

THE PAGAN AWARENESS NETWORK (PAN Inc) has prepared this brochure to educate people on basic personal safety and rights within the Pagan community and suggestions in the event of assault. By doing this we can help protect the positive image Pagans have worked for.

The majority of groups in Australia offer personal and spiritual development as well as social networks. However, there are a few that exist to provide power-trips to a 'leader'. In extreme cases there may be predatory behaviour. The reputation of these people may be well-known within the Pagan community, or their activities may be unknown to others.

Newcomers to Paganism should be aware of the following basic points:

- **You do NOT need to be initiated into a coven or a magickal order in order to be a Pagan.**
- **Sexual predators and power-trippers exist in all communities, and come from all walks of life. The Pagan community is no exception.**
- **It is ILLEGAL for anyone to touch you in an inappropriate manner without your prior consent.**

If you decide to make contact with a group or individual, don't be afraid to ask questions. For example:

- *Who created that particular group, and what tradition do they follow? Ask about their background, training programme and general beliefs.*
- *Does the group encourage students to study, question and learn from different sources?*
- *Are there membership charges? Are contributions reasonable for what is provided?*
- *Do the group leaders claim a 'title' or 'lineage'? Individuals who have earned titles such as 'High Priestess' should be respected. However, the presence of such a title does not guarantee an ethical teaching practice.*
- *Does the group insist upon an initiation ritual? If so, what is involved? What training takes place beforehand*

TIPS FOR PERSONAL SAFETY

The following are some suggested guidelines for newcomers wanting to ensure their safety:

- Do not reveal private details (phone numbers, home address, financial information, etc)
- Use an email account such as *Hotmail* or *YahooMail* to make enquiries, rather than your work or home email.
- Where possible, take a friend along to Pagan events and gatherings rather than going alone.
- Advertisements or listings in books, magazines or websites is no guarantee of integrity or quality of teaching, do some research beforehand.
- If the Internet is your only resource, join a variety of online forums and discussion groups and try a polite, generalised request for information.
- Attend public Pagan events (picnics, festivals, etc) before seeking out a teacher. Gather information about groups and traditions that interest you.
- PAN Inc provides information pamphlets which can be downloaded from www.paganawareness.net.au

Be aware that you have a number of legal rights that no group, teacher, or Pagan event can override:

- If during a ritual, class or workshop you are asked to take part in any activity that makes you uncomfortable, or you find yourself being removed from the rest of the group without prior warning, you have the right to say NO.
- You have the right to leave any ritual or event without explanation if you feel unsafe. Issues of 'breaking circle' cease to exist if your fear for your personal safety. Simply gather up your belongings and go.
- At all times you have the right to speak to a friend, a community elder, an organisation such as PAN Inc, or the Police if you feel you need advice or support on any matter.
- You can also choose to approach group leaders/festival organisers to air any complaints. Anything you say should be heard in a fair and impartial way.

SKYCLAD: INFORMATION & BASIC PRACTICE

(Refer to the PAN information pamphlet "Skyclad: The Bare Facts" available for download at www.paganawareness.net.au)

MANY PAGANS, ESPECIALLY THOSE involved in traditional Wicca (Gardnerian, Alexandrian etc) perform their rituals and ceremonies 'sky-clad', or naked. This is a legitimate Pagan custom which has no sexual expectations or invitations attached to it.

Pagan groups and individuals may choose to work this way for several reasons – usually the intent is to make a self-empowering and positive statement that there is nothing shameful about the human body. Sky-clad rituals occur in different settings: solitary Pagans, small groups in private homes, either same-sex groups or mixed and also at large public festivals. Working sky-clad implies nothing more than a deep level of trust and shared friendship in the context of religious celebration.

Not all Pagans choose to work this way. It is an optional experience. However, at all times you have the right to say NO. No one should be judged by their preference for sky-clad or clothed ceremonies.

You should establish straight away whether sky-clad work is part of the group's activities.

There are a few rules of etiquette relating to rituals that are well known to most experienced Pagans. They apply equally to sky-clad and clothed events. These rules include, but are not limited to:

- Nobody may touch another person in an inappropriate manner or without consent. What is deemed 'appropriate' depends on personal boundaries and group practice, e.g. there may be some requirement to hold hands during a ceremony. Physical contact outside of these areas is inappropriate unless invited to do so. An ethical group should explain all aspects to a new member well in advance of the ritual.
- It is considered a gross breach of etiquette to remark on or laugh at another person's appearance as it debases the sacred context and group trust.
- Being sky-clad during ritual does not EVER of itself imply a sexual invitation or expectation.

STAY SAFE: AVOIDING UNHEALTHY GROUPS

PEOPLE ARE OFTEN so desperate for guidance that they don't use their instincts or logic as normally applied to any other important decision. The same effort should go into learning about different religious and spiritual options as deciding on other important life situations.

Two highly recommended online sources are: Isaac Bonewits' 'Cult Danger Evaluation' tool, <http://www.neopagan.net/ABCDEF.html>

The Coven Abuse Self-Help Index (CASHI): A Tool for Survival, Evasion and Escape

http://healing.about.com/library/uc_covenabuse_0209.htm

Make an effort to talk to a cross-section of people in your community, both online and in real-life.

Talk to those who have socialised with or who have worked with those you are considering training with.

Ask around the general community to find out as much as possible about who can be trusted.

Always listen to your instincts.

It is much easier to work with someone and learn from them if you can respect and like them as individuals, as well as teachers.

Finally, look for obvious warning signs of an unhealthy group, *for example*:

- *Does the group leader or teacher make contradictory statements?*
- *Seem intolerant towards other Pagans?*
- *Concentrates the group work on their own interests and/or power-trip?*
- *Indulge in strong magick without explanation?*
- *Raise a lot of energy with no directive?*
- *State that anyone who does not agree with their opinions is not a real Pagan?*
- *Do they refer constantly to their own knowledge?*
- *Do they make a point of showing-off through their dress, manner or Pagan accessories?*
- *Does being around this person seem to inflate people's egos?*
- *Is there a high-turnover in group members?*

WHAT TO DO IN THE EVENT OF A SEXUAL OR INDECENT ASSAULT

*Without prior consent
it is illegal for anyone
to touch you in an
inappropriate manner.*

LIKE ANY OTHER PART OF SOCIETY, Pagans attract their fair share of 'unsavoury characters' and it is an unfortunate reality that some people who participate in Pagan ceremonies, whether skyclad or clothed, find themselves the victims of indecent or sexual assault.

There is very little information or peer support for victims of assault at a Pagan ceremony or ritual and very often they are unsure of their rights.

If you have been assaulted don't let feelings of shame or self-blame prevent you from seeking help.

The first step is to talk to someone you trust about what happened, a friend, a counsellor or Pagan community leader. It is your decision who you tell and what you tell. There are many services that can support you if you have been sexually assaulted. Remember, the choice is YOURS.

SOME SUGGESTED COURSES OF ACTION:

- Visit your Local Sexual Assault Service; often at a public hospital (call the front desk and ask to be put through to their sexual assault counsellor or SAC). Local Community Health Centre or your local Women's Health Centres may provide similar services and advice.
- Visit your your local Police station and ask to speak to an officer (women can request a female officer). Tell them your story and ask their opinion and advice. The Police in each State and Territory can advise you on the respective laws regarding assault.

An educational brochure provided by the
Pagan Awareness Network (PAN Inc)

Safety in the Circle

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