

# Self-Defense Today

In all of my years of teaching, I have been repeatedly amazed by the truth that self-defense is both incredibly simple and incredibly difficult to practice. As in any other intensive sport or physical endeavor, it's often the psychological edge that defines a successful performance. Last year, one of my students may have saved her own life with a very simple technique. She was accosted in a parking lot by two young men, one of whom grabbed her by the wrist and began yanking her off balance toward the dark area behind the shopping mall. She swiftly turned toward him, held up her free hand with a flat palm, and yelled as loudly as she could, "Let go of me!" Both men looked startled and ran away. How simple!

But, up until that point, these young men had followed her around a public shopping area for over an hour, assessing her as a target and trying to engage her in conversation. Although she felt threatened, she at first ignored her own sense of unease, didn't ask anyone in the crowded stores for help, and failed to face the men or tell them

to stop. She pretended to talk on her phone, smiling uncomfortably while turning her back on them and generally wishing they would go away. Eventually, she told a store employee what was happening. He didn't know how to help her, and she felt disappointed and left the store.

Why was it so hard for her to practice self-defense in the hour leading up to the parking lot assault? Training. Each and every one of us has been trained at some level to distrust our natural instincts. To practice effective self-defense, we must reawaken both the ability to trust our own instincts and the willingness to act on that knowledge.

Most of us, however, would rather not honestly and openly think about the possibility of being the victim of a violent, unprovoked attack, and so we don't, thus missing out on the opportunity to prepare for our own defense. Congratulations! By choosing *Self-Defense: Steps to Survival*, you are courageously refusing to remain in denial. By beginning to read about the reality of violence, you become safer.

**Myth** Violent attacks are rare and not a major problem in my community. Violence mostly happens to people who make bad choices. I'm smart enough to avoid it.

**Fact** Violence is incredibly common. People of all ages, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and walks of life are victimized, and it's not their fault.

Consider these statistics:

- An American is sexually assaulted every 2.5 minutes (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, no year).
- In 2005, law enforcement agencies throughout the United States reported an increase in the number of most violent crimes: murder, manslaughter, robbery, and aggravated assault (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005).
- Every year, 1.2 million women are forcibly raped by their current or former male partners, some more than once (National Organization for Women, no year).

- Males experience higher victimization rates than females for all types of violent crime except rape. According to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 78 percent of murder victims were male in 2003 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005). Men were twice as likely as women to be the victim of a carjacking (U.S. Department of Justice, no year).
- In the United States, a woman is beaten every 18 minutes. Domestic violence is the number one cause of injury to women of reproductive age; in fact, 22 to 35 percent of women in an emergency room are there because of injuries sustained in a violent attack by their partner. (United Nations Department of Public Information, no year).
- Children, teens, and young people are especially vulnerable. One study found that 83 percent of sexual assault survivors were under 25 years of age when they were first raped (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998). In 2003, 12 percent of male students and 6 percent of female students reported experiencing a threat or injury

at school (U.S. Department of Justice, no year).

- Although some studies indicate that reported sexual assault declined 64 percent from 1995 to 2004, one in six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, no year).

Furthermore, personal, sexual violence is widely considered to be one of the most under-reported crimes. According to the Criminal Victimization survey of 2004 by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, only 50 percent of all violent crimes are reported (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Most experts believe that this percentage is even lower for sexual assault.

Contrary to the myth that violence is rare and avoidable, violence is endemic to our society—street, sexual, domestic violence, entertainment, criminal, and political violence. It affects each and every one of us. Even if you yourself are not a survivor of violent behavior, the truth is that you know someone who is. And many of us make daily choices based on a conscious or unconscious fear of experiencing violence in the future.

## **Self-Awareness Drill 1. *How Does Violence Affect You?***

---

Read the examples below. For each example, fill in the blank with an “A” for always, an “F” for frequently, an “S” for sometimes, or an “N” for never.

Do you ever make one of these choices because you are worried about your safety?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Choose to skip something you want to do to avoid going out alone.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Leave the house only at certain times of day or if accompanied.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Get into a fight when challenged, even when you don’t want to.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Consider quitting a job because you’re afraid of clients, patients, coworkers, or customers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Allow “protectors” to make decisions for you—where to go, whom to see, what to wear.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Wonder after the fact if you did something risky or unwise through overconfidence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Refuse to allow your children to do something that may or may not be safe.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Avoid certain streets, neighborhoods, cities, or countries that you’d like to visit.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Turn down jobs for which you’d have to travel, be alone, or work late.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Get angry at loved ones when you fear you can’t protect them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Get angry at yourself for being afraid.