

Safety in numbers

"There's safety in numbers" is a Latin proverb first used in the year 1550, but its wisdom holds true even today, especially during holiday time when all of us are in a whirlwind of activity shopping and getting ready for fun times with our families and friends.

I was reminded recently of how innocent and vulnerable we are even when we think what we are doing is perfectly safe. It was around dusk, and I was driving home after a visit and mandated doggie walk with Max, my son's frisky dog. It was during that difficult time of day when Mother Earth's enormous orange sun seems to blind everything in front of you and a pair of sunglasses becomes a prized possession.

Taking the extreme "S" curves of Enola Road with ease, out of the corner of my eye I spotted a woman jogging. She was wearing sweats, in a fast trot, and her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail. She had headphones on and was oblivious



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to me.

My eyes swept back to the road and I continued on, but as I turned into my driveway, the thought of the young jogger stayed with me. I wondered why she decided to jog alone, why she chose twilight when light fades quickly, and how far she had to go before she too would be safely behind her front door. I thought about her family, waiting patiently for her to arrive home to sit down

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to a nice dinner.

And then my thoughts turned to unpleasantness, so prevalent in the news we read about daily and synonymous with the dangerous times we live in. What if she hadn't made it home? What if she met with someone or something she hadn't planned on? What if I was the last person to have seen her that afternoon? People vanish all the time. Had something horrible happened to my jogger?

But all was well and no foul deed had been committed on the jogger on Enola Road. However, it left me thinking about how important it is for all of us women to protect ourselves not only every day of our lives, but more so during these upcoming holidays when our minds are on a hundred other things than our own personal safety.

First and foremost, I know from personal experience how dangerous it is to jog alone — no matter what time of day it is. When I lived in New York, many, many years ago, my girlfriend and I used to jog three times a week at around six o'clock in the morning before the kids left for school. Five miles was tough, but we were determined to keep to our regimen. One day, however, she phoned and told me she wasn't feeling well, so I decided to go alone. After all, jogging was helping to fight off those extra calories, and I was afraid that if I missed a day, my weight

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would zoom up fifty pounds.

So, I ran out the door as the sun was just coming up over the horizon. I was doing pretty well on my five-mile jog when suddenly I thought I heard the sound of another footstep in back of me. I stopped, spun around, but saw no one. I started jogging again and heard what I thought was an extra footstep, the snap of a twig, the sound of flying gravel, or something else that I couldn't decipher. After looking behind me again and seeing no one, a shiver ran down my spine. Something wasn't quite right.

I ran as fast as I could on my familiar route and the training had helped because it took me a matter of seconds to reach a well lit part of the road littered with a convenience store and houses. The owner of the store was just opening up. "Coffee," he asked, surprised he had such an early customer. "No. Phone," I gasped, and my girlfriend, dressed in pajamas, was there to pick me up a few minutes later.

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But to this day, I think about that morning and that familiar shiver still runs through me. Was it the echo of my own footsteps that I heard or was it a well hidden figure just waiting to pounce? I'll never be sure, but when I see a lonely jogger, it reminds me that we've all got to be smarter to protect ourselves against crime.

So, my list of keeping safe this holiday season, and in fact all year round, begins with never, ever, go jogging alone. You might also want to add a buddy requirement to your trips to the mall as well, especially after dark. Whenever possible, take your girlfriend, a relative or your husband/boyfriend. Most males will complain, but offer to cook a steak for dinner instead of the traditional meatloaf and watch him grab the keys to the car.

When alone in your car, if it doesn't lock automatically when you turn on the ignition, make a mental note to manually lock all the doors. It takes time to get into the habit — I forget to do it very often — but once I hear the click of the "lock" button, I'm content that for awhile I'm in a secure little

fortress. On those unseasonably warm days, turn on the air rather than roll down the windows for added protection.

This may sound challenging, but try to do your errands during daylight hours rather than in the evenings. If you find yourself out at night, call home before you leave so that your family will know you're on your way. Take a well lit route and keep your cell phone close by rather than buried in your purse.

For holiday shopping, when you get to the mall, park right under a light if you possibly can even if you arrive in early afternoon. Sure, it's tough to pass up a parking space tucked in a corner close to the mall entrance for one under a street lamp a mile away, but think about all those calories you'll be burning and the added protection of that bright light should your shopping extend to the evening. Other safety sites recommend taking time to scan the parking lot, glancing into the backseat of the car and even looking under the car before getting in. It's a good practice to get into even with a buddy.

Here's another tip. Maintain at least half a tank of fuel.

Tough, I know. The gasoline companies will adore you, but when you run out of gas on a dark highway, often you run out of luck. Likewise, if you experience a breakdown or are in an accident, pull as far onto the shoulder as you possibly can and turn on your emergency flashers. Don't get out of the car even if you're tempted to assess the damage. That's when that handy little cell phone really comes into use — but do remember to keep it charged.

The last tip I found was one I hadn't thought of — consider carrying a whistle. Hang one on your rearview mirror, keep it in your pocket, or put it someplace where you can get to it quickly. After all, nothing breaks the stillness of night better than a shrill, sharp whistle. I truly hope that you and I never have to use one.

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