



SAFETY APP CONSIDERATIONS FOR SURVIVORS OF ABUSE



There are many smartphone and tablet applications (apps) available that attempt to address the issues of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Some of these apps offer general information to raise awareness while some provide screening tools to help identify whether abuse is occurring and provide resources for help. Other apps are personal safety tools to inform others if you are in danger and need assistance.

Your devices and the apps on them offer many opportunities for increasing access to information, resources, and assistance. However, how you use your devices and the information that's accessed or stored on them can create safety and privacy risks. Survivors often need to take into account their safety and privacy when communicating and accessing information; this is true when determining which app to download and use.

The following is a checklist of questions and considerations to go through when looking at using any of these available apps.

Does the abusive person have physical access to your phone?

If you're living with or are physically around the abusive person, they could have access to your device to monitor your activities. Consider using a passcode on the device to limit their access. If doing that feels unsafe, consider using an app that allows you to password protect it so the specific content within or about the app may be less accessible. If the person regularly forces you to give them access to the phone, consider accessing the content on a different device that they don't have access to.

You can delete the app after each use, but note that even if you delete an app from your device, the history of the download will still exist on the device, within any backups or synced records, or your App Store/Google Play store account. If you think the abuser is monitoring this information, consider accessing the information on a different device and on a different account.

Do you think that the abuser is monitoring your phone activity, even without having physical access to the phone?

With the right spyware tool, it's possible for an abuser to monitor all device activity without needing constant access to it. Generally, the person would need physical access to your phone to install the spyware, but once installed the person can monitor all activity remotely through their computer or phone. If you think that this is happening, consider using a "safer" device, meaning one the abuser hasn't had any access to, to look up resources and information.

Does the app do what it says it will do?

It is critical to test an app before relying on it, especially if you're interested in using a personal safety app that shares your location information with trusted individuals and/or police in the case of an emergency. Unfortunately, during our tests of many of these apps, several failed to send the correct location information or any information at all. Be sure to test out an app before relying on it for immediate safety assistance. Calling 000 directly may be the quickest and more effective way to get help in an emergency. When calling, be sure to provide as much information about your specific location as possible.

Safety app considerations for survivors of abuse

www.techsafety.org.au (or www.wesnet.org.au/safetynet) • ☎1-800-WESNET • ✉ [techsafety\[at\]wesnet.org.au](mailto:techsafety[at]wesnet.org.au)
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Some apps provide a list of resources based on your state, county, postcode, or GPS location. If the app isn't providing resources that are geographically close to you, call **1-800-RESPECT (1-800-737-732)** or a state-specific hotline to see if there are additional resources closer to you. Some of the apps we tested didn't always pull up the closest programs available or all of the local resources available.

Does the app ask you for personally identifying information such as your name, gender or other identifying characteristics? Are you required to provide this information in order to use the app or is it optional?

If you are uncomfortable sharing your personal information and the app isn't clear on how this information will be used and protected, then either opt-out of sharing it or use another app that doesn't ask for that information.

Sometimes apps will ask for your postcode or want access to your location to locate resources in your area. Be aware that if the app is also asking for your age, gender, and other demographic information, this information can identify you when it is combined with your location. Only share what you are comfortable sharing.

Some apps that are meant to help collect evidence of abuse and stalking ask for a lot of identifying information, including descriptions of you and the abuser to share with authorities in the case of an emergency. Read the app's privacy policies (it is either within the app or on the app's website) to learn about their data collection policies and about how your information will be used and shared. This is your information and the decision on when, how, and to whom it is shared should remain with you. A company should only share this information to comply with legal requirements; bear in mind, however, that this could include a subpoena by your abuser's lawyer to get information about you, so be sure to read the privacy policy.

Does the app ask you to always have your location settings turned on?

For privacy and safety reasons, it is best to not keep your device's location on at all times. Abusers may attempt to misuse your phone's location information in order to track you. Many apps will want you to keep your device's location on at all times so they can use that information, either to provide a service through the app or to collect usage information for the developers.

Consider the type of app you are using and your primary reason for using it. If you are using an app to find local resources and the app uses your location information to look up local programs, then turn on your location settings only when you are doing that research. Turn off the location feature after you are done to preserve your privacy and safety. If you are using a personal safety app that immediately lets someone know that you need assistance, you will want to keep the location settings on since it will be needed to share your most accurate location information. However, if you use this only when you are walking home from work/school, for example, then you can turn on your location during those times and otherwise keep it off.

Does the app provide information that is applicable to you?

Many apps provide excellent information or tools for survivors, such as screening tools to help identify abuse. However, several of these apps are developed for specific populations, such as a university or TAFE students. Although some of the information can be helpful, the resources listed may be specific to students only. If you are looking for resources and information that is more applicable to you, contact the **1-800-RESPECT (1-800-737-732)** or a state hotline.

Does it look like the app was created from a reliable source with expertise in domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking?

Many apps have been created by or in consultation with anti-violence experts and the information provided is recommended for survivors of abuse. Some apps, however, were not created by organisations with this expertise and may offer information or suggestions that aren't recommended. Always trust your instincts and do what feels safest for you. Know that you are not to blame for the abuse that someone else is perpetrating against you. If you see something in an app that you aren't sure about, ring **1-800-RESPECT (1-800-737-732)** or a state-based hotline.

If the app allows you to communicate or share information with another person or multiple people, have you discussed this and tested it with that person? Do you feel that the communication method is a safe option for you?

Many of the apps directed towards survivors of abuse allow for communication with another person or several persons. This is either done through the app itself or through the phone. Consider what is most helpful and safe for you when using these features. For example, some apps allow you to message a trusted individual with information about your safety or with evidence of the abuse. If the message is sent through your phone's default text messaging system and not through the app, the abuser could then see this by looking through the sent messages. Think through what will work best for you and your individual safety needs.

Personal safety apps are meant to allow the user to quickly send a message to one or several trusted individuals to let them know you need assistance in an emergency. Be sure to let anyone you list as a trusted individual know what it could mean if they receive a message from you. Test these apps with your friends and family to make sure that the apps work and that your friends and family will recognize what the message will look like. Talk to them about what they can do and the best and fastest way for them to respond.

Some apps provide tools for collecting and documenting evidence of abuse that can then be shared from the app with a trusted individual or authorities. If using an app for this purpose, talk with local support workers and/or police to ensure that the collection of that information and the communication of it to someone in authority is a process that is appropriate and accepted. Also discuss with them other options of documenting the abusive behaviours – something that can help build your case if you choose to go report to police.

Downloading and using apps that were created for survivors of abuse is just one thing you can do. They can give you more information, resources, and ways to access help. However, they may not prevent or stop the abuse. It is important that, in conjunction with using these apps as a tool to educate yourself or help you manage what's happening, you also talk to an expert on domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. Apps can be very helpful, but always trust your own instincts and feelings.