

Here are the guidelines NCASA (National Coalition against Sexual Assault) recommends for choosing a self-defense program.

## **NCASA Guidelines for Choosing a Self Defense Course**

Prepared for the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault by the NCASA Self-Defense AD-HOC Committee

### **PLEASE NOTE:**

*Although the guidelines as originally written addressed women looking into self-defense options, they are appropriate guidelines for men also. To reflect this, any gender-specific wording has been changed by Mary Brandl & BPS Communications.*

1. People do not ask for, cause, invite or deserve to be assaulted. Women and men sometimes exercise poor judgment about safety behavior, but that does not make them responsible for the attack. Attackers are responsible for their attacks and their use of violence to overpower, control and abuse another human being.
2. Whatever a person's decision in a given self-defense situation, whatever the action she or he does or does not take, he or she is not at fault. A person's decision to survive the best way they can must be respected. Self-defense classes should not be used as judgment against a victim/survivor.
3. Good self-defense programs do not "tell" an individual what she "should" or "should not" do. A program should offer options, techniques, and a way of analyzing situations. A program may point out what USUALLY works best in MOST situations, but each situation is unique and the final decision rests with the person actually confronted with the situation.

4. Empowerment is the goal of a good self-defense program. The individual's right to make decisions about his or her participation must be respected. Pressure should not be brought to bear in any way to get a person to participate in an activity if that person is hesitant or unwilling.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What Is Self-Defense?**

Self-defense is a set of awareness, assertiveness, verbal confrontation skills with safety strategies and physical techniques that enable someone to successfully escape, resist and survive violent attacks. A good self-defense course provides psychological awareness and verbal skills, not just physical training.

### **Does Self-Defense Work?**

Yes, Self-defense training can increase your options and help you prepare responses to slow down, de-escalate, or interrupt an attack. Like any tool, the more you know about it, the more informed you are to make a decision and to use it.

### **Is Self-Defense a Guarantee?**

No. There are no guarantees when it comes to self-protection. However, self-defense training can increase your choices/options and your preparedness.

### **Is There a Standard Self-Defense Course?**

No. There are many formats for training. They may be as short as two hours or as long as 8 weeks or a semester. Whatever the length of the program, it should be based on maximizing options, simple techniques, and respect for people's experience.

### **Is There a Course I Should Stay Away From?**

Only you can answer this question. Find out about the philosophy of the program and the background of the instructor. Observe a class session if you can and talk to an instructor or a student. Is the instructor knowledgeable and respectful of your concerns? Is it a length of time that you can commit to and at a cost you can afford? You deserve to have all your questions answered before taking a class.

### **Who's Better--A Male or Female Instructor?**

There is an advantage for women to having a female instructor as a role model--who has similar experiences surviving as a woman. All-women classes tend to provide an easier atmosphere in which to discuss sensitive issues. On the other hand, some women feel having male partners to practice with can add to their experience. The quality of a class depends on the knowledge,

attitude and philosophy of the instructor, male or female, not necessarily on gender. The most important aspect is that the instructor, male or female, conducts the training for the students geared to their individual strengths and abilities. Feeling safe and building trust comes before learning.

### **Must I Train for Years to Learn to Defend Myself?**

No. A basic course can offer enough concepts and skills to help you develop self-protection strategies that you can continue to build upon. Self-defense is not karate or martial arts training. It does not require years of study to perfect. There are women and men who have successfully improvised and prevented an assault without having taken a class. People often practice successful self-defense strategies without knowing it!

### **If I Use Physical Self-Defense, Could I Get Hurt Worse?**

The question to answer first is what does "hurt worse" mean? Rape survivors speak eloquently about emotional hurts lasting long after physical hurts heal. Studies show a physical self-defense response does not increase the level of physical injury, and sometimes decreases the likelihood. Also, women and men going along with the attacker have sometimes been brutally injured anyway. The point of using self-defense is to de-escalate a situation and get away as soon as possible. Knowing some physical techniques increases the range of possible self-defense options, but the decision to choose a physical option must remain with the person in the situation.

### **What Does "Realistic" Mean?**

Words like "most realistic", "best", "guaranteed success", etc., are all advertising gimmicks. Choosing a self-defense class is a serious decision and is preferably based on some research. No program or instructor can replicate a "real" assault since there are so many different scenarios, and because a real attack would require a no-holds barred fight which would be irresponsible and extremely dangerous to enact. Responsible self-defense training requires control. It is important that each student in a class is able to control his or her own participation in the class and never feel forced to participate.

### **What Is the Role of Mace or Other Aggressive "Devices" as Self-Defense Aids in Harming an Attacker?**

Any device is useless to you unless you understand how to use it and have it in your hand ready to use at the time of the attempted assault. There is nothing "guaranteed" about any of these devices. None are foolproof. None of them can be counted on to work against all possible attackers (no matter what the labeling may say). Realize that anything you can use against an attacker can also be taken away and used against you. While some of these devices have

sometimes helped people escape to safety, it is important to be aware of these devices' limitations and liabilities.

### **How Much Should I Pay?**

Paying a lot of money for a course does not mean you automatically get better instruction. On the other hand, don't assume all programs are the same and just go for the cheapest. It is always beneficial to be an educated consumer. Shop around the same as for anything else you buy that is important to you.

### **Where Can I Find a Self-Defense Class?**

Check with your local rape crisis center. Some centers provide self-protection classes or can refer you to one. YWCA's and Community Colleges sometimes offer classes. Some martial arts schools provide seminars and workshops. Check the phone book. If there isn't one in your community, get involved and try to organize one.

### **Am I Too Old? Out of Shape? What If I Have Some Disabilities?**

You don't have to be an athlete to learn how to defend yourself. A good program is designed to adapt to every age and ability and provide each student with the opportunity to learn. Each individual is unique and students should be able to discuss their own needs. Some programs have specialized classes for specific groups.

### **How Can I Tell a "Good" Course From a "Bad" One?**

A good course covers critical thinking about self-defense strategies, assertiveness, powerful communication skills, and easy-to-remember physical techniques. The instructor respects and responds to your fears and concerns. Instruction is based on the belief that people can act competently, decisively, and take action for their own protection. Essentially, a good course is based on intelligence and not muscle. It offers tools for enabling a person to connect with her or his own strength and power. These courses are out there. Good luck in your research. Taking a self-defense class is one of the most positive acts people can do for themselves!

The Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault –MCASA- subscribes to the NCASA guidelines with the addition of one more: Instructors should regard themselves as professionals and thus maintain appropriate boundaries and not solicit or engage in "dating" or inappropriate socializing or conduct with participants.

The guidelines can be used as criteria for evaluation by centers or agencies who are asked for referrals.

Additionally, some areas may not have numerous self-defense programs available. These guidelines provide support to a person making decisions about class participation.

*The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault was a non-profit, membership organization of rape crisis centers, associated agencies and individuals, established in 1978. The goal of NCASA was the elimination of sexual assault in all of its forms through education, monitoring public policy development and coalition building. NCASA encourages the dissemination of this material with attribution to NCASA.\**

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\*NCASA is no longer in existence, but the work continues through other organizations.

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