

Is Taekwon-Do practical for street self-defence. How do you know?

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Self-defence
(,sɛlfdɪ'fɛns)

NOUN

- 1. the act of defending oneself, one's actions, ideas, etc.*
- 2. boxing as a means of defending the person (esp. in the phrase noble art of self-defence).*
- 3. law the right to defend one's person, family, or property against attack or threat of attack by the use of no more force than is reasonable.*

Self-defence generally speaking is the utilisation of tactics and skills to enable protection of oneself from harm and allow passage to safety. Defining self-defence helps us understand why it is used and the context it is used in, and the consequences of these acts of defence in local law. The defence needs to be justified as the reasonable use of force in those circumstances for that purpose and as martial art practitioners we need to comply within New Zealand's legal framework.

From my personal experience, Taekwon-Do training has enabled me to successfully defend myself and others as early as a beginner student in my early teenage years. The physical training and moral discipline provided me the confidence and strength to address injustice and self-defence is the reason why I started training in the first place. The tenets of integrity and indomitable spirit were ideals that encouraged me to deal with violent confrontations and to de-escalate situations swiftly and effectively. I have since continually developed my situational awareness and broaden my toolbox of self-defence skills as these were necessary skills when I left home to pursue my studies at a young age and when I travelled abroad on my own and now to protecting those that are in my care. To this day, I consider myself a guardian of society and if needed to use physical force to manage a situation I would not hesitate to do so to protect myself and those that I care about. Will it be practical and effective when I am dealt with a real-life self-defence situation? I would hope so and I will train and hone my skills so that I am in the best position to do so.

In saying that, I have not experienced a dangerous and unpredictable situation that involved knives, drug intoxicated persons, multiple attackers to the extent that this could lead to considerable and damaging consequences. I ask myself would I be able to defend successfully and get to that position of safety? And if not, how do I train myself to do this?

When Taekwon-Do was originally developed by General Choi Hong Hi, the focus was military combat. The self-defence techniques described in the Condensed Encyclopaedia were deemed to be the more advanced Taekwon-Do techniques and practical for self-defence. Most of the techniques except for breaking motions are to be used against a sudden attack by an armed or unarmed opponent. They are applications of the various motions acquired from patterns, sparring, and fundamental movements. General Choi advised that these self-defence techniques can only be effective if the student takes the time to constantly train with them under realistic conditions.

In New Zealand, the instruction of self-defence has evolved and is more fitting with today's society. Historically, physical responses were the main focus of self-defence training and the most significant development over the last decade has been the incorporation of a reality based self-protection program. This has been adapted from the Protect Self Defence system which has lent itself to a more holistic and practical approach in the art of self-defence. The concepts are potentially lifesaving and can be adapted and effectively applied to a wide range of self-defence situations.

The framework is built around the Protect Self Defence four stages of self-protection:

- Avoid
- De-escalate
- Respond
- Recover

Stage 1: Avoid

The safest and preferred route is the avoidance of fighting. Situational awareness is the only broadly effective self-defence skill. Developing an awareness of the surroundings and signs of potential threat that can escalate to an unsafe and dangerous environment is essential training which can be taught to students of all ages and skill levels, especially the beginning and younger aged students. The Traffic Light System and basic self-defence guidelines on personal safety are highly effective concepts that can be easily learnt and instruction adapted to the target audience.

The three survival assumptions scratches the surface of possible perilous scenarios and repercussions should the incident escalate to a violent confrontation. An understanding of these assumptions assists to carefully modify the self-defence response and focuses awareness of the potential incoming threats.

Keeping safe is the key underlying principle and learning to avoid unsafe situations and practicing awareness and personal safety is paramount.

Stage 2: De-escalate

Verbal de-escalation is the appropriate next stage before the need to activate the physical response.

Ascertaining the offender's reason for attack either at an 'Ego level' or 'Criminal level' directs the verbal strategies which can be used to handle and de-escalate the situation. Practicing these in controlled conditions within a class setting is the initial step to developing useful phrases in confrontations and exploring potential responses from the offender. The caveats being that realism can be rather challenging to accomplish, specifically practicing scenarios with aggression and profanities which is not often easy to do especially if that is not the nature of the 'aggressor' and performing the aggressor's possible responses to the verbal tactics used.

On the other hand, the non-verbal tactics of the highly effective passive stance provides both a mechanism for a starting physical defensive position and sending a non-threatening psychological message simply by assuming a non-confrontational stance. This stance is easily taught and a swift reaction that can be developed by most practitioners.

Stage 3: Respond

Running away is considered the single best self-defence technique. However, there are occasions when a physical combat response is necessary to defend when fleeing is not an option. Despite this, the goal is to use the safest means available to end whatever conflict has already occurred. The goal is safety for oneself and those around them.

The physical response applying force predominantly utilises Taekwon-Do self-defence techniques and training to apply and adapt these to real-life self-defence situations. Nevertheless, it is critical to understand that the physical response should be used as a last resort as real life street self-defence situations can be a dangerous place to find oneself in and these experiences are uncommon for most practitioners.

The provided list of the most useful attacking tools are an excellent set of tools that is practical, simple and effective as well as an understanding of the vital spots and the appropriate tools for each vital spot. Students at beginner levels can be taught the basics of a physical response with these simplified tools and the skills required for an effective response.

The reasonable use of force requires careful consideration. The physical response needs to be appropriate to the perceived threat, the force used must be the same as what an ordinary person facing the same immediate dangers would use, excessive use of force beyond that perception can lead to criminal prosecution. The law is quite clear though that matters are not considered self-defence if you act as an aggressor.

Training under extreme stress and in as realistic conditions as possible is beneficial to defending oneself successfully. Preparation for the future possibility of having to defend oneself in practiced and realistic scenarios will provide the defender an edge and lessen the impact of shock when encountered with an imminent threat.

Stage 4: Recover

This section provides essential information on what to do in the aftermath. I will not explore this in detail but only to say that this can be tricky for instructors to cover during a class

session and it depends on the severity of stage 3, whether the incident needs to be reported to the police, even if it does not it is good practice to write down what happened soon after the incident. The process that follows varies accordingly to where the incident occurred. Support will need to be provided to help deal with the traumatic event and its consequences. Students need to be advised to talk to someone they trust about it.

I have attempted to outline the current NZ self-defence syllabus and the specified Taekwon-Do self-defence training to explain how relevant and applicable the principles of the self-protection program are. That it can be broadly applied to a range of different self-defence scenarios and how training in Taekwon-Do gives the practitioner the upper-hand should they be faced with a real-life self-defence situation. Self-defence tactics encompasses an extensive range of skills necessary firstly to avoid a physical conflict, attempts at de-escalation and if absolutely necessary to use physical force to deal with the situation.

These tactics are practical in the sense that avoidance of potential conflict should be the first instruction for effective self-defence. Placing oneself in danger should be avoided at all costs and by doing so diminishes the need to use physical force and avoids confrontation altogether.

Verbal de-escalation strategies can be fraught with elements of inevitable failure if not performed well. Rehearsing these situations requires acting abilities and aggression that are often not easily acted out in controlled class scenarios. The rapidly changing situation requires the defender to quickly assess and respond verbally to manage and control the situation, this requires life skills and experiences that are often not available to our younger practitioners.

On the other hand, the passive stance is a highly valuable tool and demonstrates the message clearly to the offender and bystanders and positions the defender in the best possible position for physical defence. Thus, verbal de-escalation and role plays requires regular practice and with strangers. Combined club trainings and pairing with strangers for the express purpose of self-defence training and practicing verbal and physical responses.

Common self-defence scenarios that should be role-played in as realistic conditions as feasible and catered to the target audience. This should include the home environment e.g. domestic violence, home invasion, robbery/burglary, the workplace e.g. customer disputes, robbery/burglary, the school environment e.g. bullying, kidnapping, and attacks in carparks and even in open public places in broad daylight. These situations may or may not be pre-meditated. It is not often that situations involve dangerous weapons and multiple attackers but these can happen and preparation for this needs to be considered as part of the training program. Practical and realistic situations are an effective way of bringing the importance of understanding the different levels in self-defence to the forefront of training.

Training for self-defence needs to incorporate the following additional elements:

- Training in street clothes rather than Taekwon-Do uniforms
- Training in environments outside the Taekwon-Do school (carpark lots, alleys, etc)

- Self-defence against armed attackers and multiple attackers
- Self-defence from ground positions (e.g. grappling)
- Self-defence when at a disadvantage (e.g. protecting a child, carrying groceries etc)

We have practiced ground self-defence, weapons and multiple attackers as part of our black belt training. Reflecting on the training we had for this and whether I feel ready to battle it out in real-life I am uncertain as to whether I will be successful. You may ask why is that?

A 'street' fight is dirty. Any tactic might be used. I believe that undertaking a reality based self-defence class really can be a lifesaver having experienced and trained with the Protect Self Defence team. To be fully effective is to train and practice with realness and the chaos that comes with it. It is physically demanding and can involve grappling and similar activity. For me to be highly confident in my skills I would also add in my toolbox training in other martial arts that specialise in grappling, ground self-defence and weapons training. That for me would give me the confidence in my ability to say yes, I can now have the best chance to be safe in real life self-defence situations.

In conclusion, Taekwon-Do training is effective in developing martial arts practitioners in the application to self-defence. This is only practical, however, when combined with the self-protection principles of avoidance and de-escalation strategies when applied to real-life self-defence situations. The caveat is, of course, that this needs to be trained and practiced under real-life based scenarios to enable the practitioner to experience the stressful and unpredictable nature of these situations. Training in more complex scenarios with weapons, ground self-defence and multiple attackers needs to be regularly practiced and under real conditions as these situations are often dangerous and preparation for the possibility of these situations needs to be incorporated in self-defence training.

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