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Practical Self-Defense Skills for Women

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PRACTICAL

Self-Defense Skills

for WOMEN

By Kevin Hunt and Michelle Grabowski

THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN (NOW) REPORTS that women between the ages of 16 and 24 years old are at the greatest risk for violence and suffer from the highest rates of rape and physical abuse (NOW, n.d.). The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that as many as one in five women will experience rape, sexual assault, or attempted rape during their college years, and as many as two in four women will suffer from some form of physical abuse during their college years (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network [RAINN], n.d.). The escalating rates of violence perpetrated against college-age women are not likely to subside in the near future, according to NOW and RAINN projections. The unfortunate reality is that it has become essential for young women to prepare themselves to handle worst-case physical encounters.

The ideal strategies college-age women should be implementing to minimize the possibility of encountering a physical assault should focus on avoiding compromising situations that have the potential to lead to bodily harm (Banks, 2012; Banks & Reed, 2003; Chen, 2011; Laur & Laur, 1999). The priorities of such proactive strategies should focus on areas including common sense, vigilance, and informed decision making (Banks & Reed, 2003; Laur & Laur, 1999; Neide, 2009). Common-sense strategies include avoiding sub-

stances like alcohol and drugs that impair cognitive function to ensure that one's mental and physical reflexes are not compromised. Vigilance tactics include planning procedures that ensure that all modes of travel are carried out in pairs or groups to reduce the possibility of an isolated confrontation where a lone individual is most vulnerable to attack. Through making sound logical decisions similar to those mentioned, women can minimize the likelihood for a potential physical attack.

However, where precautionary preparation and vigilance limit the possibility of attack, they do not remove the possibility entirely. Being prepared for a physical assault is a skill all women should possess. The purpose of this article is to offer an outline for a set of essential self-defense skills all women should possess for handling one of the most common forms of physical violence women face: a single-hand restraining grab from a male assailant accompanied by a single-hand strike.

Initial Confrontation: Maintaining Control and Minimizing Panic

The most typical violent encounter that college-age women face initiates with a same-side, single-hand grab from a male assailant. Single-hand grabs are an assailant's most common form of limiting an intended victim's initial mobility. The shock of this initial confrontation generally ignites the flight response in the intended victim and sends them into a panic and a struggle to be released. As assailants commonly attack smaller and physically weaker victims, the struggle, being a match of physical power and strength, favors the assailant. The common panic reaction generally escalates the confrontation, prompting the assailant to become even more violent. The problem with this type of victim response is not the escalation of violence; that is almost always unavoidable. The problem with this impulse flight reaction is that the assailant is expecting the reaction. Therefore, the victim's impulse reaction ultimately impairs their own ability to effectively defend themselves from harm and further reduces the likelihood of escape.

Rather than allowing emotions and fear to dictate the sequence of events during a confrontation, victims should attempt to maintain control of their emotions and refrain from panicking. In the face of an assault, this is not an easy task. However, the following thoughts will help with establishing the right frame of mind for maintaining clarity in a tense situation. First, for an assailant to be in a position to harm a victim, he must first place himself in harm's way. Defense experts commonly refer to this action as "closing the distance." Closing the distance occurs when two individuals find themselves in close enough proximity to each other to make physical contact. At this point, the intended victim should be thinking offensively and defensively, not just defensively. If a potential attacker is close enough to make a grab, they are also close enough to be struck. This is an essential concept for victims to acknowledge. Second, in making a one-handed grab, the assailant makes a crucial error: They automatically narrow down the possible striking implements to the opposite hand. The only real threat that remains to the victim is the assailant's free hand. The clasping hand is no longer a threat; it can do nothing more than restrain at this point. Knowing exactly which hand the assailant will use to strike gives the defendant a tactical advantage. Providing careful attention to the free hand will provide the defendant with the time necessary to defend a blow and to prepare for a counterattack and escape.

Defensive Strategy

The guard

The position an attack victim assumes for protection is commonly known as "the guard" (Harvey, 2009). When assuming a



Figure 1. The guard.

guarded position, a victim attempts to cover vulnerable areas such as the eyes, ears, nose, throat, neck, and jaw. In a same-side grabbing situation, the victim will be forced to use a one-arm guard; the other arm will be at the mercy of the assailant. A natural impulse for the victim will be to lean away from a strike being delivered by the assailant in an attempt to place distance between their head and the intended strike. This is a mistake. The resulting body position of such a move makes it difficult to implement a proper guard and places the victim at the ideal range for an attacker's strike. Instead, the victim should remain calm, watch for the strike, and step into the attack — not retreat from it. The victim needs to keep in mind that the greatest transfer of force comes from the full extension of the attacker's strike. By moving into the strike, the victim will reduce the amount of force the assailant will be able to generate.

The appropriate guard technique for this particular situation includes placing the free hand tightly across the back of the neck. This will prevent direct strikes to the neck that can potentially result in the victim being rendered unconscious. With the hand tight to the neck, the forearm should be positioned across the ear tight to the head, with the elbow extending out past the eye (Figure 1). In this position, the guard arm will absorb the majority of the force of the blow if the arm is tight against the head. A quick exhale of breath will also be beneficial at the time of impact. The exhale will prompt the muscles in the arm to tighten, therefore ensuring a tight seal between the head and the guard arm and reducing any transfer of energy from the arm into the head. Finally, the victim should focus on clenching the jaw tight. If the jaw muscles are loose and the follow-through of the strike makes contact with an exposed portion of the lower jaw or sends a loose



Figure 2. Striking.

guard arm into the jaw, the victim will be susceptible to being rendered unconscious from the strike.

Offensive Strategies

Even the best defensive guard will only delay an attack. Without an offensive strategy, a victim will inevitably succumb to the attack. Therefore, all women should have at least one striking and one kicking strategy in their offensive arsenal. The ideal time to initiate an offensive counterattack is during the pause that follows the initial assailant attack. Once the victim successfully defends the initial attack, they will have a small window of opportunity to mount a counterattack. The element of surprise exists only at this moment. The victim needs to strike hard, fast, and accurately. In the following sections, efficient and effective striking and kicking techniques will be described that are suitable in a one-hand grab scenario.

Striking

The natural reflex response of the victim would be to struggle and lash out at the arm or hand that is restraining them. A victim must overcome this impulse. Striking the arm will not stun an attacker and is not likely to break the restraint. Rather, this action will inform the assailant that the victim is going to struggle, thus heightening their awareness of a potential counterattack and undermining any real possibility of escape. Instead, the victim should concentrate on striking vulnerable areas that will shock the assailant. The eyes, ears, nose, throat, and upper lip are the most sensitive areas. One or two quick blows to any one of these areas is likely to provide the victim with the brief moment of hesitation required to break free from restraint.

From the guarded position, the transition into the counterattack should be smooth. After the first strike, the intended victim has an opportunity to slightly raise the guarded elbow off the head to view the assailant's face. If another blow is forthcoming, the victim can easily drop the elbow back into the guarded position. If the attack has subsided, now is the time to initiate a counterattack. With the elbow raised to enhance vision, the victim should loosen the grip on the back of the neck and tighten the hand into a fist. This is done by rolling in all four fingers, beginning with the pinky finger, tight to the palm. The fingers are then locked in place by wrapping the thumb across the outside of the fingers with the tip facing down toward the pinky finger. After identifying the target area, the victim will drive the elbow down toward the attacker, extending at the elbow, letting the fist follow through, and striking with the hard, flat bottom portion of the hand (Figure 2).

This strike, which is the most successful strike for women in this particular situation, is known as the "hammer fist" (Levine, Whitman, & Hoover, 2009). Punching is not advised for two reasons: (1) The correct technique required to deliver an effective punch requires a great deal of time and practice to master. An individual with limited training will not be able to generate enough power to deliver an effective punch. (2) The poor technique commonly demonstrated by amateur punching has a tendency to result in either sprained or broken wrists and/or fingers. If the punch is ineffective or the victim is wounded in the counterattack, the chances of a successful escape are greatly minimized. The hammer-fist strike, on the other hand, is a very effective strike for a novice. The hammer fist is a closed-fist strike, following an overhand throwing motion that uses the hard underside of the fist for contact. The motion is similar to a variety of common activities such as swinging a hammer, pounding on a door, or throwing a football, and as such, is easily transferred to a defensive strike.

When delivering the hammer-fist strike, the victim should be careful to clinch the fist as tight as possible, understanding that a strong fist will make a strong strike. It is essential to avoid swinging wildly at the head. The head is composed of hard surface ar-

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eas that are not susceptible to damage, and in fact, they possess the potential to damage the victim's striking hand. Counterattack strikes should be delivered with precision and accuracy. The strikes should be decisively aimed at a specific target. An ideal target for the hammer-fist strike is the side of the nose. The nose is ideal for two reasons: (1) The natural human reaction when struck on the nose is to bring both hands up to cover the face, and (2) the shock of being struck on the nose will result in an automatic body response where clenched muscles will relax. In both cases, the assailant momentarily loses concentration on restraining the victim, which provides the victim with an opportunity for escape. Furthermore, if the strike is hard enough, the assailant's eyes will close and well up with tears. This momentary lapse in vision will give the victim an increased window of time to evade the assailant.

Kicking

A number of factors dictate whether a strike or kick is the best counterattack option. For example, if the assailant is much taller than the victim, a strike to the face may not be a realistic option. Or if the assailant's attack is relentless, the victim may not have an opportunity to transition from a guarded position into a strike. In such situations, victims should be prepared to have a kicking counterattack in their self-defense repertoire. The most effective kick to use in this situation is the "cut kick" (Harvey, 2009). The cut kick is a variation of a roundhouse kick that is delivered to the lower leg or knee. The benefits of the cut kick in this situation are that it can be delivered easily with a reasonable amount of power and accuracy, while simultaneously allowing the victim to maintain a protective guard.

To deliver the kick, the victim will need to first shift their weight onto the ball of the foot of their base leg (nonkicking leg), bending the knee of the base leg slightly for stability. From this position, the kicking leg needs to be chambered (positioned) prior to delivering the kick. The appropriate chamber for the cut kick includes pointing the kicking leg knee at the intended target, while drawing the kicking foot back as far as possible. (The motion is similar to that of preparing to kick a soccer ball.) The natural alignment of the leg will ensure that the foot strikes where the knee is pointed. A full extension of the leg will generate the maximum power a kicker possesses. The toes of the kicking foot should be pointed forward in a full extension, allowing the top of the foot to make solid contact with the thigh, knee, or lower leg. The most productive kick will be one delivered to the side of the knee, causing a buckling reaction in the assailant's leg (Figure 3). This reaction will momentarily remove the assailant's attention from restraining the victim. This offers the victim a window of opportunity to break free from restraint and escape from harm's way.

Flight

The counterattack strikes and kicks are meant to provide an intended victim with a reasonably successful escape opportunity and time for flight — not retaliation. Victims should not attempt to cripple or immobilize an assailant during the counterattack. They will lose their window of opportunity to escape a volatile situation. Following the counterattack, a victim should place as

much distance between themselves and the assailant as possible. From the moment they are free from restraint, the victim should turn and move as fast as possible to an area of safety. While in flight, the intended victim should remain calm, make deliberate decisions, and refrain from panicking. The priority at this stage should be to get to a populated location where support in numbers will be a benefit. Once safe, the intended victim should contact the appropriate authorities to report the incident.

Preparing for Worst-Case Scenarios

Many colleges and universities do offer self-defense classes. There are also many private training facilities located near colleges and universities offering self-defense seminars and self-defense training. It would benefit any woman to take advantage of a program offering self-defense preparation. Young women who are proactive in preparing for physical altercations are twice as likely to escape an attack compared with those who have no preparation (RAINN, n.d.).

However, the college years are often too late a time to begin preparing for physical attacks. Women require early access to self-defense instruction to engage in the appropriate number of practice trials required to develop a level of competency or proficiency that will prove effective in an authentic confrontational experience. The middle school and high school settings are ideal environments to provide this early exposure.

School districts from California to Pennsylvania, recognizing this need, have begun to incorporate self-defense units into their physical education curriculum at both the middle and high school levels. California, a leading advocate for self-defense instruction in schools, has recently "required the PE (physical education) framework to be revised to include self-defense and safety in-



Figure 3. Kicking.

Secondary physical education curricula can be, and should be, allocating sufficient amounts of time to prepare young women with these essential self-defense skills.

struction in grades 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12" (*Physical Education: Self-Defense and Safety Instruction*, 2010). This decision suggests that there is a growing recognition of the need to include safe, practical self-defense content in the standard secondary education curriculum.

Inclusion of self-defense units in the secondary setting has become a realistic possibility, largely due to the recent publication of numerous self-defense instructional manuals specifically tailored to the secondary educational setting and population. One of the most popular instructional manuals for secondary education self-defense is *Teaching Self-Defense in Secondary Physical Education* by Joan Neide (2009). The text includes a 20-day self-defense unit outline, which is structured and sequenced around developmentally appropriate progression patterns, including differentiated instruction suggestions, for a variety of levels of learners. The text is aligned with the former National Standards (NASPE, 2004) and articulates the unit as being designed to: (1) develop competency in offensive movement skills such as basic striking and kicking techniques, along with defensive movement skills such as common guarding techniques; (2) develop an understanding of a variety of response patterns applicable in multiple high-probability physical encounter scenarios; (3) provide information on community-based instructional sites promoting continuous, advanced instruction; (4) promote the enhancement of flexibility, strength, and endurance; (5) promote responsible personal and social behavior; and (6) promote the development of self-confidence. Texts such as *Teaching Self-Defense in Secondary Education* have made it possible for physical education teachers to bring safe, effective self-defense instruction to the school-based classroom.

Conclusion

The high school and college years are when women are most vulnerable and susceptible to physical violence. Current research suggests that women within this demographic will continue to experience escalating rates of physical violence in the coming years. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the susceptibil-

ity of women in this demographic to physical attack and promote proactive strategies designed to prepare them to handle these scenarios appropriately. With the availability of appropriate instructional material, young women should have access to necessary self-defense instruction. Secondary physical education curricula can and should allocate sufficient amounts of time to prepare young women with these essential self-defense skills. In the event that the school teacher does not feel confident enough to teach these skills, there are alternative options available that should be pursued. Local police and local community self-defense professionals are often accessible for facilitating self-defense lessons collaboratively with existing school programs. There are also high-quality instructional videos readily available detailing self-defense techniques. Using one medium or another, secondary schools should be promoting instructional practices related to self-defense that prepare young women to face physical encounters. These skills just may save someone's life.

As an aside: Contrary to speculative positions opposing self-defense instruction in secondary school settings, no research exists suggesting that self-defense courses either incite violence in school settings or produce a higher probability of associated risk than do other physical education content areas.

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