

Are You Too Nice for Your Own Good?

We're taught to be kind to everyone, but that means keeping your guard down against potential predators. To stay safe, adapt your nature to a more dangerous world.

SEPTEMBER 2016 | BY [GRAHAM WOOD](#)

In Robert Siciliano's eyes, no one is ever truly prepared to defend themselves against an attacker. "It goes against human nature," says Siciliano, CEO of [IDTheftSecurity.com](#), who teaches personal safety skills to real estate professionals. "We inherently need to trust one another in order to survive."

According to Siciliano, most of us went through "civilized conditioning" as children, where our parents taught us to be courteous to others. While that's a virtue of society, it also teaches us to keep our guard down — and hampers our ability to assess true danger — when dealing with strangers. "As good as it is to make [kids] behave, it also suppresses their instinctual need for survival. So when they come into contact with a predator, they don't know how to deal with it," Siciliano says.

Having the physical skill to thwart an attacker is only half the battle when it comes to personal safety. The attitude you've learned to adopt in social situations may be the biggest hazard to your safety. That's why some experts suggest reconsidering your outlook on the world, even if it's uncomfortable.

"A lot of people in society choose to ignore what's going on around them," says Gianni Cerretani, a martial artist and mortgage loan originator with HomeBridge Financial Services who teaches a mental-preparedness safety course for real estate pros in Atlanta. A year ago, the Georgia Real Estate Commission approved his class for continuing education credits for local REALTORS®. "We teach that you have to deal with the fact that violence happens and criminals are out there. If you're aware of it, you have a better chance of surviving."

Is It Rude to Be On Guard?

Cerretani was inspired to begin teaching safety after the case of a [man disguised as a woman who brutally attacked several agents](#) in the Atlanta area. The suspect, Jeffrey Shumate, was arrested last year after one such incident, but he has been linked to other attacks dating back to 2000. His first intended victim was Alicia Parks, an agent who was showing him a vacant property. "He was wearing white high heels, black stockings, and bright pink lipstick," recalls Parks, GRI, a sales associate with Keller Williams Realty Lanier Partners in Gainesville, Ga. "He had on leather gloves, and he said his hands were severely burned and he didn't want anyone to see them."

Though she says she was on high alert from the moment they met, Parks thought the incident was a joke — even after the man began using provocative language. But after calling her his girlfriend and trying to get her to follow him to the back of the house, she knew she was in trouble. The meeting only came to an end after Parks accidentally set off the home's alarm system, prompting the man to flee. "I didn't even mean to set it off. I just pushed the wrong numbers," she says.

Parks had an odd feeling when she first spoke to the man over the phone, but she went to the showing anyway. "Just the way he talked to me on the phone, he was so insistent that I come show him that house right away, and it was vacant. But I didn't know him so I didn't want to judge him."

Siciliano, who helped formulate the original [REALTOR® Safety](#) initiative with the National Association of REALTORS®, says most people ignore gut feelings of fear or mistrust because they don't want to come off as rude. They also don't think ahead about safety because they adopt the mistaken idea that if they don't think about it, it won't happen to them.

"They live under the myth that if you're prepared for a dangerous situation wherever you go, you're paranoid," he says. "It's the it-can't-happen-to-me syndrome."

Modifying Your Frame of Mind

Cerretani aims to change how people think about safety. Teaching physical combat is an important component of safety training, he notes, but "to try and teach someone who has never done self-defense in their lives how to do martial arts training in a four-hour class is a waste of time. They're never going to retain that information." So instead, he focuses on mental tips such as these:

- **Look at yourself as a victim.** "We ask people, 'How would you attack you?'" Cerretani says. That question gets people thinking about the weaknesses in their daily routine. Are you often working alone outside the office? Are you aware of whether a door has been locked after you've entered a home with a client? Are you leaving a listing when it's dark? Are your keys in your hand before you get to your car? "One or two people in every class say they don't lock their house. People aren't aware that they're not aware of their vulnerabilities."
- **Be hyperaware in "transitional zones."** Stepping out of your car and into a parking lot, or entering a gas station, particularly at night, are situations in which your level of safety can swing widely. "If you really pay attention to a gas station at night — we call it the 'watering hole' for criminals — there's so much commotion going on that it's very easy to have a criminal activity happen," Cerretani says.
- **Watch people's hands.** Certain hand movements — such as balled-up fists — can signal an intention to attack. Other places to pay special attention to include beltlines and underneath shirts to determine whether a person is carrying a concealed weapon.
- **Focus on what's near you.** Most people focus on their final destination or goal, which can leave them vulnerable. For example, when entering a parking lot, those who are looking for their car are more focused on what's further away. "If attackers are closer to you and you're looking far out, you're vulnerable," Cerretani says.
- **Watch your back when you're on your phone.** Put your back against a wall when you're engulfed in texting or talking on a device so no one can come up behind you and surprise you.

Is the Industry Better Prepared?

Timperis Robertson, founder of the [Interactive Real Estate Academy](#), works with Cerretani to set up his safety class at real estate offices in the Atlanta area. She took his course before it was added to the CE curriculum, and she says it had a big impact on the way she thinks about her day-to-day routine. "It really makes you think about where you're most vulnerable," says Robertson, who is also a practitioner with First Home Realty in Lithonia, Ga. "It touches on the situations we face or may face every day. Those are things we don't think about. We're just so happy to have a client interested in a property."

While it takes a concerted effort to change your thinking around safety, it appears many real estate professionals are making strides. With 42 percent of REALTORS® saying they use a safety app on their smartphone, according to the National Association of REALTORS®' [2016 Member Safety Report](#) — a

staggering leap from the 13 percent who said so in NAR's [2015 survey](#) — a sea change is evident in the way pros are preparing for danger.

More REALTORS® also say they carry a self-defense weapon in the field, the most popular ones being pepper spray, a firearm, or a pocket knife. However, fewer indicated that their brokerage has standard procedures for agent safety — 44 percent in 2016 versus 46 percent in 2015 — a possible indicator that agents are taking on more ownership of their own protocols.

Still, it can be difficult to get agents who have never experienced an attack to think about common-sense safety measures, says Kimberly Allard-Moccia, who helped develop the Massachusetts Association of REALTORS®' first safety class. "You think you're going to just run if something happens," says Allard-Moccia, GRI, broker-owner of Century 21 Professionals in Braintree, Mass. "Let's face it: If most of us in the room are over 50 and wearing inch-and-a-half heels, you're not going to make it."

If you don't think about safety ahead of time and prepare for the worst, "you will cycle in denial and delay," she adds, "and that's when you become a victim."