

Northwest Kenpo Karate

Advanced Kenpo Training System

TRAUMA AND MARTIAL ARTS: BREAKING FREE

Black Belt Thesis

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would be remiss to forego an opportunity to thank the influential people whom have supported me in my journey to becoming both a black belt in American Kenpo Karate and a Licensed Mental Health Counselor.

Mr. Chris Panting, former owner of Northwest Kenpo Karate in Spokane, WA. When I curiously entered his school in 1998, I was immediately hooked and never looked back. After explaining the System and school to me, he said, "I'm not the cheapest guy in town, but I'm worth every penny." Not only was his instruction and guidance in Kenpo worth every penny, his friendship, mentorship, and ongoing support were worth every moment spent in his company. Rest in peace, Sir. You will always have my respect and appreciation.

M parents, Ray Valentine (Robin Valentine) and Della Adams (Mike Adams). My parents have loved and encouraged me my entire life and continue to be a soft place to land when stress comes in its waves. I am grateful for their unconditional love. My step-parents are equally as loving and encouraging, and have been immensely positive examples in my life.

Mr. Kurt Becker, current owner of Northwest Kenpo Karate and my instructor from 2021-present. His patience, knowledge, and experience helped me rebuild my confidence in Kenpo when I returned after a 15-year hiatus. A great teacher knows how to teach in a tailored fashion. Mr. Becker has an awareness for how I learn best and brings out the best in me as a martial artist. Whenever I hit a mental block in my training, he is quick to say, "Don't think about it. Just do it." I am honored to be his student and to train under him. I appreciate and respect you, Sir!

My husband and five children. The family my husband and I have created is one of my greatest accomplishments and sources of pride. I am further blessed by having my children in Kenpo with me. Witnessing growth in each of my children through Kenpo brings me immense joy! It is my hope that they will discover their own strengths and worth, independent of the beauty their momma sees in each of them.

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Numerous training partners, instructors, and school owners with whom I have been blessed to train. This includes early Saturday morning training sessions with my extended Kenpo family at Creekside Kenpo Karate. It takes a village and I am infinitely grateful for them.

Dr. David Hart, an instructor-turned-mentor in the Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at Capella University. At 39 years old, I decided to return to school to obtain a Master's degree and resurrect my dream of becoming a Mental Health Counselor. Not only was Dr. Hart supportive from the very beginning, he strongly encouraged me to pursue a Doctoral degree in the field of Counselor Education and Supervision. Today, I am a student in the Counselor Education and Supervision Doctoral program at Capella University and continue to receive guidance and support from him.

Finally, my own counselor, Yvonne. Behind every good counselor is a great counselor. She saw through the walls of protection I had erected around myself and challenged me to see myself differently. When I shared with her my desire to return to school to get a Master's degree in 2019, she asked me what I wanted to study. I said, "Something in Psychology?" She prodded for clearer details, asking, "What specifically?" I responded, "I'm thinking of the Applied Research program." Yvonne got up from her chair, got right up in my face, and said, "Why not counseling?" That pivotal moment was the validation needed to pursue my dream of becoming a mental health counselor.

Thank you for reading about those who have influenced me along my journey through martial arts and mental health. Each entry above is meant to serve as an opportunity to publicly express my appreciation for them.

I now submit to you my Black Belt Thesis.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to inform its readers of the definition and meaning of trauma, a review of trauma and its correlation to negative behaviors, how trauma occurs, and the impact trauma has on individuals. Additionally, this paper will explain how to safely and effectively treat trauma in survivors of sexual assault. Further, this paper will explore the impact trauma has on mental health. A review of martial arts and the benefits of utilizing Kenpo in the aftermath of traumatic events will also be shared in this paper. Finally, this paper will conclude with a profound message of encouragement to all women and the positive impact this message can have on mental health.

What is Trauma?

Trauma is defined as any event that causes an adverse reaction in the human body, whether it be a first-hand experience or witnessed experience (Hensley, 2021). Further defined, traumatic experiences can create a sense of “severe fright that we experience when we are confronted with a sudden, unexpected, potentially life-threatening event, over which we have no control, and to which we are unable to respond effectively no matter how hard we try” (Hensley, 2021, p. 2).

What Happens in the Body and Brain?

When trauma occurs, the human body experiences physiological reactions. These changes go largely unnoticed in the moment, though they become ingrained as a host of potential auto-pilot reactions to future traumatic experiences. Some of the physiological reactions that may occur include rapid heart rate, increased rate of breathing, shallow breathing, flushed or hot face, tension of the muscles, racing thoughts, and loss of bladder and bowel control.

Hensley (2021) describes additional changes that occur in the wake of trauma. Irrational beliefs and thoughts become commonplace in children who have been verbally, physically, or sexually abused. Thoughts of “The world is unsafe” (Hensley, 2021, p. 2) take the place of what may have once been a happy, vibrant child. Inner criticism takes the forefront in the mind of an abused child. “I’m so ugly.” “I’m disgusting.” “This is all my fault.” “Maybe if you had fought back, you wouldn’t have been beaten so much.” “You’re weak.” “You’ll never amount to anything.” This rhetoric becomes a tape played inside the mind of the assault victim on repeat for years, even decades. Notice the speech pattern of self-criticism. Graduating from internal “I” statements to mentally becoming a part of the outside world criticizing one’s self using “You” statements.

Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D. is a leading pioneer in the world of trauma. As a young medical student at Harvard University, Dr. Van Der Kolk was offered an opportunity to work as a psychiatric patient attendant on a research unit of Massachusetts Mental Health Center. His role was to organize the

recreational activities for patients on the unit. The psychiatric unit he was assigned to was focused on researching whether psychotherapy or medication was the best approach in treating patients that had experienced their first mental breakdown (Van Der Kolk, 2015). The patients were college students and were often treated for attempts to complete suicide, self-harm, physical violence against their roommates and their family members. Essentially, Dr. Van Der Kolk was surrounded by patients with a history of violent behaviors. What he found when he began talking to the patients was an astonishing correlation between lived experiences and the severe decline in mental health.

Often assigned to work the night shift, Dr. Van Der Kolk noticed patients were more talkative and open to sharing about their lifetime experiences. What he discovered was that nearly every person on his unit had a history of being victims of abuse. Physical abuse, verbal abuse, emotional manipulation, molestation by family members or friends, sexual assault as teens and adults, and rape. A correlation between their traumatic experiences and how they acted in stressful moments emerged. Abuse, whether it occurred in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, left an indelible impression on its victims and altered how they responded to triggers.

The Body Keeps the Score

Charles Darwin, perhaps most famously known for his work in the theory of evolution, devoted decades of his life to studying the “mammalian emotions” (Van Der Kolk, 2015, p. 75) of human beings. Darwin posited the main purpose for emotions in humans (and animals, alike) is to “initiate movement that will restore the organism to safety and physical equilibrium” (Van Der Kolk, 2015, p. 75). Emotions can be utilized as a protective measure, building an emotional wall around the head and heart to protect from pain, sadness, and trauma. Humans express emotions to alert others of the toll of traumatic experiences. So, what does that have to do with the body?

In the book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Dr. Van Der Kolk expands on Darwin’s discovery of the cause-and-effect correlation between experiencing

trauma and how the mind and body respond, even decades after the initial trauma occurred. Essentially, when a person experiences a traumatic event, the body reacts in physiological ways, as previously mentioned. Those reactions are stored in the body and the brain as an accessible file that pops up whenever triggers occur. What does that even mean? Take road rage as an example. Imagine driving down the road listening to music, windows down, the wind blowing through your hair. Suddenly, the driver of another vehicle speeds past you and immediately after clearing your front bumper, they dart in front of you and slow down, nearly causing a collision. What might immediately follow? You lay on the horn, wave your arms about, and yell at the other driver. You feel your heart rate instantly skyrocket, your breathing becomes rapid and shallow, your muscles become tense, and your face becomes hot. What actually happened at that moment is your body accessed that stored file, plausibly titled “Reactions to Triggers” that was developed in the early experiences of trauma. Like auto-pilot, your body responded to the traumatic situation that just unfolded in front of you. Little thought went into the response, but its impact was felt throughout the mind and the body. Effectively processing trauma and its associated negativity leads to a better quality of life and control over one’s emotions. As stated by Mr. Ed Parker in *The Zen of Kenpo: Meaning Quotes from the Teachings of Ed Parker*, “Uncontrolled anger can lead to uncontrolled fighting” (1988, p. 24).

Trauma Therapy and Treatment

Thinking about the most egregious acts being carried out on another human being is heavy and often unwanted. For many people, hearing about traumatic events, especially any form of assault, can be too much to tolerate. Mental Health Counselors are trained professionals, but also humans themselves. I am a Licensed Mental Health Counselor – Associate and trained to help trauma survivors navigate the dark, murky, frightening territory of retelling their stories. It is difficult to hear their stories, but an honor to walk their journey beside them. Mental Health Counselors hold precious space for broken individuals to speak the unspeakable, lift them when they fall, support them when they crumble, validate their emotions, assist them in their healing journey, and help them identify their inner strength.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), developed by Francine Shapiro, is a highly effective therapeutic approach to helping trauma survivors overcome negative associations stemming from their trauma history. Previously discussed was the negative internal dialog trauma survivors play on repeat in their minds. A simplified explanation of EMDR is that it, in part, works to change negative dialog, referred to as negative cognitions, into positive dialog, or positive cognitions (Hensley, 2021). By changing negative cognitions into positive cognitions, the trauma survivor is also paving the path in their brain to process the traumatic event(s) that occurred. Through the use of bilateral stimulation (eyes moving back and forth, tracking a moving object while the head remains motionless) and focusing on integral memories associated with trauma, jumbled neural pathways are being broken apart, and new, clean pathways are created in the brain.

If any of that seems unclear or foreign, do not worry. EMDR is an evidence-based therapeutic modality that has been proven effective in the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; meaning, it has been studied by researchers for efficacy and safety in therapy (Va.gov: Veterans Affairs, 2019). Often one of the most effective approaches to use with victims of assault, EMDR is highly sought after by clinicians working with the trauma population. As a survivor of sexual assault, myself, I experienced the healing effects of EMDR through therapy. Because of my personal experience with EMDR, I became trained as an EMDR clinician. I have witnessed lives changing, burdens lifted, and hearts healed through the use of EMDR with my clients.

From Trauma to Martial Arts

What is the connection between trauma and martial arts? This paper previously discussed the negative self-talk in which survivors of assault and abuse engage. The collateral damage of abuse and assault includes low self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth. At the appropriate time in the survivor's healing process, martial arts can become an empowering activity in which the survivor may participate.

One obvious benefit of participating in martial arts is the physical component (WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2021). Of course, becoming physically active promotes weight loss, muscle gain, and the release of endorphins. What about the mental benefits? Stress relief can be achieved by “practicing deep breathing, meditation, and mindfulness” (WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2021, p. 1), which are all components of martial arts. Each of the aforementioned forms of stress relief is a tool taught to clients in counseling to de-escalate high-stress emotions and regulate their systems; i.e., lower their heart rate, slow their breathing down, loosen up tense muscles, and promote the healthy flow of oxygen throughout the body. Further, mental health is positively impacted by participation in martial arts by increasing self-confidence.

Small Steps Lead to Big Results

Approaching martial arts training from a trauma background can be intimidating. Imagine walking into a studio or school and seeing people attacking each other and defending themselves. Now, imagine that through the lens of perspective of having survived a violent attack. That sounds threatening! As a martial arts instructor, building rapport with students is the gateway to gaining their trust. Getting to know the students and understanding their motivation for wanting to train in self-defense will help both the instructor and the student formulate a healthy plan moving forward. While there are very few martial arts programs geared specifically toward survivors of abuse and assault, there are modifications to martial arts that can help these students ease into a self-defense program. In a trauma-informed karate class, the student is afforded the ability to move slowly and become integrated into martial arts classes.

First, teach the student to establish control over their body. Regaining a sense of autonomy and control is a critical element in paving the path to emotional and mental wellness (Moloney, 1969). Second, talk about the art. In this case, I will speak directly about American Kenpo Karate. Teach the student about its founder, Senior Grand Master Ed Parker. Share Mr. Parker’s vision, experience, and motivation behind creating American Kenpo Karate. Essentially, leave no stone unturned and encourage the student to ask any questions they may have. Third, start slow with techniques. Be aware of how

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intimidating or scary it may be for the student to be grabbed, choked, kicked, punched, or tackled.

Acknowledge awareness of the potential for emotions to become elevated and allow the student to choose a word or sign that they may use to indicate they need a break. These steps are in place to signify to the student that they are safe to express their emotions and the instructor can be trusted. “The three stages of obtaining comprehensive knowledge are (1) embryonic basics, (2) complexity, and (3) sophisticated simplicity. (Parker, 1988). In other words, start out slow and build as appropriate with students who have experienced trauma.

American Kenpo Karate is a beautiful art that encompasses all of the above. From the very beginning, before students are hands-on with each other, the basics are taught and solidified. From a trauma-informed perspective, this accomplishes step one, teaching the student she has autonomy over her body. When practicing blocks, punches, and kicks in the air, the student is not only learning essential basics, they are also learning the motions without the physical contact component. Consider, too, what learning stances teaches the student. The horse stance gives the student a sense of her own space; a space in which they claim ownership and will grow to protect through continued study in Kenpo. From the standpoint of a woman in Kenpo, this art can be modified while maintaining its effectiveness and integrity.

Mr. Parker explains in his book, *The Woman's Guide to Self-Defense*, additional weapons that can be used in self-defense. We are not limited to “natural weapons” (Parker, 1968), such as fists, elbows, knees, and feet. For example, “a tube of lipstick, a comb, an umbrella, or a [stick]” (Parker, 1968) are all weapons that can potentially be found in a woman’s environment. Empowering women with the knowledge that self-protection is available virtually everywhere leads to increased self-confidence. Additionally, as women become more confident, they begin to view themselves differently. Remember back in the trauma section where self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth were discussed? When an assault survivor is taught the tools to defend herself, a positive correlation emerges. She becomes confident in her abilities, as well as in her autonomy. She becomes aware of her own value. She views

herself as someone worth protecting. She develops a voice to firmly and confidently make her needs and boundaries known. As stated by Mr. Parker, “Kenpo incorporates confidence, skill, and judgment.” (Parker, 1988, p. 57).

Women’s Self-Defense Classes

As a Licensed Mental Health Counselor – Associate and a woman who is passionate about martial arts and self-defense, I have a vested interest in teaching women how to protect themselves. As a clinician, I work with women daily who have experienced violent sexual assaults and come to me seeking support, validation, tools to regain their sense of normalcy, and an empathic listener. Building rapport and trusting client-counselor relationships is at the core of my counseling philosophy. As time progresses and I gain a clearer picture of my clients, their experiences, and their vulnerabilities, I am often prompted to ask the same question: Have you considered self-defense classes? Frequently, the response is affirmative, showing an interest in classes or having researched classes locally.

The dilemma is that, as their counselor, I am ethically obligated to refrain from a dual relationship with my clients. In other words, I can not be their counselor and their self-defense instructor. Per the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), which is the governing standard of licensed counselors, such a relationship would be an ethical violation. Because of this requirement, I have prepared a short list of alternative locations that offer women’s self-defense classes, as well as locations that have both male and female instructors on their teams.

Sigung Stephen LaBounty is a man I have never met, but from whom valuable lessons have been learned, even after his passing. He became well-known for the statement, “Not me! Not today!” As a former Detective in his police department’s Sexual Assault Unit, Sigung LaBounty interviewed countless women who have been sexually assaulted. From his work, this statement, “Not me! Not today!” was born. Sigung LaBounty reinforced the expectation that women do not have to become victims, even if faced with such circumstances. In each of the women’s self-defense classes I teach, a portion of the class is

dedicated to sharing his message, “Not me! Not today!” My goal in teaching women’s classes is to equip them with basic tools for protection and a heightened sense of awareness. Exposing women to the understanding that they are worth protecting, encouraging them to value themselves a little more when they leave than when they initially walk into the class, and showing them they can break free from the effects of trauma and gain control over their mental and emotional health.

Conclusion

This paper sought to educate its readers about the many dimensions of trauma, including defining what it is, a historical lens of trauma and its relationship to disturbing behaviors, and how to effectively and safely treat survivors of sexual trauma. This paper also discussed the impact trauma has on mental health. Further, this paper highlighted the advantages of trauma survivors participating in martial arts training, such as American Kenpo Karate, or taking women’s self-defense classes. This paper concluded by sharing the pertinent message of Sigung Stephen LaBounty, “Not me! Not today!” and the impact this mentality can have on healthy mental wellness.

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