Healing From Sexual Trauma: A Movement-Based, Empowerment Self-Defense Approach

Brenda Jones & Lynne Marie Wanamaker
This presentation and related resources are available online at www.lmwsafe.com

Because I Can

I had the privilege of delivering the sermon at my house of worship (Unitarian Universalist) once again, on Sunday, August 2, 2015. I am so lucky to have such wonderful friends to teach and inspire me.

This service started not as a gathering for worship on a warm summer Sunday, but at a kitchen table in a dark and quiet house at the end of a long winter day. The children are finally asleep. The dinner dishes have been washed. The lamplight throws warmth in small circles. And the grown-ups sit at the humble kitchen table with a cup of tea -- or a glass of whiskey, if that's a good choice for you -- and we talk about what matters.

And someone tells a story that becomes a kind of guide for your life.

What is Empowerment Self Defense?
Healing From Sexual Trauma: A Movement-Based, Empowerment Self-Defense Approach

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• Empowerment Self-Defense (ESD) is uniquely effective at reducing risk of sexual assault.

• ESD delivers benefits to survivors:
  • Prevents victimization and re-victimization
  • Facilitates social support
  • Consistent with emerging trauma interventions
  • Promotes active coping
  • May contribute to recovery from sexual violence.
Empowerment Self-Defense

- Rejects victim-blaming.
- Debunks “stranger-danger.”
- Addresses known assailant violence.
- Examines gender socialization.
- Teaches awareness, assessment & verbal skills.
- Teaches physical defense skills.
- Encourages healing and community organizing.

In the Media

*Everyday Feminism:* How to exercise our right to defend ourselves without being victim-blaming

*The Washington Post:* Actually, Miss USA was right

*The Guardian:* Bring Back Self-Defence Classes for Women

*Ms. Fit: Real World Feminist Fitness:* Defend Yourself!

*Jezebel:* A look inside the terrible manual cops use to teach rape prevention

*The Hairpin:* The Shark Has Pretty Teeth, Dear: Why I Teach Women Self-Defense
There is one person responsible for any act of interpersonal violence: The perpetrator.

Each of us can take action to increase safety.

www.lmwsafe.com
ESD & Person-in-environment perspective

**Individual**
- ESD promotes knowledge, awareness & skills acquisition

**Relationship**
- ESD counters the myth of “stranger-danger”
- ESD delivers healthy relationship and consent negotiation skills

**Community**
- ESD promotes collective action for increased safety
- ESD promotes social norms incompatible with violence perpetration

**Societal**
- ESD is explicitly feminist and addresses systems of inequality and oppression

[http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/overview/social-ecologicalmodel.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/overview/social-ecologicalmodel.html)
Evidence-based: Adolescent girls, Kenya

- Randomized control trial (RCT) compared ESD training with a control “life skills” class.
- In ESD group, \( \frac{1}{3} \) reduction in sexual assault rate; no change in control group.
- 50% of ESD group reported using skills they learned to stop assaults.


Image credit: http://nomeansnowworldwide.org/
Evidence-based: University women, Canada

- RCT compared sexual assault resistance program with access to brochures on sexual assault.
- Intervention included a positive sexuality component.
- **50% reduction in 1-year risk of completed rape** in intervention group; no change in control group.


Benefits of ESD

- Increased self-confidence/self-efficacy
- Increased perceived control
- Increased assertiveness
- Increased physical competence
- Does not restrict women’s behavior
- May reduce self-blame
- Increased disclosure


Benefits of ESD

- Influence community & social norms
- Reduces attempted assault
- Prevents sexual assault
- Increases well-being & autonomy
- Delivers benefits to survivors

Empowerment Self Defense delivers benefits to survivors.
Supporting Survivors

ESD professional certification requires a survivor-centered practice.

ESD instructors have developed a robust practice wisdom to support survivors.
Indivisible:  
Sexual violence prevention & intervention

• Sexual violence accrues disproportionately to women early in the life course.

• Rates of sexual violence suggest that we should assume survivors are present in any community setting.

• Once victimized, individuals are at elevated risk of revictimization.
Sexual violence: Prevalence & gender

• 1:5 women and 1:71 men have been raped during their lifetime.

• 1:2 women and 1:5 men have experienced other forms of sexual violence.

• Most sexual assaults against women are delivered by men they know.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
National Intimate Partner and Sexual Victimization Survey (NISVS), 2010

Infographic based on the 2010 NISVS available here.

• Rates of sexual violence against transgender people are also disproportionately high.

http://www.ovc.gov/pubs/forge/sexual_numbers.html
Life course perspective

Negative consequences of sexual violence include:

- Physical injury
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Depression
- Suicidal ideation
- Substance abuse
- Effects to the “nervous, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, genitourinary, reproductive, immune and endocrine systems.”

Nearly 80% of female victims of completed rape report their first victimization before age 25.
Survivors are always present

Because:

- Survivors are present in any community setting.
- Survivors are at elevated risk of sexual violence.

Community-level prevention must be survivor-centered.
Stress: Acute vs. chronic

**Short-term**
Stress response is adaptive and necessary for survival when mobilized in response to imminent threat.

**Long-term**
Stress response becomes maladaptive when mobilized repeatedly in response to reminders of a past emergency.

Understanding acute stress helps us to understand PTSD and other post-traumatic sequelae.
“This is not about something you think or something you figure out. This is about your body, your organism, having been reset to interpret the world as a terrifying place and yourself as being unsafe.”

Bessel van der Kolk
Challenges to treatment

“The Institute of Medicine found that the currently available scientific evidence for the treatment of PTSD does not reach the level of certainty that would be desired for such a common and serious condition.”

(van der Kolk et al., 2014)
Challenges to treatment

Percentage of therapy clients with PTSD who remain "significantly symptomatic" after treatment

- 45% Remain symptomatic
- 55% Symptoms resolved

Challenges to treatment

Language and attachment are compromised in PTSD

Reminders of traumatic experience create changes in the brain that make it harder to “communicate experience in words.”

Attachment = Trust, experience of social connection as safe and comforting.

Psychotherapy relies on verbal communication and interpersonal connection

(van der Kolk, 2006)
ESD facilitates social support

Image credit: http://defendyourself.org/
Mind-body trauma interventions

Yoga
Mindfulness
Breathing
Mind-body trauma interventions

- Interoceptive awareness
- Movement
- Intentional movement and/or body postures
- Breathing
- Meditation
- Mindfulness
- Martial arts techniques
ESD does not provide an intervention-level “dosage” of mind-body practice. The same techniques have been suggested as “somatic approaches to decreasing arousal.”

On the basis of these findings, LeDeux & Gorman (2001) recommended active coping for survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Other researchers recommend movement, including stretching, punching or kicking, to address tonic immobility arising in response to reminders of past trauma.
ESD supports survivors

- **ESD uses active teaching methods that include movement and participation.**

- Most sexual assault prevention models reviewed by the Centers for Disease Control use passive, didactic methods.

ESD may be more supportive of survivors of sexual violence because it utilizes **mind-body techniques and active coping**.
Lack of Access to ESD

Image credit: http://defendyourself.org/

George Washington University Physician’s Assistant Program
Benefits of ESD

- Empowerment
- Self Defense
- Influence community & social norms
- Reduces attempted assault
- Prevents sexual assault
- Increases well-being & autonomy
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Empowerment Self Defense
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