropriate behaviour.

Assessment of the situation and strategies to deal effectively with the effects of fear.

It is essential to trust your intuition or 'gut feeling' and to assess the early warning signs to a possible attack. Develop the ability to set limits on inappropriate behaviour, or behaviour that is unwelcomed or makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Early recognition of a potentially assaultive situation enables you to act sooner in a manner which will maintain your safety, avoiding the possibility of a more dangerous physical confrontation.

Often the effects of fear and confusion can lead to panic or, worse still, not acting at all, fear can be extremely debilitating both physically and emotionally. Fear is a natural response by the body to a direct or indirect threat. The physical responses to fear include increased heart rate, sweaty palms etc., this is the body preparing itself to fight or run and can assist us in our ability to react quickly and effectively. 'Freezing' is associated with a lack of knowledge or plan of action of how to respond to the situation, our thoughts become confused, and both our mind and body become 'frozen'. This is a state that an attacker most often relies upon in their victim, it is predictable, and generally a person in a state of fear poses little risk to the attacker.

Breathing is a powerful means by which we can begin to take control of our fear and use it more

positively. Breathing helps us to think more clearly, and allows us to use the body more powerfully and most importantly use our voice. We can also use mental tools which help us challenge the 'what ifs' or negative self talk and change our fear into anger. However, the anger we use is not that which is an uncontrolled rage, but rather an anger that provides the mental energy to respond positively and appropriately. Another powerful mental strategy is the use of positive visualisation in dealing with our fears and in pre-planning how we could respond to an assault situation.

Physical Strategies

In an immediate attack situation consider what options are available that will enable you to get away to somewhere safe. It is vital to maintain distance (at least 2 meters) between yourself and the potential attacker, remember you should be acting on your early warning signs, so if they are close, or attempt to get close to you move away, always be prepared to move. Your feet should be apart with knees slightly bent for better stability and ability to evade quickly if the attacker lunges or attempts to strike at you. Use your arms and hands extended forward, for both protection, readiness to strike and to reinforce your verbal self defence.

Verbal self defence strategies combined with positive body language can assist in defusing or de-escalating some situations where, for example, anger or frustration are involved. Accurate assessment of the situation helps us in choosing strategies that are more appropriate. Other verbal strategies involve using a loud, clear voice and short statements like "*Stay away from me*"... "*No!*"... "*Let go*" "*Stop*" etc. Using a whistle in an outdoor situation can also assist in distracting the attacker enabling you to escape, and may attract attention.

Physical striking techniques are necessary if the person has a hold of us, or we are trapped in a confined space ie. bathroom, or fighting from a ground position. The primary vulnerable points on an assailant's body are eyes, nose/mouth area, throat and groin. Other most vulnerable vital points include stomach (using an elbow strike), shin/foot and knee joint. The purpose of striking techniques is to distract the attacker from their grip momentarily so that you can effect an escape, you must be prepared to use all your force and commitment and most importantly be prepared to hurt someone.

Many people, in particular most women, find the notion of hurting someone repugnant and difficult to accept, particularly when it is required to hurt someone on their own behalf, if it were to protect their child, then women often state that they are prepared to kill. Many women also believe that they do not have the capacity to physically resist an attack. If we directly challenge an attacker's weight and strength then someone smaller or lighter than the attacker will probably not succeed. Therefore physical strategies must enable us to maximise the full use of our physical power (for women this is in the hips and legs) and use techniques to break free, which attempt to 'go around' and do not attempt to directly challenge the assailant's strength and weight. For example, trying to pull away from a grab to the arms is usually not successful and often results in being pulled or pushed over, or losing balance and falling; while twisting and turning movements from the hips and legs help us to maintain our balance and break free, utilising strikes to vital points in order to distract the attackers attention. Of course to fully understand our own abilities

to physically resist it is important to learn and practice from time to time striking techniques and other strategies to deal with a variety of attack situations.

When striking we can use whatever objects we may have ordinarily at hand ie. keys, pen, umbrella, torch, bag etc. to assist us. We also need to be aware of our own body weapons which include our finger/hands and fists, elbows, knees, legs, feet, our head and teeth. Always combine your movement and strikes with loud shouting this helps us to be more powerful, can be distracting in itself, and ensures we are breathing. As soon as you break free move away as quickly as possible – escape.

Currently the options available for women to deal with rape are to attempt to talk the attacker out of their intentions; run away if possible; to comply or submit as a means of survival. These strategies of course are still available, however there are other options available through effective self defence strategies which are based on what women can do, not what they cannot!

Women do not have to be physically stronger to effectively deal with an attack situation. Instead women require the opportunity to gain knowledge and to learn physical strategies which assist them in feeling more confident and able to take control of a situation. It is essential that these strategies reflect a woman's physical capacity, and that they be relevant to women's experience of violence. Some form of practice is essential as most women lack experience in causing physical harm, and they are often not accustomed to the varying forms in which physical assault occurs.

A woman's vulnerability to sexual assault is reinforced by expectations about passivity and her inability to resist physically and thereby cause any harm to the attacker. A surprise and committed physical response, which intends to hurt the assailant, is more likely to be successful because it is unexpected. It is preferable to act sooner by trusting and valuing your early warning signs, thereby not enabling the attacker to get close which may result in the necessity of contending with his weight and strength in a physical confrontation.

Concluding comments:

The SDA Personal Safety and Self Defence courses are structured to provide participants with a 'journey' of self discovery of personal power and ability to take control of circumstances where their personal safety and well being may be compromised. The course provides the opportunity for lively discussion of important issues where women can challenge myths about personal safety and their beliefs in what they are really capable of doing. A significant part of the program provides women with the opportunity to practice and 'discover' what they 'can do' physically. Participants report that they gain a great deal of confidence in learning that they can hit hard without hurting themselves or feeling inadequate, which is often the experience of women while growing up. An essential aspect is the development of skills that increase confidence to deal effectively and directly with inappropriate and harassing behaviour, the ability to break free from being grabbed and knowing that they are capable of hurting someone if necessary.

The provision of the courses through the SDA at no-cost to participants provides a pro-active and positive response to concerns expressed by women in the retail sector to the introduction of 24-hour trading, and other personal safety issues such as workplace harassment. The structure and organisation of the courses enables women to more easily access a program that specifically responds to the needs of women in the retail sector.