

The Seven-Second Rule: Don't Be the Chosen One

It can take a seasoned criminal less than seven seconds to size you up. To decide whether you would be easy to rob, assault, kidnap, or whatever else is on his mind. Count to seven now: One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

In the time from when you started counting to when you finished, a predator would have given you the once-over and decided whether he was moving forward to attack or whether he would be looking at the person walking behind you as his potential target. Yup, that's how quick it is.

His two biggest fears are getting hurt and getting caught. This knowledge empowers you in case you are picked. Fight back and cause a scene. The predator wants to commit the perfect crime and, in those few seconds, he assesses whether he runs an increased risk of getting hurt or caught by choosing you.

In 1981, sociologists Betty Grayson and Morris I. Stein conducted a now-famous study* that cast new light on how assailants picked would-be targets. The researchers set up a video camera on a busy New York sidewalk and taped people walking by for three days, between 10 a.m. and noon. None of the pedestrians knew that they were being videotaped.

The tape was later shown to inmates in a large East Coast prison who were incarcerated for violent offenses (such as armed robbery, rape, and murder) against people unknown to them. The inmates were instructed to rate the pedestrians on a scale of one to ten, from "a very easy rip-off" to "would avoid it, too big a situation. Too heavy." This is the basis for the Seven-Second Rule.

Two striking facts stood out. First, there was a consensus about who would be easy to overpower and control. Every inmate chose exactly the same person. Second, and unexpectedly, the choices were not solely based on gender, race, or age, as you would expect. Older, petite females were not automatically singled out. What came as a surprise was that there were

* Betty Grayson and Morris I. Stein, "Attracting Assault: Victim's Nonverbal Cues," *Journal of Communications* 31 (Winter 1981): 68-75.

other criteria that influenced the decisions. The inmates read the pedestrians' nonverbal signals and used those to make their choices.

When questioned about why they picked certain people, many of the participants couldn't articulate what had triggered their preferences. It was a subconscious decision, based upon the traits a predator knows indicate a soft target. As the researchers probed further, they figured out that the inmates' selections were based on a mixture of nonverbal cues. Basic movements made by the pedestrians, such as the length of their stride, how they moved their feet, the way they shifted their body weight, and whether their arms swung while walking, came into play and were interpreted for signs of vulnerability.

While it may seem surprising that something as basic as walking conveys information about your mental and physical state, it is worth noting that experienced medical professionals can also tell a lot about your overall health and well-being through your stride, gait, pace, and posture. The extensive study of body language in fields such as psychology, neurobiology, sociology, communications, and anthropology, in addition to the interest shown by law enforcement, the FBI, and the CIA, attests to the power of

these gestures. In this case, however, it was the criminals who were using the knowledge to select would-be targets.

The speed and consensus of their assessments is instructive. You are evaluated in the blink of an eye for any sign that potentially marks you as uncertain or hesitant. While women and the elderly are frequently targeted for assault because of the perception that they are vulnerable, anyone who lives off an air of being weak can be pegged as easy to compromise.

On the flip side, since we know what movements and actions signal unease and uncertainty, you can take steps to protect yourself by changing your behavior, including modifying your walking patterns to project yourself as someone who would be difficult to subdue and who would likely cause a scene: in other words, a hard target. Even if you don't feel particularly strong or purposeful, you can teach yourself to walk in a way that makes you appear as if you are. With practice, you can get better at projecting the external image until finally you may even internalize it.

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Take the Right Steps to Be a Hard Target

When you see a hero or heroine in a movie, ready to save the day, they stride forward, chin up, head held high, chest forward, and shoulders back, prepared to meet whatever challenges lie ahead. Take Katniss Everdeen, the young heroine from the book and movie series *The Hunger Games*, for example. Just by looking at the way she walks and holds herself, you can tell she is confident and determined. Even if you have the sound off or have never seen *The Hunger Games*, or barely understand the story, her self-assurance comes through by the way she moves. And yes, that is an actress in a role, but her walk conveys power and strength, and that is something you want to do, too. And yes, this behavior can be learned.

The following illustrations show different styles of walking and I go over some of the key body language signals that are markers of strength or weakness. The descriptions are exaggerated to help me get my point across. In reality, differences in stride or foot movement might be subtle, yet working together with other movements such as posture, alertness, and even level of energy, they convey an overall impression of how vulnerable you might be. You will be assessed by unfriendly eyes to see if you are weak, are easily intimidated, or suffer from an injury. When you know what the signs are, you can influence the signals that you send out to the world.

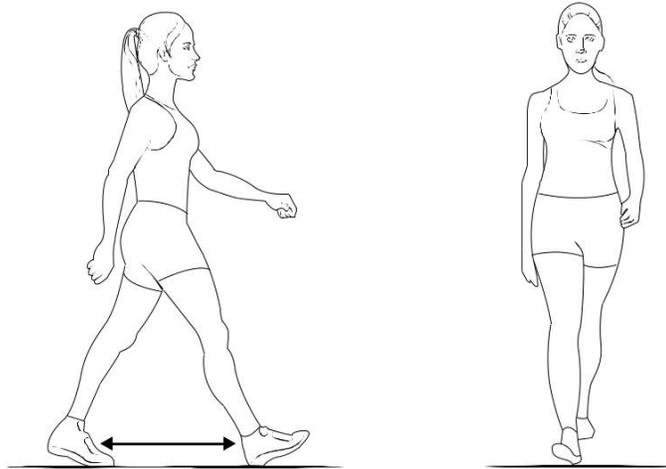
Ask a friend to record you walking across the room toward them to get an idea of how you look when you walk. I'd suggest doing it in several places, such as down the street, in the park, in the grocery store. Watch the videos, paying particular attention to your stride length, foot movement, arm swing, body weight shift, posture, and speed (when appropriate). Try experimenting with how you walk. Imagine that you are the heroine of a movie, ready to win the day, and record how you look when you walk with that in mind. Practice walking with purpose and confidence for a few days, get another recording of yourself, and compare the two. Is there a difference?

While you may not be able to consistently control the nonverbal signals you give off, the knowledge of what the criminal is looking for gives you an enormous advantage. You can try to incorporate that knowledge into your daily movements and influence how you are perceived.



Stride Right

WALK THIS WAY



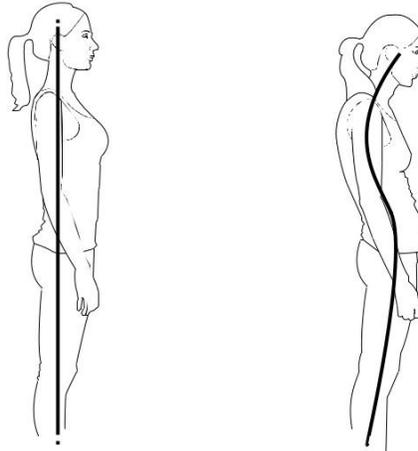
Stride length: Take forceful, dynamic steps that convey assertiveness and confidence. The pedestrians in the study who were categorized as difficult to assault had a medium stride length when compared to their body height. When they walked, it looked effortless and natural.

Foot movement: Swing your feet gracefully forward. The pedestrians who were not selected swung their feet in a fluid motion.

Arm swing: When you walk naturally, your arms are slightly bent at the elbows, and you let them swing back and forth. It's natural for them to move to counterbalance your leg motion. When your left leg comes forward, the spine goes into a right rotation and the right arm moves forward. And then it repeats on the opposite side. The pedestrians who were not targeted walked with a swing to the arms.

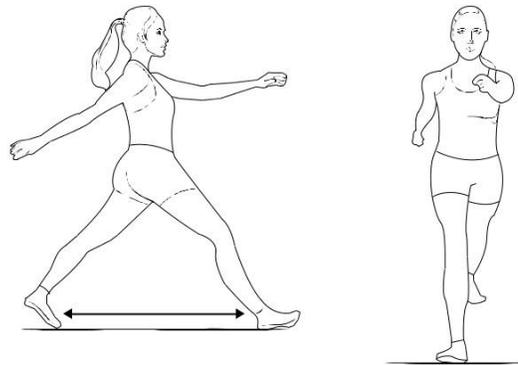
Body weight shift: Walk smoothly, without jerking your body. Have an internal flow to your motion.

Posture: *Your posture tells the world a lot about you and is an easy fix. Chin up, spine straight, and shoulders back, looking around, taking in your surroundings.*



Speed: *Walk at the same pace as the foot traffic around you, or slightly faster. This way you won't draw much attention to yourself or, at most, you will give off the signal that you are more energetic or athletic than everyone else.*

DON'T WALK THIS WAY



Stride length: *The illustration above shows an abnormally long stride. Taking a long stride entails reaching out farther with your front foot, making you appear clumsy or ungainly. In a crowd, you will stand out as having a peculiar walk.*

Foot movement: As mentioned, this type of stride makes you reach out awkwardly with your foot, almost as if you were making a small leap. All of the pedestrians selected as targets lifted their feet in a manner that was deemed odd.

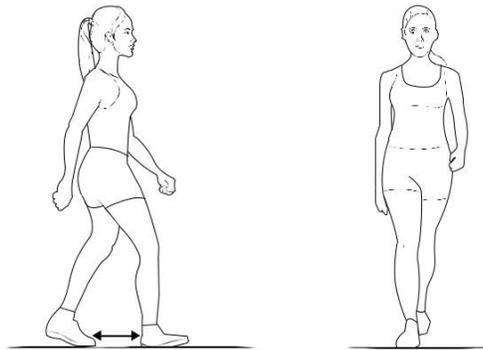
Arm swing: When you take abnormally long steps, your arms will swing in a correspondingly uncoordinated fashion. They will fly up too high or appear to be flapping around your body. It can look comical and draw unwanted attention.

Body weight shift: With an extra-long stride, your arm swing may not be in sync with your legs, and you may look to be moving in a lumbering fashion as you shift from one leg to the other.

Posture: Be sure to indicate awareness of your surroundings. Don't give off the appearance of taking long steps, wildly swinging your arms, and being oblivious to who is around you.

Speed: Moving at an unnaturally rapid pace can make you stand out and appear nervous or fearful.

DON'T WALK THIS WAY

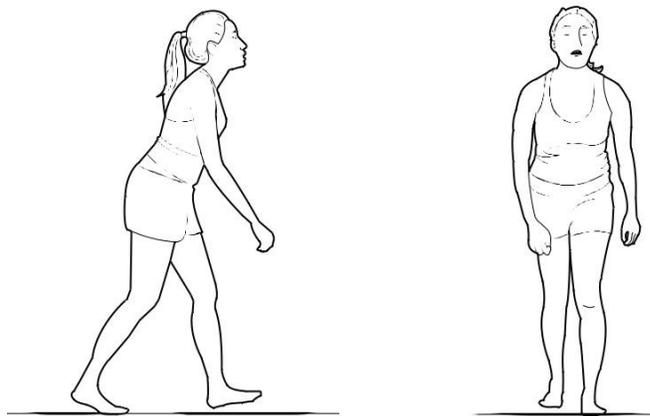


Stride length: The illustration above shows a shortened stride length, which can communicate caution or timidity. Almost like baby steps. Imagine a hiker with a twisted ankle, alone, trying to get back to camp before the sun sets. She may shorten her stride to avoid putting weight on the injured leg, sending off a signal of weakness and injury.

Foot movement: Every pedestrian who shuffled or dragged their feet was selected as a target. As were those who lifted their legs up and down and moved their feet in a vertical motion, like you may have done as a kid when you pretended to be marching, lifting your legs up with a bent knee and then down, rather than swinging them forward, feet first. It's similar to the kind of walk you might have when you wear new heels out for the first time and get blisters. Or you get those areas that are rubbed raw and are on their way to becoming blisters. Ouch. You start taking smaller steps, lifting your feet deliberately, even dragging or shuffling them to avoid the pain. This sends a subtle message that you are vulnerable.

Arm swing: A smaller stride length frequently corresponds with limited arm swinging. If your arms are pressed to your sides, immovable, you look clumsy and awkward. A limited swing is like waving a red flag that you are injured or scared. When you are nervous and afraid, you tense up, limiting your range of motion. Or you might be in pain, again sending the signal that you are fragile or delicate. In general, the shorter your stride length, the less you swing your arms and feet, making you appear to be walking with low energy and sending a signal that you are easier to attack.

Body weight shift: Most of the pedestrians selected by the inmates walked in a jerking fashion, their body weight shifting from side to side or up and down, reflecting an internal lack of synchrony.



Posture: A slumped or hunched posture, as above, sends out a message of fear and timidity, of being less likely to fight back. Similarly, walking with your

gaze lowered or looking down suggests a lack of awareness, all of which make you an inviting target.

Speed: Moving more slowly than the foot traffic around you sends a signal that you are possibly injured or weakened or simply distracted and not paying attention. Just as with zebras or gazelles on the wild plains, moving more slowly than the herd sends a signal to a predator that you are a soft target.

The Split-Second Glance

As you go about your day, you want to be casually looking around, seeing what types of people are in your vicinity and registering your surrounding environment. This gives your intuition a chance to chime in and takes away any opportunities for a surprise assault.

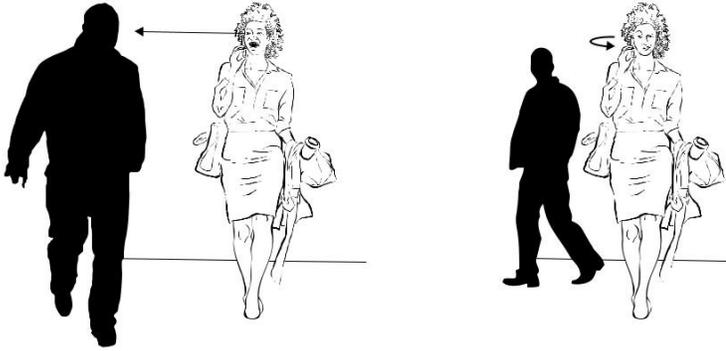
I suggest giving people a split-second glance so that you have put them on notice that you know they are there. You are talking with your body and telling them, “I see you. If you’re up to no good I know it, and I am not an easy target.” When a predator knows that you have seen him, he may look for another target because the element of surprise is lost.

The split-second glance is exactly what it sounds like. You slightly turn your head toward the person you want to notify and flash a look in their direction. You don’t even have to meet their eyes. It is almost like a brief nod. That’s how subtle it is.

Many women I have spoken with believe that any glance can be interpreted as an invitation to interact. This one is different as it is extremely rapid and you do not necessarily meet the other person’s eyes. You merely look in their direction, indicating your awareness.

Keep Your Head on the Level

After glancing over at someone, try not to instinctively incline your head. It is a natural reaction to look down afterward, but it can send the message that you are scared or timid. Train yourself to keep your chin level.



Remember to Be a STAAR

As you go about your day, remember to be a STAAR.

Stride: Take forceful, confident steps with a gait that is neither too short nor too long.

Tall: Shoulders back, chin up.

Arms: Let them bend naturally at the elbow and swing them as you walk.

Awareness: Take a look around as you walk, noticing people and things that might seem out of place.

Relax: Above all, stay calm, cool, and collected.

It may not be all that difficult to stand up straight, walk with determination, and be alert to your surroundings. The challenge is to keep it up for extended periods of time. When your phone pings, signaling that you have a new text or like, it is very easy to get distracted and forget to monitor the environment. The moment your chin drops and your awareness focuses on your screen, you turn into an easy target for anyone watching.