

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WOMEN'S SELF-DEFENSE AND HOW TO FIX IT - Teja VanWicklen

Hello: I'm Vanessa Corwin

And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Teja VanWicklen is a writer and consultant focused on self-defense for women. Trained in martial arts, among other things, she has overseen stunt performances for major events and films. Her latest book, "Reimagining Self-Defense For Women" details what's wrong with martial arts training for women and how to fix it. She joins us today. Welcome, Teja.

VC: First of all, tell us more about your background, which is quite varied, and what inspired you to write this book?

TVW: Like a lot like of girls in the early 80s I started in ballet and I loved it but we went away one summer to Long Beach Island, New Jersey, to the beach. And I couldn't do ballet there, after doing ballet in Manhattan there wasn't anything available but we happened to rent a house and the house behind us was a Tae Kwando family. The father was an instructor and the son was an 11-year-old brown belt, or at that time red belt in Tae Kwando and I would watch him performing these beautiful moves that were actually very ballet-like. He'd be holding his leg up high, doing these graceful movements and I thought OK, Maybe I could do this this summer. So, I began training with them and I never went back because, though I was thin I had big legs. The big legs that I had were perfect for Tae Kwando. My ballet teacher was telling me I needed to lose weight. (KK: Wow) You could imagine such a thing for a 14-year-old girl (VC: Hmmm) whose family was telling her she was too skinny. I had bigger legs but I was skinny everywhere else.

VC: And then people that age, you know, their bodies change...

TVW: Yeah, my mother was not thrilled with that. So, Tae Kwando was it and I started there like a lot of people did because in those days you didn't have a lot of options. Now you have a lot of options. You have Japanese Ju Jitsu, Brazilian Ju Jitsu, Judo, you have Krav Maga, you have so many options. Silat, Kali, you have all these options that you didn't have in those days, you had very few options. So that's where I ended up. And I was there for probably 10 or 15 years. And then I started to realize, as I got older and life got more serious, and I had a lot of martial arts friends who were outside of Tae Kwando that there was a lot of stuff missing from my training. Tae Kwando was predominantly a sports art but not really a self-defense practice. And the problem is that whatever you train in you tend to see the world from that—it's the old, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And that's a really important analogy because when you are spending most of your time kicking and perfecting the art of kicking, you're sure that kicking is the answer to any kind of physical situation, and then you're told as a woman that women's legs are stronger than the rest of their bodies so they should be using the strongest part of their body and that sounds perfectly logical. But a woman's legs are not necessarily stronger than a man's whole body which is what he's going to be using against you. And they're not your only resource by any means so you should not be depending on those. And I can speak from experience, when I say that I had a drunk friend aggress on me once and he would not take no for an answer and I spun and kicked him in the midsection which now I would never do. That's not where you

kick somebody and it didn't even faze him. And that was my tournament kick where I broke six inches of solid pine with and he just braced for it and said, nice kick and kept coming. So, I ended up having to talk him down. Anyway, so you need other resources, is what I'm saying, other tools and you need to understand a bigger picture.

KK: All the reasons that you just described, that is wrong with self-defense training for women, I imagine your book is unique in that sense, that you don't just focus on one thing.

TVW: When people ask me how to get self-defense training, I tend to suggest several books to them, because books are the best way to start. Since you only want to use physical force when there's no other option, because even if you use it well and you get lucky, you're still likely to suffer certain consequences. Getting physical is always, you're always risking some sort of damage, Psychological, physical damage, whatever. Somebody else's damage. So, you really want it to be the last resort. And if it's the last resort, why are we spending the most time on it? Not the most time on things that keep us out of trouble. And you can train in Tae Kwando or anything you want. You just need to understand that what you're getting is center of gravity and power and certain other things but you're also gaining a few bad habits too because in a lot of these martial arts you stand around while someone does some moves and you get used to standing still or you get used to being hit in a certain place or not being hit at all, not reacting fast enough, not working on reaction time. It's rather complicated and the mental stuff is not as exciting but it's a lot more helpful but it's also harder to teach which is why it doesn't get taught. But I didn't find any books that covered everything I wanted to cover. I was looking for a system, a way to systematize the training, so that instructors and martial arts geeks could find answers and synthesize their own answers and not be forced to go back to what's already been done for thousands of years, right? We need a clean slate. Something that addresses women in the current state they're in now.

VC: So, you talk about the concept of "protective offense." Can you explain what that is and why it's important?

TVW: Protective offense is, I didn't love the term self-defense. First of all, self, it's just about protecting yourself, and often women have children with them, or parents or other people they're responsible for. So "self" is kind of diminishing the extent of the process, and defense, it is defensive in legal terms but you can use "offense" to protect yourself defensively and I advise it because defending yourself against a man with a knife kind of gives the impression and the feeling of trying to avoid the knife and to keep it from making contact. You probably want to think more in terms of hitting him with something or knocking the knife out of his hand or something which is offensive thinking so I think part of it was the mindset. And also, self-defense is a legal term that you use to explain a very complex situation in which you did everything that you could and therefore you had to hurt him in self-defense. But self-defense for the purpose of training, I think "protective offense" for the purpose of self-defense is a better mental picture.

KK: One of the things you just hit on was parents with children walking around. What are the most unique challenges for them if they're moving a thing with kids in it? What happens?

TVW: The whole time I was training I was always asking, does the fact that I'm smaller and have shorter arms and legs, and men aggress on me differently than the way they aggress on other men and there was never any difference, really, the training was the same for men and for women and I thought that was odd. I always had questions and I got knocked down for questions. It was "Oh, Teja, just do the work." It was the same in school. Just do your homework and stop asking so many questions. I was already concerned about what I wasn't learning and what was missing, but when I had my son, I was greatly diminished. I had a number of health issues all of a sudden that came with the pregnancy including post-partum depression which is not a popular thing to talk about but I think it's a necessary thing to talk about because it made me feel even weaker, more diminished than the pregnancy did. I was in very bad shape. And then all of a sudden, I guess I have it to thank for the book, because all of a sudden, I felt catastrophically unprepared for anything that might happen to me. And that was with 30 years of martial arts training with military personnel in the woods and doing survival EMT training and all this stuff. I felt like I had no answers. I was wearing this tiny little being attached to my chest most of the time because he was ADHD and he had to be on my body or else he was very pissed off. I thought, what if something happens, what do I do? I can't kick and punch with him, wearing him. That's a crazy thing to think. What would I do? And so, because my first inclination was, I've gotta, what are the best techniques for if someone aggresses on you and tries to strangle you or hits you whatever, pushes you, pulls you into a car what are the best techniques? Everything I came up with fell short because of a child. And that started a whole new process of thinking, and that meant I had to drop every bit of knowledge about the training that I had done in the past. Put everything on a shelf to reference later but started a workshop with nothing but an empty table and forget about physical stuff until I got to that point. And the book does absolutely, very carefully address physical self-defense but it addresses it in a different way. It doesn't address it as, here's what to do when this happens, it's not an easy thing to talk about. How do you do the most damage in the shortest period of time when you're tried every other option for escape. Because you always, legally and ethically, and in terms of safety, if you can escape, you escape. You only fight when there's nothing else you can do. And if you fight, you don't want to tap him, you don't want to let him know that you're ready to fight. You don't want to give away the fact that you have a weapon. He's fighting dirty. You fight dirty, which means you do several things. You do them very well, very quickly and in a relatively brutal way. And you don't do those things without exercising all other options.

VC: Can you give us an example of something that you might do if you're in a situation?

TVW: Yeah. If you're with your child and someone corners you and says hey, lady, do what I tell you and I won't hurt your baby, the problem is, criminals lie. If you are cornered and someone wants something from you generally, we call them resource predators. If they want something they'll tell you what they want and if you give it to them, you have a better chance of being OK because they want the resource, they want the thing. They want your car, they want your money, your wallet, whatever, especially if you have a kid with you, antagonizing is probably not the way to go. But if you have somebody that wants something from you, your person, and not a thing that you can give them, you're in the presence of a different kind of criminal and these types of criminals are especially unlikely to tell the truth. If you cannot leave, you cannot fool him then you hit him with something and you do it hard and fast. There are some things you can pick up and do damage with, sharp things, work on the inside of the body, hard things work on bones and soft tissue. Depending on how someone's holding you there are short, quick things you can do. You can head butt somebody, I talk about

where and how, from the back or from the front, you can break fingers which makes it harder for someone to grab you. If you can do something more catastrophic you probably want to do that. But if a finger happens to be what you're holding onto at the time, grabbing a couple of fingers with your whole hand can really work. Pain compliance is generally not what I recommend because there are levels of determination in criminals. There are ways I discuss in the book that you can tell determination. You can discern determination and these are some of the skill sets. You look at your surroundings, you see what kind of resources you have, you understand what kind of criminal you're being confronted with based on what he's asking you. You consider things that you say and the way he reacts. And you're looking for your exits; you understand where you can go and what you can do. Is there anyone outside who is likely to hear you? Is screaming likely to go unheard? Because if you can get away you do that, especially if you have a kid with you. And then there are issues like, can you carry the kid? Can the kid run? Is it a baby? Do you have multiples? Are you pregnant? All of these things make this particular situation a really catastrophic and difficult to address issue and you think that all of the martial arts classes that are out there and all the different styles of self-defense that are out there that people would be discussing this and I just found that they're not and that just blew me away

VC: Yeah, it's when you're really vulnerable. You do talk about the breakdown of violent crime. So, what does that mean and why is it important in self-defense?

TVW: This is a perfect place for that. So as soon as I realized that you have to only, with a baby or a child with you you're only going to fight if it's your last possible option I had to work backwards. And then I started to ask myself, where are the inflection points? Like, how to break things down so that there's a sort of understanding of where we can make changes to the situation and where we can adapt our thinking and where we can gather information, and exactly how a crime evolves. We can see it earlier. Because what happens is we're doing our thing, we're walking down the street and all of a sudden somebody does something. There were probably signs before that. Like the fact that you saw the guy in the coffee shop. He was standing next to you and he asked you to pass him a sugar packet. And you didn't notice that he was the guy who was walking next to you the whole time. That he in fact followed you...There are signs that we can learn to notice so that we have more information. What I ended up doing was, I kind of left a traditional martial arts situation, going to classes, seminars and things like that. I started to gather people and look for other people who were thinking this way. And I found some people and we kind of formed a think tank. The initial people were Erik Kondo and Kathy Jackson and Roy Miller. Erik Kondo is a really amazing guy who is a jujitsu stylist and instructor, Brazilian Jujitsu, I believe, small-circle jujitsu which is like floor wrestling and that kind of stuff and he built his own wheelchairs because he is paraplegic from a motorcycle accident when he was 19 (VC: Wow!) So, he is a guy who understands the vulnerability of other people. And we did a lot of talking, and he had come up with this really wonderful tool that law enforcement was using called the Five Ds of Self-Defense, which gave you the steps that you would take if someone was aggressing on you. It's decide, deter, disrupt, disengage and debrief. I then spoke with, through Rory and Erik, I met Mark MacYoung. Mark MacYoung, he's an expert witness for criminal cases and a really interesting guy. And he had come up with something called the five stages of violent crime, which was intent, interview, positioning, attack, and reaction. And those were the steps that criminals took to get where they wanted to go. And I thought, well, Erik and Mark, thank you. Because these two five step tools together, one from the point of view of the

defender, and one from the point of view of the attacker, fit perfectly together and gave me a timeline that I call the self-defense continuum and that's what the whole book is based on.

KK: Well, these I think they are the tips to stay off the criminal radar. That's what you're talking about. (TVW: Yes.). To be aware of what's around.

TVW: It starts with awareness. But how? We hear about situational awareness all the time but what is it and how do you accomplish it, right? It's about that. It's about noticing when someone has targeted you in some way. Something's off. It doesn't mean you should start wondering if everyone's after you, panicking every time someone does something weird, sometimes people are just odd or they're just curious, they're just lonely, and there are ways to discern that as well because we start looking at groups of behavior. It's a series of events, of behaviors that come together and inform your intuition and it's a practice, like anything else. You start hearing your intuition a little earlier and going "You know what? I'm not gonna stick around to find out what happens next. I'm just gonna leave." And the problem with that is that it's not sexy. People want you to say, "Hey, this guy like did this to me and I did this thing, and I got away, yay me!" It's not so much fun to say, "I got this weird feeling from this dude so I just left." Yeah so, who cares?

KK: I think, I may be wrong, that people that live in urban areas like New York City have more awareness of what's going on around them than if you're driving down a lovely lane in the country.

TVW: Interestingly, I think they both do and don't. There are different levels and different kinds of situational awareness and people who live in the country are aware of sounds. If there's a lot of quiet, they are aware of sounds, they're aware of weather, they're aware of changes in the environment, they're aware of a particular sound of a particular car, it's interesting. And New Yorkers are very good at certain kinds of, they're very good at discerning that the guy who's screaming curses on the corner is probably not dangerous. (KK: Right). They're very good at discerning when people are walking a little too close, because everybody walks close, so when there is something a little more uncomfortable. But they're also used to a lot of chaos so they're not always used to discerning which chaos to pay attention to.

KK: One time, this was a long time ago, I took a taxi and there was something not right about this guy. I couldn't put my finger on it but I was a little scared. I got out of the cab and he stopped and I decided to walk in the middle of the street, like the middle of the avenue. Somebody's gonna kill me or somebody will help me. And he stayed there for a while and then he left. Because I was walking in the middle of Second Avenue.

TVW: Wow. Was it night time?

KK: Yeah, it was night time but there's always traffic. I just felt like, somebody will see me.

TVW: What do you think made you think... do you remember any of the signs?

KK: No, I don't really, it was a long time ago. There was something about him, it was maybe asking questions that were too personal or something. I just knew that I needed to get out. And I did.

TVW: That is brilliant. I love that story. Because that is exactly what we're going for. I can't remember where I read this, it might have been in Gavin De Becker in "The Gift of Fear" which is a book everyone should be reading and it's actually fun to read, it's really quite a brilliant little book specifically about intuition and abiding by those signs and signals it's a really great book because it really articulates clearly what you just talked about, there's some wonderful stories to that effect, but he talks about, there's no animal, I believe it's Gavin De Becker, there's no animal in nature, large or small, that would get in an elevator or cab with someone who gave them pause and stay there to be polite. We will, and I don't wanna make him feel bad, I don't wanna be rude...

VC: Oh yeah, well that, not exactly happened to me. I was mugged. I was, I had just moved into an apartment in the city. I was coming home from work. I'd gone grocery shopping, I had grocery bags and I lived in a building that didn't have a doorman or anything. It was a small building so I go into the vestibule and I stick my key in the door. Now, I had kind of seen this guy out of the corner of my eye following me and I got a bad vibe immediately. So, I really made a beeline to get right into that vestibule. My strategy was let me get right in there and slam the door behind me so he can't get in. But that did not happen. He was right behind me. (TVW) Could you have not gone into the vestibule?) I was already in it. I figured maybe I can just slam the door. Anyway, that did not work out. He just zipped in right behind me. The elevator was open. I should not have gotten into the elevator but I got into the elevator and he was right there. He was right there. (TVW: What happened?) He pulled out a knife and said, give me all your money. And he said, don't scream or else. And I said well, I'll give you my money but I need, I'm like negotiating with this guy, and I said I need like ten dollars for the weekend. And he's like, OK. So, I gave him the money and I screamed and he ran. (KK: Oh, but that's a funny story. It's scary but it's funny).

TVW: You did great, though. If you had had a little bit of training, you probably wouldn't have gotten into the elevator but where else would you have gone? Run up the stairs?

VC: Yeah, exactly. And you have to understand the space was...

TVW; You could have knocked on other doors; you drop whatever you're carrying and knock on other doors but you don't think of those options ahead of time. You don't know.

KK; I love that you negotiated ... I need \$10.00 (VC: Yeah, and then...)

TVW: That is a great story. And what's interesting about both stories, it's kind of a case in point for why self-defense for women needs to be different than what it is for men. How many men have these stories? Almost every single woman I've met, oh yeah, I was held at knife point, oh yeah, I was mugged. And only a fraction of the guys have even vaguely... except, you know, some guy cursed at me and pushed me, you know, wanted to start a fight. But it is not the same as being held at knife point. A fight is not the same as a self-defense situation. You're carrying your groceries into the vestibule, going home, and all of a sudden you find this aggressive guy there with a knife in a small space who is threatening you. And most men don't have these stories. And the answers for them are utterly different. Every martial art claims to have, and has some

answers. But they are spread out across the martial arts and the problem is you're not going to get all the answers you need about self-defense from one martial art style. People say what martial art do I go and I give them three. I could go to all of them which is not really feasible for most people and spend ten years... spend at least two years in each of them before they know anything so it's not really feasible. The truth is what you know is a lot more helpful and the kind of techniques you're going to do, the kind of physical actions you're going to take if someone's attacking you, anyone can learn. And one of the things I discuss in the book is something that I learned from the last martial art that I took, it was really a genius art form, Sayoc Kali, is a Filipino martial art that considers everything in martial art. It considers knowledge and health part of self-defense and self-care, and family protection. So, knowing things and being able to find which weapons are going to work for you and which ones aren't. Certainly, you would be better with some training. But you don't need a lot of training to head-butt someone or stab them with a pencil. You don't need a lot of training. It might be nice to have training to know the most likely places to stop him because if he's on drugs or really determined sometimes pain isn't enough.

KK: Well, all that training will kind of help you to determine what am I gonna do and where can I stab him. I mean the training is important.

TVW: The training is important but you can get some of that training from a book. And there are not a lot of martial arts that even discuss those things. There are not. They don't discuss that in Tae Kwando. I did Tae Kwando for 15 years. That was a long time ago. Tae Kwando is different now. I believe it's even more acrobatic. I took traditional Tae Kwando and we would kick and punch and fight and spar, laugh and have fun. It was all great. No one ever talked about blood. What would happen if you actually kicked someone in the head and they lost their teeth or shattered their nose. We never discussed that, ever. That was one of the things that was so shocking to me. I'm doing all this crazy stuff and no one's ever talked about first aid or what could happen if you did this to somebody.

VC: I know you touched on this a bit earlier, you do encourage, as you've been saying, people to learn, to get out there and find information and to also try to help others. Can you suggest some resources where people can go to learn more about self-defense and maybe find classes that are right for them?

TVW: The reason I wrote the book is that I don't have those answers. People have asked me for so long, where do I go? What do I do? How do I learn? Usually, it's someone something's happened to. That's the trigger that makes people start looking for something, women particularly, to start looking for something. Or they have a friend who's doing it and they've joined their friend. I could suggest that Brazilian Jujitsu is predominantly performed on the floor and you train to move on the floor and somebody gets on top of you. It's a really good thing to know how to do. The problem with it is 99% of Brazilian jujitsu instructors are men and have never been in a situation so there are nuances to the way rapes happen and the way that things happen. And part of the problem with Brazilian jujitsu is that they do a lot of arm bars and chokes which, some of which can take a while, like a choke, depending on, unless you're perfect at it the way that you do it And the whole time you're holding onto him in a choke he's doing whatever he's doing to you and can you withstand that when he outweighs you by 150 pounds. My other problem with Brazilian jujitsu is that, why it's only a part of the question, is, you're training to be on the floor with a big guy just in case. What if you spent

the same amount of time training how not to end up on the floor? But you also want to do a lot of standup training, standup grappling, which is where Judo excels so that you don't end up on the floor. So now you're training in Judo and Jujitsu. Then you want something like Krav Maga or Kali where you're learning multiple ways of striking, multiple ways of using your legs to offset balance, multiple ways to use your environment and all the different types of tools you can use in your environment. So now you're talking about three or four martial arts to study.

KK: Or you buy "Reimagining Self-Defense For Women."

TVW: Part of the reason I wrote this book is a different lifestyle. Each woman has a different question they're asking for a specific situation that they're in. They're in the country. They have six kids. They're in the city, they're pregnant. What you want to do is answer the questions that are most urgent to you. So, you just want to choose carefully. But the most important thing I recommend is an instructor. Look for an instructor who your instincts are at ease around because martial arts and instructors, it's kind of like a power-driven thing. There's a master, there's someone in charge, there's a lot of deference and anybody, when you ask questions over and over again, and I learned this over many years, shuts you down, won't answer those questions, or, "don't worry so much, it's going to be fine" or whatever, that's the exact opposite of self-defense. If they shut you down, they are disregarding your intuition. They are keeping you from asking the questions that are going to keep you safe. Find an instructor who's willing to listen to your concerns as a woman. And even female instructors, they have been raised by male instructors and that's why I wrote this book. Because women are not going to spend 12 hours a day training in this stuff. What they need is a little bit of knowledge and a way to train daily in their head. "Oh, I just noticed that. Oh, what would this book or that book suggest I think about in this situation?" And in that way, you train in little bits and pieces daily. And they're really important skill sets. One of my favorites to mention is de-escalation. No one really knows what that is, it's a rather complex thing. Most people think it's about staying calm. Well, to some extent it is because escalation is emotions getting higher and de-escalation is not throwing gasoline on the fire and trying to lower the emotions. And when you have someone who's really upset and freaking out, picking something up and coming at you, what you don't want to do is escalate. But when they first start yelling at you before they pick something up the first person you want to de-escalate is you. Because when an ex-husband comes into your salon, which happens to a woman, and says, "Listen, we're getting back together whether you like it or not," or whatever, or, "this is what I think of you," and you go "No, this is what I think of you!" Then he picks something up and then you're in a coma. That happened to somebody who I know. So, the first thing to do is de-escalate yourself. That is one of the hardest things and it's probably the best self-defense technique that you could offer anybody, self-de-escalate, because when something raises your hackles, they go up fast and hard and shutting yourself down and trying to make good decisions is virtually impossible. Every mother of a screaming four-year-old in a grocery store, how hard it is to de-escalate yourself when the kid is going, "I want candy!" And you're going, "No candy." And they're screaming and everybody's staring at you, right? Staying calm is very hard. And the bear won't necessarily chase you if you just stand there. But you start running (VC/KK: Yes). That's when the trouble starts. So, there are a lot of skill sets that just aren't taught because they're hard to teach, it's no fun to learn de-escalation. You don't get to show somebody this cool technique that you learned. It's a lot more difficult to learn how to de-escalate your emotions and other people's emotions than it is to learn a really good kick.

VC: Wow! This has been (KK: Amazing) completely awesome. So much... this is an eye-opener. This definitely has been an eye-opener. If people have questions, can they contact you?

TVW: They can contact me through my website, (I'm still working out the whole social media thing, everything's kind of in flux), so tejavanwicklen.com is the website, my author site.

KK: And where can they get the book?

TVW: They'll be able to get the book on Feb 3 at Barnes & Noble, Amazon, wherever, everywhere. (KK: Fabulous), E-book and I have to work on the Audible version. I have to get started on the Audible version (VC: Excellent!) But that won't be out for a while.

VC: We will look forward to actually reading it from cover to cover. You sent us the excerpts now but after talking to you, I'm like oh, I want to read this book.

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