



Women's Self Defense: From A to Z

By

Sensei Mark McGee

I taught my first self-defense class for young women in 1964. I was a junior in high school. I had only been in martial arts for three years at the time, but I shared what I knew to help young women learn ways to defend themselves against an attacker.

Since those high school days I've learned a lot more about self defense and taught hundreds of girls and women. It's been a joy to see them develop **self confidence** through ongoing classes and special clinics.

Self Confidence and Self Defense

I was bullied as a child. Older boys pushed me to the ground and held me down. They liked to hit me, make fun of me, humiliate me. I didn't know how to defend myself, other than running in the other direction when I saw them coming toward me. I had no self confidence.

My parents thought joining the YMCA might help me develop some confidence, so they signed me up. I enjoyed some of the exercises, but found myself drawn to a class where people in white uniforms were throwing each other to the ground. I noticed that smaller people were able to throw larger people over their shoulders, so I signed up for my first Judo class.

Judo was my introduction to the world of martial arts. That was in 1961. What happened to my being bullied? It stopped — immediately. I didn't tell anyone I was studying Judo, but the bullying stopped. Why? I think it was because I developed self confidence. I was ready to defend myself if someone attacked me. That life lesson became a motivation to help other people learn self defense and develop self confidence.

Why teach girls and women?

I studied several types of martial arts in the early 1960s including Judo, Aikido, Karate, and Kung Fu. One thing I noticed was that almost all of the students in classes were male. I rarely saw a female studying martial arts. Who was teaching girls and women how to defend themselves? I took the idea of teaching high school girls to our gym teacher and he agreed to my teaching a class.

That was 60 years ago, but the need for girls and women to learn self defense is even greater now than it was then. We see the videos. We read the news stories. Women of all ages are under attack across our country and the world. Many of the attacks are vicious and brutal.

I highly recommend that women learn how to defend themselves against attackers. Some women will join a martial arts class, but many won't. However, they will often attend a self-defense clinic. That's also a great idea. Many of the principles and techniques I will share with you come from years of experience teaching women in clinics.

Once a woman learns the basics of self defense, she needs to continue working on those skills so she is ready to defend herself effectively, efficiently, and legally. I mention the legal ramifications of self defense because states and countries often have different laws that regulate what is viewed as “legal” self defense.



Photo by [Anantha Krishna A](#) on [Unsplash](#)

What do you think of when I say “turning on the lights?”

You may think about going into a dark room and literally “turning on the lights.”

You may think of it in a mental setting when you come up with a solution to a problem that has been on your mind for awhile.

Suddenly, the lights turn on in your thinking and you know what to do. What do we mean when we say “turning on the lights in self defense?”

I teach children **three lights** and women **four lights** for self-defense situations.

The three lights for kids are —

1. Green - *Safe*
2. Yellow - *Caution*
3. Red - *Danger*

The four lights for women in self-defense situations are —

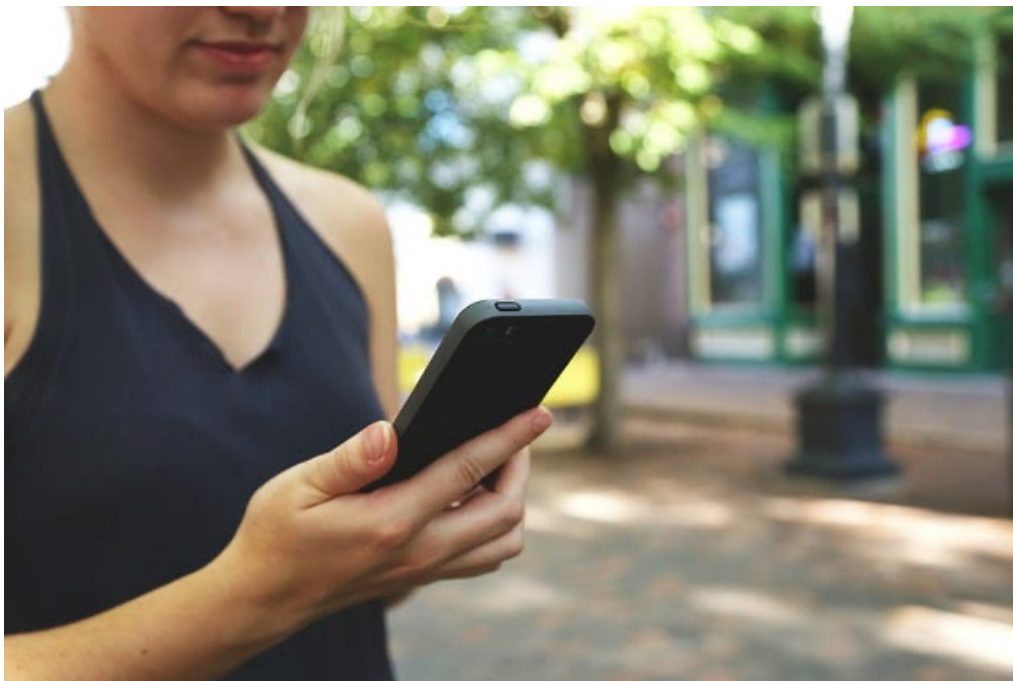
1. White - *Unaware*
2. Yellow - *Aware*
3. Orange - *Beware*
4. Red - *Strong Physical Response*

Here's how that works in a self-defense application —

White

In the world of situational awareness, white is the color for being “unaware.” It’s the awareness state we’re in during sleep. That’s fine as long as you made sure to lock the doors and windows. However, it’s unfortunately the awareness state many people are in during their waking time as well.

How often have you seen someone walking in a parking lot or on a sidewalk, or going in or out of a store, reading something on their smartphone?



Where's her focus? **On the phone.** That's not where your focus needs to be when you're outside. Which leads us to the next color.

Yellow



This woman is walking outside with awareness and confidence. Her eyes are straight ahead, but she can easily turn from side to side to widen her field of vision as she walks. She also has a smile on her face. This is opposite of what a predator is looking for in his target.

Attackers do not want to deal with someone who looks confident and is fully aware of their surroundings. They are looking for someone who is distracted, unaware, not paying attention to their surroundings; who looks like they might be an easy target to attack.

Our focus needs to be dialed up to “aware.” That’s the color **yellow**. That’s where we need to be all day long. Being “aware” is not the same thing as being “afraid.” We *trade fear for faith* in our ability to defend ourself and others, so “awareness” is the better term.

Orange

If we see or hear something that doesn't seem right or we sense that something is not as it should be, our focus needs to be dialed up to "beware." That's the color orange.



If you are **aware** of your surroundings (situational awareness), it's easy to quickly move to **beware**. You can change direction and move rapidly toward a safe place. You can also face your attacker, take a step back to make distance and get into a strong stance, and put your hands out in front of you in a way that doesn't appear to be confrontational but moves your hands and arms into a good blocking/striking position.

If you can get away, get away. However, if you can't get away .. be ready to dial everything up to **red**.

Red

If someone physically attacks you, your focus needs to be on a strong “physical response.” Strike fast, hard and continuously until the attacker stops attacking. Strikes to the eyes, nose, throat, solar plexus and groin are primary targets for defense. Use your hands (open or closed), your elbows, your feet, and your knees. Use everything you have to stop the attacker in his tracks so you can escape to safety.



Remember!

When you wake up in the morning, mentally go from **white to yellow** – unaware to aware. Stay in yellow (aware) all day, especially when you are outside. Don't let your guard down.

I highly recommend you get some basic training in martial arts. You may love it and stay in training for years, but at least get several months of good training that's based on effective, real-life self defense. That training will be with you the rest of your life.



Image by Sam Williams from Pixabay

[If you would like to learn how to defend yourself, I highly recommend you enroll in a self-defense or martial arts class in your community. Even several months of training will usually prepare you to deal with the possibility of defending against an attack. Check out two or three different classes before signing up. Be sure you like the instructors and the atmosphere of the class. Self-defense training should be effective, but taught in a friendly environment.]

When a man attacks a woman or a child — the gloves are off. I teach women and kids to do anything they have to do to stop the attack and escape. I teach them a martial arts system I call **SSAP**. Here's how it works —

SSAP – Surprise, Speed, Accuracy, Power

Surprise your attacker – Yell in their face, put your palms, thumbs, or fingers into their eyes. Kick or strike them hard in the groin. Stomp on top of their feet. The bad guys don't expect that kind of response, which often puts out the spark in their mind (mind intent). Instead of thinking about hurting you, your rapid response will get them thinking about how you're hurting them. A quick and forceful response is confusing to someone who is used to attacking children or women successfully. You are about to disrupt their world.

Speed – Practice defensive techniques that can be completed in 1-2 seconds. Learn enough of the 1-2 second responses that you could continue for at least 15-20 seconds. Multiple strikes to face, throat and groin in two seconds or less can end the attack. If the attacker doesn't stop, keep striking, kicking, scratching, and biting. If you have training in throwing, use it. If you have training in trapping as part of a throwing technique, use it. Use whatever you know as fast as you can. Don't give your attacker time to respond in a way that knocks

you unconscious or puts you in some other position where you can't continue your response.

Practice your favorite techniques hundreds of times until they become locked in by muscle memory. Practice with your hands and feet for times when you have space between you and the attacker. Practice with your elbow, knees, thumbs, and fingers for times when you don't have space between you and the attacker. Your goal is to escape, so know how to hit fast going forward and fast going backward. Also, practice screaming and yelling words that other people would recognize as your being attacked.

Keeping your balance is another important goal. If you lose your balance, you can't hit as hard and your attacker could take you to the ground. That's one of the reasons we emphasize learning strong stances in martial arts. You can still escape from the ground, but it's harder to do and there's more chance of you getting hurt if that happens. Do your best not to fall down. Plus, your attacker may have friends nearby. You don't want to be on the ground with two or more men trying to hurt you. Oh, if you do get pushed or pulled to the

ground, use your elbows, knees, thumbs, and fingers there as well. Don't give up.

Accuracy – Practice striking/kicking from your center. That way you will hit what your eyes see. Practice hitting the eyes with hands and elbows, thumbs and fingers. Practice hitting the nose with hands, elbows, and palms. Practice hitting the throat with hands and elbows. Practice hitting the middle of an attacker's chest or stomach with hands, elbows, and knees. Practice hitting the groin with feet, fists, and knees. If you ever have to use your self defense skills in a real attack, you want your arsenal ready to go and aimed in the right direction.

Power – Put your body into your strikes. Strike and kick like your life is in on the line – because it might be. If you can afford it, buy a striking bag or punch shield (\$25-\$50). If you can't afford that, use some large, thick pillows. The idea is to give you a large area to aim at for strikes and kicks while keeping your partner safe. If your partner gets hurt, they won't want to help you anymore. :)

Mama Bear Syndrome

I've taught hundreds of women how to protect themselves. Women, by their nature of nurturing others, often struggle with the idea of hurting another person. How do we help them get past that? I tell them to imagine that the kicking or punching bag is a man trying to hurt their children. It's amazing how quickly the "Mama Bear" shows herself in those training situations. My purpose as an instructor is not to teach people how to hurt others, but how to protect themselves and people they love. If the choice is between the attacker or the victim getting hurt, I'll go with the attacker every time.



The number of young women who are sexually assaulted in the United States is staggering. You can link to some of the statistical resources at the end of this article.

However, I want to **emphasize** that girls and women who are sexually assaulted are not numbers or statistics. They are fellow human beings. Each girl and woman who has been attacked has a name. They have a life. They have a family. They have friends. They have hopes and dreams. Sexual assault can steal those hopes and dreams.

Learn How To Defend Yourself

I have taught many women who were victims of sexual assault and have seen the pain in their eyes and in their voices as they shared what happened to them. I've also seen some relief from that pain as they learned how to defend themselves so that **no one** would ever do that to them again.

That's why I teach self defense. It gives girls and women some of what was stolen from them. It returns to them a sense of confidence and renewed purpose.

As you look through these staggering statistics about the problem of sexual assault in our country, remember that every number is a real person. They may be your neighbor, your classmate, your friend, someone who attends your church, maybe even someone in your family.

[Boys and men are also affected by sexual assault as you will see in the stats below.]

Sexual Assault Resources

[National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)

[Victims of Sexual Violence](#)

[Sexual Violence is Preventable](#)

[Sexual assault - prevention](#)

[4 Things Women Can Do to Lower Their Risk of Sexual Assault](#)

[Rape Prevention: How to Prevent Rape](#)

[Children and Teens](#)

[Sexual assault among adolescents: 6 facts](#)

[Sexual Assault of Men and Boys](#)

Campus Sexual Violence

Warning Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse in Children and
Teens



Be Aware

We live in a society that is becoming increasingly violent. That violence can become part of our experience quickly and without warning. It's unfortunate, but a reality we need to acknowledge and face. More than 60 years in martial arts and 50+ years as a journalist have shown me the rougher side of life. That's one of the reasons I am so passionate about

training children, women, and men to think defensively and train to survive an attack.

The best way not to get hurt in an attack is — ‘not be there.’ If we think defensively and train to survive, we won’t purposely put ourselves in places where attacks are likely to happen. That’s smart and will probably keep you from being hurt most of your life. However, more and more attacks are happening in places we cannot avoid, unless we want to cower behind locked doors and never venture outside to live our lives. That is no way to live. So, instead of cowering behind locked doors, we open our doors, go outside, and live our lives — having trained in the **3 A’s of Attack Awareness**:

“Be Aware that an Attack can happen Anywhere, at Anytime, by Anyone.”

I don’t walk around afraid of people. However, I am aware that I could be attacked **anywhere**: inside my house, in my yard, in my driveway, on the street in front of my house, down the block, at the store, anywhere.

I'm also aware that I could be attacked at **anytime** day or night. Look at the incident reports at your local police station or sheriff's office and you'll see every time of the day and night listed. Checking the police blotter as a news reporter years ago used to mean going to the police station every morning to see what had happened overnight. I found that people had been assaulted all night long and into the early morning hours. I checked the police blotter in the afternoon and saw that people had been assaulted all day long. We can be attacked at any time of the day or night.

Be Ready

I also know that I could be attacked by **anyone**: family member, friend, neighbor, co-worker, business associate, training partner, stranger. Anyone could attack me with the right provocation or evil intent. I'm not afraid of people, but I am aware. I watch for any changes in the behavior of people I know well. I watch for personality traits that are a clue to someone leaning toward the possibility of violence. I observe strangers who are behaving abnormally or irrationally. My purpose in doing that is not to be unfriendly, but to be ready for a possible attack — ready to defend.

Please keep this in mind as you go through your day: **The 3 A's of Attack Awareness.**



What do martial arts instructors mean when they talk about **evade to escape**? Here's the basic process for teaching self defense to women, girls, men, and boys –

1. First – teach awareness
2. Second- teach preparation
3. Third – teach evasion (escape and run)
4. Fourth – teach invasion only when it's necessary (stun and run)

Let's take a closer look at the third step – *evade to escape*.

Be Aware and Ready

Evasion in a self-defense context means evading capture. How to teach and learn that is a combination of being aware and ready to escape in case of attack.

We start with **situational awareness**. We need to be aware of our situation at all times: location, environmental elements, time of day, who is close enough to you to be a possible threat, etc. We think of it as having our “radar up” in all directions (360 degrees). It means using all of your God-given senses to assess your safety at all times. It's engaging mind, body and spirit for safety sake.

If what you see or hear doesn't seem right or safe to you, move. That may mean walking faster or even running in a different direction because of what your senses tell you.

If someone approaches you in an aggressive manner, yield and clear. That means moving away from them quickly and in a direction that makes it difficult for them to reach you. If you can evade and escape before they grab you, you should be fine.

Help!

However, what happens if someone grabs you? The good news is you still can *evade to escape*.

We teach children, teens and women to yell something that other people would understand as a distress signal. An example for children might be – “Help! Bad man! Not my daddy! Bad man! Help!” An example for women might be – “Help! Bad man! Hurt me! Help me! Bad man!” Any words that are easy to understand and describe the danger you're in should work well.

Escape and Run!

We teach how to get away from a variety of grabs, but it's important to remember to run after getting away. If we do a great job escaping from a grab but don't run away, the attacker will just grab us again. We have to do several things in two seconds or less:

1. Yell
2. Escape
3. Run

We teach children (girls and boys) how to 'zig-zag run' so it's more difficult for attackers to chase and grab them again. The same is true for women, boys, and men. Run in such a way that you become 'difficult' to catch.

We also teach children and others to continue yelling descriptive words (e.g. words that describe the attack and attacker) while they're running. They can stop yelling when they reach a safe distance away from the attacker as long as the attacker isn't still chasing them.

But what if we don't escape from the grab or the attacker catches up with us? What do we do then?



What do martial arts instructors mean when they talk about *evade to enter*?

In our last article we looked at how to *evade to escape*. That should be our first response to someone attacking us. If you can get away – get away. But if you can't get away – **evade to enter**.

'Escaping' should be your main objective. If you can run, run. If you can't run because someone is holding on to you, 'stun and run.' Stunning someone might include kicking them in the leg, hitting them in the face with your palm (like the photo above), poking them in their eyes with your thumbs, stomping on the top of their feet, punching them in the throat — and everyone woman's favorite — a knee strike to the attacker's groin.

Once your attacker stops attacking you, that's your chance to run away. 'Stun and run' is quite effective if done with enough power and speed.

Power

The first thing I want to emphasize is how to use **power** in self defense. Many of my female students through the years have shared that concern because someone who would attack them (or had attacked them in the past) would usually be larger and stronger.

First rule — **don't meet force with force**. What I mean by that is don't think you can 'power' your way out by using your strength against the strength of your attacker. You may be able to 'break free' of someone's grip by using some of the techniques I mentioned in the last part of the series. However, if you can't break free it's usually because the attacker is too strong. That's why 'stun and run' works well.

Second rule — **take advantage of the power your body gives you through 'adrenaline.'** It's known as an 'adrenaline rush.' It doesn't last long, but it's usually long enough to help you hit someone harder than you could ever imagine and run away at increased speeds. You'll probably feel worn out when it's over, but at least you will be a safe distance from your attacker where you can call police or someone else for help.

I tell my students to think of the adrenaline rush as a 'super juice' God built into the human body to help us deal with stress, excitement, or a physical attack. An adrenaline 'rush' uses glycogen stored in your muscles. Adrenaline helps you focus on the attack and use power from your muscles in ways you might not have thought possible. Adrenaline is sometimes called the 'fight-or-flight' hormone. That's what you need when you're under attack — stun, then run.

Speed

The next thing I want to emphasize is the 'need for speed.' It is surprising to see how quickly someone can change an attack into a powerful self defense. My goal for students is to accomplish their escape or stun-and-run in less than two seconds.

While a student can usually evade and escape in about one second, evading to enter to escape will take a little longer – about two seconds total. That's because the student will push, pull, strike, kick or throw the attacker just before escaping to safety. That will add another second to the technique. If the attack is especially strong, the student may launch a flurry of kicks and punches that might add another one or two seconds to the total response prior to escape. The larger goal is to finish your defense in under five seconds to limit injury to yourself.

Again – and this is VERY important – your goal is to **escape** from an attacker, not **fight** with them. They may have a weapon or friends nearby who will join in and try to hurt you. If you can't escape an attack, 'stun and run.' Use any method necessary (and legal) to defend yourself. This is a basic tenet of *Women's Self Defense*.



If you are attacked and want to escape to safety, what is your *exit strategy*?

Think about it. If you had to decide in less than two seconds where you should run once you escape from an attacker, would you know where to go?

We've recently looked at Evade to Escape and Evade to Enter. Both have the purpose of escaping to safety in two seconds or less, but how will you know which direction to run in that short time span? Keep in mind that you'll be focused on protecting yourself and escaping the attack, so where do you get the time to develop an exit strategy?

The best time to develop an exit strategy is **before** someone attacks you.

What! How can I develop an exit strategy before I've been attacked? Don't I do that **when** I'm attacked?

That is an option, but not the best option.

The first part of a personal 'safety plan' is the 60 seconds **before** an attack. Every person who has ever been attacked had a period of 60 seconds prior to the attack. We use that 60 seconds to prepare ourselves for possible attacks and one of the things we do is continually build our "exit strategy." Why? Because exits often change as we move or enter into new situations.

Exit Strategy

Building an exit strategy begins with **situational awareness**. That's where we have a *60/360 mindset*. We are aware of our present situation at all times (every 60 seconds) and in every direction (360 degrees). We know what's happening around us and whether we need to do something to protect ourselves or others. Our senses are finely tuned toward safety concerns at all time. Spouses, parents and friends will also be looking out for the safety of others as well as themselves. That can be for human, animal, or other dangers (e.g. cars, trucks, construction equipment, storms, water hazards, etc.)

The worst position to be in is "unaware." That's where you have no idea what's going on around you. You may take a nap and leave the doors unlocked. You may be walking on a sidewalk or in a store texting a friend or talking with someone on the phone. You are not paying attention to your environment and have no way of knowing you're in danger until it hits you. Then, it's often too late to respond effectively.

A better position is to be “aware.” What does that look like?

1. Keep your eyes and ears open for any person who could attack you.
2. Keep your eyes and ears open for any animal that could attack you.
3. Keep your eyes and ears open for any “thing” that might hurt you.
4. Keep your eyes and ears open for a way to exit your current location if you are suddenly attacked or otherwise find yourself in harm's way.

If you see or hear something that looks like it could lead to an attack or danger, you should quickly move into an “alert” position. My wife knows when I have moved from awareness to **alert**. My visual and audible “radar” is sweeping the area and I'm ready to move quickly to protect her or anyone else I'm with (e.g. grandchildren, friends). My self-defense plans, including an exit strategy, are ready to go. If someone moves aggressively toward me or someone I'm with, I immediately

go into defense mode, which includes getting **between** the attacker and my family or friends.

[Part of training for this kind of self defense is also training your family and friends what you're going to do in an attack situation and what you want them to do to stay safe.]

Field Tested

Martial arts has a long history that includes military functions (attack/defense). Many of the best martial arts systems and techniques have been field tested through multiple centuries. One of those systems is *60/360 situational awareness*. Anyone who has been in the military has studied situational awareness in one form or another. However, you can be the best trained and armed person in the military, but if you aren't aware of your surroundings – your training and weapons may not save your life or the lives of others.

A Way To Escape

Our goal when attacked is to **escape** – get away from danger. Knowing how to defend yourself effectively in two seconds or less is an awesome skill. However, if you successfully escape an attacker only to discover that you don't know how to get from your current location to safety – you have a big problem.

As you use the *60/360 Mindset* throughout your day, keep your eyes open for exits – places that would allow you to get away if you had to quickly.

- Do you know where the nearest door, hallway, or stairs are located that would lead you outside or to another part of a building or open area that would allow you to find a way to escape?
- If your attacker comes between you and your exit, do you have a plan for getting *through, over, under, or around* your attacker to get to the exit?
- Is there more than one exit you can use? If so, do you know where each exit leads?

- Do you know which exits not to use? (e.g. an elevator is usually not a good place to run to unless it's the only exit available and you believe the doors will close before your attacker can get into the elevator with you).
- If you are surrounded by a group of people or several animals or a fire, do you know what you would do to get away safely?

An important part of self-defense training in Martial Arts is to develop a *60/360 Mindset* and an *Exit Strategy*. We hope this article will help you build on both. If you've never trained in this type of self defense, check with your local police, fire department, or martial arts studios to see what 'exit strategy' programs are offered.

You can be attacked anywhere, at anytime, by anyone. Be ready.



Sensei Mark McGee, 7th Dan

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