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Does Self Defense Make Sense?

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Members of the community often ask us about the effectiveness of taking a self-defense class. They pose questions as; "Is it a good idea to take a class?", "What classes do you recommend?" and "Are they effective?" The answers to these questions are not black and white and there are several issues to consider. An effective self-defense course is a lot like a good defensive driving

course. It should increase your awareness, educate you on the best strategies to evade dangerous situations, and teach techniques that may be effective if the worst happens. However, defensive driving courses are fairly standard and teach the same principles whether you are in California or New York. Self-defense courses are not standardized and there is a wide array of approaches and curriculums. So how do you know if a self-defense class is right for you personally, and if so, how do you choose?

First, check your own expectations. Learning self-defense does not guarantee your future safety. An effective course should give you a set of tools and strategies that may apply in different situations. However, there are many factors that influence the outcome of a potential assault. The effect of stress and trauma impact each of us differently and how we respond under stress is complicated. Treat self-defense training with reasonable expectations and remember that you are gaining some new tools and strategies, not a magic bullet. It is important to stress that NOT fighting back is sometimes the best and safest choice.

Second, when looking for a course, remember that self-defense and martial arts are not the same thing. This can be confusing as some classes claim to be the ultimate in self-protection. Martial arts in general provide many benefits to students but not all schools teach skills that work for the world you live in and the type of dangers in your life. Self-defense courses that encourage heightened awareness, safe escape from a risky environment or situation and dispel shame around passive resistance and not fighting back should be considered over those that focus solely on physical techniques.

Ideally, the instructor will have some education and awareness about the issue of sexual assault and the conditions under which it occurs. This is important because most sexual assaults are not perpetrated by strangers but by someone we know. And for many, the weapons used against them are a verbal threat or alcohol, not fists or knives. If your class only covers physical assaults from strangers, you are missing an important aspect of education and awareness. Each situation requires a different skill set and the knowledge to know what is best for your safety is your decision. An instructor sensitive to the issue of sexual assault will also convey from the start that no one ever asks for or invites an attack because of something they did or did not do. Remember, attackers are responsible for their attacks and their use of violence to control and harm another human being.

If you are a survivor of sexual assault, please know that self-defense courses may trigger memories, physical reactions and emotional responses. Should you choose to take a self-defense course and are triggered please get help. Use your coping tools if you know any, call your therapist if you have one, or call DARCC's hotline at 972-641-7273.





Guidelines for Choosing A Self Defense Course

A committee of sexual assault experts developed a list of guidelines to assist you in choosing a course.

National Coalition Against Sexual Assault: Guidelines For Choosing A Self-Defense Course Self-Defense Philosophy – Ideally, a good self-defense program should reflect these philosophical points in its outlook:

- No one asks for, causes, invites, or deserves to be assaulted. Women and men sometimes exercise poor judgment about safety behavior, but that does not make them responsible for the attack. Attackers are responsible for their attacks and their use of violence to overpower, control and abuse another human being.

- Whatever a person's decision in a given self-defense situation, whatever action she/he does or does not take, that person is not at fault. Someone's decision to survive the best way she can must be respected. Self-defense classes should not be used as a judgment against a victim/survivor.

- Good self-defense programs do not "tell" an individual what she "should" or "should not" do. A program should offer options, techniques, and a way of analyzing situations. A program may point out what USUALLY works best in MOST situations, but each situation is unique and the final decision rests with the person actually confronted by the situation.

- Empowerment is the goal of a good self-defense program. The individual's right to make decisions about her participation must be respected. Pressure should not be brought to bear in any way to get someone to participate in an activity if she's hesitant or unwilling.



Common Questions about Self-Defense Courses

A committee of sexual assault experts developed a list of guidelines to assist you in choosing a course.

Where can I find a self-defense class?

Check with your local rape crisis center. Some centers provide self-protection classes or can refer you to one. YWCA's and Community Colleges sometimes offer classes. Some martial arts schools provide seminars and workshops. Check the phone book. If there isn't one in your community, get involved and try to organize one.

What is self-defense?

Self-defense is a set of awareness, assertiveness, verbal confrontation skills with safety strategies and physical techniques that enable someone to successfully escape, resist and survive violent attacks. A good self-defense course provides psychological awareness and verbal skills, not just physical training.

Does self-defense work?

Self-Defense training can increase your options and help you prepare responses to slow down, de-escalate, or interrupt an attack. Like any tool, the more you know about it, the more informed you are to make a decision and to use it.

Is self-defense a guarantee?

There are no guarantees when it comes to self-protection. However, self-defense training can increase your choices/options and your preparedness.

Is there a standard self-defense course?

There are many formats for training. They may be as short as two hours or as long as 8 weeks or a semester. Whatever the length of the program, it should be based on maximizing options, simple techniques, and respect for individuals' experiences.

Is there a course I should stay away from?

Only you can answer this question. Find out about the philosophy of the program and the background of the instructor. Observe a class session if you can, and talk to an instructor or a student. Is the instructor knowledgeable and respectful of your concerns? Is it a length at you can commit to and at a cost that you can afford? You deserve to have all your questions answered before taking a class.

What are the instructors and what is their training background?

For women, there is an advantage to having a female instructor as a role model, who has similar experiences surviving as a woman. All-woman classes tend to provide an easier atmosphere in which to discuss sensitive issues. On the other hand, some women feel having male partners to practice with can add to their experience. The quality of a class depends on the knowledge, attitude and philosophy of the instructor, not necessarily on gender. The most important aspect is that the instructor, male or female, conducts the training for the students geared to their individual strengths and abilities. Feeling safe and building trust come before learning.

Must I train for years to learn to defend myself?

A basic course can offer enough concepts and skills to help you develop self-protection strategies that you can continue to build upon. Self-defense is not karate or martial arts training. It does not require years of study to perfect. Many people have successfully improvised and prevented an assault who have never taken a class. People often practice successful self-defense strategies without knowing it!

If I use physical self-defense could I get hurt worse?

The question to answer first is what does “hurt worse” mean? Rape survivors speak eloquently about emotional hurts lasting long after physical hurts heal. Studies show a physical self-defense response does not increase the level of physical injury, and sometimes decreases the likelihood. Also, going along with the attacker does not guarantee that you will not be brutally injured anyway. The point of using self-defense is to de-escalate a situation and get away as soon as possible. Knowing some physical techniques increases the range of possible self-defense options, but the decision to choose a physical option must remain with the person in the situation.

What does “realistic” mean?

Words like “most realistic”, “best”, “guaranteed success”, etc., are all advertising gimmicks. Choosing a self-defense class is a serious decision and is preferably based on some research. No program or instructor can replicate a “real” assault since there are so many different scenarios, and because a real attack would require a no-holds barred fight which would be irresponsible and extremely dangerous to enact. Responsible self-defense training requires control. It is important that each student is able to control her own participation in the class and never feel forced to participate.

What is the role of mace or other aggressive “devices” as self-defense aids in harming an attacker?

Any device is useless to you unless you understand how to use it, and you have it in your hand ready to use at the time of the attempted assault. There is nothing “guaranteed” about any of these devices. None are foolproof. None of them can be counted on to work against all possible attackers (no matter what the labeling may state to the contrary). Realize that anything you can use against an attacker can also be taken away and used against you. While some of these devices have sometimes helped women escape to safety, it is important to be aware of their limitations and liabilities.

How much should I pay?

Paying a lot of money for a course does not mean that you automatically get better instruction. On the other hand, don't assume that all programs are the same and just go for the cheapest. It is always beneficial to be an educated consumer. Shop around the same as for anything else you buy that is important to you.

Am I too old? Out of shape? What if I have some disabilities?

You don't have to be an athlete to learn how to defend yourself. A good program is designed to adapt to every age and ability and provides each student with the opportunity to learn. Each individual is unique and students should be able to discuss their own needs. Some programs have specialized classes for specific groups.

How can I tell a “good” course from a “bad” one?

A good course covers critical thinking about defense strategies, assertiveness, powerful communication skills, and easy-to-remember physical techniques. The instructor respects and responds to your fears and concerns. Instruction is based on the belief that we can act competently, decisively, and take action for our own protection. Essentially, a good course is based on intelligence and not muscle. It offers tools for enabling a person to connect with her own strength and power. These courses are out there.