

This document covers basic personal safety within the Pagan community and what to do if you witness or become the victim of illegal or unethical behaviour.

The Basics

“Perfect love and perfect trust” is a phrase familiar to most Pagans, and it is an admirable ideal. But predators exist in every community – sadly, the Pagan scene is no exception. With a little information and common sense, you can take appropriate action if you ever encounter the small minority of toxic individuals out there. Here are some points to keep in mind:

- Predators can be well-known within their communities, or their activities may go unnoticed.
- Predators can be sexual (after your body), financial (after your wallet) or narcissistic (after your loyalty and devotion)
- Initiation can be a legitimate requirement for many Pagan traditions. However, you do NOT need to be initiated by anyone in order to consider yourself a Pagan, witch or non-traditional Wiccan. Nor do you have to be part of a coven or group.
- It is ILLEGAL for anyone to touch you without your prior consent – either in a Pagan ritual or out of it.
- Never hand over money unless you know exactly what you are getting in return.
- Titles like ‘High Priestess’ usually denote experience within a tradition. Anyone can claim a title for themselves. Don’t take titles on face value. Do some research and find out if the person is for real.
- You should never be asked to do anything illegal. No one in the Pagan community is above the law.

Tips for personal safety

Here are some common sense suggestions:

- Never reveal private details (landline numbers, home address, financial information, etc.).
- Use an online email account (Hotmail or Gmail) to make enquiries, rather than a work or home email.
- Where possible, take a friend along to Pagan events and gatherings rather than going alone.
- Advertisements in books, magazines or websites are no guarantee of integrity or quality of teaching. Do some research before making contact.
- If the Internet is your only resource, join a variety of online forums and discussion groups.
- Attend public Pagan events (picnics, festivals, etc.) before seeking out a teacher or a group. Gather information about traditions that interest you.

The signs of an unhealthy group.

- Does the group leader or teacher make contradictory statements?
- Is there a high turnover in group members?
- Do the group and/or the leaders seem constantly embroiled in feuds with other members of the Pagan community?
- Do they state that anyone who does not agree with their personal opinions is not a real Pagan, Witch, or Wiccan?
- Do they hint at having special knowledge or abilities that others don’t possess?
- Do they have a habit of seeking attention through their dress, manner or accessories?
- Do they promise to cast spells on your behalf, in return for payment?
- Do they ask you to take part in rituals without properly explaining what you are doing, and why?
- Do they have projects requiring financial contributions that never seem to produce results?

If you answered YES to these questions, the group may not be working in the best interests of the individual members.

Look at the groups and leaders behaviours. Consider if you would like or respect them if you met them outside of the ritual, workshop or festival context. That is your best guide to knowing who they really are.

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Safety in the Circle

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Looking after the wellbeing of the victims of abuse is more important than protecting Paganism's public image.

If you don't speak up, the next victim could be you.

Asking questions

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

- What tradition do they follow? Ask about their general beliefs and practices.
- Are students encouraged to study, question and learn from different sources?
- Are there membership charges? Is the money being requested simply to cover expenses incurred by the organisers, or more than that?
- If the group leaders claim a title or lineage is there a way for this to be verified without offending?
- Does the group insist upon an initiation ritual? If so, what is involved? What training takes place beforehand?
- Will you ever be expected to work 'sky-clad' or naked?
- What work or contribution will you be expected to make?

You have legal rights

You have rights that no group, teacher, or event can override:

- No one has the right to endanger your physical safety. If you are asked to take part in an activity that makes you uncomfortable, or you find yourself being removed from the rest of the group without warning, you have the right to say NO at any time, even if you previously said yes.
- You have the right to leave any ritual or event without explanation if you feel unsafe. Issues of 'breaking circle' don't exist if you fear for your personal safety. Simply get your things 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 on any matter. Issues of secrecy or loyalty to a group are irrelevant when safety for yourself or others is at stake.
- You can approach group leaders and organisers with complaints and be heard in a fair and impartial way.

Working Sky Clad – the bare facts

For detailed information, refer to the information pamphlet "Sky-clad: The Bare Facts" available on the PAN website. Many Pagans perform their rituals and ceremonies 'sky-clad', or naked. This is a custom which has no sexual expectations attached to it. Working sky-clad can, in the right context, provide a deep level of trust, shared friendship and empowerment.

Sky-clad rituals occur in different settings: same-sex groups, mixed groups, and at larger festivals. Many Pagans choose not to work this way – it is an optional experience. At all times you have the right to say NO.

You should establish straight away whether sky-clad work is part of a group's activities. But just because a group works naked doesn't mean they are predators. And just because a group works clothed, doesn't mean they aren't!

There are a few rules of ritual etiquette that apply equally to sky-clad and clothed events. These rules include, but are not limited to:

- Do not touch another person inappropriately or without consent. 'Appropriate' depends on personal boundaries and group practice, e.g. many rituals require participants to hold hands. Physical contact beyond this is not okay unless a clear understanding is present. An ethical group will explain its expectations to new members in advance.
- Never remark on or laugh at another person's appearance. This debases the sacred context and group trust.
- Just because people are naked in a ritual, does not mean they are issuing an invitation for sex.
- Rituals involving sexual contact are not unknown within Paganism, but they involve willing adult participants. Clothed or sky-clad, in a ritual or outside of one, it should happen only if YOU want it to, and you have said so clearly. Anything else is sexual assault.

Stay safe – avoid unhealthy groups

People are often so desperate to receive guidance or make a connection with others that they don't use their common-sense the way it would be applied to any other important decision. Common-sense should rule when joining a coven, temple, order or other Pagan group.

Two highly recommended online sources are:

- Isaac Bonewits' 'Cult Danger Evaluation' tool, <http://www.neopagan.net/ABCDEF.html>
- Coven Abuse Self-Help Index (CASHI): http://healing.about.com/library/uc_covenabuse_0209.htm

In the event of a sexual assault...

Predators exist in every community, and unfortunately the law of large numbers means that some who participate in Pagan ceremonies, whether sky-clad or clothed, may find themselves the victims of sexual assault. 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: a friend, a counsellor, or a 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). A local Community Health Centre or Women's Health Centre may provide similar services and advice.
- Visit your local Police station and ask to speak to an officer (you can request a gender-appropriate 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.

If you see something illegal...

Predators rely on the unwillingness of people to get involved in order to continue their illegal, unethical or anti-social behaviour. If you avert your eyes and say nothing, you can become complicit in the crime.

You can make a positive difference:

- Intervene only if it is safe to do so. You can't help by becoming another victim.
- Make a written record of what you see. Include important details such as date, time, who was involved, what happened and where.
- If you see a suspicious pattern of behaviour, keep making written records on each occasion. If need be, make copies and keep them in secure locations.
- Report the matter to the police. You can do this even if you are not sure a crime has been committed. It is not your job to prove anything. It is their job to investigate.
- A culture of silence doesn't help anyone except the predator. Don't let anyone tell you that "it will make Pagans look bad" or that "the Police will misunderstand".