Emergency safety apps: which one is right for me?

There are many emergency safety apps for smartphones and wearable devices (sometimes also called personal safety alarms) available for victims of abuse. They generally fall into two categories: (1) services that notify a select group of individuals that you have an emergency, and (2) services that notify emergency responders that you need help. Because there are so many available, this article explains what each of these types of apps/services do, the limitations of these emergency safety apps, and things to think about before using an emergency safety app as part of your safety plan. In most circumstances, simply dialling 000 in an emergency or your emergency contact may be the simplest and best thing to do.

Apps that notify emergency contacts

How it works

The most common emergency safety apps are the kind that notify a group of individuals (of your choosing) that you are in trouble or need assistance. The specific features vary but in most cases, this is how the app works.

1. Download the app onto the mobile smartphone.
2. Enter your chosen contacts into the app. (Some apps require a certain number of contacts while some apps only require one contact.)
3. During an emergency, activate the app and it will notify the contacts that you require assistance. On some apps, the contacts will also receive your location.

Some apps have additional features, including the ability to select which person to call or a count-down feature where the contacts are only notified if you don't tap on the app after a certain number of seconds or minutes after you've activated it.

For some apps, both you and the contacts you enter need to have downloaded the app for it to work. For other apps, you need to enter the emergency contact's phone number or email address and the notification will be sent via SMS or email.

An example of this type of app is SafeTag.

Benefits

Emergency contact apps can be helpful if you want to be able to contact someone without dialling a phone number or typing out a text message. Many of the apps will automatically notify the emergency contact once the app is activated. Other benefits depend on the additional features the safety app provides. Such as the ability to pre-activate the emergency alarm in case something should happen. In other words, you activate the emergency alarm and if you don't deactivate it within a certain period, the emergency notification will be sent to your contacts. This might be helpful if you anticipate a risk to your safety and want to prepare.

What to consider

Talk to your contacts first

It's important for you to think about who your emergency contacts are and whether they will know how to respond to an emergency notification. Some apps will allow you to customise your emergency message in advance, so it could say something like, "On a date. Not going well. Come and get me." Other apps have default messages that you cannot edit, and may be something like, "Your friend needs help." Even someone who knows you well will need some kind of context to know what to do. Make sure you know how the app works, and what type of message your contacts will get. Talk to your contacts about the circumstances in which you may use the app, and what you want them to do if they receive an emergency notification.

How will your emergency contact be notified?

For some apps, both you and your emergency contact person need to download the app for it to work properly. For other apps, you enter your contact person's phone number and/or email address and they are notified by SMS or email. Again, talk to your contact person first. If they are notified via email and they only check their email once or twice a day, they might receive your emergency message much later than when you sent it. Or if your contact will be somewhere that doesn't have mobile service and they can't receive SMS, they may not get your message.

Make sure the location services work

For many of these apps, one of the benefits is that it will let the contact person know your location. For this to work, you will need to have your location services turned on. Depending on the type of phone you have, you might be able to turn on location for just the safety app, or you may need to have location services turned on for all functions and apps on your phone. If turning off location services on your phone is one of your safety strategies or something you always do for privacy reasons, this may prevent the app from working the way it needs to.

Would it be easier to just ring someone?

Consider whether it would be easier to just ring someone via speed dial if you need to contact them immediately. While an emergency contact app might sound appealing, think through how you would use it, under what circumstances, and whether it would be helpful to you.

Apps that notify emergency responders

How it works

Another type of emergency safety app will notify a call centre, who will then contact 000 on your behalf if you have an emergency. Often called 'personal safety alarms,' these services can come as

a mobile app, an app that you download onto a smartphone, or a wearable device, such as a a card, bracelet, or necklace you wear.

Generally, this is how these apps work:

1. If you need to ring 000, you either tap an emergency alarm on the mobile app OR you press a button on the wearable device.
2. Once activated, a call centre is notified of the alarm.
3. The call centre may ring you back (if it's a mobile app) or open a 2-way connection between you and the call centre (if it's a wearable device) to learn about your emergency and connect you with 000, or ring 000 on your behalf.
4. OR some call centres may automatically ring 000 on your behalf and inform emergency responders that one of their customers (you) need emergency assistance.

Some of the apps/services allow you to share personal information with the call centre when you set up the service so that if you activate the emergency alarm, they will have a sense of what the issue is likely to be. Another feature that some of these apps/services offer is the ability to track your location via the mobile app or the wearable safety alarm.

Examples of these apps include SafeT Card, CJ Securities.

Benefits

Wearable personal safety alarms can be helpful if you worry that you won't be able to get to a phone in an emergency. Wearables are intended to be worn at all times, so you always have it on you.

Since most of the wearables and mobile apps track your location, if you activate the alarm but are unable to speak or communicate, the call centre may automatically contact 000 on your behalf, and share your location along with any additional personal information you previously provided to the call centre.

Some wearable devices, when activated, will open a phone line between the device and the call centre. It can be set so that it is a one-way line, where the call centre hears everything (and record what is happening) but they can't communicate back. Or it can be set so that it's two-way, where you and the call centre can speak with each other via the wearable.

What to consider

It will always be best to ring 000 yourself

If you are in an emergency, can speak, and can ring 000 yourself, it is best for you to make the call yourself. When you call, you will be able to speak with a 000-emergency operator, explain exactly what's going on, where you are, what type of service you need, and get information about when emergency response teams will arrive. When possible, direct communication is always better than explaining it to a third-party call centre, who then relays it to 000 or for a third party to ring 000 without any of contextual information about exactly what is happening to you.

Moreover, it might be faster to simply dial 000 on your phone than to find the app and activate the emergency distress button. Most phones allow you to make emergency calls without even unlocking the phone, in less than two taps.

Not all call centres are the same

Some call centres are trained to respond specifically to emergency situations. They will have appropriate protocols and processes to connect you with emergency responders. However, some call centres may not have the appropriate training or ability to connect you with emergency responders. If you want to use these services, get as much information as you can about the call centres' protocols and processes for responding to domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking victims.

Privacy

One of the potential benefits of this type of app is that you can share personal information with the call centre so that they have background information about you when they contact emergency services on your behalf. Being able to provide emergency responders with additional information can be helpful, especially if you are unable to speak to them yourself. However, consider whether you are comfortable sharing personal information with an unknown party. Although privacy laws in Australia limit when companies may share personal information, for some survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, the details of why they may need emergency assistance might be something they don't want shared in a database accessible by employees of the service provider company. It is often difficult to find out whether a company has good security in place for the data they hold or any previous history of breaching privacy obligations.

It doesn't guarantee faster or better response by police

Keep in mind that emergency personal safety alarms are meant to offer you additional ways to ring 000 when you need help. You should not consider these alternatives to ringing 000 yourself. In addition, these services don't do anything more than just connecting you with emergency services. It doesn't necessarily mean that the police will respond faster or in a better way.

Location tip

If you are concerned that when you ring 000, you may not know your location to tell the emergency operator, you can always open a Maps app on your phone to find out where you are. Or you can download the Emergency+ app, which is created to tell you your location and offer easy ways to ring 000, state emergency services, or the non-urgent police assistance line.

Keep in mind that your location information may be affected by the settings on your phone (if you have location services turned off on your smartphone, it will not work) and where you are (if you are in an area that have limited service, your location information may not be accurate).

How to choose emergency safety apps
and incorporate it into a safety plan

With so many different apps, and the fact that some of them duplicate what you can already do with your phone, how do you decide if you need an app, and if so, which one to choose? Below are more tips on whether you need an emergency safety app and how you can make it work for you.

Does the app/service meet a need or a gap?

If you have a smartphone, you can already do most of what the emergency safety apps promise to do: which is ring, text, or email a contact or ring 000. Moreover, it's probably better for you to make that call or text yourself, so you can communicate directly with your emergency contact or with 000.

However, some of the additional features of these apps, such as automatically contacting your emergency contacts with a pre-written message or ringing 000 when you cannot speak or have access to a phone, can be helpful as part of your safety strategies. If these additional features are what you need, then a safety app can be useful.

Does the app/service create additional safety risks?

Whether it is a mobile app that is downloaded onto your smartphone or a wearable device like a necklace or tag consider if it will create any safety risks. Each survivor will have different safety risks because it will depend on what is happening in their lives. For some survivors, if the abusive person knows that she is planning on reaching out for help, this could cause the abusive behaviour to escalate. For some abusers, knowing that the survivor has additional options to reach out for help or evidence of their behaviour, it might cause them to stay away. If it is more dangerous for you to use any of these services, strategise on how you can access help in a safer way.

Do you already use something that does what the app/service does?

The other thing to consider is if you already use or have something that that does what the app/service promises to do. Some smartphones (specifically the Samsung Galaxy and iPhones) have emergency features built into the phone that will ring 000 and also notify emergency contacts. They aren't exactly the same as some of the emergency safety apps, but they are similar.

Another issue to consider is that if you don't use an app very often, you may forget how to use it when an emergency occurs. It's important that if you need it, you can quickly get to it. If it's something you already use all the time, such as using the phone function on your phone or typing out a message, even if it takes a couple more taps, it still might be faster than opening a rarely used app and trying to figure out how it works during an emergency.

Did you test the app?

Apps can be buggy, faulty, or simply not work as described. If you are using an app for your safety, test it to make sure that it works the way you expect it to. Sometimes the description of how an app works is quite different to the experience of using it. Many of these apps use your location. However, location accuracy depends on a wide range of factors, including where you are, the settings on our phone, and how well your phone is accessing the mobile network.

If possible, test it in an environment that will be closest to when you think you'll need it. For example, if you think you'll need it while traveling to a certain area, test it in that area to see if it will work the way it's supposed to.

Know how the app works. Go through the app, look at the settings, and test the features. Don't be afraid that you're sending emergency alerts to your contacts – tell them that you're testing the app and they can ignore it. It's better to send some false emergency alerts while testing it than to rely on it in an actual emergency and have it not work. Let your contacts know when you have finished testing, so they respond to future alerts.

Don't let the app create a false sense of security or expectation

It is important to understand that emergency safety apps are meant to supplement and support your safety plan. They are not meant to take the place of a well-rounded, thorough safety plan. They are also not meant to take the place of the police or any other community service.

The response you receive in an emergency is subject to limitations, even if you have more than one way of contacting the police or personal contacts. If your emergency contacts are too far away or don't know how to respond and help you, alerting them that you are in danger isn't going to do much good. Keep these realities in mind when you create your safety plan and plan around them if needed. An emergency safety app can support your safety plan only if it meets your needs and works for you.