



Personal safety for councillors



#DebateNotHate

This booklet has been provided for your personal reference, to support your attendance on the LGA's Personal Safety for Councillors' event.

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Introduction

We tend to take our own personal safety for granted and it is only when critical incident occurs we become reminded of our own vulnerability.

Whilst there have been very few major acts of violence directed towards public figures, when attacks happen they tend to be widely reported.

Within the UK there is a general perception that the level of violence is on the increase although the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), reporting in March 2020, found no significant statistical change. They explain any slight upward trend as a result of differences in the way that crimes are recorded.

In addition, the CSEW conclude that broadening of legislation, including the Protection from Harassment and the Crime and Disorder Acts, will have impacted on these results by including incidents which would have historically been excluded.

Their research finds that most violent incidents tend to happen during the evening or night-time, rather than during the working day. Whilst women may feel they are more vulnerable, statistics prove that most non-domestic attacks are on men.

In the UK, stranger attacks are very rare. In the year ending March 2020, the CSEW estimated that 70% of violent acts were committed by a person who was known to the victim.

From a Councillor perspective, there is no evidence that we are more at risk than anyone else in a front-facing role although the current political climate, combined with the controversial decisions are often made at local level, may mean that we may feel more exposed.

Although some Councillors may reluctantly accept that abuse is part and parcel of the role, others will find this type of behaviour totally unacceptable. The number of incidents being reported is

increasing and some Councillors have decided not to stand for re-election because of the way members of the public have behaved towards them.

Whilst some of the grievances we are exposed to are related to broad discontent about “big P Politics”, closer to home there are waves of unhappiness at some of the decisions, particularly financial ones, that councils have taken.

In some instances, people are resorting to the internet to vent their anger which has caused major issues for some of us, who have ended up closing social media accounts. Female Councillors, in particular, have reported an increase in the number of on-line sexual insults they have received.

With all of this as a backdrop, it seems sensible to take a step back from what we do on a day-to-day basis to review our working practices. The aim behind this is to make sure that we are doing everything possible to manage our personal safety.

This booklet will help you to do this. It has been specially written for Councillors and includes a wide range of tips and techniques which centre around the main elements of the role.

As you read through, you will be able to reflect on the way you carry out your role and identify any actions you could take which would increase your safety.

General Principles of Personal Safety

There are four underpinning elements of personal safety to consider:

1. Dynamic or organic risk assessment
2. Gut feel
3. Early choices
4. Routine.

Dynamic risk assessment

The formal risk assessment mentioned in the previous chapter is a desk-based activity which is completed away from the role. An organic risk assessment is a personal appraisal which is carried out in situ. No piece of paper will ever trump an “on-the-spot” evaluation of danger.

There is research which suggests that people who are new to a role will tend to be more alert in identifying and assessing potential problems because they tend to be more aware of their environment. Someone who is used to repeating a similar activity over and over again over a period of time can become a victim of “Script Theory”.

Script Theory is a way of describing habitual behaviours which result in someone following a script, ie. doing the same thing in the same way time-after-time. This means that the same pattern is kept, even if a situation demands a different approach.

For those of you who are experienced Councillors, the message is to take care not to slip into autopilot mode. The best way of avoiding this is to be aware that this can happen and to take time to deliberately and consciously evaluate your environment.

Gut feel and instinct

Gut feel, which is hard-wired into us, is a biological mechanism which helps us to recognise and identify danger. Our brain is programmed to learn from events and will store residual memories of incidents which threatened our ability to cope in the past.

In the face of threat, two brain circuits become active. One of these feeds sensory data about the hazard to the cerebral cortex. Sensory data includes sight, smell and touch. The cortex evaluates these messages and forms a conclusion about the level of danger.

The other circuit is responsible for relaying the sensory information to part of the brain called the Amygdala, which in turn stimulates the autonomic service system. Once activated, a person's heart rate increases, and stress hormones and glucose levels are raised to help respond to the threat.

As an early warning sign of danger, our body produces biofeedback, which emerges in the form of physical indicators. This is our brain's way of letting us know there is a potential threat.

Whilst we all have our own unique warnings, commonly recognised alerts can include:

- Sense of being on high alert
- Tightening in the tummy
- Muscle tension
- Sharpening of senses including hearing and vision
- Goose bumps
- Icy hands or feet
- Nausea

- Changes to breathing
- Hairs on the back of the neck/hands/arms rising.

As adults we often silence our gut feeling in an attempt to intellectualise a situation and this can mean that we do not always take early action. In safety terms, instincts are one of our most important tools. Although our brain can be mistaken and misread a threat, it is vital that we pay attention to the signals our body gives us.

If you ever have strong instincts about a person or situation, the best advice is to find a way to remove yourself as soon as you can. Once you are in a controlled environment, you can process your reactions and draw conclusions about the experience.

You can then use this understanding to pull out learning points that will help you to manage future events.

Making early choices

An “early choice” is a way of describing a conscious activity or decision made early on, which can help us later if we run into a problem.

Although this can feel like packaged common sense, it is surprising how often this element of personal safety is ignored.

It is not untypical for people who have been involved in an incident to have major regrets about their failure to plan.

Early choices include:

- Deciding to tell a friend or a relative where you are going and an indicator of what time you will be back
- Programming emergency or important numbers into your mobile telephone’s memory
- Checking a route or public transport timetable before setting off

- Choosing to wear clothes and shoes which allow you to move freely.

Routine

Routine is often described as the enemy of personal safety because habitual behaviours can make us predictable and reliable.

Whilst reliability is often seen as a prized characteristic, in personal safety terms it is a potential weakness which can make us vulnerable - particularly when our routine is known to others.

Obviously it isn't practical or possible to vary all of our patterns and of course many meetings and events are permanently scheduled to take place on the same day of the week or month.

When you can, though, deliberately change your rhythm and routine so that you avoid:

- Leaving or returning home at exactly the same time
- Walking the same routes at the same times
- Parking in the same spot
- Always catching the same bus
- Going to the same coffee shop for coffee at 11.00am every day.

Personal Safety Tips

These ideas the follow have been compiled from a variety of sources including Councillors, the Police and personal safety organisations. Whilst some of the approaches are common sense, other ideas will be less obvious.

This is not designed to be a list of dos and don'ts and read out of context, the advice can imply that our role is more dangerous than it really is.

This section covers key activities including:

- Travelling
- Visiting people in their homes
- Managing the meeting
- Callers to your own home
- Surgeries
- Canvassing
- Use of interview rooms

Travelling by car

- Make sure that you have enough fuel for your journey. You may feel more comfortable filling up your car during daylight than after dark
- Regularly check the condition and pressure of your tyres (including the spare)
- Consider joining a motoring organisation (some give preferential treatment to lone drivers or female motorists)
- Check your route, and avoid areas that you consider high-risk

- Avoid placing your handbag or valuables on the passenger seat
- Use your instincts about offering lifts to people. If you must give a lift to somebody you do not know well, the safest place to seat a passenger is in the rear of the vehicle, diagonally opposite the driver's seat
- Lock all your door when driving around town or in remote areas. Some cars have an automatic setting to do this when the vehicle reaches 10 mph. If you are involved in an accident which causes the car's airbag to inflate, the doors will unlock automatically
- If someone you do not know taps on your car window to ask for directions, avoid winding your window down. Talk through the closed glass
- Park your car in a place that you know will feel safe to return to, and choose well-lit areas
- In multi-storey car parks, use the ground floor or park nearest the walkway to shops/offices
- Avoid parking your car with the driver's side next to a van with sliding doors
- Reverse into your parking space so that you can drive away easily
- If you are parking in a cul-de-sac, drive in and then turn the car around so that your vehicle is facing the road's exit
- Avoid having identifying Council stickers in your car as this could make your car a target for someone with a grudge
- As you walk towards your vehicle, hold your car keys in your hand so you can climb straight into the vehicle. Avoid locking or unlocking your car from a distance to avoid key cloning

- Before you get into your vehicle, have a quick look inside, to check that everything is as you left it
- After dark, or in less certain areas, don't faff around taking your coat off or organising bags: get into your car and then lock the doors. You can sort yourself out once you are safely in the vehicle
- If you have a satnav, take care about being too specific when programming your home address. If your bag has your device and home keys in it, you are making it very easy for a burglar
- Have the correct change ready for the parking machine, or pay on-line later
- For keyless cars, make sure that you buy a "Faraday Cage" for your key. This stops thieves cloning its signal from inside your house and stealing your car
- Whenever you get out of your vehicle, even for short periods of time, for example paying for petrol, lock your car doors
- If you are being followed when driving, do not get out of the car. Proceed to a busy area, ensure that all your doors are locked and flash your lights and sound the horn to attract attention.

Public transport

- Have the right change ready or have you pass in your hand, so that you do not have to reveal your purse or wallet
- Ensure that you know travel times or consider using an "app" which give you real-time information
- Wait for the bus or train in a well-lit place, ideally near other people
- Pay attention to your environment, not your mobile telephone

- Have the number of a reliable taxi firm programmed into your mobile
- Carry emergency money so you can call a taxi if a bus or train does not turn up
- If a bus is empty, or it is after dark, it may be safer to stay on the lower deck and sit near the driver. This way if you have an issue you are more likely to attract their attention
- On trains, choose carriages that are well-populated. Do not hesitate to move if you feel uncomfortable
- On public transport, if you sit next to the door make sure that you keep your mobile telephone close to you. A common crime is for a thief to grab a telephone and make a dash just as the doors are closing
- If you think that somebody is following you, enlist help from some of the other passengers or, if on a bus, from the driver
- If you feel threatened, attract the attention of the driver or guard
- When travelling at night or in an unfamiliar area, try to arrange for someone to meet you at the bus stop or train station. If this is not possible, walk near other people with whom you feel safe, and walk purposefully to your destination.

Taxis

- Taxis (Hackney Carriages) can be hailed in the street. They look like purpose-built taxis or black cabs and have an illuminated taxi sign on the roof. Licensed minicabs cannot be hailed in the street. They must be pre-booked. The driver should have ID and the vehicle will have a photographic licence. Check that the photograph matches the driver. If it doesn't, don't get in the cab

- Minicab drivers who pick-up fares on the street, without being pre-booked, are illegal, uninsured and potentially very dangerous
- When booking a taxi or minicab, ask for the driver's name, as well as the make and colour of the car. Confirm the driver's details when they arrive to check that it is the taxi or minicab you ordered
- App-based taxi services such as Uber, will send you details of the driver. Check the registration number of the vehicle and driver ID before you commit to getting into the car
- Sit in the back of the vehicle
- When you can, share the cab with a friend
- If you chat to the driver, be careful not to give out personal information.

Cycling safety

- Keep your bike in good working order and have it serviced every year. Repairs are best done at home rather than by the roadside
- Get your bike security marked, insure it and make a note of its serial number
- Obey the rules of the road and take care with under-taking at traffic lights or roundabouts
- Dress for safety. Wear a cycling helmet and choose something fluorescent to wear. Always use lights
- Never use earphones when cycling as they block your sense of hearing. They will also distract you from your environment
- Do not check your mobile telephone when cycling

- Secure your bicycle with a good quality chain and padlock and if your bike has a removable wheel, take it with you.

Walking

- Check your route before setting off. If you need to ask for directions avoid looking lost and helpless as research suggests that people are less likely to be a victim of crime if they appear confident and assured
- Walk down the middle of the pavement
- Remember that routes which seem very safe during the day look completely different after dark. Be prepared to walk a longer way around to avoid isolated alleys and spaces
- Avoid making eye contact with a person if you do not want to make conversation
- Wear shoes and clothing which enables you to move freely
- If you are using a personal alarm, have it to hand and make sure that it is working. Battery alarms can go flat, even when unused and aerosol ones lose air after a time
- Tuck your scarf under your coat collar. Do the same if you have long hair
- Sling your bag with its shoulder strap diagonally across your body, preferably under your coat. Ensure your bag sits away from the road to avoid grabs from moped riders
- If you are ever threatened, be prepared to give up your wallet or your bag. Wallets secured in coats inside pocket with a safety pin will foil a pickpocket
- Keep your hands free as you walk
- Be aware of distraction crimes - eg. somebody asking you for the time and then snatching your telephone or bag when you turn your wrist over to check your watch

- Avoid talking on your telephone - this advertises that you have something expensive which could be attractive to thieves and distracts you from noticing your environment. If you do need to text or talk, find a busy place where it feels safe to stop and stand with your back to something solid. Look up from your telephone at regular intervals to monitor your environment
- Keep some taxi money on you for emergencies
- If you think that you are being followed, head for lights and noise, even if it takes you off route. Find a commercial premises or public building and seek out somebody you trust
- Many pubs and restaurant staff will respond to “Please may I speak to Angela” which is coded language for “help me”.

Visiting people in their homes

It should always be your aim to arrange meetings with residents in public places; home visits must be treated as a last resort.

Before automatically agreeing to a home visit:

- Could the meeting be carried out by telephone?
- Or by e-mail – or over Zoom/Teams?
- Is there a public place where you could meet such as a local community centre or a café?
- Could they attend your next surgery?

Some Members will be more flexible about house calls to older or disabled members of the public, or if they are asked to look at a housing or neighbourhood issue.

If you decide that a home visit is essential, make sure that you carry out proper checks before going into anyone’s property.

In preparation for a planned meeting, you should carry out some research. This may involve talking to the case Officer, who should provide any relevant background information. They should also make you aware of any previous issues or concerns. You should also check the Electoral Register to confirm identity.

Anyone with a history of poor behaviour should not be visited in their home and should be met in a public place or at your Council's offices. There should also be more than one person present if someone's past conduct is a concern.

Remember also to check the Electoral Register to see if the person who has requested your visit appears at this address. If they are not shown, seek advice from an Officer.

If you are satisfied with your findings, you should also:

- Ask someone to accompany you: this could be an Officer, a fellow Ward councillor or a friend
- Arrange the visit during the working day (if possible)
- Check beforehand who else may be in the property including whether there are dogs on-site. If there are, request that they are put in another room before you arrive
- Make sure that a responsible person knows exactly where you are and has an idea of what time your meeting will finish.

Some Councils have a policy requiring residents not to smoke during a visit from Council representative. You may like to check whether there are any in-house rules on this.

Arriving at a resident's home

- Avoid taking a handbag or personal belongings into somebody's property just in case you need to make a quick exit. It is also more difficult for someone to prove an allegation of theft if you did not take a bag in with you

- Always keep one hand free. Tying up both hands will reduce your ability to move quickly and can make opening doors tricky
- Carry out a mini assessment of the property before knocking on the door. Pay attention to the outside: dog poo in the garden is a clue that there may be at least one pooch at the address
- After knocking, stand back and angle your body slightly, so you can see into the area behind the person when they open the door
- If a resident is not dressed, or is in their night wear, do not enter the property. Say you will wait outside until they are clothed, or will arrange to visit another time
- Carry out a little doorstep conversation before committing yourself to going in. Use all your senses:
 - Smell – is there a whiff of alcohol or can you smell marijuana?
 - Sight – do they look friendly; is there someone you can see in the property whom you weren't expecting?
 - Feel – does this feel right?
- If your gut tells you that something is not right, make an excuse for not going in, for example you have just been called to an emergency meeting... could you rearrange? Promise to rearrange and then seek advice about how to do this
- If you decide that it is safe to enter, do not allow yourself to be locked in. Some people do this purely out of habit. If you came by car, you could ask for it to be left unlocked as you might need to pop out in a moment to retrieve something from your vehicle. Or you could just be honest: you would prefer it if they would leave the door unlocked

- As you go in, note the geography of the hallway
- Always follow the resident – ask them to lead the way.

Managing the Meeting

- Avoid meeting in the kitchen unless your visit is to view the room. The kitchen is full of items which could be used as weapons
- It is not good practice to have the owner and their dog in the room together with you. If the owner becomes upset this may agitate the dog and if the dog had to take sides, it probably wouldn't be yours. One way to remove a dog from the room is to apologise to the owner and say that you have asthma and are allergic to both dogs and cats. This provides a genuine reason to be separated from the animal and minimises any perceived insult. Note that uncaged budgies can prove hazardous
- If you sit down, choose the chair nearest the door
- When sitting on a settee, place yourself by one of the arms so if need to leave quickly, its support makes it easier and faster for you to stand
- Stay “above” the meeting. Occasionally just distance yourself from the conversation and check that you still feel comfortable
- By all means ask a buddy to make a safety call to you at a specified time during your visit to check you are alright, but if you do, brief them to speak quietly when they talk so that the resident cannot hear what they are saying
- Agree “coded language” with your companion, which is a way to communicate an issue. Using names is a good way of doing this. For example of your companion turns to you and says: “Shall we refer this to Maureen?”, this indicates that you are uncomfortable and want to leave

- During the discussion, if their behaviour deteriorates, or you start to feel uncomfortable, smooth things over and make an excuse to leave. Find sensible a reason, such as referring a decision back to the officer or checking facts.
- In extreme situations, you can agree to anything which enables you to get away safely. Whilst lying is generally a mortal sin, if you are being threatened you must be prepared to promise anything which enables you to leave. This can be unpicked later when you are safe and have consulted with others on how to proceed
- In a heated situation, even if the other party appears to calm down, you have seen a flash of their behaviour. Whilst things are calmer, find a legitimate reason to leave.

Callers to your own home

Whilst some Councillors are happy to see people in their own home, others will avoid home meetings unless the person is well known to them.

In personal safety terms, unannounced visitors should not enter your home unless you have a long-standing relationship with them and trust the person implicitly.

Some Authorities have a no home visits policy, so check the rules. It is always safer and more comfortable to ask members of the public to contact you by telephone or e-mail, or to attend your next surgery.

A recent change has meant that it is now possible for Councillors to use the Council's registered address rather than publishing their own home location.

It is recommended that you never invite unexpected doorstep callers into your home unless they are well-known to you and you trust them.

Ward surgeries

Choose your venue carefully and avoid holding surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building. Some Councillors use busy supermarkets, libraries or shopping centres where there is good footfall. Make sure your room has good access and exits. Check for a strong and reliable mobile telephone signal.

All venues should be properly risk assessed, so seek advice from your Clerk or the Democratic Services team on how to go about this.

Consider having a companion with you; they can help to manage any queues and assist with some of the practical elements of the session. If you do have someone with you, make sure that you develop some coded language so that you can share information without alerting your visitor.

Sit nearest the exit and consider how you want to lay out the rest of your seating. Chairs set out at a 45 or 90-degree angle can be more co-operative and less confrontational than sitting directly opposite someone, although sitting opposite has the benefits of space between you and your visitor.

Sitting across a desk can provide you with a security barrier and also make it easier to take notes. You will have your own preference, although a table between parties is always safer.

If you have a choice of seating, pick higher chairs with arms, as these are easier and faster to get out of than armchairs.

Keep the desk clear of items which could become used against you. If you are lucky enough to have a hot drink, place it to the side of your chair rather than on the table in front of you.

Use of interview rooms

- Be careful about taking someone whose behaviour is uncertain or threatening into a confined space
- Always let somebody else know you are in there

- Sit closest to the door so that you can exit swiftly
- Have a table between you to create a safe space
- Make sure that the interview room is uncluttered and there is nothing on the desk or table which could become a problem
- Be familiar with any alarm buttons or strips
- If you can, leave the door open so others can hear what is happening
- Ask an Officer check on you, or to monitor the meeting on CCTV
- Agree coded language so that you can communicate issues to other people
- Make sure that you are not left alone in an interview room at the end of the working day: ask someone wait until you have finished.

Personal alarms

It is recommended that you invest in a personal safety alarm. Contrary to popular belief, the purpose of the device is not to alert others but is designed to disorientate an attacker. Their surprise element can buy you valuable escape time.

When you choose an alarm, avoid ones which pulsate in favour of a device with a continuous volume of around 138 decibels. You can choose from a number of designs:

- Belt clip with quick release cord or push button
- Keyring push button
- Wristwatch type with push button
- Hand-held compressed air cannister.

Depending upon the type you choose, alarms cost around £10. Some people keep a spare one in their car or coat pocket. The device will need maintaining, and you do will need to check that the battery is still fresh as cells can degrade over time.

The alarm should be kept close to you, in your pocket or on your belt as in an emergency situation you would not have time to dig for it in the bottom of a bag.

You may find the following websites useful:

<https://www.suzylampugh.org/Pages/Category/personal-alarms/>

<https://www.wealarms.co.uk/>

<https://www.crimepreventionproducts.co.uk/personal-alarms/>

Canvassing

Many elected Councillors and prospective candidates will canvas before and election – or leaflet all year around.

Before

- Find someone to canvas with you – this could be another councillor or a friend.
- You should not canvas alone but government guidance states that the number of campaigners in a street or neighbourhood at one time should be kept to a minimum.
- Work out your plan with your colleague/s and develop some principles of how you will work together, eg: nobody moves on to another road/block of flats alone.
- Start canvassing together and you finish canvassing together.
- Talk beforehand about your strategy if a colleague does not answer their telephone or is not visible.

- Swap telephone numbers and provide details of anyone you would want contacted in an emergency situation.
- Developing coded language (a way of communicating with each other without other people understanding what you are saying).
- When you are canvassing you must adhere to any current social distancing requirements.
- Do not carry a handbag: keep your hands free and keep your charged mobile phone tucked away out of sight.
- Take a personal alarm with you.
- Look confident and assured.
- Canvas in daylight, if you can, rather than after dark.
- If you are out after dark, carry a torch and wear bright clothing
- Choose well-populated areas and avoid isolated short-cuts.
- Wear clothes and shoes you can move swiftly in.
- Do not use headphones and minimise your mobile phone usage.
- Walk facing oncoming traffic.
- Post leaflets through letterboxes using a wooden spatula.
- If you notice plenty of “warning – guard dog on premises” or “no cold caller stickers” in a house window, you might choose not to knock and just leaflet.
- Use your gut feel: if you don’t feel right about knocking on a door, don’t.

Doorstep conversations

- When you knock, stand back from the doorstep
- Stand slightly tilted so that you are not “squared up” when the person answers the door.
- If you are greeted by a dog, even if you are a dogaholic, do be careful in the way you behave on first meeting. Experts often advise that we avoid direct eye contact which may be seen as a challenge. Keep your hands close to you and tilt your body so that you are not squared up. Dogs do not like peoples’ hands above their head and may react adversely to this. Always ask an owner’s permission before petting their dog.
- If the door is opened, take notice of the person’s non-verbal behaviour, particularly their facial expression. If you read this as not being a good time or an unwelcome visit, you could make your excuses and leave.
- Use your judgement: if someone looks like they do not want to engage, then do not persist with the conversation. If someone is abusive or aggressive, keep your distance and make your excuses.
- It is always worth having a few pre-planned phrases ready that you can use as part of your extraction strategy.
- It would be a good idea to let your colleagues know about any households you chose to avoid so that they can make sure they do not visit either.

Mobile Telephones and Technology

One of the biggest myths about mobile telephones is that they keep us safe. They don't; using a telephone in public makes us more vulnerable. With some handsets retailing at well over £1,000 they are a magnet for thieves: would you take the equivalent amount in £10 notes and hold them to your ear in a public place?

The other major issue about using a 'phone on the go is that they draw our attention away from noticing our environment.

In personal safety terms, a cellular device had only two uses: to communicate a problem or to locate a person. In a crisis situation it would not be possible to reach for a telephone – let alone dial a number.

Setting up your mobile telephone

It is worth spending a few minutes organising information on your mobile device. Windows, Android and Apple systems all have the facility to show vital pieces of information on a telephone screen. This includes adding a line of text to your device's lock screen, for example the name and number of the person you would want to contact in an emergency.

Apple and Android also have a facility to input details about blood group, medical conditions and allergies. On some mobiles this information can be accessed even if the telephone is pin-locked.

It is a good idea to make sure that the numbers you would want to dial first in an emergency sit at the top of your contacts list. An easy way of doing this is by adding "A"'s before the contact's name – for example Office becomes "AAA – Office"; Home now shows as "AAA – Home".

Some smart watches have a facility to call for help. On an Apple watch, you can press the crown for two or more seconds which will bring up the option to swipe for the emergency services.

Just finally ...

Taken out of context, this booklet implies that we live in a violent and unsafe world, where danger lurks on every corner and every person we encounter represents a risk. This is not true.

Most of the people we meet are friendly, well-mannered, and kind. Poorly behaved individuals are in the minority and provide the media with dramatic headlines which can promote fear and anxiety.

Having worked your own way through this booklet, you will now have some clear ideas on how to improve your safety. Even if you just make some small changes to your working practice, the very act of reading this publication will have raised your level of consciousness.

Take some time to develop and implement sensible precautions which will help to keep you safe and remember to share any of the tips you have found useful with family, friends, and other elected Members.

In the famous words of Crimewatch: “Please sleep well... and don’t have nightmares.”

Miranda Smythe

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