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Lifestyle



Choosing
right class is
key to learning
self-defense

A FIGHTING CHANCE

By CARA NISSMAN

The drunk sidled up to me and asked if I was alone. My heart raced as my brain downshifted into slow motion. I stood like a statue opposite him. Then he grabbed for me, and I sprang into action.

"Get away!" I screeched. I pushed him away, but he lunged for me again. "Shut up! Don't come near me! Back off!" I shouted, swinging at him with my Persuader Defensive Keychain — a 5½-inch grooved plastic stick with keys attached at one end.

I jabbed at his eyes. I smashed his nose. I pummeled his groin and hammered his chest. And with each hit, my voice grew louder and my swings gained strength. Finally, my assailant hit the ground with a vacuous stare.

Fortunately, the drunk, also known as "Ted," was a dummy. And luckily for me — especially considering the length of time I was paralyzed with fear — I was participating in a self-defense course.

"Anytime anybody walks through the door, they're scared. That's a given," said Dr. Lynn Auerbach, executive director of Brookline-based Impact Model Mugging. "If you're going to face your fears in a course, you're going to be scared."

These fears often prevent women from seeking out self-defense lessons in the first place.

"People say, 'I know I should do it,'

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STAFF PHOTOS BY RENEE DEKONA

PREPARATION: AWARE instructor Dave Ventura, left, helps student Joe Onofrio practice self-defense kicks. AWARE students, above, learn a defensive stance.



Look out for best defense class

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but they make excuses for themselves, like 'It's all common sense' or 'I'll get around to it later' or 'Nothing's going to happen to me,'" said Charles Lowney, chief instructor at Safety & Fitness Educators in Newton. "It's something they don't want to think about. We had more calls after the North End attacks (last summer). But it should be something that's preventive."

Before starting a self-defense course, a woman must determine whether a program is right for her.

"Every woman has different self-defense needs," said Lyn Bates, vice president of Bedford-based Arming Women Against Rape & Endangerment, which is the course I took last week. "They need to decide exactly what they want to protect themselves from. You wouldn't teach someone to use a tennis racket if they're preparing for a golf tournament. They're both good tools, but they're appropriate for different types of activities."

"Using the wrong tools in self-defense can be a recipe for disaster," Bates continued. "If you're being stalked and at risk of being murdered, you'll need different protective tools than if you're preparing yourself for a purse snatcher."

When evaluating a specific program, ask about its philosophy. Do instructors teach preventive measures or physical tactics to stop an attack? Which do you prefer to learn, or do you seek a combination of both?

"Many courses offer exclusively physical techniques, and, especially for women who are young and healthy and in good shape, those courses can be excellent," Bates said. "But you don't have to be thin, young or healthy in order to be safe. There are many options available to you."

If you prefer to learn in a female-only atmosphere, don't be afraid to ask if men will be involved in the course.

"Women need to feel that camaraderie," said Cheryl Montgomery, founder and managing director of Arlington-based In-Defense Inc., a Rape Aggression Defense Systems Inc. course. "If men were in the



PERSUASIVE: At the prompting of AWARE self-defense instructor Dave Ventura, right, student Susan Plawsky of Boston jabs 'Ted' with a weapon called 'the Persuader.'

STAFF PHOTOS BY RENEE DEKONA

room, women would feel constrained. Besides, most of the time we're talking about a not-so-great portion of society. Men would feel the need to defend (their gender)."

Two men attended the course I took, and I had a husband-wife team for instructors. I found the men contributed valuable perspective on possible scenarios and defenses.

If you're open to working with a male instructor, make sure he understands the mind-set of his female students.

"Most women have not been taught to defend themselves," so instructors must know how to address women's concerns, Auerbach said. "Do they understand the fears that women have?"

Instructor Toni Flynn said every

class should build self-confidence.

"A good self-defense course raises a woman's self-esteem so she projects herself differently," said Flynn, who teaches the "Street Smarts" Women's Self-Defense Course at New England Bushido Institute in North Attleboro. "Women need to learn how to avoid becoming a victim."

Students also should review potential instructors' credentials, said Montgomery. Ask about their certification or training.

Once you've chosen a course, you might want to attend a class before enrolling.

"Trust your instincts," Lowney said. "We are the products of millions of years of evolution, and a lot of that is because we have good

instincts, when to fight and flight. Instinct also applies to choosing a program. If you don't get a good feel for it, it's best to choose another one."

I participated in only one course for this article, so I'm not certain it's the best for me. But I can attest to its power.

At the beginning of the class, I nervously imagined myself being strangled by a large man and not being able to wrench free. Now I envision myself dressed like Jennifer Garner in "Alias" (albeit a shorter version), beating the beans out of the last guy who bugged me on my walk to work.

Before jabbing at his chest in defense, I say: "Watch out, man, I've got a stick and I know how to use it!"



ESCAPE PLAN: Instructor Dave Ventura shows a student how to loosen an attacker's grip.

Staying safe

Local self-defense programs include:

- Arming Women Against Rape & Endangerment (AWARE), Bedford: 781-893-0500 or www.aware.org.
- Impact Model Mugging, Brookline: 617-232-7900 or www.impactboston.com.
- In-Defense Inc., Arlington: 781-643-SELF or www.rad-systems.com.
- New England Bushido Institute's "Street Smarts" Women's Self-Defense Course, North Attleboro: 508-699-5450 or www.marubashidojo.com/marubashi.htm.
- Safety & Fitness Educators (SAFE), Newton: 617-965-7233.

— CARA NISSMAN