

Teaching Self-Defense for Women

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Self defense for women is an increasingly important aspect of martial arts instruction. It is important for several reasons. First, there is an perception of increased violence in our society. As a result of this, many women are at least interested in taking such courses. Second, it is a common reason for women to take martial arts and in particular Taekwon Do classes. Given this, the basic knowledge of how to effectively teach self defense is important if not critical to most instructors. Third, instructing can serve as an introduction to Taekwon-Do. Instructing a seminar on self-defense for women is at least a good way to get "name recognition" and it additionally can be used as a vehicle to show women that Taekwon-Do is not just for men. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, martial artists have as part of their ethical code an obligation to help the weak. Some students will fall into this class though even in this case, "weak" is usually just a mindset.

This thesis will deal with several aspects of teaching self-defense for women. It is meant to be a source of information and experiences to be used by instructors intending to start such a course or who want to incorporate more aspects of self-defense into their courses.

There are three primary basis for this thesis. They are literature, comments from instructors, and this authors own experiences teaching self-defense for women. At the beginning of almost any book on self defense, there are one or more chapters describing different aspects of avoiding and when this fails, coping with a self-defense situation. From there, most books go on to cover a variety of techniques, some of which are useful, and often some of which are not. In addition to general literature, this author also consulted with a psychologist (Carol Loveman, Ph.D.) regarding perpetrators of violence on women. In this thesis, this is also included as part of the literature. This author observed one Taekwon-Doist instructing self-defense and talked to several others regarding the teaching of self-defense to women. Among these were Rob Tobin (V), Jonas Pologe (V), Teresa Tobin (IV), Scott Barnes (IV), Mark Breede (III), and Glen Fox (II). Additionally, this author has also taught self-defense for women. For the purposes of this thesis, teaching

experiences of this author, those from the Taekwon-Do instructors, as well as observations this author made will be categorized as "from instructors."

Section headings are *What Should be Covered*, *Who is qualified to teach*, *Techniques Which Work*, and *What's Missing*. The last chapter is primarily a comment on what is available in typical libraries on Self defense for women.

What Should be Covered in a Self-Defense for Women Course

Most self defense courses are only several hours long and meet as few as once to only as many as several sessions. Given this, it is critical for an instructor to carefully select the curriculum.

All instructors agreed that empowerment and awareness are the two primary items which can be taught during the few instruction sessions and have a positive effect. There are several specific exercises which instructors found effective for teaching these. Some of these exercises will be described in the fourth section.

With the short duration of most self-defense courses, it is unlikely that a student will learn a new physical skill. Even if a student learned some new skill, it is not realistic for an instructor to expect most students to practice sufficiently to maintain that skill. It is much more feasible for a student to learn to use an old physical skill, perhaps with minor modification, for a new circumstance. The further advantage of this is that the old skill is already something which is practiced, and the modification is primarily a change in mindset.

It therefore seems reasonable that exercises, physical and mental, should focus awareness and empowerment rather than a set of physical skills. This is not to say physical skills and interactions should not be a part of a self-defense class. Indeed, they are extremely effective as a means to empower the student.

Who Should Teach Self-Defense Classes

It is rare that an author can safely generalize, but it is fair to say that the students in a course on self-defense for women are either women or girls. With the level of violence against women as common as it is, it is also very likely that in any group of female students, one or more may have been and may still be the subject of physical abuse. Sensitivity to the world women face is paramount to developing an effective rapport with students. This rapport in turn is critical to teaching empowerment and awareness.

Another aspect of rapport is the ability to communicate effectively. Again, all of the students will be women or girls. There is now a significant amount of popular literature dealing with differences between the way men and women communicate. Women may also modify their behavior when men are present, and this may impede good communication and rapport. Obviously, anyone who wants to teach self-defense to women should be able to communicate effectively with them.

It is further important that the students be able to trust the instructors abilities as well as intentions. Students cannot often honestly discern who can instruct and who can't, so for this purpose it seems that a demonstrable rank or expertise in a martial art is sufficient. However, this author has dealt with at least one Taekwon Do instructor (not one among those listed earlier as references) who clearly had problems dealing with society. To the extent that this will interfere with that instructors ability to gain the respect of his/her students, he/she will be less effective.

Physical skill in a martial art, however, is not that critical. Put very simply, if something takes an average student three to six months of regular Taekwon-Do classes to learn, an instructor is foolish and even dangerous if she/he expects a student to pick it up in a few sessions teaching self-defense. The two aspects of maturity as a martial artist which do come into play are understanding which techniques work or don't work, and understanding mindset in a fighting situation.

Given all of this, the best instructors for self-defense for women will be mature women. Generally, this would mean women past the age of twenty-five. While men will probably be less effective than women at

teaching self-defense, they can still develop sufficient rapport to make a significant change in their attitudes and behaviors so as to increase their safety and consequently their happiness. Once again, maturity is critical.

Regardless of the gender of the teacher, the following are necessary characteristics. First, the instructor must be sensitive to the environment in which women were raised and in which they now find themselves. Second, the instructor must be able to communicate effectively with women. Third, the instructor must be able to be respected by the students. In this case rank is usually a good indicator. Finally, the instructor must actually have an understanding of both mindset and the effectiveness of different techniques.



Techniques Which Work

There are any number of exercises which are useful in teaching self-defense. Perhaps the only exercise which is universally included in every class is discussion; talking about issues, techniques, mindsets, and so forth which are relevant to self defense. One thing instructors have noticed is that many if not all of the students are informed regarding the "common sense" aspects of awareness and avoiding potentially dangerous situations. Instructors can easily take advantage of this by letting the students carry on the bulk of the discussion while subtly determining the direction of the discussion. This is a particularly useful tool for men teaching women in that the male instructor can "fade into the background" while the female students proceed to instruct each other. The degree that the instructor should get involved will depend on the individuals in the class, but it need not be any more than making sure that all the topics the instructor wants discussed are discussed.

There are a number of key issues which should be brought up during this "talking" phase. Among these are who are attackers, how to avoid being attacked, what are the things to do in case of an attack, and what to do after an attack. For practical purposes, it is useful to break an attack into seven phases. These are prior to the attack, the negotiation phase, the physical initiation, fighting, final physical interactions, exiting, and repercussions. It is not clear that such an analytic approach is useful for students, but it is useful for the descriptions in this thesis.

There are many things students can do "prior to an attack" to avoid being attacked. Logically, this can be referred to as avoidance. It should be noted that two authors suggested that referring to these acts as avoidance procedures may promote a victim mentality in students or worse may blame victims for what was obviously not their fault.¹ With this in mind, instructors may want to refrain from using the word avoidance. In any case, the instructor should emphasize that these procedures are means to reduce threats. They are not always effective, and more importantly, they are not rigid rules. An example of this sort of presentation is walking alone; it is clearly much more of a problem for a woman to go walking alone than for her to walk with a friend. This doesn't mean that women should be instructed never to walk alone, rather

that it is safer to walk with a friend and that the fewer times she takes risks, the better her chances are of avoiding being attacked. Developing habits such as walking with a friend, locking home and car doors, varying timing, meeting people in public places, being aware of the environment are all means to slant odds in favor of students. They are the equivalent of wearing seatbelts. People should wear seatbelts not because it's their fault when a drunk driver runs into them, but because it might save their lives and there are drunk drivers out there. Similarly, we do live in a society where estimates are that between one in ten and one in three women will be raped in a thirty year period², and there are ways to avoid these problems.

The list of ways to avoid attacks and be aware given above is by no means complete. Any group of women will with encouragement arrive at a far more inclusive list. The primary aspects the instructor should emphasize are be aware, use your instincts, and use common sense. One other final point that an instructor can make is that the majority of attacks are at least to some degree planned.³

In understanding attacks, it is important that students be given an idea of what attackers are like and what they are looking for. Rape is not a sexual crime, it is a sadistic crime. Most attackers are doing so as an expression of a need to dominate in a physical way other people. There are several reasons this need can arise, but the overwhelming majority of men who perpetrate these attacks were abused as children. Along with descriptions of what attackers are, students should be told that nothing excuses the attacker's transgressions.

In general, attackers are looking for weakness. These are not men who are looking to be challenged.⁴ An important aspect here is that a challenge will deter most attackers. One other aspect of attacks; of reported attacks about half of the time the victim and attacker knew each other, about half the time they were unknown to each other. Many attacks are unreported, and it is believed that more of these were perpetrated by men known to the victims.

Studies have been done on what attackers are looking for in a potential victim. It is clear that body posture and the way people walk strongly affects how likely they are to be attacked. One study found that attackers found people whose walk was characterized by such actions as uneven shifting of weight, swinging the

same side arm forward with an advancing leg, walking with a stride too large for a persons height, and in general walking in a disjointed fashion as being preferable to attackers. Conversely, smooth "together" walking, opposite side arms swinging forward with and advancing step, and so forth was found to be much less attractive to attackers.⁵ A useful exercise here is a classic acting exercise. This can be made into a game. Each student walks in front of the class with a certain mindset. The class has to guess what that mindset is. The point is that if the students can change their mindset, they can walk with a confident, aware, and directed stride which will make them less prone to attack.

One final aspect that should be brought up during a self-defense class is that anything a woman does if she is attacked either in terms of action or inaction is alright. It is never her fault she is attacked. Regarding coping with all of the trauma, it is good advice to tell students that if they should be attacked, they should seek psychological counseling and that the sooner this starts, the faster it finishes and the more effective it will be.

Sometime in the onset of an attack, there is an opportunity for "negotiation." Negotiation is only being used in a technical sense here, as what is hopefully occurring is the defender is taking a command tone, taking control, and demanding that the attack stop. The simplest and most expedient way to do this is to shout NO! The critical item is however the command tone. At least one source states that attackers will cease an attack 60% of the time as a result of a loud scream.⁶ An additional point regarding negotiations is pleading is worse than useless...it is what the attacker wants.

There are many exercises which may be useful in teaching women to scream. Almost all of them will involve practicing screaming. Screaming should also be a part of any physical drill. Some amount of socialization may have to be overcome here; many women have been brought up that it is not "ladylike" to scream. One means of empowerment which will allow women to transcend this training is to ask them if they are confident that they would scream if attacked. Many will not be confident. Immediately ask them if they would be able to scream if they saw a man striking a small child. A significant number will say they

could scream under that circumstance. At this point the instructor only need point out that it is established that they can scream confidently, now the only have to vary the circumstances.

A point which should be brought up is then when a person is being attacked, she/he will be afraid. Fear is natural, and there is nothing wrong with it. The important thing is not to panic. The critical aspect of this is training. One other mindset that should be taught is that if the first scream doesn't come out loud or in command tone, continue and increase the volume. Gain power, control, and command. Don't relinquish it.

The easiest time for a smaller person to defend themselves against a larger person is during "physical initiation," the onset of the attack. There are several means of attacking which have been found to be useful, and several which have been found to be weak. Notable among those which are weak are a forefist punch and attacking with keys interlaced between fingers. The former is often difficult to teach women undoubtedly because of the way they were socialized and trained as girls. It is not uncommon for women to be in a Taekwon-Do class for over a year before they can punch properly. The keys in the fingers, though commonly taught has two problems. First, it can interfere with using the keys to get into a car quickly and efficiently. The second problem is it is actually quite weak. At least one instructor reported a broken hand when this technique was tried on a practice dummy. Techniques which do work are striking with elbows and knees, as well as striking the eyes. It should be pointed out that most instructors do not consider the two finger thrust found in pattern Chong Jang to be effective. Techniques taught for jabbing the eyes include a supported forefinger jab (one eye) and a forefinger-thumb jab (two eyes).

The most important part of the physical exercises are to teach the women what they are really capable of doing, and to have them experience some of the emotions they would encounter if they are attacked. Both of these are empowering.

The exercise here is quite simple. A man plays the role of an attacker. It is a good idea for him to be wearing a good deal of protective gear so that the students may have the opportunity to attack back at full power and have a variety of counters available to them. As the attacker the man should charge the woman, generally screaming obscenities and being abusive to her. It is her exercise to attack back and turn him

away. There are several aspects that should be emphasized here. First, the woman should be screaming NO! Second, her attacks should be totally committed. Third, the effectiveness of the defense both in terms of the mindset and commitment and in terms of the execution and technique choice should be critiqued. These critiques should emphasize positive aspects. In this regard, the woman should continue trying until she "gets it right." An important point here is that a woman should not apologize for defending herself. In an exercise like this, it is a little awkward as the man is not really an attacker. Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasize to the students that there are no apologies in the case of real attack. To the degree that the instructor wants realism in this exercise, this should be true here as well. If nothing else, even if students are sorry for hurting the "dummy," the continuous emphasis on the no regrets aspects of defense is an importance means to teach it.

What's Missing

In researching this topic the lack of studies which have been done is very disturbing. The determination of what really works is based exclusively on what instructors found to be most effective in dealing with students. There have not been follow-up studies on the effectiveness of self-defense courses. Books on self-defense for women are noticeably short on studies on other things as well. A simple example is as follows. One instructor was adamant that under no circumstance should a person get into a car with a known attacker, even if resisting led to a significant threat of death. The implication was that the chance of survival after getting into a car under this circumstance is very small. Certainly, that is what the news would have us believe, and it may very well be correct. However, it would be nice to have a statistical back up for this; Of the cases of reported attack/kidnaps, how many did survive and how many were killed? Given the nature of violence of all sorts against women, studies should go beyond cataloging what kinds of violence occur and should go into aspects which will help women avoid, repel, and survive attacks more effectively.

References

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Susan Smith, **Fear or Freedom**, Mother of Courage Press, (1986)
- ²*Don't Take it Lying Down*, **Psychology Today**, (Jan. 1975) p.73.
- ³Marcia Molmen, **Avoiding Rape without Putting Yourself in Protective Custody**, Athena Press (1982) p.11.
- ⁴Carol Loveman, private communication.
- ⁵Study by Betsy Grayson published in *How Muggable Are You*, **Black Belt Magazine**, (Oct. 1981) p.46.
- ⁶Emil Farkas and Margaret Leeds, **Fight Back**, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, (1978) p.12.

