

Beating Stress

THE HARD WAY



By Mina K. Ludwig

I have been a student of Chito-ryu karate for 25 years, which is not very long. My teacher, Lawrence C. Hawkins Jr., started grooming me to teach karate about 24 1/2 years ago. Somewhere in there, I went to law school and became an attorney - just like my teacher. So did his son. The three of us now practice law together. When we are not practicing law, we throw punches, kicks and strikes at one another along with others at our karate school. Sounds strange, but I'm here to tell you, nothing relieves stress quite like hitting something, or someone, with all your might. There is also great clarity that comes with getting hit. (Ouch!) But, obviously, there is a lot more to it than that. The health benefits of what we do as students and teachers of karate are many-fold.

Who hasn't heard of endorphins and "runners high"? Sure, you'll get that with a hardcore karate training session. But what is it about traditional karate that is particularly worthwhile versus running, boxing, weightlifting or the like? In karate circles, everyone has this *mantra* about perfection of character being the ultimate aim of training. Can it be that merely working out hard, punching and kicking at someone can make you a better, healthier person? If that were true, a learned friend once pointed out to me that Mike Tyson would be a paragon of personal virtue and character. What is unique and "healthful" about traditional karate is immersion in an ancient culture and way of life. We are not just talking about karate, but karate-*do* (pronounced 'dō') or the "way" of karate. As with most things, context is key.

The Japanese term *nangyo-do* may be translated as the "way of hardship." What can that possibly have to do with stress relief and personal health? Well, let's look at aspects of the typical class and the progression of a student for some examples.

From the moment the new student walks in the *dojo* door, western social etiquette gets chucked out the window in favor of eastern etiquette, manners and conduct. Leave your shoes and your ego at the door because you are about to unlearn and then relearn just about everything. Assuming the student has decided to don the traditional uniform, or *gi*, they begin their first class stripped of all that they thought they knew — literally. The *gi* is unlike anything the student has ever worn. Coarse material, strings, ties and belts — like a child, they must ask for help in order to learn how to dress. Most students need help for at least the first month. Executives of major corporations, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, graduate students — one and all need help getting dressed. Then, somewhat awkwardly attired, the student walks barefoot to the training deck.

The student learns to greet others, not with a handshake, but with a bow from the waist. Unlike a handshake in which one person might dominate another by gripping harder, using piercing eye contact and/or challenging body postures, a bow is an exercise in respect and humility. It is a selfless and humble greeting.

Upon command, everyone runs quickly to their place in line according to their rank to begin class. Guess where everyone started? Everyone begins as

low person on the totem pole. No matter who you know and regardless of the prestige you may enjoy outside of the *dojo*, you start last in line. In this way, the student begins to learn humility. "Humility" should not be confused with "humiliation." The humble person does not lack confidence. On the contrary, the humble are strong and centered enough not to be concerned with how they are perceived by others. Bit by bit, students become desensitized to stress, anxiety, fear and embarrassment through timely exposure to growthful situations.

Traditionally, for those whose physical health allows it, the opening and closing rituals of class involve kneeling in a position called *seiza*. In the beginning this might be uncomfortable, though not painful *per se*. In *seiza*, we begin to learn to drop the center of gravity to low in the hips and we practice correct breathing while enjoying a period of *zazen*, or »



Mina K. Ludwig throws her partner, Lawrence C. Hawkins III.

meditation. Most people lose the ability to breathe correctly and effectively as they age. Watch a sleeping baby and you'll notice that the baby breathes from deep in the belly, not taking shallow breaths from high in the chest. Once again, the new student is stripped of what they thought they knew. Nope, you don't even breathe right.

Zazen is not easy, but it is a very worthwhile exercise. Part of the reason attorneys and others get so stressed out is because their minds are seldom at rest. The un-rested mind becomes overloaded and unproductive. Even computers can't run effectively this way. *Zazen* is an effective way of 'rebooting' your brain and your body. After years of training, many exercises are performed in a state of *mushin* or no-mindedness. This moving meditation allows further opportunity to clear the mind of everything, including debilitating emotions, stress and worry.

The physical training heavily emphasizes core strength. Here in the west, core training has been in vogue for perhaps a decade. Eastern arts, including karate, yoga and the like, have been emphasizing, exploring and exploiting the incredible power and health benefits of engaging and strengthening the core for centuries. Most new students have to relearn even simple calisthenics such as sit ups, leg lifts and pushups in order to maximize the core benefits. They also learn that flexibility and daily stretching are critical to maintaining good physical health. One small but significant way that flexibility is encouraged is the rule that, while in uniform, students may not sit in chairs. We sit on the floor cross-legged or in *seiza*. Everyone is taught how to sit with correct posture.

As if all of this were not foreign enough, virtually everything the new student does is learned from the ground up. The various stances and techniques are certainly not within the normal western experience. Guaranteed, the new student is going to have some sore muscles in the days to come.

Throughout what should be a lifelong endeavor, there will be countless times when the *karate-ka*, or student of karate, is forced out of his/her comfort zone. Students are consistently required to set aside ego and self to do what must be

done. It might be performing a *kata* or form in front of the class, a test board or tournament judge. It might be *kumite*, or sparring, without showing fear and without surrender. It could be a simple thing like not eating or drinking until your seniors and teachers have partaken of food and drink. Respect, trust and obedience towards seniors are required without question. This requires trust in a system that will not tolerate abuse or self aggrandizement. You might be told to drop and crank out 10 or more push-ups. You might be challenged to train out in the July sun for four hours, or to run in the January snow after training from 2:30 to 8:30 a.m. No one is forced or pressured to do these things, mind you. We actually volunteer for these and other learning opportunities.

Why would anyone sign up for this? How is it even tolerable? If it sounds crazy or bizarre, all I can say is don't knock it until you try it. If you ask me to explain succinctly how and why all of this is beneficial to one's personal health, despite best attempts in this article - I cannot do justice to the subject. It just is. That's why I still do it. Seems to me that half of stress is the inability to get outside of oneself along with the inability to focus on the singular goal of doing what must be done, effectively and efficiently, without the debilitating fear of outcome. Face your fears. Once you do that, create new challenges to overcome.


In *karate-do*, the only competition, the only true opponent and the only true critic is oneself. *Karate-do* can be a lifelong exploration of conquering oneself and learning to break beyond self imposed limitations and fears. Everyone works and progresses in accordance with their own abilities and potential — not someone else's. The student learns to look at things in a different way. We learn to be flexible, in body and mind. We learn to breathe and to develop strength, resourcefulness and determination of spirit. We learn to savor and conquer challenges as they arise, both in and out of the training hall.

If you were to come to our karate school to watch a class, would you encounter something frightening, violent and... weird? No. You would be welcomed, intrigued, entertained and



Partners in the law as well as in karate, from left, Lawrence C. Hawkins III, 3rd degree black belt; Lawrence C. Hawkins Jr. - 6th degree black belt; Mina K. Ludwig, 5th degree black belt, and Steven Fischer, a first-year law student at the University of Cincinnati, who has his yellow belt.

perhaps impressed. We are out there training and having a good time doing it. In fact, odds are, you might decide you'd like to begin karate training as well. It's good exercise, with endorphins galore. But, like anything else, you'll get out of it what you put in. Is it right for you and will you benefit from it? Probably, but that depends on you. I can only say what I continue to get out of it.

Anyone who tells you they can teach you to not experience stress is a snake oil salesman. The truth is, I can't teach you anything. But, I might be able to help you learn some things for yourself. *Karate-do* is intricately woven with opportunities to learn personal coping skills. There are other ways - easier ways, but what's the fun in that? For myself, not all that long ago, I chose the hard and less traveled path. And it really has made all the difference. 

Mina K. Ludwig is a personal injury and probate mental health attorney. Her firm, Hawkins and Ludwig which is moving to 10490 Taconic Terrace, adjacent to the karate school she and her partners participate in. Yoseikan II specializes in Chito-ryu, a Japanese style of karate with Okinawan and Chinese origins. Ludwig also teaches a Karate and defense course at U.C.'s recreation center. To learn more, visit www.Yoseikan2.com.