

Summer 7-4-2016

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Recommended Citation

Mendez Ruiz, Ashley, "Self-defense; An Intervention Technique to Empower Victims of Domestic Violence" (2016). *Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works*. Paper 35.
http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/undergrad_works/35

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Self-defense;
An Intervention Technique to Empower Victims of Domestic Violence.

Ashley M. Méndez Ruiz

Self-defense plays a significant role in domestic violence cases. In the domestic violence context, self-defense can be defined as a set of survival skills that combine: awareness, verbal confrontation techniques, safety and survival strategies, as well as physical exercises that will enable the victim to escape from a violent situation. An effective self-defense training combines physical and nonphysical strategies to empower the victim. In those cases where a domestic violence victim uses self-defense as a survival technique, a remarkable difference can be noticed regarding the power self-defense gives the victim to overcome the abuse.

Self-defense training has been labeled as one of the most promising interventions to prevent violence against women (Hollander, 2009). This survival technique provides the victim a psychological as well as physical preparation. Even though self-defense can make a great difference in domestic violence cases, it is important to understand until what point the use of self-defense can be justified and when it may be considered an extreme measure by the criminal justice system. Cases where there was no immediate threat or danger and the victim's response is considered irrational, self-defense does not over rule the criminal charges.

Self-defense training for domestic violence victims is considered an effective technique in for intervention in domestic violence cases, especially if the training entails in a women empowerment focus. The empowerment focus given to the self-defense training can increase the victim's self-confidence and reduce levels of anxiety and depression caused by the abuse. Additionally, self-defense has been empirically proven to decrease the number of psychological attributes that are associated with victimization (Brecklin, 2008; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Sochting, Fairbrother, & Koch, 2004; Ullman, 2007). Like other interventions developed from empowerment theory, empowerment based self-defense, challenges the prevailing cultural

narrative of weak, passive victims and strong, invulnerable perpetrators and instead helps students to discover and maximize their own strengths (Jones & Mattingly 2016).

From a criminological perspective, the self-defense domestic violence concept is regularly taken out of context. Even though self-defense and self-protection have significant importance in our society and within our justice system, there is a thin line between what is considered appropriate in the criminal justice system. Although it is legal to protect yourself from a domestic violence abuser, it is only legal under a certain point. In cases where an individual responds to an immediate threat in a way that is irrationally aggressive or dangerous, this creates problems for them in the courtroom (Collins, 2016) which might lead to a criminal conviction. In domestic violence cases the following aspects should be considered:

No Immediate Threat. To demonstrate that a person was defending themselves, they have to prove that they were, or that they believed they were, in imminent danger (Collins, 2016).

Irrational Response. Although it is legal to protect oneself against a domestic violence abuser, it is only legal under very particular circumstances. Also, if an individual responds to an immediate threat in a way that is irrationally aggressive or dangerous, this can create problems for them in the courtroom (Collins, 2016).

The Role of the First Responder:

- **Social Workers:**

1. Apply empowerment techniques to reduce victim blaming behavior.

2. Provide to the victim the National Women's Martial Arts Federation or the In Power Women's Self Defense Training website to introduce her to self-defense itself.
 3. Refer the victim to a local accredited self-defense practitioner, or find a self-defense instructor that could help the victim and adjust to the particular situation.
- **Lawyer:**
 1. Explain to the victim what the legal term of self-defense entails and how she can claim it in a legal forum by avoiding at the same time criminal charges.
 - a. Immediate Threat or Danger
 - b. Irrational Response

Action Steps (3-5):

1. **Mental Preparation:**
 - a. Education and Acceptance-
 - i. Acceptance of the situation.
 - ii. Stop victim blaming.
 - iii. Recognize the cycle of domestic violence.
 - iv. Learn about the legal spectrum of self-defense and criminal behavior.
2. **Preparation and Plan Prior Attack:**
 - a. Find a safe place.
 - b. Collect evidence of the domestic abuse.
 - c. Practice situational awareness, body language, attitude, and appearance.
 - d. Develop intuition.

- e. Create a boundary setting.

3. **Physical Preparation:**

- a. Train to respond to all forms of aggression.
- b. Learn to:
 - i. Disrupt, Shock and Surprise your Aggressor.
 - ii. Disengage, Evade and Escape from your Aggressor.

Self-defense training provides victims of domestic violence the necessary empowerment techniques to overcome the abuse and minimize their risk of victimization. By exposing domestic violence victims to self-defense training, one is providing them many possible choices and actions to take to break the abusive cycle. Also, self-defense training gives the victim a valuable set of skills like awareness, assertiveness, safety strategies, and physical techniques that enable victims to be prepared for a possible confrontation. Additionally, this method may decrease several of the psychological damages associated with victimization and post trauma. Although, self-defense plays a major role in domestic violence cases, an integral part of giving or receiving self-defense training is to be aware what the criminal justice system considers self-defense, and what could be regarded as a criminal behavior in a domestic violence situation.

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