

SECRETS OF A BLACK BELT MOTHER

After a lifetime of being told that she was neither strong nor powerful, a petite mother of two discovers that she is both.

by Carol Krucoff

I could feel the young clerk's eyes on me when I dashed into the Quik Stop, but like many women who have learned to ignore the stares of men, I pretended not to notice as I strode purposefully toward the milk. When I placed my purchase on the checkout counter, however, I realized this wasn't a typical once-over.

"Don't hurt me, lady," the young man said, raising both hands protectively in front of his face. "I won't mess with you."

Until that moment I'd forgotten I was still wearing my karate uniform, having rushed from black belt class to drive afternoon car pool. Had this encounter occurred when I first began martial arts training, I'd probably have flushed spotlight red and stammered apologetically that karate was only for defense, reassuring this hulking boy who was probably half my age and twice my weight that he had nothing to fear from little old me.

But I merely smiled, because I've changed in the 4½ years since I started taking karate, in ways more subtle and profound than simply learning how to break a concrete block with one swift kick. Physically, at age 44, I'm in the best shape of my life. Psychologically, the difference is much deeper.

I've jokingly told friends that earning my black belt was my way of dealing with my midlife crisis. Like many jokes, this one is based in truth. I'd started taking karate because both my kids were interested, and a local karate school had a special price for a family membership.

After several months of training, it began dawning on me that this art was about much more than just learning to punch and kick. Unlike many other forms of exercise I'd done—such as

jogging or aerobics—karate requires total concentration and the summoning of spiritual energy. If your mind strays during class, you may wind up getting punched in the nose. And to succeed, you must learn to tap into your life force, the vital energy known as "chi," which can dramatically enhance your power.

To my surprise, I found that the lessons I was learning in class, such as sparring with a "never-say-die" attitude, came in handy in daily life. Not that I've become a Hollywood-style martial arts bully eager to bloody the nose of anyone who displeases me. But by training mind, body, and spirit along the black belt path of perseverance, integrity, courtesy, and courage, I've become confident that I can handle whatever life throws my way.

The true goal of karate is not learning to devastate attackers, but learning to master yourself.

It's been quite an education for a petite female raised in a generation where ladies didn't sweat, let alone make fists. After spending a lifetime hearing that I was neither strong nor powerful, I discovered that I am both.

On the first anniversary of my earning a black belt, I offer ten "mental self-defense" techniques I've learned along the way. They can be used against any kind of attack—be it a mugger, an obnoxious salesperson, or your kids trying to bully you into letting them watch TV before finishing their homework:

1. Breathe. In tense situations, people tend to tighten up and hold their breath. Yet breathing helps connect the mind with the body, calming both and adding power to your actions. In times of stress, breathe deeply, exhaling tension and inhaling energy.

2. Recognize the importance of attitude. If you say, "I can't," you won't.

3. Be courageous. It's human to be afraid, but you can control your fear. True courage isn't a matter of eliminating your fear, but doing what you know to be right despite your fear.

4. Make a commitment to your goals. Ancient samurai burned their ships when they attacked distant foes, since knowing they couldn't turn back

enhanced their commitment to victory.

In my experience, the difference between painfully smashing my heel against a concrete block and sailing my heel right through it is the elimination of doubt and the total commitment to success.

5. Treat everyone with respect, including yourself. While it may be worth ignoring bad behavior from strangers, do not accept disrespect from people you deal with frequently. Politely bring the offense to their attention, and be clear that if they want to continue to interact with you, this behavior will not be tolerated.

6. Be flexible. Emulate the willow that bends to the wind, but doesn't break. In adversity, adapt and overcome.

7. Stay centered and focused on what's important to you. Don't let others sucker you into losing your focus, and learn to deflect an attack by disrupting an adversary's physical or mental balance.

8. Retain a "beginner's mind." This is a term Zen masters give to the humble state of always being open to

learning new things.

9. Be positive. If you exude positive energy, positive things will come to you.

10. Seek to resolve conflicts without fighting. Reserve physical force as a last resort if you or others are in danger. As the founder of modern karate, Gichin Funakoshi, said, "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the highest skill." ✽



The art of karate is more than learning to kick and punch, says the author (right) at an early training session with her children, Max and Rea. The mental self-defense techniques of karate, she stresses, can be used by anyone.