Methods and Tools for Decreasing Vulnerability to Physical and Sexual Assault Among People with Visual Impairments

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For many decades, research studies have consistently shown that people who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision) are at substantially higher risk of nonfatal violent crimes than are their non-disabled peers (David et al., 1988; Gish, 1977; Pava, 1994). The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) implemented by the U.S. Department of Justice specifically defines these nonfatal violent crimes as including "rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault" (Harrell, 2021, p. 3). Four decades ago, Welbourne et al. (1983) reported that half of all women who were congenitally blind and participated in their study had experienced at least one incident (and often, more than one incident) of forced sexual contact. Two decades ago, it was found that three out of every four people with visual impairments have been physically assaulted in their lifetimes—a figure that was found to be 15 times greater than the figure for physical assaults among the general population (Collinsworth, 2001). Data pertaining to violent crimes against people with disabilities, including those who are visually impaired, from the most recent years are consistent with these data from the past several decades. The most recent National Crime Victimization Survey report showed that the rate of nonfatal violent crimes against people with visual impairments in the U.S. was nearly four times the rate for persons without disabilities (Harrell, 2021). Specifically, the rate of nonfatal violent crimes against people with visual impairments who were aged 12 and over was 47.6 per 1,000, compared to 12.4 per 1,000 among people without disabilities who were aged 12 and over (Harrell, 2021). Also, notably, of all the disability types measured by the National Crime Victimization Survey, those who identified as visually impaired had the second highest rate of nonfatal violent crimes, with cognitive disabilities being the only disability group that ranked higher (Harrell, 2021). Thus, nonfatal violent crimes, including "rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated

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assault, and simple assault" (Harrell, 2021, p. 3), against people who are visually impaired is a long-standing problem in dire need of attention.

Pava (1994) explained several reasons for the greater incidence of physical and sexual assault against people who are visually impaired, and these reasons are still highly relevant today.

> That is, such considerations as impaired mobility, high visibility, inability to identify their assailants or to use visual cues, less access to safety precautions, the use of alternative forms of transportation, and the occasional need for assistance from sighted persons when traveling independently may all serve to "mark" a visually impaired woman or man as a "target" for a sexual or physical assault. (p. 105)

Therefore, many people with visual impairments perceive themselves to be more vulnerable and at risk for physical attacks (Pava et al., 1991). These perceptions are rooted in a long history of people who are visually impaired not having adequate methods with which to protect themselves from a significantly high incidence of physical and sexual assault.

Methods Designed to Increase Personal Safety of People with Visual Impairments

This article shares methods that people with visual impairments can use to decrease their vulnerability to violent crimes. We include a brief discussion about strategies that are not recommended, and this is followed by an explanation of the environments in which these questionable strategies are intended to be implemented along with our rationale regarding their inappropriateness. We follow with our considerations regarding guide dogs, as related to the topic of personal safety. These discussions are followed by our recommendations for strategies that are low cost and require little to no training on the part of the person who is visually impaired.

Self-Defense Methods That We Do Not Recommend

Commonly considered strategies for self-defense include the use of martial arts, spray irritants, and the long cane. We do not recommend these approaches for the reasons detailed below.

A frequently recommended strategy for personal safety among people who are visually impaired is to become an expert in a martial art. We do not recommend that approach for several reasons. First, it is difficult to find martial arts trainers who are skilled in adapting techniques for use by individuals who are totally blind. Second,

not all individuals who are blind possess the physical capability of mastering the techniques. Third, training in such self-defense strategies requires a considerable commitment of time for the initial training and subsequent practice to be proficient in the use of the strategies. These same disadvantages apply to any martial art that is specially designed for use by individuals who are blind.

The use of pepper spray has unique disadvantages as a self-defense tool for people who are blind because they likely cannot detect where the pepper spray lands after it is discharged. The lack of control over where the spray hits is a strong disadvantage.

We do not include the use of the long cane for protection. We realize that the use of the long cane as a weapon may be a seemingly convenient self-defense technique, but this scenario presents numerous hazards and risks. For example, a person who chooses to use their cane to defend themselves can be easily disarmed of the long cane by their attacker and could be left with no mobility tool with which to travel in their environment.

Self-Defense Methods for Consideration

We believe that there are other, more effective strategies to consider as primary methods of self-defense against a perpetrator. These methods and tools are outlined in this article. We emphasize that there is no way to guarantee complete safety for anyone using the tools or strategies that are described here. Therefore, we emphasize that the information presented in this article is designed to reduce vulnerability, not to guarantee safety.

An additional point to be made here is that the recommendations are designed for use by people who are blind and who are traveling independently in the environment. The recommendations are not designed to protect individuals who are vulnerable to attack by family members or acquaintances of the family. These are dangers that unfortunately exist and require a completely separate discussion, apart from the information presented in this article.

Considering Guide Dog Color and/or Breed as a Matter of Personal Safety

To begin, we believe that the most effective and most easily implemented strategy is the use of a trained guide dog. We understand that guide dogs are not trained to be guard dogs. We also understand from personal experience and existing research that individuals who belong to the sighted community view dogs as protective (American Kennel Club, 2021).

We realize that this strategy, unlike those that follow, requires a substantial investment of time and effort on the part of the person who is visually impaired to

acquire and maintain a guide dog. However, there is no special training required on the part of the guide dog or the person who is visually impaired in terms of the suggested personal safety benefit of guide dogs. It is simply the presence of a guide dog that likely makes a difference in terms of personal safety.

Additionally, we present a novel concept that dogs of particular colors or breeds may decrease the likelihood of assault, merely based on the public's perception of the particular dogs' aggression. We share this novel concept as a result of the personal experience of one of the authors, who has used three dogs, two of one color and one of another. He has noted that the colors of the dogs' coats have made a difference in the perception of the sighted public.

In general, the colors of dogs may affect the perception of the aggression of the dogs, regardless of the breed. There is some scientific support for the concept that the color may cause some members of the public to view the dog as more or less dangerous. In a 2018 study conducted by Stanley Coren on behalf of the American Kennel Club, people rated photographs of Labrador Retrievers that differed only in color. The result showed that dogs with darker coats were perceived as more aggressive (Coren, 2018).

Breed may also have an impact on the perception of a dog as a protector. A German shepherd, for example, is often seen as the most protective breed.(American Kennel Club, 2021). German Shepherds are often bred to be working dogs by the military and law enforcement, which are two highly protective career paths. Therefore, the general public may regard German Shepherd guide dogs as more protective of their owners.

Based on these factors, individuals who are blind and who desire to travel using a guide dog may want to consider the breed and color of the dog. We make these suggestions as a novel concept for those who may be considering a guide dog for the first time. We also recognize that guide dog schools may not adhere to this novel suggestion about the consideration of guide dog color and/or breed in terms of protection from physical harm by strangers.

Self-Defense Methods and Tools that are Low Cost and Easily Implemented

The following recommendations are based on four requirements for inclusion. First, the tool must be accessible to people who are visually impaired to be recommended for use. Second, the tool must be inexpensive to be recommended for use. Third, the tool must be easily implemented without extensive training to be recommended for use. Last, the tool, of course, must be considered to be effective in reducing the individual's vulnerability to sexual assault to be recommended for use.

Table. Accessible Tools for Personal Safety Use Among People with Visual Impairments, Including Estimated Costs and Sources for Purchasing.

Tool	Estimated Cost	Source(s) for Purchasing
Sting Ring	$18.95 per unit	Home Security Superstore
Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring	$5 to $20 per unit	Several online vendors are available. Google search "Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring"
Personal Keychain Alarms	$5 to $30 per unit	Amazon
Care Go Personal Alarm	$45 per unit	Amazon
Smartphone SOS functionality	No cost beyond the smartphone purchase itself	Apple (for iPhone) and/or Google (for Android)
Accessible books about physical and personal safety, empowerment, and recovery from physical or sexual assault	Any subscription/membership fees for these services (Bookshare and/or Audible) that may or may not be applicable for the individual who is visually impaired. A Bookshare membership is for people with print disabilities and is provided free **to qualified US students of any age and the schools that support them.** Non-students and other organizations pay a low fee.	Bookshare and/or Audible

We have compiled a list of recommendations and tools that may be used to reduce the vulnerability of people who are blind to physical and sexual assault. Table summarizes the tools that are discussed in detail in the paragraphs that follow (Table).

Sting Ring

The Sting Ring is a small device that is carried in the palm of the hand. The user positions it so that a finger protrudes through the ring and the base of the device is held in the palm of the hand. The device has an on/off switch that can easily be

manipulated by the thumb. The ring portion of the device produces an electrical charge. a bright light, and a loud sound.

It is a "taser-like" device that, when triggered, emits a strong electrical charge while making a loud sound that results from the discharge of electricity. It is designed to be pressed against a portion of the body of an attacker while the palm of the hand is squeezed. That action causes the device to emit an electrical charge while producing a loud sound. The electrical charge produces a strong contraction of the muscles of the body in the location where the device is in contact. It is recommended that the electrical charge be induced for no longer than five seconds. The resulting contractions of the muscle as well as the pain are designed to cause an attacker to relent.

The device has a recharging plug that can be inserted into a wall socket to renew the electrical charge of the device's battery. The reader should be aware that "taser-like" devices, such as the Sting Ring, require the owner to hold a Firearms Owner Identification permit (FOID card) in some states. We believe that this small, relatively inexpensive device can be used with great effectiveness by a person who is blind. Sight is not required for its use. One need only be in physical contact with the recipient of the painful electrical charge. A person who is blind and who is being attacked will undoubtedly be in physical contact with their attacker, making the use of the device easily manageable. A second advantage of the Sting Ring is that it cannot easily be taken from the user because it is held in the palm of the hand with a finger protruding through the ring portion. A third advantage is that it cannot be easily used against the defender. If the person using this device for self-defense does not put pressure on it by squeezing the palm, it will not "fire off". A fourth advantage of the device is that the sound that it makes is alarming. We believe that merely pointing it at a potential attacker and causing it to fire off without actually touching the attacker would do much to discourage a perpetrator.

The sound that the device makes and the spewing of the light of the electric charge may, in our estimation, discourage some people with visual impairments from using it. That same illusion of deadliness that discourages some people from using it may also have the same effect on potential attackers.

The Sting Ring is found on the Home Security Superstore for the price of $18.95. The website where the Sting Ring can be found for purchase is available at https://www.thehomesecuritysuperstore.com/products/streetwise-sting-ring-knuckle-stun-gun-black-18m.

For additional information about the Sting Ring, the reader is encouraged to view a YouTube video review of this device, located at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmBB8tb8fqU. This particular video review describes the device in detail and includes a demonstration of the device being used to transmit its high voltage surge into the air, away from any person. It is a short video, 2 minutes and 25

Figures 1, 2, and 3. A series of three pictures of the Sting Ring are shown from different viewpoints, being worn on the hand and not being worn on the hand. The Sting Ring, as it is pictured, is similar in shape and size to a padlock. To wear the Sting Ring, as shown in the pictures, put the ring part of this device around the middle finger and then place the larger part in the palm. A finger protrudes through the ring, and the base of the device, where the trigger button is located, is held in the palm of the hand. An on and off movable switch is shown on the side where the thumb is located.

seconds in length, that can answer many questions that readers may have about this device. Figures 1, 2, and 3 each show a picture of the Streetwise Sting Ring.

Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring

The Cat Ear Spike Ring consists of a metal ring with two sharp spikes protruding from it. The ring can be worn on any of the fingers with the spikes pointing outward.

There are several advantages of the Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring. It is inexpensive, does not require any kind of setup or charging, and is easy to conceal. This device is usable with and without vision. To our knowledge, its use is not forbidden by any legislation. It would be difficult for the attacker to take the ring away from the user or to use it against the person being attacked. The use of this device may be more acceptable by some people when compared with the previously mentioned Sting Ring. We note that there are also other similar defense rings available, such as the Defender Ring and other models. We have presented the Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring in particular because of its design elements of having two distinct, large spikes and a smooth side of the ring. This smooth side of the ring is distinct and has no spikes or tactile marks of any kind to allow the person wearing the ring to have the ring securely and properly worn when feeling the ring by touch.

The use of the ring is obvious. Should a person be physically attacked, they would likely be in physical contact with the attacker. In that position, the person

being attacked could administer a blow to any portion of the attacker's body, hurting or puncturing the attacker's skin with the sharp portion of the ring.

There are certain disadvantages in the use of the Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring. The person defending themselves using this device must strike uncovered portions of the attacker's body. The sharp portion of the ring may not penetrate thick clothing, especially if the person being attacked does not have considerable strength in their arms as they administer the blow or blows. The recommended approach is to strike the attacker's face, but the person being attacked, not possessing sight, may have difficulty reaching the face of the attacker. Also, it might be the case that the attacker's face is not readily accessible to the person being attacked.

The Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring is found on various sites for various prices, ranging in cost from approximately $5 to approximately $20. A Google search using the terms "Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring" results in several sources from which this self-defense tool can be purchased. Figures 4 and 5 each show a picture of the Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring.

Personal Keychain Alarms

There are numerous personal keychain alarms that can be purchased. Generally, these are inexpensive. Additionally, personal keychain alarms are easily carried and concealed, and they are usable with and without vision. There are no complex actions that must be taken to operate them; thus, the use of personal keychain alarms is easily learned without any required setup. Another advantage is that personal keychain alarms cannot be used against the person being attacked. The major disadvantage is that the alarm may be ignored by others, given the prevalence of car alarms, which are frequently heard in some environments.

Personal keychain alarms are available on Amazon, ranging in price from $15 to $30 for a six-pack of multiple keychain alarms. Figures 6, 7, and 8 show pictures of an assortment of personal keychain alarms.

Care Go Personal Alarm

The Care Go Personal Alarm is in the shape of a small cylinder, approximately three inches in length and approximately the diameter of a dime. The top third of the device is a triggering mechanism that the user can rotate and pull to engage the alarm. At the top of the device, a small connection allows it to be attached to a keychain. That portion of the device can be removed to gain access to the charging port. The device is linked to the Care Go App, which the owner of the device and their contacts of choice must download. The owner is required to pair the device with the Care Go App that is present on their phone. The instructions for this procedure are automatically started when the owner opens the app for the first time. The owner

should ask friends or family members to download the Care Go App and designate themselves as "protectors". The device provides precise location details, and, using the app, the protectors can see the location of the device at all times. The device works in two ways. If the owner is moving through an environment and feels unsafe, they can twist the device to initiate the "follow me" mode. This action automatically sends a signal to the protectors' devices. As soon as the protectors touch the notifications on their phones and open the Care Go App, they can see the location of the phone owner. From the app, the protectors are able to determine the location of the owner. The individual being contacted can call the owner via the app. The protector can also track the movement of the owner via the app. In this way, the protectors are aware that their loved one feels unsafe and can reach out to them and/or easily observe their route.

If the person who is blind feels they are in immediate danger, they can send an SOS signal to their contacts. This can be done by triggering the device by pulling the top, causing it to snap. The protectors' phones emit a loud sound that directs their immediate attention to the situation. The protectors can open the app, which will provide them with the location of the person. The protectors can call the owner if needed. If the owner twists the triggering mechanism and snaps it back down, then the "follow me" and SOS signals are cancelled. The protectors can still continue to view the owner's location and check on them if they wish.

The device has several advantages. It is small and easy to carry. This device and the Care Go App are accessible to people with visual impairments. The device has both a "follow me" and an SOS feature. Thus, protectors can discriminate between the person feeling unsafe or being in immediate danger and can take the appropriate action. According to the owner's manual, the device needs to be charged only once a year. Perhaps the major advantage is that it is easier to manipulate than dialing a phone during an emergency because it requires only one small movement of the fingers to activate.

The Care Go Personal Alarm is found on Amazon for approximately $45. Figure 9 is a picture of the Care Go Personal Alarm side by side a screen shot of a smart phone with the SOS Mode of the Care Go Alarm engaged.

Smartphone SOS Functionality

An SOS function can be found on many different types of smartphones. Thus, one major advantage is that there is no additional cost to invoke this on a smartphone that someone already owns. The SOS capability on iPhones and Android devices is accessible to people with visual impairments.

This feature on iPhones enables one to immediately call emergency services after quickly clicking the power button (also known as the Sleep/Wake button) five times in a sequence. After pressing the power button five times quickly, an emergency SOS

Figures 4 and 5. A picture of the Cat Ear Spike Defense Ring not being worn. This is followed by a picture of the ring being worn on the middle finger of a hand rolled into a fist, with the spikes pointing up and out. As shown in both pictures, the ring resembles cat ears with the two spikes located on the ring.

"slider" appears, enabling one to cancel the SOS alert signal by tapping the phone. If the alarm is not canceled, the phone is linked to a 911 operator. If the individual is unable to speak and has their medical ID imbedded in their phone, their ID card will be shared with local emergency services personnel. Once the call with emergency services personnel is concluded, the iPhone sends the emergency contacts a text message with the person's current location. If the phone's location identification capability is off, the phone will temporarily turn it on. When the person's location changes, the person's contacts will receive an update, and the contacts will receive a notification about 10 minutes later. Android phones have an SOS emergency feature that is set up in a similar manner and works in the same way. Clients and students who are visually impaired may require assistance in setting up their emergency contacts.

There are several advantages of the SOS feature on smartphones. As mentioned, the feature is built into a smartphone. Generally, people nearly always have their phones in their possession, especially when traveling independently. Also, the feature is easy to set up for those who are familiar with the smartphone interface.

A disadvantage of smartphone SOS functionality is that rapidly pressing the button several times in a row may be difficult to accomplish during an attack. Figure 10

Figures 6, 7, and 8. A series of three pictures of three different types of keychain alarms found on Amazon that are all variations of small, handheld, push button personal keychain alarms.

shows screen shots of the iPhone SOS function and Figure 11 shows screen shots of the Android SOS function.

Fighting Back Wildly

Finally, we recommend that people who are visually impaired should be instructed on the use of their bodies to attempt to defend themselves. As stated earlier, we do not recommend training in any type of martial art, given the reasons previously stated. However, we do recommend that an individual who is being attacked should take actions that may stop the attacker. These involve maneuvers such as screaming and wildly thrashing about. An individual who is attacked can scratch, bite, kick, pinch, spit, pull hair, and perform any other action they can devise. A person who is being attacked can go limp and suddenly follow this by flailing wildly, twisting, jumping, and then going limp again and repeating the actions over and over.

As explained by Bozeman (2004) "the body can serve as a weapon for striking the attacker with the hands, fists, knees, feet, elbows, fingers, and head; biting; pinching; and/or yelling to attract attention" (p. 436). An additional suggestion to attract attention when yelling is to yell "fire" instead of "help" because "fire" may trigger a quicker reaction from others who may hear the shouts.

These maneuvers and techniques can be practiced by people who are visually impaired. It is important that the person who is visually impaired understands why they should appear to be in this crazed state when being attacked. The more difficult the person makes it for the attacker, the more difficult it is for the attacker to carry out any contemptible intentions. Additionally, these actions may draw the attention of others who may be in the area. If others are not in the area, these actions may

Figure 9. The Care Go Alarm shown beside a screenshot of a smartphone with the SOS Mode of the Care Go Alarm engaged. The Care Go Alarm, as shown in this image, is approximately the size of a tube of lipstick.

cause the attacker to relent because of the possibility that others, unseen by the attacker, may view the actions that the attacker is attempting to carry out. If this approach is taken, we recommend that individuals who are blind be given the opportunity to practice these behaviors in a safe environment.

Books Focusing on Physical Safety and Empowerment Available on Bookshare and/or Audible

There are many books on the topics of personal safety and empowerment that are readily accessible to people with visual impairments. While some of the books indicate by the title of the work that the content is written for women, the reality is that the safety tips apply to all humans, especially those who may be the most vulnerable, regardless of gender or gender identity status. Several examples of books that focus on physical safety and empowerment and are available on Bookshare and/or Audible include:

- *97 Powerful Safety Tips for Women: How to Protect Your Loved Ones in Dangerous Times* by Damian Brindle can be found on Audible.
- *Reinvent Your Personal Safety: 3 Keys to Successful Self-Protection for Women* by Matt Tamas can be found on Bookshare.

Figure 10. Two side-by-side screenshots of the iOS interface for the built-in SOS distress signal on an iPhone.

- *Survive the Unthinkable: A Total Guide to Women's Self-Protection* by Tim Larkin can be found on Bookshare.
- *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals that Protect us From Violence* by Gavin de Becker can be found on Bookshare and Audible.
- *The New Superpower for Women: Trust Your Intuition, Predict Dangerous Situations, Defend Yourself from the Unthinkable* by Steve Kardian and A. Clara Pistek can be found on Bookshare and Audible.

Books to Aid in Recovery for Rape and Assault Survivors Available on Bookshare and/or Audible

Additionally, there are many self-help books that were written to aid in the recovery of rape and assault survivors. Many of these books are available on Bookshare and/or Audible and, therefore, are readily accessible to people with visual impairments. Examples of these books include the following:

- *Dear Sister: Letters from Survivors of Sexual Violence* by Lisa Factora-Borchers and Aishah Shahidah Simmons can be found on Bookshare.
- *Mastering Your Mean Girl* by Melissa Ambrosini can be found on Bookshare and Audible.
- *Mind Over Mood, Second Edition: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think* by Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky can be found on Bookshare.

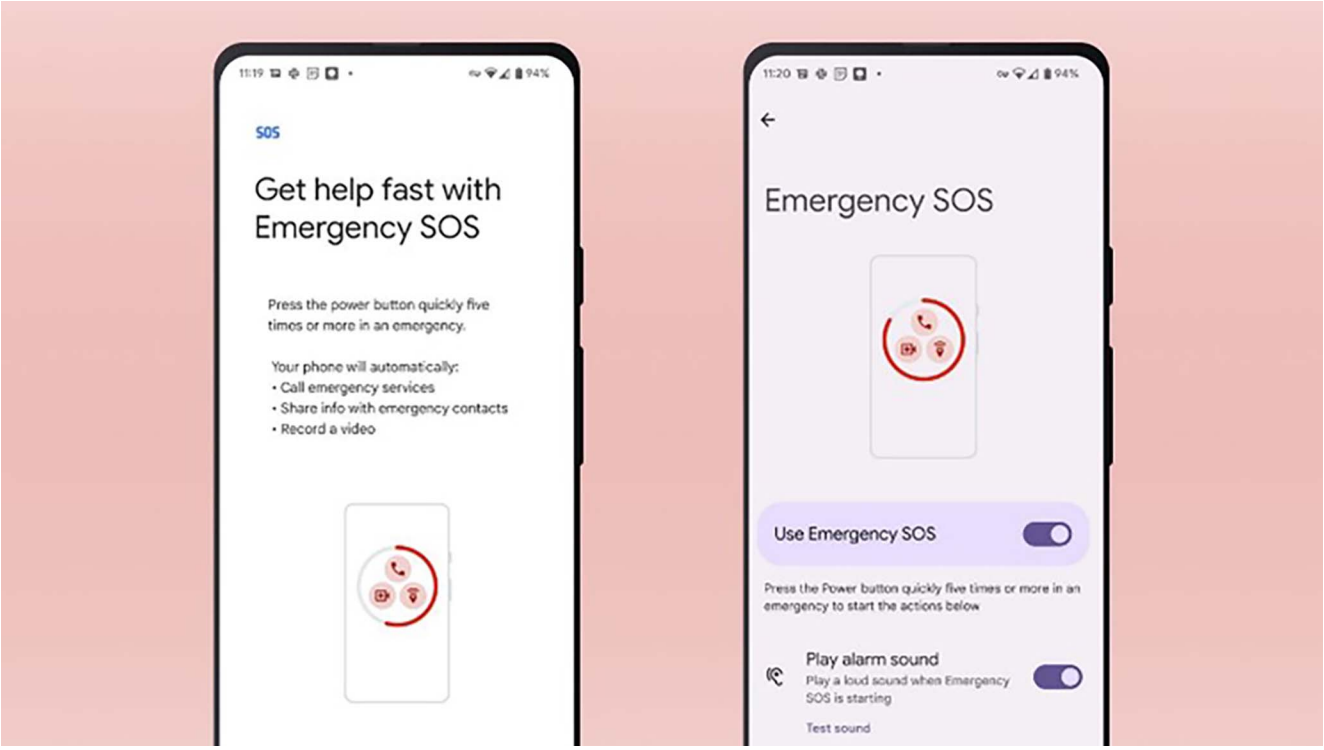

Figure 11. Two side-by-side screenshots of the Android interface for the built-in SOS distress signal on an Android mobile phone.

- *The Body is Not an Apology* by Sonya Renee Taylor can be found on Bookshare and Audible.
- *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk can be found on Bookshare and Audible.
- *The Self-Love Experiment* by Shannon Kaiser can be found on Bookshare and Audible.
- *Waking the Tiger* by Peter A. Levine and Anna Fredrick can be found on Bookshare and Audible.

Summary

Physical and sexual assault among people who are visually impaired is a long-standing problem that has been documented in the literature for more than half a century. The purpose of this manuscript is to share meaningful methods and accessible tools that may be used to decrease vulnerability to physical and sexual assault for people with visual impairments.

In conclusion, we do not want the reader to overestimate the effectiveness of the tools or actions presented in this manuscript. The use of a self-defense device will not guarantee that a person who is blind and traveling alone is invulnerable to

assault. No strategy can guarantee total safety in today's unfortunate environment. However, these tools and strategies are recommended to further empower people who are visually impaired throughout their lives.

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