

Verbal Self Defense

by Theresa Byrne



Verbal Defense - Learn to Respond instead of React

How often has someone said something to you that made you feel uncomfortable? And without knowing how to react, you did nothing? Later you either came up with the perfect response, or you just felt “yuk”?

Most people think of self-defense as using a combination of intricate martial arts or combat moves on the guy that jumps out of the bushes. In all honesty, in my 14 years of martial arts training I’ve rarely used my own martial arts in that type of scenario...but I use my verbal/spiritual self defense techniques every day!

Verbal self-defense is one’s ability to speak out in a situation where the body’s adrenaline response would have us Fight, Flight, or (the newly added) Freeze.

During an attack, most women end up freezing, like a deer in the headlights. We get surprised by a verbal attack, or a conflict and we Do Nothing. It seems silly to run away, and most women aren’t comfortable fighting, so we’ve mastered the Freeze Response. Then we come away feeling badly about ourselves! And I’m here to tell you that it doesn’t have to be this way, there are some very simple tools you can use whenever you need to.

The first key is in understanding your body’s responses as well as understanding your opponent.

Know Thyself: The Adrenaline Response: Our bodies were built for survival and when we sensed danger, we’d go into self-preservation mode, what was called “Fight or Flight”

Your body, when under a perceived dangerous threat or attack releases a hormone called adrenaline, which can wreak a type of havoc on your system.

Your heart rate jumps up preparing you for vigorous activity (combat or escape), your breathing gets shallow (to allow you to sprint if you need to), your mouth gets dry, your hands and feet get cold (blood starts flowing to the vital body parts in case of devastation), and your brain gets a sort of “tun-nel vision” where all you can see/ feel/hear is the attack. All of these things make higher-level skills like communication and reasoning near to impossible! When we were living in caves, adrenaline helped us to run fast or fight the tiger, not discuss the situation with the tiger to create a win-win. Unfortunately our body doesn’t know the difference between an impending attack from a tiger and today’s verbal conflict from an adult bully!

Know Thy Enemy: (Bullies and Power Takers): A bully is all about power... someone that gets energy from the pain of others. They do this by making fun of others, or making them feel small, power-less, bad, scared, angry, or anxiety to make himself/herself feel better. Bullies feel bad and want to feel better, so they berate, tease, or hurt someone else so they can get what they want. In seeing the pain they cause to another, or the reaction of fear, the bully feels more power-ful. It makes them feel better about themselves in an unconscious, dysfunctional way. Which is often why we’ll feel so drained or negative after having been around a bully, they attempt (and succeed at times) to pull energy away from us.

I’ve seen an adult business owner require his employees to grovel when they’ve made a mistake in order to keep their jobs!

Bullies typically have low self-esteem, have been bullied themselves, and learn the abuse cycle for survival or a way to “get what they want”.

In my self-defense travels and classes, I’ve run across many bullies (both kids and adults) stuck in this cycle. Some adult bullies are sick and tired of this lifestyle and want to heal. The only way for a bully to heal is to deal with his/her low self-esteem, learn to love themselves, and understand the dysfunctional dance they get themselves in.

So...how do YOU stand up to a bully?

1. **KNOW** what you want/don’t want: The basis of self-defense starts with simply being able to SAY what we want, or what we don’t want. Knowledge is power. Know what makes you uncomfortable and SAY so. Tell someone to leave you alone.

2. **Respond vs. React:** It’s our ability to RESPOND in a difficult situation instead of REACT to another’s actions that makes us feel powerful. Create a safe response ahead of time if you know a bully. Use humor. Deflect their negative energy. “Hey is it Pick On Theresa Day? Just cool it, ok?”

3. **Shield yourself:** When you know that you’re dealing with a bully, limit your interactions with that person. I teach kids to stay at least 2 arms lengths away. Create an invisible force field around your body, protecting yourself.

Eventually bullies get tired of not getting what they want from you, and they’ll move on to someone else. Next up...Spiritual Self Defense!

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