Safety When Working Alone



What's at Stake?

Working alone means working where you cannot be seen or heard by another person and where you cannot expect a visit from another person.

While not an ideal situation, sometimes it is necessary. In occupations as diverse as a home care nurse, security guard, property manager, plant attendant, taxi driver, custodian, logger, ranch hand, retail clerk and oil field mechanic, sometimes must work alone.

What's the Danger?

A 17-year-old girl was found murdered in the back room of a gas station in Montreal, QC. The station's owner says the building should have been locked while the young woman was on shift. Customers should have been served through a transaction window, but obviously someone was able to get inside the building.

A miner was working under an unsafe, unbolted rock ceiling, contrary to safe procedure. Loose rock fell on him and pinned him down. He was found about two hours later, then remained trapped for another 45 minutes while a rescue party was assembled. He died shortly after arrival at hospital.

Doing a job alone can be more hazardous than doing the same job in company of others. If a worker is injured, ill or trapped, there is no one nearby to help or call for assistance. Lone workers are also more vulnerable to crime such as robbery or assault. Workers alone in the wild country are more vulnerable to animal predators.

The risk of working alone depends on circumstances including the location, whether the work itself is risky, and involvement with the public. Workers who handle money, work away from the regular work site or work alone with patients or clients face unique hazards. As do those who work at heights or in confined spaces such as silos, work with electricity, hazardous substances, dangerous equipment or with the public where there is the possibility of violence.

How to Protect Yourself

Consider these tips for greater safety when working alone:

- Talk to your boss and colleagues about your job, the hazards and how to minimize them.
    - Can work be rescheduled so you do not have to work alone?
    - Can the buddy system be used?
- Follow your employer’s check-in system and check in at the scheduled regular intervals.
    - Agree on a tracking method to be used if you are overdue.
    - Carry a personal alarm, cell phone or two-way radio. Manage the batteries so you will always be able to use them.
- Use a buddy system in higher risk situations.
- File a travel plan and let people your route and ETA when you drive somewhere alone.
    - Keep vehicles well-maintained to avoid breakdowns.
    - Stock an emergency survival kit in the vehicle.
- When visiting a possibly intimidating client, take a taxi and have the driver wait outside.
- If you work alone late at night, get a security escort to your vehicle or bus stop.
- Handling cash or other valuables puts you at risk for violent robbery.
    - Have your employer take steps to reduce the amount of cash on hand to lower the incentive for robbers.
    - Have your work area arranged for maximum visibility from windows.
    - Get training in how to avoid and handle a robbery and learn to use the security system.

Final Word

Some people enjoy working alone and choose solitary jobs on purpose. An injury or a violent encounter can take the fun out of your work, so be prepared to work as safely as possible when you work alone.