

HOW TO CHOOSE AN EMPOWERMENT BASED SELF-DEFENSE CLASS

An empowerment-based self-defense class teaches skills in awareness, assertiveness, verbal confrontation skills, safety strategies, and physical techniques. These tools can help a person prevent, resist, escape, survive and heal from assault, abuse or harassment. An Empowerment-based Self-Defense (ESD) course provides training not only physical techniques like blocking and strikes but also psychological awareness and verbal skills. Practicing a wide range of skills builds personal confidence and competence, which transfer into daily life.

In choosing a class, look for a program or an instructor who:

- **Knows the facts about abuse and assault** and tailors classes to these realities. For example, a good class will address situations involving acquaintances and romantic partners and authority figures, not just attacks by strangers.
- **Is able to meet people where they are.** For example, a good teacher is able to adapt verbal and physical techniques to each student's strengths and challenges; the instructor will not have a "one-size-fits-all" program.
- **Offers techniques, knowledge and strategies as resources** to help students make their own decisions about how to handle situations. The instructor does not tell students what they should or should not do.
- **Makes conscious efforts to challenge victim-blaming language, beliefs and behavior**, as well as myths/stereotypes about violence
- **Respects students' decisions** about how to handle threatening situations and understands that people are the experts in their own lives
- **Prepares students to respond to various scenarios.** Role-plays include situations from irritating to dangerous to life-threatening.
- **Makes space for student's voices and experiences** and encourages them to offer feedback and suggestions to improve class content
- **Takes an empowering approach to the practice of self-defense as well as teaching.** For example, students should be able to determine their own levels of participation in the class, be invited to adapt and modify techniques as needed. No one should feel pressured into doing specific exercises.

An instructor who is oriented towards social justice and works with a trauma-informed lens:

- **Includes ways to regulate emotions, manage triggers and self-soothe** as part of class (via breathing, meditation, time-outs, etc.)
- **Helps decrease shame and self-blame** by normalizing a range of natural self-protective responses like flight, fight *and* freeze
- **Can speak to intersections** of race, class, gender, age and ability and how these impact safety
- **Uses inclusive language around gender & sexuality** and values people of all gender identities and sexual orientations
- **Understands how racialized violence and sexual violence intersect** and recognizes the additional barriers BIPOC people face, related to ongoing systemic violence, increased criminalization, a history of sexual exploitation and objectification, and a lack of culturally responsive support services.

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