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Practice Report

Environmental and Personal Safety: No Vision Required

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Personal safety is an important issue for all people, regardless of their physical capabilities. For people with visual impairments (that is, those who are blind or have low vision), real concerns exist regarding their vulnerability to crime and their greater risk of attack (David, Kollmar, & McCall, 1998; Gish, 1977; Pava, 1994). With a nationwide increase in crime in the United States, "Three out of every four visually impaired people will be, or have been, assaulted in their lifetimes"—a figure that is 15 times the figure for assaults for the general population (Collinsworth, 2001). Welbourne, Lipschitz, Selvin, and Green (1983) reported that 50% of the women who were congenitally blind who participated in their study had experienced at least one incident of forced sexual contact. Some reasons for the greater physical and sexual assaults on people with visual impairment include

such considerations as impaired mobility, high visibility, inability to identify their assailants or to use visual cues,

less access to safety precautions, the use of alternative forms of transportation, and the occasional need for assistance from sighted persons when traveling independently. (Pava, 1994, p. 105)

Regardless of the statistics, many people with visual impairments perceive themselves to be more visible, vulnerable, and at risk for attack (Pava, Bateman, Appleton, & Glascock, 1991).

Fear of a personal attack may have negative effects on orientation and mobility (O&M) instruction if a person is afraid to be out in public or to travel independently. O&M instructors promote travel that is as efficient and independent as possible, given their students' needs and desires. However, a key issue that pervades O&M instruction is safety—both environmental safety (commonly recognized as one basis for O&M instruction) (Hill & Ponder, 1976; LaGrow & Weesies, 1994) and personal safety (David et al., 1998; Park-Leach, 1994). O&M instructors help their students to understand environmental safety without vision. Personal safety is certainly possible without vision as well (Bozeman, 1994, 1998). Addressing both issues of safety may enable O&M instructors to teach their students more effectively.

Many people who are visually impaired assume that vision is required for effective personal safety; however, confidence, preparation, and body/spatial awareness may be the solutions to avoiding or handling an attack (Gleser & Brown, 1986; Park-Leach, 1994).

The objective of self-defense is to prevent physical contact and to preclude an attack. In that respect, prevention is also a key to personal safety. One must know how to avoid becoming a victim (Bozeman, 1994, 1998).

Pava (1994) reported that women with visual impairments who were surveyed to determine their perceived risk of assault said that they had greater confidence about avoiding or handling an attack after they attended a seminar on self-defense. Similarly, teenagers with visual impairments who attended a series of self-defense workshops (1999–2002) reported greater levels of personal confidence when traveling independently after the workshops (Pava, 1994).

The increase in confidence may be a critical component of being prepared and may mean the difference in these teenagers' personal and travel safety. Confidence is known to affect body language, line of travel, head position, and general posture—areas that are commonly addressed during O&M instruction (Rosen, 1997).

Addressing personal safety in O&M instruction

Environmental safety, or safely negotiating traffic and obstacles while moving purposefully through the community, is a common goal of O&M instruction and includes training to promote an understanding of spatial concepts and relationships. Personal safety

includes knowledge and awareness of one's surroundings, which requires an understanding of spatial relationships and the look of confidence and competence that may deter a criminal from making one a victim (Bozeman, 1994, 1998). O&M instruction may easily include both aspects of safety.

Body and spatial awareness: The keys

Most self-defense techniques do not require vision (since the attack is frequently from behind, and it is usually dark); however, body and spatial concepts are critical. If the victim cannot see the attacker, situational control lies in the victim knowing the location of the attacker for escape and the attacker's vulnerable body areas if the victim chooses to fight. Therefore, knowledge of body image/spatial relationships (how the parts relate to each other, to the whole, and to objects outside the body) is necessary (Bozeman, 1994, 1998).

Body image develops first within the self and progresses to relationships within the body (for example, left or right), to the self related to other objects, and to the relationship of objects to objects (Skellenger & Hill, 1997). If the victim has poor knowledge of his or her own body, the effective and quick location of the attacker's body is difficult.

The O&M instructor is in a unique position to incorporate personal safety into O&M instruction by

comprehensively teaching all areas of spatial awareness. Furthermore, teaching to the highest level possible for the person who is visually impaired will usually include thorough training in the areas of spatial understanding. Skellenger and Hill (1997) noted that body image is also related to motor development and balance because spatial understanding and concepts are developed through movement.

Motor development, balance, gait, and posture are other areas that are refined by the O&M instructor and are equally critical to personal safety. To be able to move quickly and to be stable on one's feet depend on good muscle control and balance. Considering the dual aspects of safety (environmental and personal), the O&M instructor can provide instruction in both areas to achieve the goals and outcomes that are necessary for safer, more independent travel.

An O&M instructor usually works with a student to expand backup plans and alternative routes. With personal safety in mind, the instructor can help the student formulate alternative routes if an unsafe situation is detected. While strategies for personal safety may be included in O&M instruction, integrating a self-defense course, workshop, or ongoing class may be a good idea for the student, if desired.

Prevention strategies

The best self-defense is to avoid becoming a victim.

Self-defense techniques include prevention by effective situational control as a critical component, with an emphasis on body language, communication, route planning, and general safety tips. Self-defense techniques do not require vision—only the conceptual, spatial, and physical ability to perform the maneuvers and adaptations when necessary (Bozeman, 1994, 1998). Self-defense is just that—defense. Actual physical contact should be avoided and used only as a last resort.

The following are tips that may be useful in preventing a dangerous situation:

- Walk confidently. Body language/posture is extremely important when criminals are choosing targets. Walk erect with the head held up.
- Use effective communication skills. Know how to solicit aid, to request and receive directions, and to refuse persistent offers of unwanted assistance.
- Use appropriate route planning, knowledge of surroundings, and alternate routes (do not set a pattern).
- Always have a bailout system or backup plan. Know where to go for help in the area of travel.
- Yell "Fire!" rather than "Help!" to attract attention.

- Being prepared is more important than being physically strong.

Here are some general safety reminders:

- Do not carry large amounts of money.
- Belt bags are safer than purses.
- Carry a wallet in the inside pocket of a jacket or a shirt pocket, rather than in a hip pocket.
- Carry a purse on the side of the body facing the street.
- Walk in the middle of the sidewalk, rather than close to buildings or the street, when possible (unless following the building line).

If attempts to prevent an assault fail, and the person becomes involved physically with an attacker, he or she needs to remember to defend only his or her life and the lives of loved ones—things can be replaced! During an attack, the person needs to make as much noise and attract as much attention as possible. Noise can be a valuable weapon. Attracting attention may be helpful for persons who know that they would not fight back in any situation, which makes prevention the only defense (Bozeman, 1994, 1998).

Awareness of personal abilities, speed, and agility are important if escape is needed. Planned, alternate routes (a common part of O&M) can incorporate this

information and are conducive to travel and personal safety, as well.

If an unwanted physical contact occurs, the victim needs to use any available means to get away from the attacker. Items that are useful weapons may be a handbag, backpack, or cane. Although a long cane may prove flimsy for defense purposes, any item that can be used to strike the attacker may assist in freeing the victim. The goal of physical defense is to inflict the amount of discomfort needed to be free from the attacker (using whatever means available) and to move as quickly as possible to safety. For some, the better alternative may be to drop the cane or any items being carried and use the body as a weapon and a tool of defense. The body can serve as a weapon for:

- striking the attacker with the hands, fists, knees, feet, elbows, fingers, and head;
- biting;
- pinching; or
- yelling to attract attention.

According to Bozeman (1994, 1998), if an individual is interested in learning self-defense, he or she should enroll in a standard (or modified) self-defense course to practice and integrate self-defense techniques. Self-defense techniques should be demonstrated and taught in a workshop to be understood and useful and to

prepare the individual effectively. The effective control of weapons, such as a gun or knife, may require some amount of vision and requires expert teaching and a lot of practice. (Weapons and self-defense techniques are not discussed in this article because of the degree of practice and refinement that is needed.) Physical contact with an attacker who has a weapon would, most likely, involve some injury to the victim. The key is to avoid receiving a wound to a vital (for life) area of the body (neck, chest, or abdomen) (Bozeman, 1994, 1998).

Implications for practice

The O&M instructor teaches people with visual impairments in such areas as concepts, problem solving, the use of sensory information, environmental negotiation, effective communication, body language, and backup plans. Competence in these areas facilitates travel that is environmentally safe, efficient, and as independent as possible. Many strategies, also common to personal safety, are taught in self-defense classes; the aim is to avoid becoming a victim and to handle a physical attack as the last resort. The same techniques (the use of sensory information, a confident posture, effective communication, backup plans, and alternative routes) are key areas of O&M and foundations for personal safety. Moreover, many self-defense prevention strategies do not require vision and are based on skills that are commonly stressed in O&M instruction. That personal safety and O&M are related

is evident. Integrating the two disciplines may be beneficial to improve the motor abilities, spatial awareness, confidence, and overall safety of people with visual impairments.

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