

Empowerment Self-Defense Frequently Asked Questions

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What is Empowerment Self-Defense?

- **Empowerment self-defense (ESD) is a comprehensive, evidence-based, trauma-informed approach to resisting and preventing violence. ESD:**
 - focuses on the full range of gender-based violence, from everyday harassment to life-threatening situations.
 - is grounded in empirical evidence about assaults and the kinds of responses that are most likely to stop them.
 - recognizes that most assaults are perpetrated by acquaintances and intimates, and provides strategies appropriate for these situations.
 - teaches effective physical tactics that require minutes or hours rather than years to master and can be adapted for any body.
 - includes boundary-setting, de-escalation, and verbal self-defense strategies as well as physical techniques. These skills empower students to stop assaults in their early stages, before they escalate to physical danger.
 - offers a “toolbox” of strategies for avoiding and interrupting violence and empowers students to choose the options that are appropriate for their own situation.
 - expands students’ freedom and agency, empowering them to make their own choices about where they go, what they do, and who they do it with.
 - addresses the social conditions that facilitate sexual assault and the psychological barriers to self-defense that make resistance difficult for women and other marginalized groups.
- There are many kinds of self-defense training. **ESD is the only form of self-defense training with research evidence supporting its effectiveness.**

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Does ESD training prevent violence?

- This is really two questions. **First, can women's² resistance stop violence? Yes.** There is a large and nearly unanimous body of research that demonstrates that most women resist when they are being assaulted, and that their resistance is frequently successful.
- **Second, does self-defense training decrease women's risk of assault? Yes.** Five major studies over the past several years, including a large, randomized control trial, found that women who complete an ESD class were at least 50% less likely to be raped over the following year than similar women who did not learn self-defense. Self-defense students were also much less 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. Studies also report significant decreases in sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and physical violence.

Is ESD training victim blaming?

- **No.** ESD classes explicitly attribute responsibility for assault to perpetrators, not victims. Just because someone is capable of defending themselves does not mean that they are responsible for doing so.
- 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.

Does physically resisting assault increase the 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 examining the sequence of events has found that in general, injury precedes 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.**

² Most research on ESD has evaluated classes specifically for women, and so this document focuses mostly on ESD classes for women. However, ESD classes are increasingly welcoming of nonbinary and trans people, boys, and men.

Is self-defense training cost-effective?

- **Yes.** Sexual assault is very expensive in terms of post-assault medical services, legal services, and human suffering. Self-defense training, in contrast, is quite inexpensive. A recent Nairobi-based study found that comprehensive ESD 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.

Shouldn't we be focusing all our resources on preventing perpetration or training bystanders?

- **No.** We don't yet have good evidence that perpetrator-focused strategies actually work. Most strategies that have been rigorously evaluated have been found to be *ineffective* at preventing violence. Similarly, bystander intervention training has not yet been shown to reduce perpetration or victimization. It also can replicate harmful gender stereotypes.
- Ultimately, large-scale social changes will be needed to end sexual assault and other kinds of gender-based violence. In the meantime, ESD training can provide an immediate and effective antidote for sexual violence. We do not have to choose only one approach; we need multiple strategies to address this complex social problem.

What else do I need to know about ESD training?

- ESD training **empowers women in ways that go far beyond preventing assault**. ESD 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 and empowered interactions with strangers, acquaintances, and intimates, both in situations that seem dangerous and those that do not. ESD training **can be healing to survivors** of sexual violence. ESD classes also **contribute to social change** by transforming gendered ideologies and practices.

References and Resources

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