

Women's Self-Defense Frequently-Asked Questions

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What is women's self-defense?

- Perhaps the most common stereotype of women's self-defense is a woman – probably young, white, and fit – karate-kicking a stranger in a dark alley or parking garage. However, women's self-defense involves far more than just physical fighting, and it is accessible to all women, regardless of their age, race, level of fitness, or physical ability. It also addresses far more than just assaults by strangers.
- There are many types of self-defense training. The kind that has been most frequently studied by researchers is *empowerment self-defense* (ESD). These classes:
 - focus on the full range of violence against women (from harassment to rape).
 - are grounded in evidence about the kinds of assaults women suffer and the kinds of responses that are most likely to stop these assaults
 - recognize that most assaults are perpetrated by acquaintances and intimates, and provide strategies appropriate to known perpetrators.
 - include awareness and verbal self-defense strategies as well as physical techniques. These skills empower women to stop assaults in their early stages, before they escalate to physical danger.
 - teach effective physical tactics that build on the strengths of women's bodies and require minutes or hours rather than years to master.
 - offer a toolbox of strategies for avoiding and interrupting violence, and, rather than teaching a single "best" way to respond to violence, empower women to choose the options that are appropriate for their own situations.
 - address the social conditions that facilitate sexual assault and the psychological barriers to self-defense that women face as a result of gender socialization.

Does self-defense prevent violence?

This is really two questions:

- First, ***can women's resistance stop sexual assault?*** The answer is a resounding **yes**. There is a large and nearly unanimous body of research that demonstrates that women frequently resist violence, and that their resistance is often successful. This research, of course, includes many women without self-defense training.
- Second, ***does self-defense training decrease women's risk of assault?*** Here the research literature is smaller, but unanimous: **Yes**. Three major studies over the past few years, including a large, randomized control trial, found that women who complete an ESD class are **at least 50-60% less likely to be raped** over the following year than similar women who did not learn self-defense (see Hollander 2014, Senn et al. 2015, Sarnquist et al. 2014, and Sinclair et al. 2013). In addition, women who completed a self-defense

class were **one-third as likely to report an attempted rape**. In other words, women who learn self-defense are both more likely to avoid rape if they are attacked, *and* much less likely to be attacked in the first place.

Does self-defense increase a woman's risk of injury?

- No. There is an *association* between resistance and injury, in that women who resist a sexual assault are also more likely to be injured. But research that looks at the sequence of events has found that in general, the injury *precedes* the resistance. In short, women resist because they are being injured, rather than being injured because they resist. On average, resistance does not increase the risk of injury.

Shouldn't we be putting all our resources into prevention strategies focused on perpetrators?

- No. Violence against women is a complex social problem. Ultimately, large-scale social changes will be needed before violence against women can be stopped. However, this kind of social change is slow – and so far, our efforts have not been very successful. If we focus only on perpetrator-focused, “primary” prevention strategies, we are condemning millions of women to suffering rape and sexual assault. While we wait for these efforts to work, ESD training can provide an immediate, and effective, antidote for sexual violence.
- There has been little research on the effectiveness of prevention strategies focused on potential perpetrators. Most strategies that have been rigorously evaluated have been found to be ineffective at preventing violence.
- Preventing sexual violence will require a comprehensive range of efforts. Some efforts should be long-term (e.g., cultural climate assessment and change), others should be medium-term (e.g., bystander intervention training), and some should be short-term (e.g., self-defense training). We do not have to choose only one approach; a complex social problem requires that we address it on multiple fronts and in multiple ways.

Is self-defense training cost-effective?

- Yes. Sexual assault is very expensive, in terms of post-assault medical service, legal services, and human suffering. Self-defense training, in contrast, is quite inexpensive. A recent Nairobi-based study found that comprehensive empowerment self-defense training cost US\$1.75 for every assault prevented, compared with an average of US\$86 for post-assault hospital services. Given the higher cost of medical services, it is likely that the savings would be even greater in the United States.

Is self-defense victim blaming?

- No. Empowerment self-defense classes explicitly attribute responsibility for assault to perpetrators, not victims. Just because a woman is capable of defending herself does not mean that she is responsible for doing so.
- Although empowerment self-defense training is frequently lumped in with other kinds of risk reduction advice (e.g., staying out of public spaces, traveling with a buddy, wearing modest clothing, or avoiding alcohol), it differs in important ways. Staying home, relying on others for protection, and limiting one's clothing or alcohol consumption all

constrain women's lives. ESD training, in contrast, *expands* women's range of action, empowering them to make their own choices about where they go and what they do.

- Some people have worried that women who learn self-defense may blame themselves if they are later unable to prevent an attack. However, research has found that women with ESD training who experience a subsequent assault blame themselves no more – or even less – than women without self-defense training. Moreover, women who are raped but physically resist are actually *less* likely than other women to blame themselves for their assault.

What else should I know about empowerment self-defense training?

- Learning self-defense empowers women in ways that go far beyond preventing assault. Empowerment self-defense training decreases women's fear and anxiety and increases their confidence, their sense of self-efficacy, and their self-esteem. Learning self-defense helps women feel stronger and more confident in their bodies. Women report more comfortable interactions with strangers, acquaintances, and intimates, both in situations that seem dangerous and those that do not. Empowerment self-defense training can also be healing to survivors of sexual violence.

Further Resources and Research on Women's Resistance and Self-Defense

What is women's self-defense?

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