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The Best Offense Is a Good Self-Defense

—By Kenya McCullum

If you've ever asked yourself whether or not you need to take a self-defense class, you need look no further for answers than the evening news, where on any given day you can hear numerous examples of violence against women.

Although you will find an element of media manipulation and sensationalism in some stories, the statistics speak for themselves. According to the National Organization of Women, each year:

- About 1,400 women are murdered by their partners;
- Between 2 to 4 million women are battered; and
- About 1.2 million women are raped by a current or former partner.

Although statistics like these suggest an open season of sorts, it doesn't mean that women are necessarily sitting ducks. Through self-defense training, women are becoming empowered in the knowledge that they don't have to end up a statistic, a headline, or a blurb on a scrolling news ticker. Women are fighting back in a big way, and it's saving their lives.

Getting physical

One form of self-defense that is increasingly gaining attention is Krav Maga — a street fighting technique that was designed for use by soldiers in the Israeli Army. In addition to Krav Maga being prominently featured in the 2002 film "Enough" — where Jennifer Lopez, playing a battered wife, uses it to protect herself from her husband — it has been mentioned in television shows such as "Law & Order," "Alias," and "24," among others.

But Krav Maga is far from just another Hollywood fad. The self-defense technique is an easy to learn, down and dirty system that keeps women safe on the street, and at home, by teaching them how to avoid injury and neutralize a threat in order to get away from a would-be attacker.

At first, you may have some reservations about learning a self-defense technique like Krav Maga. Maybe you don't think of yourself as a fighter. Maybe you wouldn't want to fight even if you did know how. But rest assured, Krav Maga stresses that practitioners attempt to diffuse a confrontation first through verbal skills because 70 percent of all confrontations are de-escalated with words and do not end in physical violence. However, if you do find yourself in a physical confrontation, Krav Maga gives you

the tools you need to get out of it alive.

“Krav is great street fighting, and great self-defense, but the whole idea is to prevent yourself from getting into that situation in the first place through awareness and assertiveness,” said Joanna Robson, an instructor at the Krav Maga Official Training Center in San Francisco (www.kravmaga-sf.com) who has been practicing the technique for over three years. “But if you end up in that situation, we’re going to teach you how to get out of it alive.”

In addition to physical safety, learning Krav Maga gives women a sense of empowerment and freedom that is carried with them in every area of their lives. Pam Tao, who currently practices Krav, said her training has been particularly rewarding because, as a woman who is 4' 11" and 110 pounds, she now knows that her small stature will not hinder her ability to protect herself if she needs to.

“For me physically, when I started Krav four years ago, I couldn’t do 20 regular push ups. You come a long way. I never would have thought in a million years that I would know how to roll a 200-pound person off of me if he were mounted on me,” said Tao. “Four years ago, I wouldn’t have even dreamed that I would know how to defend myself against a hand gun threat. Four years ago, I would have been freaking out and totally froze, whereas now I know what to do.”

Say “No” to Saying “Yes”

Although physical training is the obvious element of self-defense, it’s also important for women to remember that they also need to protect themselves through their words and their voice.

This may not seem as obvious but creating boundaries with people — and using verbal assertiveness when someone crosses your drawn line — is just as important as learning how to physically fight.

“It’s everything from how to deal with your mom who wants you to do something you don’t want to do, to your partner, to your boss at work,” said Wendi Deetz, an instructor with Women Defending Themselves / Women’s Safety Project (<http://www.wdo.org>), two Bay Area organizations that have recently merged to provide physical self-defense and assertiveness education to females who range in age from early teens to septuagenarians.

“When women get really clear about what their boundaries are — not based on what somebody else told them they should be — they’ll become less prone to attacks because the large majority of women are attacked by someone they know. Learning how to say ‘no’ allows you to say ‘yes’ more,” said Deetz.

Deetz, who has been teaching self-defense for nearly a decade, knows from personal experience the importance of being able to defend yourself from physical and emotional attacks. As a teenager, she was sexually assaulted by a drama teacher, who, like many pedophiles, spent time before the physical attack grooming her through inappropriate comments and socially isolating her from her peers. This experience has fueled her desire to teach women what she didn’t know at the time so that others don’t have a similar one.

“I usually talk to my students about it because I think it’s been really healing for me and I think that everything happens for a reason,” she said. “I’m convinced that the reason I was assaulted was so I could find this work and help women who have been through it and help women and girls prevent it from happening to them.”

Heeding the Voices

Although women are known to be naturally much more intuitive than men, unfortunately, we have often been taught to ignore — and even stifle — the little voice inside of all of us because the idea of relying on intuition is at such great odds with the tenor of our culture. But ignoring this part of our natural make up is not in our best interest, because it is often through intuition that we can gain valuable information that will ultimately keep us safe.

“In a lot of dangerous attacks I’ve heard of, the woman or the girl has that intuition, whatever that physical intuition is for each individual, then proceeds to override it because, ‘oh this is my uncle, or this is my teacher, or this is the guy that I see everyday at the store.’ Whatever the situation is, we endanger ourselves just in that act of overriding our intuition,” said Deetz, who stresses the importance of trusting intuition in her classes.

In the end, how a woman decides to defend herself from an attack is a personal choice that will be right for her. But it is important that she do something, because studies show that women who use three or more self-defense techniques, whether they are physical or verbal, are more likely to get out of the situation safely. Self-defense classes, no matter what their focus, are an excellent way to give women options.

“What we say to people is that we give you a toolbox. Every decision that a woman makes when she’s being attacked, verbally or physically, is the right decision for her at the time,” said Erica Neuman, the executive director of Impact Bay Area (www.impactbayarea.org), an Oakland-based organization that teaches both physical and verbal self-defense techniques throughout the area. “But most women don’t have a full toolbox. Most women are just too fearful and they freeze because they’ve not been taught that there are other things you can do.”

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