

## **An Empowering Approach to Women's Self-Defense**

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### **Summary**

The ACTION self-defense course empowers women by teaching them a variety of simple, effective physical and verbal strategies for regaining control of an assault situation. Rather than being controlled by fear that limits their freedom, women are taught skills to protect and assert themselves and encouraged to take control of their choices and actively choose where they walk and to whom they speak. The more choice of strategies a woman has, the more likely she is to feel safe.

The ACTION program is particularly empowering when contrasted with the traditional victim control approach to women's assault prevention which limits women's freedom and increases their fear by warning them to lock their doors and to avoid going out alone especially in certain areas, dressing in certain ways, talking to strangers... all rules based on a mistaken belief that most assault is done by a stranger on the street at night. In reality, the vast majority of assaults on Canadian women are done by someone known to the victim either in the home or workplace.

A key element of empowering self-defense is teaching a woman to *retake control of the situation* so that she can assert herself and fight back rather than struggle. Strategies differ depending on the situation and include realistic physical techniques targeting one's strength against an aggressor's weakness or vulnerability. Physical, verbal and non-verbal strategies help women to harness inner strength, take control of the situation, and exercise the right to fight back.

### **The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre**

The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre is a community organization which offers assault prevention education to those most vulnerable to violence: women, children, parents and school staff, adolescents, people with disabilities, older people.

One of our main programs is the ACTION self-defense course for women. This is a 15-hour course given to women of all ages and abilities. It is not a martial art; it rather teaches simple, effective physical and verbal strategies.

## **Victim Control: the traditional approach to women's assault prevention**

The Child Assault Prevention Project, in Columbus, Ohio developed the following analysis.

In our society women are taught to avoid violence by following certain rules which limit their lives, and which do not effectively prevent their being assaulted, while increasing their fear. Women are cautioned to lock their doors, avoid going out alone at night, avoid walking or driving in certain areas, avoid dressing in certain ways, hitchhiking and talking to strangers. This approach to assault prevention is known as *victim control*.

There are many limitations to this method of assault prevention. Most women find it impossible to follow all the rules all the time, and find that doing so severely limits their freedom. The rules are based on myths about assault, chiefly a mistaken belief that most assault is done by a stranger, on the street and at night. It is known that the vast majority of assaults on Canadian women are done by someone known to the victim, meaning that the home and the workplace are more often scenes of assault than the street.

The victim control approach is not empowering. It leads to increased fear, since a woman who is out at night will fear assault without feeling capable of reacting effectively should she be assaulted. It also leads to victim blaming, for the crime of being outside or talking to the wrong person, or being dressed in a certain way.

The strategies themselves are not disempowering, but rather it is the presentation of a long list of rules or tips, which many women find overwhelming and guilt inducing.

## **Empowering self-defense**

A self-defense course can be an empowering experience for women. An empowering self-defense course will provide women with a variety of strategies to deal with aggressive situations, so that women can choose one or several strategies in any given situation, and so that they can feel that they are equipped to handle even the most extreme situations which they can imagine happening to them. It can encourage them to make choices in their lives, and provide them with the means to

carry out these choices safely. This allows women to choose where they walk and to whom they speak, because they are taught skills to protect themselves should they be assaulted.

An empowering self-defense course encourages women to share their experiences, their 'success stories' and strategies, thus breaking down isolation between women.

## **Empowerment made concrete: struggling vs. fighting back**

The concept of empowerment may also refer to specific situations in which a woman feels uncomfortable or threatened.

An important element of self-defense for women is, understanding the difference between *struggling* and *fighting back* in aggressive situations. The key to fighting back is to *retake control* of the situation. The aggressor is trying to control his victim, and fighting back effectively means taking control of the situation. This can be done using many different techniques, depending on the people involved and the particularities of the situation.

One example is using one's strength against the aggressor's weakness, either by choosing to hit a vulnerable point on the aggressor's body, or, in releasing from a hold, by using a strong part of one's body against a weaker part of the aggressor's. Thus, it is not necessary to be stronger than the aggressor in order to get away from him. The idea of strength also refers to inner strength, or self-trust. Feeling that we have the right to fight back and that we can do so effectively is an important first step. The element of surprise (the aggressor is expecting an easy victim) adds to the inner strength of the woman and the psychological weakness of the aggressor.

There is also a difference in verbal responses, such as begging and pleading (*struggling*) versus ordering the aggressor to let go or to go away (*fighting back*). Successfully fighting back means doing whatever is necessary in order to get to safety. This can mean making a scene, running, asserting oneself verbally, using eye contact, hitting the aggressor, waiting for an opportunity to get away, and many other strategies.

The larger the choice of strategies a woman has, the more likely she is to feel safe.