

## CHAPTER 10

# Empowerment Self-Defense

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Empowerment self-defense (ESD) training grew out of the radical feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which aimed to radically rework social, political, and cultural structures in order to dismantle male dominance. Young feminists, newly aware of the prevalence of rape and other forms of violence against women, turned to martial arts in their search for a means to prevent this violence. What they found, however, were hierarchical and patriarchal schools where women were often unwelcome (if not explicitly barred) and were subject to sexual harassment (Sunny Graff and Nadia Telsey, personal communications), as well as techniques that were not necessarily appropriate for the forms of violence faced by women. In response, they banded together to share their experiences and develop new strategies to counter sexual assault and domestic violence. These new strategies drew from the martial arts but incorporated techniques from street fighting and their own practical experience. Over time, they also developed verbal and emotional self-defense strategies that could be used to prevent and interrupt assault before it escalated to the point of physical confrontation. They shared their ideas and practices with others across the country, founding all-women martial arts schools, teaching self-defense classes and workshops for women, and eventually launching women's martial arts and self-defense organizations.

It is worth noting that the efforts of feminists in the 1960s and 1970s were not the first time that women turned to self-defense to reduce their risk of violence. A largely forgotten history of women's self-defense existed in early decades of the 20th century, when women trained in jiu-jitsu and shared strategies for resisting "mashers" and other forms of public harassment and, occasionally, violence in the home (Rouse, 2017; Rouse & Slutsky, 2014). Across the Atlantic, women active in the British suffrage movement also trained in jiu-jitsu in order to resist police brutality (Rouse, 2016). By 1918, self-defense had become a symbol of the empowered modern woman, claiming her right to public space. Self-defense training, especially

judo, was also visible in the 1940s. As men left to fight in World War II, self-defense training was seen as acceptable for women because of the absence of their “natural” protectors (Rouse, 2016). In the 1950s, however, self-defense training for women disappeared almost completely from public view and was virtually forgotten until the mid-1960s, when second-wave feminists began to share their experiences of assault and develop strategies for reducing violence against women.

Today, the descendants of these second-wave feminist self-defense classes are known as ESD, a distinctive approach to assault resistance education. ESD (sometimes called feminist self-defense) is not a single program. It is taught in different ways by different practitioners, and it has evolved over time so that recent courses are quite different from those of the 1970s. However, ESD classes are unified by their shared grounding in a set of root principles, which are described in detail below. ESD principles are currently institutionalized in guidelines developed by the National Women’s Martial Arts Federation (NWMAF), which certifies women’s self-defense instructors (see [nwmaf.org](http://nwmaf.org)). NWMAF has made adherence to ESD principles central to this certification.

In this chapter, I review the distinctive focus, theoretical grounding, and evidence base of ESD classes, focusing mostly on their implementation in the United States. ESD training has been frequently misunderstood, confused with martial arts training, and perceived as simply physical fighting in an attack situation. Rather, as I describe later, it is a comprehensive approach to personal safety that is grounded in the realities of violence against women, fits well with psychological and sociological theories of violence and violence prevention, and has a growing evidence base for its effectiveness. I conclude with directions for future research on empowerment self-defense.

## **WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT SELF-DEFENSE?**

Although there are many kinds of women’s self-defense classes, most are not empowerment based. What qualities define ESD classes? As noted earlier, ESD is not a single program but a distinctive approach that can be adapted to a variety of class types and formats. Some ESD classes (e.g., those offered by IMPACT Self-Defense; see “[What Is IMPACT?](#)” n.d.) include realistic mock assaults, in which students engage in full-force resistance against a heavily padded instructor. Other classes rely on full-force drills using striking pads or heavy bags, and a few classes do not include physical

practice at all. Class length can vary from a 1-hour workshop to a 10- or 15-week course and are taught on college campuses, through city police departments, martial arts studios, nonprofit organizations, or by independent instructors.

There is considerable variation in the content and structure of these classes. After reviewing multiple authors' descriptions of these classes (Hollander, 2015, 2016; National Women's Martial Arts Federation, n.d.; Taylor & Wanamaker, 2014; Telsey, 2001, 2006; Thompson, 2014; Wanamaker, 2015; Wanamaker & Schorn, 2016), I suggest that ESD classes are distinguished by the seven qualities discussed in the following sections.

### **Evidence Based**

ESD classes are grounded in evidence about the kinds of assaults women suffer and the kinds of responses that are most likely to deter or interrupt these assaults. Initially, this evidence base was derived from the shared experiences of the women who were teaching and taking these classes. More recently, ESD curricula have also been influenced by sociological, psychological, and epidemiological research on assault. For example, once it became clear that most women are assaulted by men they know, rather than strangers, ESD classes shifted their focus to address the distinctive challenges of these situations, such as women's reluctance to harm those they are close to (Nurius & Norris, 1996). Similarly, ESD classes pay particular attention to how women can best defend themselves on the ground, because many assaults on women involve attempts to force the target into a lying position. ESD classes are also responsive to evidence about the kinds of strategies that are most effective in deterring assault. As considerable research has demonstrated that assertive verbal responses (e.g., yelling) and forceful physical responses (e.g., kicking, striking, or running away) are far more likely to end assaults than passive responses such as pleading or crying (Clay-Warner, 2002; Tark & Kleck, 2004, 2014; Ullman, 1997, 2007), ESD classes focus on these assertive responses. Christina Dardis and her colleagues provide an overview of the evidence base for women's resistance tactics in a chapter in this volume.

### **Comprehensive**

ESD classes offer a comprehensive "toolbox" of strategies to their students in two different ways. First, they are comprehensive in terms of the situations they address. Unlike some self-defense classes that focus only on rape, or even more narrowly on stranger rape (as do many classes that do not

ground themselves in evidence on how women are assaulted), ESD classes address a continuum of assaults that range from the merely irritating to the life-threatening. ESD classes expose the relationships between these different types of assault: For example, they are all related to gender inequality and are centrally about the exercise of power. In recent years, ESD classes have prioritized assaults that happen at the hands of acquaintances and intimates, though they still address assaults by strangers.

Second, ESD classes are comprehensive in the skills they offer to women. Although they teach physical self-defense skills (e.g., kicks, strikes, and defenses against grabs and pins), they focus a great deal of attention on nonphysical skills, such as verbal assertiveness, boundary setting, and deescalation. Even more important, they teach women how to identify and interrupt threatened violence *before* physical confrontations even begin, by addressing awareness of one's environment, signs of aggression in others, and assailant tactics, and by teaching assertiveness, boundary-setting, and healthy relationship skills. ESD classes are thus as much about preventing violence from happening in the first place as they are about responding to it when it occurs. Crucially, ESD classes do not prescribe particular responses to threat but provide a range of options, empowering women to choose those that work best for them and the situations in which they find themselves. If a woman does not feel, for example, that physical resistance is possible for her because of her physical abilities or life circumstances, she would still be able to access a range of other skills and strategies to increase her safety.

### **Locate Responsibility in Perpetrators**

A key tenet of ESD classes is that the responsibility for assault lies with perpetrators of violence, not targets (Hollander, 2016; Telsey, 2006; Thompson, 2014; Wanamaker, 2015). The NWMAF states this explicitly in their instructor certification requirements: "Women do not ask for, cause, invite, or deserve to be assaulted. Women and men sometimes exercise poor judgment about safety behavior, but that does not make them responsible for the attack. Attackers are responsible for their attacks and their use of violence to overpower, control, and abuse another human being" (National Women's Martial Arts Federation, n.d.). Although critics of self-defense training often charge that advocating self-defense implies that victims are responsible for preventing assault, ESD teachers explicitly and repeatedly attribute responsibility and blame to perpetrators. For example, at the very beginning of Senn's Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge Ask (EAAA) program (Senn et al., 2015) facilitators state:

*Although it is important to learn how to assess whether a situation is risky for sexual assault and how to defend yourself in such a situation, I want to remind you that you are never responsible for being sexually assaulted; it is never your fault. If a woman is sexually assaulted, it has nothing to do with her, and everything to do with her attacker. Just like when you get sick—it is not your fault. Whether you get sick or not is a reflection of different environmental circumstances and the strength of the virus.*

*Senn et al. (2015, EAAA Unit 1, pp. 3–4).*

This explicit refusal to blame victims is repeated multiple times throughout ESD courses.

### **Transform Understandings of Women’s Bodies**

ESD classes teach simple, easy-to-learn physical techniques that pit the strong points of women’s bodies against the vulnerable points of an assailant’s body. Challenging the assumptions that men are inherently stronger than women and that their violence cannot be stopped, ESD classes point out the truth that all bodies, no matter how large or muscular, have weak points. Eyeballs, for example, cannot be strengthened by exercise, and so a defender can use her fingers or hands against an assailant’s eyes to resist an assault. Similarly, everyone needs to breathe, and so targeting an assailant’s airway can be an effective means of resistance. ESD classes point out that for most women, lower body strength surpasses upper body strength and so focus on the use of feet and legs and the additional power gained by using one’s hips to drive an upper body strike.

By teaching and encouraging women to practice these techniques, ESD classes dismantle deeply ingrained ideas about gendered bodies (Hollander, 2001; McCaughey, 1997; Thompson, 2014). Even if women enter a class believing there is little they can do to stop a determined attacker, they leave with a much better sense of their own power and a recognition that women’s bodies are not as vulnerable—nor are men’s bodies as invulnerable—as they had been led to believe. When they have watched classmates they perceive to be small or weak execute powerful verbal and physical moves, and when they have felt the effects of their own strikes on heavy bags or padded assailants, it is difficult for them to continue to believe the fiction that women are inevitably weak. Participants come to have new understandings of their own and others’ bodies (Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997), a transformation that changes their experience of the world and themselves.

This transformation also changes the way their bodies engage with gender inequality. As Cahill (2009, p. 143) writes, women are taught to move

and to experience their bodies in ways that “express the truths and values of a rape culture” (see also [Marcus, 1992](#); [McCaughey, 1997](#); [Young, 1990](#)). When they take up as little space as possible (e.g., through weight control or simply minimizing the spread and movement of their bodies in everyday interaction), when they “engage with their bodies as hostile entities that must be controlled, managed, and surveilled” (p. 368). When they move in ways that emphasize delicacy rather than agency and strength ([Young, 1990](#)), they participate in the construction of female bodies as “pre-victims, as rapeable, as needing to constantly manage the threat of sexual violence” (p. 368). ESD classes challenge this conception of the female body and encourage women to use their bodies in powerful, agentic ways, rather than viewing them as decorative objects that put them at risk. Thus ESD classes “transform the feminine body from an enemy into an ally” ([Cahill, 2009, p. 371](#)).

### **Situate Violence in a Social Context**

This transformation is supported by the explicit location of violence against women in a social, rather than individual or psychological, context ([Thompson, 2014](#)). As [Cahill \(2009, p. 370\)](#) writes, ESD classes “present the threat of rape as a social and political expression of an unjust sexual hierarchy,” rather than as the inevitable result of women’s innate vulnerability, their risky choices, or the psychopathology of individual assailants. Violence, ESD classes suggest, is socially produced, fostered by gender ideologies that require dominance, toughness, and ever-ready sexual desire from men and compliance, other-centeredness, and delicacy from women ([Gavey, 2005](#); [Hollander, 2001](#); [McCaughey, 1997](#); [Phillips, 2000](#)). Socialization into these divergent identities, and the constant policing of behavior that strays from them ([Hollander, 2013](#)), encourages men to become perpetrators and women to become victims. ESD classes build from these insights to address the resulting psychological barriers to women’s resistance ([Nurius & Norris, 1996](#); [Rozee & Koss, 2001](#)), helping women to recognize and acknowledge threats and act on them for their own safety ([Rozee & Koss, 2001](#); [Senn et al., 2015](#)). ESD classes also frequently discuss the intersecting identities and structural locations that foster inequalities in women’s experiences, constraints, and abilities to resist violence ([National Women’s Martial Arts Federation, n.d.](#); [Thompson, 2014](#)). As a result of this sociological framing, women often develop a critical consciousness about gender inequality and the intersectionality of oppressions after taking an ESD class ([Hollander, 2004](#)); ESD is a gender-transformative intervention ([Casey, Carlson, Two Bulls, & Yager, 2016](#); [Gupta, 2000](#)).

## Social Change Goals

Growing out of their understanding of assault as a social rather than individual issue, ESD classes aim to change not simply individual women but the society in which they live. One way this happens is through the fostering of a supportive environment of women. In many classes, women encourage and cheer for each other as they practice physical techniques and support each other emotionally as they discuss issues and experiences of violence. ESD classes point out the commonalities in women's experiences of violence and suggest that these commonalities can also be the source of change. ESD classes also bring attention to the social functions and consequences of violence. As [Telsey \(1981\)](#) states,

*Classes with a feminist consciousness impart the idea that self-defense is not solely an individual matter. We teach that it isn't enough for a woman to successfully avoid an attack, she ... has a responsibility to alert other women to the problem. We cannot turn our backs on women who are being abused and we cannot ignore women who are being punished for resistance ... It is crucial always to remember that none of us will be free from violence until all of us are free.*

[Telsey \(1981, p. 192\)](#)

It is worth noting the parallel here to bystander intervention programs, which aim to empower bystanders to intervene in situations of threatened or actual violence. ESD training both incorporates the idea of bystander intervention and applies it to oneself: Women are encouraged not only to be an active bystander for others but to, in effect, be their *own* bystander. Because perpetrators often seek to isolate their victims, acting as one's own bystander may be more effective than relying on others to intervene ([McCaughey & Cermele, 2015](#)).

ESD classes also contribute to social change by transforming gendered ideologies, identities, and practices. As I have argued elsewhere ([Hollander, 2013](#)), although these changes occur in individual women, they do not remain personal; they affect social interactions with others, and those others may then change their own behavior. A woman who comes to believe in her own right to self-determination, for example, may start to behave more assertively in her interactions with her friends, families, and coworkers, stating her opinions and desires more explicitly and expecting that others will respond. These new behaviors can shift the dynamics of interaction, as others attempt to meet or, in some cases, resist these new expectations. These others may then, in turn, behave differently with others. These ripple effects may spread well beyond the individuals enrolled in a particular class, and when cumulated, they may affect larger communities as well. As Cahill writes, "Individual bodies are political expressions ... and intervening in their habits

and way of being is no less a political act than lobbying for the reform of laws regarding rape ... To change social perceptions of what women's bodies are, and what they can do, is to change political discourse" (Cahill, 2009, p. 378).

### **Aim to Empower Rather Than Restrict Women**

Finally, ESD classes, as their name suggests, aim to empower rather than restrict women. Non-ESD classes often tell women what they should or should not do to increase their safety, adding to the already long list of safety strategies they are expected to follow. Rape Aggression Defense (R.A.D) classes, for example, which are currently the most frequently taught self-defense classes on college campuses, instruct women to draw their shades, trim all bushes to 6 in. below window ledges, keep at least a quarter tank of gas in their cars at all time, and walk in the direction of traffic flow in parking lots, among many other risk reduction tips (*The R.A.D. Systems of Self-Defense, Inc., 2014*). These detailed instructions add to the burden of safety that women already bear (Stanko, 1997) and do nothing to protect them from violence perpetrated by acquaintances or intimates. Most ESD classes, in contrast, deliberately do not suggest particular restrictions on women's lives. They present empirically based information on risks and strategies and empower women to make informed decisions about their own safety based on that information, their own situations, and their own desires. In this way, they treat women as full adults, capable of managing their own decisions and choices, not as children who must be protected by those who are stronger and wiser. If, for example, a woman chooses to walk alone at night, or if she chooses not to do so, that is her choice to make, and her choice is supported but not required of any other woman.

Even more fundamentally, ESD classes empower women by infusing their curricula with the belief that the students who take their classes (1) are worth defending and (2) have the right to defend themselves. These ideas may seem self-evident, but for many students they are shockingly novel. For women who have been trained to consider others' needs and desires as more important than their own (Phillips, 2000), prioritizing their own safety can feel revolutionary. ESD classes also honor survivors of assault, integrating awareness of their experiences into their pedagogy and affirming that regardless of how they responded to the assault, they did the best they could with the information they had at the time and successfully survived the assault. This too can be a profound reframing of women's experiences in a culture where victims are often blamed for provoking an assault and/or for the choices they made in responding to it.

The core of empowerment-based self-defense classes, then, is these seven elements: They are evidence-based, comprehensive, hold perpetrators responsible, transform understandings of women's bodies, place violence in a social context, advocate social change goals, and empower rather than restrict women's lives. Because it is not a set program, ESD classes are continually evolving. For example, recent years have seen efforts to include trans women and non-gender binary people, the development of modifications for people with disabilities, and the incorporation of new information on the psychology and physiology of trauma. The core elements of these classes, however, remain consistent. These elements distinguish ESD from other self-defense approaches, as summarized in [Table 10.1](#).

For example, R.A.D. classes focus mainly on physical defense against stranger assailants and so would not be considered ESD. Similarly, most traditional martial arts classes do not include verbal assertiveness training or place violence in a social context and so are not ESD. In contrast, Nadia Telsey's Self-Defense from the Inside Out curriculum taught at the University of Oregon, which I have previously evaluated ([Hollander, 2004, 2009, 2014](#)), fits the above ESD criteria, as does Lee Paiva's No Means No Worldwide curriculum ([Sarnquist et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2013](#)). To be clear, not all non-ESD classes embody all of the qualities in the right-hand column, and many fit some (but not all) of the criteria in the left column. For example, Charlene Senn's EAAA class ([Senn et al., 2015](#)) fits most of the criteria in the left-hand column, though it focuses mainly on sexual assault, places less emphasis on social change, and also has additional features

**Table 10.1** Core elements of ESD classes

<b>ESD classes</b>	<b>Non-ESD self-defense classes</b>
Evidence based	Reaffirm stereotypes and inaccurate information about assault
Comprehensive self-defense toolbox for the full continuum of assault	Limited techniques (e.g., physical only, or focus on stranger-danger)
Explicitly hold perpetrators responsible for violence	Imply victim blame
Transform understandings of women's bodies	Do not challenge the myth of women's vulnerability
Locate violence in a social context	Individualize the causes of and/or solutions to violence
Social change goals	Individually focused
Empower women	Frighten or restrict women

(in particular, an emancipatory sexuality education curriculum) that distinguish it from most other ESD classes. However, all ESD classes engage the qualities in the left-hand column; without these core elements, a class cannot be considered an example of ESD.

One of the challenges for ESD programs is the difficulty of signaling their distinctiveness from these other types of self-defense training. Calling a class “self-defense” tends to suggest that it teaches only physical resistance skills that would be used in a face-to-face confrontation, most likely with a stranger, and makes invisible the many other elements of ESD training, such as deescalation, verbal self-defense, boundary setting, and empowerment, that are useful not only in confrontations themselves but in deterring and avoiding such situations in the first place, as well as in everyday interactions (Hollander, 2016). On the other hand, removing the term “self-defense” from the title of these classes might make them invisible to women seeking such training. The current compromise is the term “empowerment self-defense,” yet this is an imperfect solution to the problem.

## THEORETICAL BASES OF ESD

ESD has its roots in the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Radical feminists identified male dominance as the main source of gender inequality and oppression (see Bevacqua, 2000; Echols, 1989). Violence against women—both physical violence itself and the fear of violence that prevents women from living freely (Brownmiller, 1975; Sheffield, 1987)—came to be seen as a central means by which women are oppressed. Through participation in consciousness-raising groups, women involved in this movement came to understand the pervasiveness of violence. Sexual violence, they concluded, is usually not the act of a mentally ill or sex-crazed stranger, as was widely assumed. Rather, it is a commonplace experience in women’s everyday lives and at the hands of ordinary men (Brownmiller, 1975; see also Griffin, 1971). Men who commit rape, they argued, are not qualitatively different from other men; the culture implicitly and explicitly encourages men’s violence against women by rewarding dominance and sexual aggression.

Radical feminists made connections between the brutal stranger rapes that were the stuff of sensationalized newspaper reports and the everyday “little rapes” (Medea & Thompson, 1974) that occur when women are harassed on the street, coerced into sex by a date or partner, or targeted by an employer’s persistent sexual advances. All, they argued, are expressions of

male power and hostility toward women, not sexual desire (Brownmiller, 1975; Griffin, 1971; Mehrhof & Kearon, 1971). And if rape is about violence, not sex, then women are not to blame for inviting or provoking rape through their dress, behavior, or attractiveness. This analysis framed rape as “a political problem that functions to keep women subordinate to men, not a personal problem for which individual women should feel shame or guilt” (Bevacqua, 2000, p. 31). Gendered socialization and stereotypes foster men’s dominance and women’s subordination and far outweigh any “natural” differences in size and strength. As summarized by Brownmiller:

*The psychologic edge men hold in a situation characterized by sexual aggression is far more critical to the final outcome than their larger size and heavier weight. They know they know how to fight, for they have been trained and encouraged to use their bodies aggressively and competitively since early childhood. Young girls, on the other hand, are taught to disdain physical combat, healthy sports competition, and winning, because such activities dangerously threaten the conventional societal view of what is appropriate, lady-like, feminine behavior . . . We have been trained to cry, to wheedle, to plead, to look for a male protector, but we have never been trained to fight and win.*

**Brownmiller (1975, pp. 451, 452)**

In this context, self-defense became a way that women could both resist sexual assault and challenge male dominance in society. Not only might self-defense stop an individual assault, but “through the practice of self-defense, women might reverse or resist their socialized passivity and dependency on men, which contribute to the problem of rape” (Bevacqua, 2000, p. 67). Through workshops and classes, antirape organizations, magazine articles, and books, women shared physical and verbal self-defense techniques that could both stop an assault and resist male dominance.

Radical feminism has, of course, been challenged over the years, and the theoretical grounding of ESD training has evolved as well. Some early radical feminist theorizing identified innate bodily differences between women and men as the source of rape and therefore gender inequality, leading critics to dismiss radical feminism as essentialist. Modern self-defense advocates, however, while still seeing the body as a major source of women’s inequality, understand the body to be socially constructed; otherwise, self-defense training could never be effective in resisting violence. More recently, radical feminism has been challenged by the emergence of trans and gender nonconforming activists who have demanded acceptance as women. Although some radical feminists have resisted this challenge (e.g., Jeffreys, 2014; Raymond, 1979), ESD practitioners have generally embraced this new move in gender identity and politics.

Second-wave feminism was also roundly criticized for its white dominance and myopia about the different challenges facing women of color, and self-defense practitioners were not immune from these challenges (although some early theorizing did address race; see, e.g., [Griffin, 1971](#)). Physical self-defense, for example, can be more risky for women of color and women in other marginalized groups, as they are more likely to be blamed and criminalized when they use physical resistance ([Kaba, 2012](#); [Law, 2012](#))—witness, for example, the recent cases of Marisa Alexander or the New Jersey Four ([Eastman, 2015](#); [McClain, 2015](#)). Feminist self-defense advocates were quick to address issues of intersectionality ([Telsey, 1981](#)), acknowledging the ways that rape laws and the cultural myth of the Black rapist were used as tools of racism ([Davis, 1981](#)). The Center for Anti-Violence Education, for example, has long addressed violence against women of color and women with disabilities ([Center for Anti-Violence Education, n.d.](#)). Modern ESD advocates acknowledge the limitations of self-defense for women of color and other marginalized groups, and point to the concept of the self-defense toolbox: Not all tools are equally available to all women, but that does not mean that the toolbox should be discarded ([Hollander, 2016](#)).

Because ESD emerged out of grassroots feminist activism, it is not as explicitly grounded in scholarly theory as other antiviolence interventions developed by academic researchers (e.g., Senn's EAAA program ([Senn et al., 2015](#)) or Gidycz et al.'s Ohio University Sexual Assault Risk Reduction Program ([Gidycz et al., 2001](#); [Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2006](#))). However, ESD practice is consistent with most of the major theoretical perspectives that form the basis for these interventions, as well as with major sociological theories of gender. For example, *social learning theory* ([Bandura, 1977](#)) and later *social cognitive theory* ([Bandura, 1986](#)) propose that learning is social: People learn by observing other people's behavior, as well as the consequences of that behavior. ESD programs are highly interactive and allow students to observe the behavior of others, both instructors and students, and practice modeling their own actions on these observations. Further, many programs are explicit that the best models for women students are other women, especially when the behaviors being modeled are outside of normative gender expectations, and insist on female instructors for that reason (e.g., "[What Is IMPACT?](#)" n.d.).

The *theory of planned behavior* ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) argues that behavior is shaped by beliefs, including beliefs about others' expectations and judgments, the likely consequences of the behavior, the degree of control one has over the

behavior, and one's intentions to engage in the behavior. ESD programs target all of these beliefs. Students learn information about the effectiveness of self-defense techniques and come to feel that they have more control over the outcome of an assault situation. They develop new expectations for their own and others' behavior and develop new, concrete, and well-practiced ideas about how to respond to an assault.

Nurius and Norris' (1996) model of *cognitive appraisals* is also relevant to ESD training. According to this approach, women's responses to a possible assault situation are preconditioned on two types of appraisals: first, an assessment of the relevance and threat level of a situation, and second, an assessment of their own resources, options, and likely outcomes. Rozee and Koss's (2001) "Assess, Acknowledge, Act" (AAA) model is based on this conceptualization and suggests that effective responses to an assault require that women *assess* the situation and then *acknowledge* to themselves its reality as potentially dangerous before *acting*. ESD courses strengthen women's responses at each stage: They transmit information on the scope of sexual assault, the characteristics of risky situations and people, and the ploys and strategies used by perpetrators, as well as training women in the concrete strategies they can use to respond to an assault situation at any stage. ESD classes also help women address the *psychological barriers* that can make resistance difficult for women. Because of their attention to the ways that gender socialization makes self-defense difficult for women (Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996), these classes address women's fears about embarrassing themselves or others or offending the perpetrator.

ESD classes also challenge gender socialization by "redoing" expectations about how women and men should "do gender" (Fenstermaker & West, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and changing the perceived consequences of doing gender differently (Hollander, 2013). They address multiple levels of the *ecological model* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004; Heise, 1998) that guides much current prevention work by addressing individual behavior, interaction patterns, and social norms (Taylor & Wanamaker, 2015).

## EFFECTIVENESS

Very few self-defense classes have been systematically evaluated. However, a small but growing literature assesses the effectiveness of ESD training for preventing violence and empowering women. For example, my own research (Hollander, 2004, 2013, 2014) has assessed the consequences of

ESD training for college women, both for reducing sexual assault and for changing students' perceptions and lives. In a quasi-experimental study, I compared 117 students enrolled in a 30+-hour, university-based ESD class (Nadia Telsey's Self-Defense from the Inside Out) with 169 similar students enrolled in other classes at the same university. In addition to the 30 hours of instructional time, the class also included 15 hours of small group discussions, led by peer facilitators, for a total of 45 hours. Because these discussions did not have a set curriculum, these hours are not included in the total class time. A year later, 30.6% of the comparison group, but only 12% of the ESD intervention group, reported any form of sexual assault (unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, or completed rape). Importantly, the self-defense students also reported proportionately fewer attempted rapes than those in the comparison group. In other words, they were able to prevent assaults from beginning, as well as resisting assaults already in progress (Hollander, 2014). In addition, the self-defense students, but not those in the comparison group, reported significantly higher rates of self-defense self-efficacy at follow-up, as well as increases in their projected effectiveness in defending themselves against both strangers and acquaintances (Hollander, 2014) and decreases in fear (Hollander, 2004). Participants reported that the skills they learned in the class had helped them cope more effectively with interactions with strangers, friends, acquaintances, and intimate partners, in situations that were potentially risky and those that were simply uncomfortable (2004). They also reported statistically significant changes in their perceptions of their own physical competence and strength (2004).

Two recent studies have assessed the effectiveness of an ESD curriculum implemented by No Means No Worldwide in Nairobi, Kenya. This curriculum is rooted in the US-based ESD approach (Lee Paiva, personal communication), adapted for the Kenyan context. The 6-week course includes awareness, verbal resistance strategies, boundary setting, and physical resistance strategies. In the first study (Sinclair et al., 2013), 522 girls (aged 14–21, with a mean age of 15) attending eight high schools in an extremely impoverished area of Nairobi completed the 12-hour training and four, 2-hour refresher courses over the 10-month follow-up period. At follow-up, the incidence of rape among these girls had decreased from 24.6% in the year before the intervention to 9.2% between the intervention and the 10-month follow-up assessment (a 62.6% decrease), whereas the rate among the control group of girls in a neighboring area, who received a 1-hour standard-of-care life skills class, did not change. More than half of the girls who had completed the ESD class reported that they had used

the techniques they learned in the class to stop a sexual assault during that follow-up year; in most cases, verbal skills were sufficient to halt the assault. They also reported themselves to be significantly more likely to disclose a future assault, which increases the chances of receiving support and services and potentially improving mental and physical health outcomes. The authors note that the cost of the ESD intervention was about \$1.75 USD per student, compared with the approximately \$86 cost of medical services for rape survivors.

The second study (Sarnquist et al., 2014) replicated these results with a larger sample. The same curriculum (with three instead of four 2-hour refreshers) was administered to 1978 adolescents in four Nairobi neighborhoods. The annual rate of rape among those participants decreased from 17.9 to 11.1 per 100 persons between the year before and the 10.5 months after the intervention; there were no significant changes in the rate of assault reported by the control group. Again, the majority of participants reported using the skills they had learned to stop an assault, and willingness to disclose an assault increased. Nearly 65% of participants also reported that they had used the skills to stop sexual harassment (unwanted comments or sexual touching), indicating that the curriculum was effective in reducing a range of unwanted behaviors.

Although not identified as an ESD program, the EAAA curriculum developed by Charlene Senn and her colleagues (Senn et al., 2015; Senn, Gee, & Thake, 2011) teaches many of the same principles and tools as ESD classes and so is worth including in an assessment of ESD programs. The curriculum was developed to embody the AAA approach (Roze & Koss, 2001) and was further enhanced with an emancipatory sexuality education curriculum. The program includes four 3-hour units that focus on (1) assessing risk and developing strategies to reduce it; (2) acknowledging risky situations, overcoming emotional barriers to resistance, and practicing verbal resistance; (3) developing physical resistance skills; and (4) increasing knowledge about sexuality, clarifying one's own sexual values and desires, and developing effective sexual communication skills. In a randomized controlled trial with 893 first-year university students (Senn et al., 2015), women who completed the program reported much lower risks of completed rape (5.2% vs 9.8% for a control group), attempted rape (3.4% vs 9.3%), attempted sexual coercion (14.5% vs 22.6%), and nonconsensual sexual contact (25.8% vs 39.1%) at the 1-year follow-up. The program was equally effective for women who had and had not been sexually assaulted in the past. In an earlier randomized experiment

with 244 first-year undergraduate women, [Senn et al. \(2011\)](#) found that students who completed the program reported improved risk assessment, self-defense self-efficacy, self-defense knowledge, and intentions to use this knowledge in hypothetical risky situations.

There have also been evaluations of several programs that are less clearly empowerment based—either programs that are feminist in outlook but focus primarily on physical self-defense or programs whose published evaluations do not present sufficient information about the curriculum to clearly identify them as ESD. For example, [Weitlauf, Cervone, Smith, and Wright \(2001\)](#) and [Weitlauf, Smith, and Cervone \(2000\)](#) developed a 15-hour university-based curriculum that included both verbal and physical resistance training. The “enhanced” condition in the 2001 article included group discussions and writing assignments focused on the relevance of the training to their own lives, but other central elements of ESD training (e.g., holding perpetrators responsible or situating violence in a social context) are not evident in the brief published descriptions of the intervention, and the curriculum appears to be focused on physical resistance to attacks by strangers. In the 2000 article, this training produced very large effects on participants’ self-defense self-efficacy and smaller but still significant effects on physical and global self-efficacy, compared with women in a wait-list control condition. Participants in the program also reported increased assertiveness and decreased hostility and aggression. All changes except the increase in assertiveness were maintained at a 6-month follow-up. In the 2001 article, participants who received the training reported similar increases in self-defense self-efficacy, as well as increased self-efficacy in a variety of other domains such as sports competencies, general coping skills, and interpersonal assertiveness. These evaluations did not report whether the program was associated with decreases in rates of sexual violence among the participants.

Similarly, [Ozer and Bandura’s \(1990\)](#) study of a Model Mugging class seems focused on stranger assaults, though their description also mentions instruction in assertiveness, confident body language, and yelling. However, there is no explicit discussion of acquaintance assault, assignment of responsibility to perpetrators, or social causes of violence. At the 6-month follow-up, participants reported significant increases in self-defense self-efficacy and significant decreases in fear and anxiety. They also reported greater participation in recreational and social activities and were judged by raters to have high proficiency in the use of the self-defense skills they had learned in the class.

[David, Simpson, and Cotton \(2006\)](#) developed a 36-hour curriculum for survivors of sexual assault that includes “assertiveness, boundary setting,

prevention skills, and physical techniques designed to resist assault,” as well as information about assault and debriefing with trained psychologists. These qualities are consonant with ESD principles, but the very brief description in the published report does not specify whether the class fits the other elements of ESD. The authors found that female veterans who completed this curriculum reported significant increases in self-efficacy and significant decreases in depression, hyperarousal, and behavioral avoidance. They were also better able to identify risky situations and felt less fearful and more self-confident. These findings are all consistent with the results of other research on ESD classes.

McDaniel (1993) reports the outcomes of a 4-week self-defense course that focused on “issues related to self-defense, such as body language, mental preparedness, obstacles women face in using self-defense techniques, and society’s attitudes toward women as well as physical techniques (punches, kicks, blocks, and release) and verbal skills” (p. 42). She found that at follow-up, women who took the class reported significantly lower levels of fear for eight different crimes and significantly increased confidence that they could successfully defend themselves.

Finally, Gidycz and her colleagues (Gidycz et al., 2006, 2015; Orchowski, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008) report the development of a “risk-reduction” program for college women that, in its recent iterations, includes a self-defense component. This program includes both physical and verbal self-defense, is explicitly antivictim blaming, and aims to empower women, though other elements of ESD (especially the social change goals) are less clearly included. Three evaluations of this program have produced mixed results. In the first (Gidycz et al., 2006), participants completed a 7-hour program (including a 2.5-hour self-defense session) that was “aimed to empower women to respond more assertively both physically and verbally to a wide range of threatening situations” (p. 175). Participants who received the program were more likely than a control group to say they would use assertive resistance (and indeed, many participants reported having used assertive resistance on the follow-up survey). They also had more accurate knowledge of sexual assault and were more likely to say they would report a sexual assault in the future. However, there were no straightforward effects of the program on victimization, self-efficacy, or sexual communication. A second evaluation of a revised protocol with increased focus on psychological barriers to resistance and behavioral intentions (Orchowski et al., 2008) found a significantly reduced rate of rape (but not of other types of victimization) among the program participants at the 2-month follow-up. However, these effects were not maintained at 4 months. There were indications, however, that

there may have been a decrease in repeat victimization among participants. They also report significant improvements in self-defense self-efficacy, assertive sexual communication, and use of self-protection strategies. Finally, a 2015 article reported results from the same program, and there were no differences in rates of victimization for program and control groups. Findings did suggest, however, that program group women reported increased relational sexual assertiveness over a 7-month follow-up and behavioral intentions for self-protection over 4- and 7-month follow-ups, compared with control group women, but no consistent effects on self-efficacy were found. Program participants also reported increased likelihood of using several resistance strategies at both 4 and 7 months compared with the control group, including paying attention to their intuition, yelling, and running to evade an attacker. Finally, for women who were victimized during the follow-up periods, program group women were more likely to utilize active resistance against an attacker at the 4- and 7-month follow-up and reported increased perpetrator blame and decreased self-blame compared with those women in the control group.

Overall, the evaluations of these programs have found very promising results for reducing sexual assault and increasing women's confidence and freedom. Four courses consistent with the ESD criteria have been assessed for their effects on victimization: Self-Defense from the Inside Out (Hollander, 2004, 2014), No Means No Worldwide (Sarnquist et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2013), EAAA (Senn et al., 2015, 2017), and the Ohio University Sexual Assault Risk Reduction Program (Gidycz et al., 2006, 2015; Orchowski et al., 2008). Three of the four have shown dramatic decreases in victimization for program participants, while the fourth has shown mixed but still promising effects. Evaluations of these four programs, as well as others whose published descriptions are consistent with ESD principles, have also reported significant increases in self-defense self-efficacy among program participants. Although these studies have not assessed a consistent set of outcomes, they have collectively demonstrated significant increases in self-defense knowledge, behavioral intentions to use resistance strategies, projected effectiveness, improved self-perceptions, willingness to disclose a future assault, physical and global self-efficacy, assertiveness, self-defense skill proficiency, and participation in recreational and social activities, while decreasing fear, anxiety, depression, and self-blame. Taken together, these evaluations suggest that ESD training both reduces women's risk of victimization and has far-reaching positive consequences for women's well-being and empowerment.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON ESD: WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?**

Although research to date on ESD programs is both consistent and promising, it is still in its early stages. Additional research is needed to confirm the effectiveness of ESD programs and to assess their relative effectiveness compared with other self-defense approaches (e.g., traditional martial arts classes or the R.A.D. classes that are popular on college campuses). Despite the commonalities I have described earlier, there are still substantial differences among ESD classes, and we do not yet know which configuration of topics and approaches are most effective. For example, are classes more effective when they incorporate padded attacker drills, group discussion among students, or attention to sexual communication? We also do not know what the ideal “dose” of an ESD class is and whether it would be possible to produce significant results with a smaller outlay of resources and time than some of the longer classes that have been evaluated (e.g., the 30-hour class evaluated in [Hollander, 2014](#)). Senn’s EAAA program produced similar reductions in subsequent victimization with a 12-hour course, but the studies were methodologically quite different, and a systematic comparative study is needed to understand the similarities and differences between these two programs. Evaluations would also be strengthened by the development of a broader set of outcome measures. Past studies have not systematically assessed some of the most central elements of ESD programs, such as women’s use of verbal assertiveness skills, changes in body language, or boundary setting in their everyday lives following class participation.

ESD classes are also highly complex, incorporating many different components (physical training, verbal training, assertiveness training, risk reduction techniques, deescalation strategies, etc.), and we do not yet know which components are most important (or whether they are all necessary) for the various outcomes described earlier. We also have no research on the mechanisms for these changes. How do ESD classes produce these results? Are they due to the rehearsal of different reactions to threatened assault, to increases in women’s precautionary behavior, to shifts in women’s understandings of gender and gendered practices, or to their better understanding of the barriers to effective resistance? All of these are plausible explanations, yet we have no way of assessing which explanation (or combination of explanations) is correct. And the answers may vary for different women: Perhaps, for example, assault survivors are affected through different mechanisms than women who have never been targeted. We also need information about effectiveness for different audiences and in different

situations. Most studies have been conducted with college students: Does ESD training work equally well for women outside of college settings, older women, or less privileged women? Does it work equally well for women who survived different types of past sexual assault? Is it similarly effective for assaults by strangers and acquaintances? Does it work in situations of intimate partner violence? Is there an optimal time for women or girls to learn self-defense to reduce their lifetime risk of sexual assault? We also have no information yet about how ESD classes work over the long term. The maximum follow-up periods to date have been 1–2 years (Hollander, 2014; Senn et al., 2015, 2017); what happens at 5 years or at 10 years?

Clearly, we have more questions yet to answer. But one conclusion is evident now: ESD classes are effective in preventing violence, at least in adolescent and college populations. Indeed, they are the *only* intervention that has so far demonstrated sizable reductions in women's risk of violence. For that reason, they should be an important part of prevention strategies aimed at reducing sexual assault.

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