

Application for III Dan, essay  
By Margot Bawden  
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## **Four principles to ground teaching strategies for de-escalation in self defence**

Last year two RTR Taekwon-Do classmates and I embarked on a new journey together teaching self defence at a local girls high school. Based on the Taekwon-Do syllabus we developed a short programme to be delivered over one term, suited to people who didn't have any martial arts background. While there were many positives that came out of it, including feedback from parents, we felt we could improve our teaching of de-escalation.

This essay explores creating a principle based approach to teaching de-escalation, combining our Taekwon-Do tenets, which ground our ego and behaviours. I propose in this essay if we respond in alignment to the Taekwon-Do tenets, particularly in self-control and courtesy, the chances of successfully de-escalating increase.

Originally I wanted to create a cheat sheet for instructors with scenarios and responses to assist in teaching de-escalation. What emerged through my research is that there isn't a one size fits all approach where this would work effectively. Instead at the end of the essay are some ideas on how to incorporate the four principles below.

On reflection of teaching self-defence in a school environment I realised the value of de-escalation for the current stage of the teenagers life at school, but also as they leave home for the first time. We noticed how difficult it was for many school students to simulate a situation, and then to try and find something to say that wouldn't further aggravate an ego-fuelled aggressor.

From 2018 - 2020 those testing for senior dan answered an essay question: 'Is Taekwon-Do practical for street self defence, how do you know?' Three of these essays noted de-escalation and its role<sup>1</sup>. Of these essays key themes included:

- Practising de-escalation felt unrealistic
- Realism can be challenging to accomplish
- Creating the right environment to be realistic is difficult
- A list of scenarios with a framework would be helpful for training
- Practising in controlled conditions of a class is useful for developing potential responses.

The themes coming through these essays reflect my own experience of teaching de-escalation, including the difficulty of creating realism, and theoretical understanding not translating to practical application.

The self defence syllabus is a valuable resource, it is simple and clear. However, there's always more depth to be explored with people who work in this area everyday. One of the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://members.itkd.co.nz/reference/essays/index.php#self\\_defence](https://members.itkd.co.nz/reference/essays/index.php#self_defence)

Self defence essays in 2018, 2019, 2020 for those testing for 5th and 6th Dan, specifically including the essays by Mr Kevin Joe, Dr Thu Nguyen, and Mr Brice Vallès.

experts involved in the content development of the self defence book is Mr Phil Tompson, who has a self defence business, Protect Self Defence.

I interviewed Mr Thompson in October 2023 to discuss the role of de-escalation and how I can improve my own teaching. When we started talking about this topic his insights were more nuanced than I expected. Over the 20 years that Mr Thompson has been working in this area his approach to self defence has changed as his continued learning, study and research in human behaviour, alongside his practical experience in teaching inform his ongoing teaching strategies.

One of the most influential aspects in his teaching has been training as a trauma specialist, and volunteering on a suicide prevention 24/7 phone number. The principles he's learned through these intense experiences can also be applied in a classroom context teaching de-escalation with an ego-fuelled aggressor.

Within his own business the demand for de-escalation has changed the focus of his business from primarily physical responses, to primarily de-escalation techniques with physical responses a secondary and last resort. This might be because the violence that we train a physical response to, isn't as common as we usually think.

The statistics tell a different story to what we see reflected in the news media, and social media. Interpreting the data from the Police<sup>2</sup> and more targeted research through the Ministry of Women's Affairs show that almost all (over 90%) of survivors know or can identify the perpetrator(s)<sup>3</sup>.

In Mr Thompson's field working with rape prevention, and other social violence groups, anecdotally shows that the small percent remaining breaks down to demonstrate that true criminal attacks are rare. The vast majority is social violence.

Through the course of the interview several themes came up that could help to provide a broader context for de-escalation. I have taken these and created four principles that we can incorporate into our training. Note, the principles below do not apply to criminal attacks or domestic violence.

### **Principle one: Understand your triggers and park your ego**

To effectively de-escalate it is about you, not the attacker. Mr Thompson wholeheartedly believes that effective de-escalation is about how you respond.

As martial artists we can embody the Steven Covey *be, do, have* model<sup>4</sup> for self defence where we can change our focus from what we want to have in that moment, to who we want to be. By focusing on the outcome we can begin the process of parking our ego.

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<sup>2</sup> NZ Police Data and Statistics

<https://www.police.govt.nz/about-us/publications-statistics/data-and-statistics/policedatanz/victimisations-demographics>

<sup>3</sup> Venezia Kingi and Jan Jordan, 2009, *Responding to sexual violence : pathways to recovery*, report commissioned by the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

<sup>4</sup> Covey, Steven *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*. First published in 1989.

One of the hardest parts of de-escalation is not being triggered in an ego situation. You may know what is being said is triggering you, but if you escalate you're not behaving in a way that will reflect building a more peaceful world. Think again, of your 'be'. Who do you need to be in this situation to come away without a physical confrontation? Who do you need to be to de-escalate this?

One of life's greatest challenges is learning to manage our own emotions, and to develop our empathetic self and ability.

We can do this by looking at our reactions when we are triggered. It all starts with the self and this turns ego on its head. There are themes that come up which are universal, that are established as thought patterns, or paradigms from childhood. Unless we consciously look and shed light on our own subconscious triggers, we can't know ourselves, and develop a truly empathic response. Unprogramming and creating new neural pathways so you're not triggered takes a lot of work.

#### **Five universal trigger themes:**

1. Anger, with an accompanying physical response that says, "let's go".
2. Fear or feeling scared (which is an extension of point four).
3. Life lens - what type of day has it been, this may reflect your level of patience.
4. Freezing, which is an extension of fear.
5. Righteous indignation, which goes back to anger.

#### **Principle two: The conversation or interaction starts and finishes with empathy**

Before you start training in self-defence, particularly for our junior students, understanding the role of empathy in self defence is a game changer. Empathy is understanding and articulating back without judgement or bias. If we think about it in terms of our Taekwon-Do tenets it can feel like courtesy - while we may be personally affronted by what is happening, or what is being said, we can de-escalate firstly by being courteous and wrap it with empathy.

15-16 year olds do not have a neural pathway formed to de-escalate social situations - the only way is to practise situations with dozens of repetitions. Our teenagers simply do not yet have the skills to manage their own anger or ego. Creating a neural pathway through repetition creates a way of thinking that will be activated, just like muscle memory.

#### **Principle three: Always start with recognition, awareness and then activate de-escalation strategies**

Always bring the training back to our Taekwon-Do self-defence framework. Begin with recognition and awareness, by providing examples to students and ask them what traffic-light colour do they think they would be in and why. Examples can be completely made up and verbally discussed, or you can find examples on YouTube.

By finding examples on YouTube, you can also examine behaviours and what's de-escalating an attacker, and what's escalating to them.

The made up examples you have provide an excellent backdrop for role plays.

### **Principle four: Why we role play**

Role play fits with some people more than others. It's awkward, but it's effective. Understanding why it is effective can also help you teach using this as a tool. If you listen to a person talking, you will likely only remember about ten percent. If you watch videos and demos, the retention is far better with people remembering about half of what they watch.

However, if someone acts out, or role plays, the retention rate of the knowledge soars to anywhere between forty-five percent<sup>5</sup> to anecdotally experienced in Mr Thompson's seminars of up to ninety percent. There's no easy way to do role plays, and by their nature they are uncomfortable and awkward. When progressing with this style of learning with a class it is really important to notice how people are reacting.

Phil Thompson's trauma informed training approach recognises how to deal with role play and teaching people who have past trauma. He assumes that every person in the room has had a significant trauma at some point in their lives. He stresses to always read the room, don't do it once, do it constantly. When you do this, look for changes in people's behaviour, and bring them back. He finds using humour to defuse the seriousness of the topic a useful tool.

Other fundamental elements include having no surprises for the students you're teaching. Explain what you're going to teach and what this will look like, and what you would like the students to do. At any point in time be upfront with students, and say, "This next thing we are going to teach, it will be full on."

If a student doesn't want to participate in that, never make them.

### **One page pull out for instructors:**

#### **Ideas for instructors on how practise de-escalation with adults**

1. Categorise your trigger, or triggers, make it specific to dojang (see themes above). You can do this by keeping the context to social violence for de-escalation practice, and keep it simple.
2. In an ego based assault ask questions that figure out what the attacker is angry about. What's the quickest way out for you? Apologise. Notice if your own ego starts to flare, or is triggered. If your ego is triggering practice centering yourself in the

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<sup>5</sup> Harneel Acharya, Rakesh Reddy, Ahmed Hussein, Jaspreet Bagga, Timothy Pettit, *The effectiveness of applied learning: an empirical evaluation using role playing in the classroom*, Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning, Article publication date: 10 December 2018, Issue publication date: 3 December 2019.

tenets, breathing life into self control and courtesy. This practice will help you create new neural pathways on how you respond.

3. How can you frame your responses in an empathetic way?
4. Make this thought process your 101 -
  - Can you use passive behaviour to give the attacker a way out? For example if it's social violence - can you solve it?
  - Can you give the attacker my phone/bag/valuable?
  - If you can't solve it, can you escape?
  - If you hit someone - is it appropriate, what is the appropriate force? Do you need time to escape, is your life (or the person you) under extreme threat?
5. Role play - literally play with giving the attacker your top ten objections.
  - How does the person playing the attacker respond?
  - How did it make you feel?
  - Ask yourself if you stayed in control of your thoughts and actions, or could you feel yourself being triggered?
  - Were the words you were using grounded in the tenets or had they slipped into an ego response?
6. Bring your responses back to the tenets, how do your responses align - are you using integrity, courtesy, perseverance, self-control and perhaps some indomitable spirit? Help your training partner analyse your response with the tenets in the forefront of your mind.

### **Role plays with children**

With children the best way to connect and create neural pathways is to make the activity fun, while retaining a serious overone. Some ideas include:

1. Use your voice as a barrier and make it a game. Get them screaming and sprinting, screaming sprinting, yelling at the same time.
2. For children in particular they will more often than not know their attacker. Helping children learn to trust their intuition is important, as is subverting an attacker who is telling a child to keep the attacks a secret. Creating a neural pathway that it's ok to tell a secret to a trusted adult is an important part of self defence for children. A way to do this in the dojang is to play the 'opposites game' Think about what predators say, but in a fun way. Get the kids excited for example you can whisper "When I say keep it a secret, what do you do? As loud as they can, they say "You tell everyone."
3. Focus on lures - come up with the top 12 that would put a child in a privacy/control situation. If an adult says, "Come to home so we can have a private session," teach children that a guardian should stay with them.