

Women's self-defense courses use body and mind

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BEIRUT: It's late, the streets are deserted, and you're walking alone. A tug on your handbag strap startles you. Bam! Your honed reflexes land a decisive blow to your attacker's neck. No, you've not just discovered unknown superpowers; you're trained in self-defense.

Whether in Beirut or cities around the world, muggings and attacks on women happen. Lebanese martial arts master Joe Habis says it is crucial to be prepared for any scenario and teaches a course specifically tailored to women – including how to put those hazardously tall high heels into action for self-defense.

"A lot of instructors will teach self- defense but they teach the same techniques for men and women ... You really need to have a specific program for women aggressed by stronger people. You don't need to train men how to hold on to a handbag or how to use their high heels as a weapon," says Habis, who is the owner of a martial arts school (dojo) in Ashrafieh, Beirut.

Habis has been a martial arts instructor for 20 years and opened the dojo in Beirut in 2003, where he and other instructors teach a variety of courses, among them Judo, Kali Sikaran, Jiu Jitsu and women's self-defense.

Women's self-defense is offered at the dojo in private or semiprivate sessions by request.

Habis notes that more women are seeking out the course recently and he commonly hears stories from many of them about a rise in muggings and attacks in Beirut.

"I want to be sure that the girls that train with me, when they leave the dojo are confident that if anything happens they know what to do," says Habis sitting in his studio.

Habis' program consists of two parts, he explains: power training and technical training for specific scenarios.

"The first stage is to work on the striking power, teaching women to really hit hard when they need to hit. How to use their punches, elbows, knees and kicks if necessary," he says.

Then the technical work begins. Habis puts his students through situation training – what to do if they are punched, grabbed from behind or thrown on the ground.

He tries to account for as many situations as possible, but concedes that it's impossible to prepare for every single scenario. That's why putting his students under pressure is important – to hone their awareness and produce mental toughness.

The training is meant to "prepare not only their body but also their spirits," Habis says.

"A lot of women feel that they're weak and that's the main problem. You can train them as much as you want but something happens – in their heads they are victims, so they stay victims."

Natalia Sancha began training with Habis five months ago. As a photojournalist she often finds herself exposed

during her work and decided to take the course because she is “tired of sexual harassment on the street and while traveling.”

She believes that the mental aspect of her training has been crucial: “Mental strength is the most important because as women we are physically weaker and smaller than the men who will try to attack us. It’s very difficult to neutralize them.”

“Always observe the situation around you,” Sancha recommends. “Your best option is to call for help or try to run away as fast as you can.”

Mental preparation helps women keep their head when the unexpected occurs, believes Ghalia Baggily Ogden-Smith, a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu instructor at Habis’ dojo.

“The mental side is important ... training will give women the ability to stay calm and to think instead of panic when attacked. All martial arts teach people to stay focused and to manage the adrenaline,” she says.

The Jiu Jitsu instructor concurs with Sancha that the first, best option is to flee the situation, and to dig in that high heel with effect: “Pretend to be cool and calm, step hard on the [attacker’s] toes with your heel and run.”

Otherwise women should find out what to expect and prepare for it, Ogden-Smith believes: “Every woman must think of different scenarios in her mind, keep thinking about them until they become familiar, so that when it happens she would skip the shocking unfamiliarity of the attack and would quickly use her mind instead of losing it.”

Awareness and prevention are the best ways to stay safe, Habis says. This can be small measures, he points out, like locking the doors as soon as you get in your car, not using an ATM late at night or walking down the street with your handbag on the wall-side of the street to deter someone on a motorbike from snatching it.

Habis acknowledges that prevention doesn’t always work out and sometimes women must resort to defending themselves in a physically unfair fight.

“When you’re facing a stronger opponent, even if you strike really hard, he’ll still be stronger. So you need to learn how to improve the line of attack and how to target vital points,” Habis advises, adding that the best points to target are the eyes, neck and groin.

It is difficult to provide advice for what to do in every scenario – the response depends on what type of attack you face.

But there are tricks. For instance, Habis describes a move to use when someone tries a driveby purse snatching. He says there is a way of holding onto your handbag and putting your knee down so that you change your center of gravity, making the attacker go flying and giving you time to get away with your belongings.

Women must also learn how to use the environment around them to their advantage and turn common possessions into “improvised weapons,” Habis adds. “You can use a pen to strike, a cellphone, your handbag or umbrella, your high heels. Anything, even your hat or your keys.”

But, Habis cautions against relying on mace or a taser, saying that to use them effectively you have to react immediately. “If you’re too slow [the attacker] can take them and use them against you,” Habis warns. “A lot of women under panic take out [the mace] and they spray themselves, because they’ve never used it. So it can turn against you.”

Despite her interest in taking a self-defense course, Sancha believes that Beirut is still a very safe city for women.

“Compared to cities in Europe, [in Beirut] if you need help people will help you. No one will hesitate here to intervene if they see a woman being attacked,” she said.

Ogden-Smith agrees that Beirut is generally pretty safe, “but that doesn’t mean to let your guard down.”

Delving into a self-defense course can be about more than just preparing for the worst case scenario – it can also be about a sense of empowerment, observes Habis. “Sometimes a very shy little girl comes in and at the end of the training I think wow, what have I done here? She’s turned into a real warrior.”