



## App Safety

### A Note on Language



In this toolkit, we will sometimes use the word woman/women and feminine pronouns for simplicity and to recognize the significant impact technology-facilitated violence has on women and girls. We recognize that TFCBV also impacts trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people. We hope that all people impacted by TFCBV will find these documents useful.

## Choosing and Using Safety Apps Designed for Women Experiencing Violence

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; some provide screening tools to help identify whether abuse is occurring and provide resources for help; and others are personal safety tools to inform others if you are in danger and need assistance.

Your phones and 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 also create safety and privacy risks. The following is a checklist of questions and considerations to go through when looking at using any of these available apps.

## Does the Perpetrator 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 won't have access to such as a work or library computer.

- You can delete or uninstall the app after each use. It is worth noting that there is a difference between removing an app from the home screen and deleting/uninstalling the app. Removing the app from the home screen does not delete the app. The app is still available in your app library. Deleting/uninstalling the app will remove it from your phone completely and erase all its data.
- With the right stalkerware tool, it's possible for a perpetrator to monitor all device activity without needing constant access to it. Mobile spyware is often installed through physical access to your device or by having your cloud ID and password. Once installed, the person can monitor all activity remotely through their own device. If you think that this is happening, consider using a safer device, meaning one the perpetrator hasn't had any access to, to look up resources and information.

## **Do You Think that the Perpetrator Is Monitoring Your Phone Activity, Even Without Having Physical Access to the Phone?**

### **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. When the National Network to End Domestic Violence in the USA tested 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. If you live in an area with unreliable Internet and data, create a safety plan with alternative ways to reach out for help as apps may not work in these areas.
- Calling 911 or your local emergency number 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.
- Some apps provide a list of resources based on your location. If the app isn't providing resources that are geographically close to you, go to [www.sheltersafe.ca](http://www.sheltersafe.ca) for a list of anti-violence programs in your community.

### **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 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 this information.
- Sometimes apps will ask for your postal code or want access to your location to locate resources in your area. If it's also asking for your age, gender, and other demographic information, that information, in combination with your location, can be very identifying. 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 perpetrator to share with authorities in the case of an emergency. Read the app's privacy policies (they are either within the app or on the app's website) to learn about their data collection policies and how your information will be used and shared. Your personal information belongs to you and the decision on when, how, and with whom it is shared should remain with you. A company should only share this information to comply with legal requirements. Keep in mind that the perpetrator's attorney could send a subpoena to an app company to get information about you, so the company's policies on how they share your information are important to your privacy.

## **Does the App Ask You to Always Have Your GPS and Location Settings Turned On?**

- Consider the type of app you are using and your primary reason for using it. Many apps will want you to keep your device's GPS/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. For privacy and safety reasons, you may want to turn off your device's GPS and location when you don't need it on. Perpetrators can attempt to misuse your phone's location information to track you.
- If you are using an app to find local resources and the app uses your GPS information to look up local programs, turn on your location settings only when you are doing that research. Afterwards, turn off the location feature on your phone 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 GPS during those times; otherwise, keep it off.

## **Does the App Provide Information that Applies to You?**

- Many apps provide excellent information or tools for women experiencing violence, such as screening tools to help identify abuse. However, several of these apps are developed for specific populations, such as college students. Although some of the information can be helpful, the resources listed may be specific to only college students. If you are looking for resources and information that are more applicable to you, check out [www.sheltersafe.ca](http://www.sheltersafe.ca).

## **Does It Look Like the App Was Created by 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 those experiencing violence. Some apps, however, were not created by organizations with this expertise and may offer information or suggestions that aren't recommended.
- Always trust your instincts and do what you feel is 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, discuss it with an anti-violence worker at a local program.

## **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 women experiencing violence 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 abuse. If the message is sent through your phone's default text messaging system and not through the app, the perpetrator 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 enable you 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. These apps should allow you to send, download, or print the evidence so you don't have to turn over your whole phone as evidence. Speak with local anti-violence 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 acceptable. You can also discuss other options for documenting the abusive behaviours – something that can help build your case if you choose to go to the police to press charges.

Using downloaded apps that were created for women experiencing violence 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 instincts and feelings.

*Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is part of a continuum of violence that can be both online and in-person. If you or someone you know is experiencing TFGBV, you are not alone. You can use [sheltersafe.ca](https://sheltersafe.ca) to find a shelter/transition house near you to discuss options and create a [safety plan](#). You don't need to stay in a shelter to access free, confidential services and support.*

*Adapted for Canada with permission from NNEDV's Safety Net project, based on their resource [App Safety Considerations for Survivors of Abuse](#).*

# Online Dating: Privacy Risks and Strategies

Online dating has rapidly gained popularity as a common way to connect to potential dates or find a partner. Dating sites range from major companies with millions of users to niche sites that cater to specific communities based on interests or background. Some women who are wary of meeting in person or prefer to be able to choose the identity they present to the world find more flexibility or comfort online.

For anyone considering online dating, especially women who may have heightened privacy risks, it's important to have information about privacy and safety options. Everyone should be able to be online safely, free from harassment and abuse, and that includes when dating.

## Privacy

Dating sites rely on gathering and selling information about users for marketing purposes and to make a profit. This is important because the perception of anonymity online may not match the reality: private and intimate information about users is gathered and sold by most sites. In addition to the routine sharing of user data for marketing, dating sites have exposed users' personal information accidentally through bugs in their software and inadequate security, enabling hackers to access personal and financial information.

## Harassment

Young adults, particularly young women, experience online harassment at a high rate. People who identify with other marginalized groups are more likely to experience harassment. Online dating represents a small portion of where people say that online harassment happens.

Harassment, threats, and abuse that happen "only" online should be taken seriously. Such experiences can be traumatizing and may include financial crime or identity theft. Victims report efforts to ruin their reputations and drive them from online communities. If enough identifying information is known, the abuse can also quickly become an offline threat.

## Strategies to Increase Privacy and Safety

The most common concern with online dating is safety, especially as users move to meet up in real life. People often ask, "How do you know the other person is really who they say they are?" and "How can I protect myself?" Another concern with online dating, and dating in real life, is the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Read more about

image-based abuse in this toolkit. While most sites offer tips to increase safety, most advice puts the responsibility on the potential victim.

There have been several dating services designed and marketed to increase feelings of safety and empowerment when dating online, particularly for women and 2SLGTBQIA+ people. One common approach is to limit potential matches to people who are friends of your friends (through Facebook or another social media platform). However, this approach is driven by the fear of attack by strangers, while, the majority of assaults and abuse are actually perpetrated by an acquaintance or someone known to the victim.

When using online dating services, you may want to consider some of these steps to increase your safety and privacy online.

## Getting Started

1. When creating accounts and profiles, choose a username that doesn't include your real name or other identifying information. Protect your privacy by not giving out identifying or contact information.
2. Consider using different email addresses, profile pictures, and strong passwords for dating sites; and maybe even for each site you use. Keeping this information separate from the rest of your life can help protect your privacy and safety.
3. Search for yourself online or use privacy checking services to find out what information is available about you online.

## Connecting Online with Potential Dates

1. Take as much time as you need before sharing a lot of personal information, including pictures. Just because someone asks for your info or more photos doesn't mean you have to share. They should respect your boundaries. It's impossible to get information back once it's been shared.
2. Do an Internet search about the person. Check out news articles, social media sites, and images. Remember that criminal background checks only turn up information if someone has been arrested and/or prosecuted.
3. Be careful about attachments and links, which might install spyware or other malware on your devices.
4. **Trust your instincts.** If you start to feel uncomfortable, it's always ok to stop contact.

## Considering Meeting in Real Life (IRL)

1. Meet up instead of having them pick you up.
2. Bring your phone.
3. Let a friend know ahead of time where you are going and that you will reach out to them when the date is over.
4. Leave an address and some information about your meeting with someone you trust.
5. Familiarize yourself with the meet-up spot ahead of time. Only meet where you're comfortable.
6. Watch out for people saying they want to visit but need loans to be able to get to you, or who use other stories to gain your sympathy and then ask for money. These may be signs of a scam.
7. It's ok to schedule short dates or to cut dates short if it's not going in a direction you are interested in (no matter how long you've been chatting). **Trust your instincts.**

# Evidence and Documentation

Women experiencing, or who have experienced, abuse that began online may choose to report their experiences to the dating platforms or the legal system. Often, a site's Terms of Service will state what kind of behaviour is not allowed and a woman can ask to have someone banned from the site based on that.

Because online dating sites use both hardware-like devices such as smartphones as well as Internet providers and the dating company's servers, digital evidence may be available through all of these companies. In addition, women can consider taking pictures, screenshots, or saving other relevant information. See our tips on [documenting abuse](#) and a sample [documentation log](#).

Online harassment and abuse may fall under a number of crimes, depending on what is happening. Learn more about preserving evidence or about the laws on online harassment.

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*Adapted for Canada with permission from NNEDV's*

## Online Gaming: Privacy Risks and Strategies

Contrary to popular perception, online gaming is not just a pastime for teenage boys. Online gaming is very popular in Canada. Unfortunately, many women experience online harassment while playing games that can also cross into real-life abuse. Additionally, women experiencing violence, sexual assault, and stalking may have additional privacy concerns when trying to engage in online spaces. Women who choose to join online gaming communities should not be isolated from those communities because of online harassment. Fortunately, it is possible to increase privacy and safety when gaming online.

## Online Gaming Basics

Games include sports, shooter, simulation, adventure, real-time strategy, role-playing, and educational games. Online gaming communities use their own lingo in chats between players within the game.

Many games use hand-held game controllers, though increasingly games call on users to move their whole body or to enter "virtual reality" through the use of goggles. In addition to purely online gaming platforms, some games cross into the real world through "augmented reality," which creates a filter or overlay of game-related information as the user moves through the real world.

## Privacy and Safety Risks

The ability to remain anonymous online varies depending on the gaming platform. In some games, a user can make up any screen name and choose an “avatar” or online image to represent them. Users may have a choice about what personal or contact information to share with other users through their online profile or chat conversations with other players. Privacy and safety concerns may increase with games that cross into virtual reality or real life with augmented reality. Augmented reality games may link a player’s online presence to a specific location to let other gamers interact with them at a shared location.

## Potential Benefits to Women who have Experienced Violence

Online gaming provides an opportunity for connection, particularly with people who share a common interest. Some games have vast numbers of users, some of whom have played for many years, building up a sense of familiarity or community. Some women who are wary of meeting in person, or prefer to be able to choose the identity they present to the world, may find more flexibility and comfort online. As with any activity, online or offline, everyone should be able to participate free from harassment and abuse.

## Strategies to Increase Privacy and Safety

Responsibility for stopping online harassment and abuse should rest primarily with those who misuse tech against other people online. Game developers and companies can also take steps to counter online abuse and promote good behaviour in their spaces. As the International Gaming Developer Association says, “The onus is on harassers and their communities to discourage harassment and report harassing behaviour when it is observed. You have a right to work, speak, create, and exist in a space free of harassment and the threat of harassment.”

Nonetheless, female gamers may want to consider some of these steps to increase their personal safety and privacy online:

1. When creating accounts and profiles, choose a username that doesn’t include your real name or other identifying information. Protect your privacy by not giving out identifying or contact information.
2. Consider using different email addresses, profile pictures, and strong passwords for gaming and for each game you play. Keeping this information separate from the rest of your life can help avoid doxing, or other users being able to connect your gaming profile to your real life.
3. Search for yourself online or use privacy checking services to find out what information is available about you online.
4. Be careful about attachments and links, which might install spyware or other malware on your devices.
5. **Trust your instincts.** If you start to feel uncomfortable, it’s always ok to stop contact.

When considering augmented reality games or meeting up in real life, here are some additional steps to consider.

1. Let a friend know ahead of time where you are going and that you will reach out to them after the gaming session is done.
2. Leave an address and some information about where you’ll be.
3. Familiarize yourself with the meet-up spot ahead of time. Only meet where you’re comfortable.
4. Watch out for people saying they want to visit but need loans to be able to get to you, or who use other stories to gain your sympathy and then ask for money. These may be signs of a scam.



5. It's ok to cut a gaming session short if it doesn't feel safe or fun. **Trust your instincts.**

## Evidence

Women experiencing online harassment and abuse may choose to report to the gaming platforms and/or the legal system. Because the technology uses both hardware-like devices such as smartphones, as well as Internet providers and the gaming company's servers, digital evidence may be available as they can be stored within these tech companies. In addition, women may consider taking pictures, screenshots, or saving other relevant information. See our tips on [documenting abuse](#) and a sample [documentation log](#).

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*Adapted for Canada with permission from NNEDV's Safety Net project, based on their resource [Online Gaming](#).*

## #WHATSMYNAME: Tips for Staying Safe While Using Rideshare Apps

Ridesharing is a newer mode of transportation in some communities. Ridesharing companies use a smartphone app to connect drivers with passengers nearby. Ridesharing differs from taxis because rideshare vehicles are generally owned by the driver and blend in with other cars on the street. Most of the time, the only identifier on the vehicle is a sticker or light on the front or rear windshield. Here are some safety tips for women using ridesharing services.

### Before Getting in the Car

- Review the safety features of the ridesharing app.
- Check your driver's photo in the app. In most ridesharing apps, when a driver accepts your request, you will see the driver's photo, car model, and license plate number, and you can follow them on a map in real-time as they make their way to pick you up. Match the driver and vehicle information upon arrival.
- Choose to wait inside whenever possible until your driver arrives. If not, wait in a well-lit area where there may be a security camera (e.g. a doorway of an establishment). In most apps, you can see your driver's ETA (estimated time of arrival) on the app; therefore, you can choose to wait inside until your driver arrives.
- Ask the driver to confirm YOUR name to make sure they are your ride before you get into the car. On most ridesharing apps, the driver who accepts your ride request will have some of your information such as name, phone number, and pick-up location. Asking a driver to confirm your name (instead of you telling them your name) will indicate to you that they are the correct person who is supposed to pick you up.
- Before closing the door of the car, check that there is no child safety lock on the door that will prevent you from opening the door and leaving the car if necessary.

# While You're in the Car

- Sit in the backseat, preferably on the passenger side so you can see both the driver and the road.
- Keep your phone in your hand or within reach so you can easily access it in case you need assistance.
- Share your trip with a friend or family member. This can be done through most rideshare apps. Some apps allow you to add “trusted contacts” so you can easily share your trip details.
- During your ride, call a contact and verbally tell them (or leave a voicemail) where you are, your destination, and what time you expect to arrive. This will suggest to the driver that someone is looking out for you and/or waiting for you.
- Follow along in a maps app and note any route changes.
  
- If you feel unsafe, some apps contain a feature that allows you to call 9-1-1 from within the app. They may provide an estimated current location that you can share with authorities.

## After Your Trip

- Report uncomfortable, unsafe, inappropriate, harassing behaviour, and/or experiences of violence to the police and the ridesharing company. Reporting your experience of violence promptly will encourage accountability by the ridesharing company.
- If you need support reporting an experience of violence to the police and/or ridesharing company, contact your local anti-violence program. Use [sheltersafe.ca](https://sheltersafe.ca) to find a program near you.
- You can also give feedback (whether good or bad) about the driver to the ridesharing company on the ridesharing app after your trip or call the contact number in your community.

*The #WHATSMYNAME Foundation was established to honour Samantha Josephson and educate the public on the importance of rideshare safety. For more information, <https://www.whatsmyname.org>.*

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*Adapted from BC Society of Transition Houses' Tech Safety project, based on their resource [#WHATSMYNAME : Tips for Staying Safe While Using Rideshare Apps](#).*

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*This document is part of a series of resources provided through Women's Shelters Canada's Tech Safety Canada project. We encourage you to visit [www.techsafety.ca](http://www.techsafety.ca) to find additional information and resources about technology-facilitated violence, technology safety planning, and preserving digital evidence. This document, or any portion thereof, may be reproduced or used as long as acknowledgement is included. If you would like to adapt the content, please contact Women's Shelters Canada at [info@endvaw.ca](mailto:info@endvaw.ca).*

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