

Women and Self-Defence: An Interview with Sue Cockerton

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Les femmes et la défense personnelle

Entrevue avec Sue Cockerton qui enseigne les bénéfices des méthodes de défense personnelle.

Women often feel victimized in today's society, but now they have the chance to do something about it. It's all a matter of being assertive, according to Sue Cockerton, the instructor of a self-defence class for women at Centennial College. It's a physical assertiveness. Women gain the power to defend themselves and get rid of their inhibitions about being physical in the process.

The general feeling radiating from the students in Sue's class is one of self-confidence. They had been brought up to believe violence is wrong, but Sue has taught them it's alright to fight back. In the following interview, Sue Cockerton talks about self-defence.

How did you become interested in self-defence training for women?

I took a basic course myself five years ago, and really enjoyed it. I liked the teacher, she started motivating me into going to other classes, assisting her, and doing demonstrations. I then started doing advanced stuff.

Have you tried different forms of self-defence training?

I'm not too sure that there are different types, it's a combination of different types. Basically, the self-defence that I've had has been karate training, and I've worked with other professionals as well. I feel that self-defence for women is not a

question of physical skills, it's a question of attitude.

It's also important to know the politics of rape, know why it happens, and the kinds of attacks that are directed at women.

Have you noticed any differences in women's attitudes towards self-defence?

I think there's a group of women, and hopefully that group is getting larger, who have an increased consciousness in general to all sorts of women's issues, including the issue of rape and self-defence.

Has the number of women taking such courses increased recently?

I don't think so. When I started, it was the beginning of the whole issue of self-defence for women in Toronto. The first year was slow, but it peaked in the second year. A lot of newspaper and magazine articles were out on the subject, I was interviewed on television, and so on. That's levelled off now.

What are the greatest barriers to overcome for women?

One is fear. I think things like rape are so bad we don't want to talk about them. It's like never feeling you're going to have a car accident until you have one. It's also a bogey-man theory. Ever since we were kids we were told to watch out for strangers. You get a feeling that there's somebody out there who will get you. Also, the sort of myth like, 'rape is a fate worse than death.' A lot of the women I teach have had some kind of attack, and this is a hurdle to get over in class.

Another thing is the question of the violence of self-defence. Most of us have been conditioned to be non-violent. It's a

breakthrough for women to realize it's alright to break a nose in self defence.

Is this an inhibition that some women have?

Yes. Some of us think it's not ladylike, especially those of us with a more traditional up-bringing. Some women have been given the label of being nice and they think self-defence isn't nice.

Some of us, most of us, don't want to hurt or be hurt. The fear of being hurt is so great we don't want to face the problem at all. I try to get women to feel good about their bodies, and to do physical things.

What methods do you use to try to help women become less inhibited about using physical force?

Lots of practice. I get them to yell and kick, and I encourage them. Other people in the class lend encouragement to one who's having a hard time as well.

If I can't deal with that part during the physical parts of my classes, I'll bring it up during discussion. I ask the class or an individual how they're feeling. If a woman is having a hard time of it, I'll talk to her after class, or outside of class.

Once you begin classes, is there a point which you consider to be a breakthrough point?

Yes, I think so. I simulate attacks in class, and after a certain point, the women will attack each other. Sometimes I try to stimulate a little anger, and do verbal things, like, 'Come on, you bitch.' After taking some insult, she'll finally hit me. That's terrific. For some of the women, it's board-breaking. They'll break a board with their hands and realize what strength they have.

For some women, it doesn't happen for a while. A couple of months later they'll be talking to a friend and they'll talk about their self-defence and how they feel about it.

Does a woman usually feel guilt when she uses self-defence?

That's not my experience. Usually the feeling is one of joy, because they have proved that they can do it. If a woman didn't feel right about using self-defence, she wouldn't be able to do it in the first place.

Would you recommend that self-defence be taught in the schools?

We should start in primary school. I'd like to see it put into sex education, or human relationship classes. It's a case of being assertive, if you're assertive in general, that's basically what self-defence is. It's stepped up somewhat because often you have to have a very strong 'no', but being able to say no is being assertive. Young children should be taught that they have rights, too, and they should be taught to be assertive.

It would have been good if we had got some solid support, such as from the Board of Education, in hiring self-defence teachers during the second year of operation, when there was a tremendous awareness of self-defence. That was difficult to get together.

Are the students in better shape after they take the course?

Not really. Classes are held only once a week so there isn't time to do fitness training as well as teaching self-defence. I really dislike the concept of fitness as being a part of self-defence. If a woman can incorporate it into her training program, that's great. Certainly it's better for me if the women in the class are in touch with their bodies and are physically fit. I really feel though that self-defence for women is for every woman regardless of whether she's overweight, elderly, or physically

handicapped.

Do the women have a different attitude toward their bodies after taking the course?

Certainly. Sometimes when I see the women later on, I am surprised at how many of them say that taking the course changed their lives. I invite my students to come back and get in touch with me. If they use their skills, I want them to drop in and let me know.

I had one woman come back to me after a year incredibly changed. When she started taking the class, she used to leave early every night so that she could get home before dark. When she came back after a year, she started reciting at me all the movies she'd seen. She said, 'It's incredible! I go to movies by myself now.' To her it was a really big deal.

Do you have any idea how many of the women you've trained have had the opportunity to use their self-defence skills?

I've talked to a couple of dozen women and it's sort of scary when you realize how many of them have actually had experiences of rape or attempted rape. I had a woman in one class who had had to use her skills in a really serious situation after only her third lesson. Five guys were following her home one night so she turned around and kicked the leader in the groin. She was so amazed at what she'd done that she just stood there thinking to herself, 'Look what I've done! Look what I've done!' The other four guys were standing there too, looking at her thinking, 'My god! Look what she's done.' It ended up that they all stood there for a few seconds and then everybody just turned and ran, and left this guy lying on the ground.

How should a woman handle herself in a group situation?

Group attacks are a lot scarier. You need to really get your courage together more. But I think in some ways they're easier to handle because you're dealing with cowards and the bullying mentality. If you can get one guy down and look together enough while doing it, the other men will be so scared of you they'll think, 'Wow! Who is this woman who's willing to take on all five of us!' They don't know how much you know so they think, 'Wow! She's really something.' For men there's something about seeing a fellow male lying on the ground holding his groin that makes them think twice about attacking you.

Have any of the women who have used their self-defence skills ever been unsuccessful and come back to tell you?

Not that I know of. It's unlikely that a woman would come and tell me about that. The statistics on women who use some kind of physical defence successfully without any training at all is very high. At the very least it's 90% and some statistics say it's 98%, so even if you just try something without any training you'll still have a very high success rate. Obviously with a little bit of training I think very few of my students would not succeed if they tried something. By doing something physical I mean really fighting as opposed to just trying to struggle away from him by hitting him on the chest. You really have to hit out and mean to hurt the guy.

Do you feel they should take a course, or do you think they should just trust themselves?

That's hard to say because trusting yourself seems like a very easy thing to talk about but it's often very hard to do. Sometimes we need to go through a process of changing ourselves and the self-defence course helps. If I could spend five minutes with a woman and teach her how to kick and punch, and change her attitude as well, then I could teach her everything in five minutes. You can't change her attitude that fast though, so I think the eight week course is best. I've tried a four week programme but I've found that a month isn't long enough to go through the process. The course isn't just the one night that

you come in to class. During the week the women go home and think about what they learn and then discuss it with boy-friends, husbands and girlfriends. Then they come back the next week with all kinds of questions. That's the process of going through the attitude change.

Do you think that only a little training might be a misleading thing because it might make a woman over-confident?

I don't think so. It's a really unusual woman who's going to be over-confident. We tend to feel less confident about ourselves than we should. The only exception is that sometimes when women go home after the first or second class they're really high. I remember myself when I left my second class, I wanted to meet five guys in a parking lot. But that feeling goes. It hangs around for a couple of days and then you realize, 'I wouldn't even want that experience.' I think most women are really sensible as to what their skills are.

Have you ever had to use your self-defence skills in your own defence?

Yes. One incident happened before I had any self-defence training. One night a man came in through my bedroom window with a knife. It didn't occur to me that there was anything I could do about somebody with a knife, so I talked my way out of that. So that my students know how to handle a situation like that, I teach verbal self-defence in the class.

Since I've taken self-defence I think I use it all the time in the sense that I'm a lot more confident about where I go and whom I talk to. I think too that if you have some self-defence skill, it's a lot less likely that you will be attacked. In addition to that I've done some crisis intervention work with women who have been raped, and with battered wives. I've sometimes been in the position of getting in between a husband and wife.

Would you have done the same thing in the situation where the man confronted you with the knife, now that you have the training?

I don't know. I never know how I will react until the incident happens, no matter how much training I've had. I could leave the school tonight and if I'm feeling depressed or tired it could cut down on my skills. The most important thing is that you have to really want to defend yourself. If a woman goes away thinking, 'Oh, I know I'll definitely defend myself,' that's great, but I don't think that you can ever rely on that attitude.

Are there any good books on self-defence?

No, but there are some bad ones. I tried to get funding from Ottawa for a manual on Self Defence for Women, and I got as far as putting together a brief for it, but that's about it. I've talked to some people about publishing it, but now I don't think I would ever really want to. I think it's far more important for women to practise self-defence than to read about it. I've talked to the rape crisis centre and a woman from the National Film Board about putting a film together, but I don't think solely a demonstration of punches and kicks is very useful. You can't get into someone's head via a film very well.

If a woman has no access to training courses in self-defence, could you recommend anything that would help her break down her barriers against striking out in her own defence?

I think the most important thing for her to do is for her to talk about attitude a lot, preferably with a group of other women friends who are interested in just getting together and talking. Then she should get some books on rape and self-defence and read a lot about that. I think the important thing though is the *doing*. You should practise self-defence with the group and should try different situations out, which will help bring about the attitude change.

Recurrent Theme of Wood:

After the First Workshop

To-day, I almost took your hand
to search it creased & calloused
as wit
you splinter in the soft grey matter
of my brain membranes ragged & ripped
warped & rotted boards pushed
again, & yet again against the blades
of the machine
to make it perfect flaws dancing to curls,
curling and uncurling, rise in wooded smoke
My hands.
Two purple and pale
soft with new bruises
still white between the stains of sap and gum
almost entered
Yours.
You understand this would not be a tender gesture
but the hard look
of a pilgrim
wanting to know where she was headed.

Leslie Saunders