

TRAINING PROTOCOL & CLASS MANAGEMENT

T R A C T I O N
P R O J E C T

Permissions & Dedication

We invite you to use any or all of this curriculum in your own training groups, with credit to Traction Project or TransFighters. We have even written an extensive guide for Running Your Own Classes including Sample Classes. Our hope is that this unusual information changes how everyone views the practice of Self-Defense. We also hope you can help sustain Traction Project by telling your students about us and what we do.

This information is based on the experiences of running our Oakland and Portland training clubs from 2014-2024, expanded from what we first published in *A Self-Defense Study Guide For Trans Women** (2021). This is the core project of Traction Project, the result of 10 years of work by dozens of people,

Reflection Space

A 15x15 grid of dots on a white background. The dots are arranged in a regular pattern, with 15 dots in each row and 15 dots in each column, forming a square grid.

but if your students start asking for self-defense moves, please do not teach them generic striking-and-assertiveness moves while calling it TransFighters. We did a lot of work and research to develop a truly useful self-defense curriculum, and students should expect to have access to it when they come to a TransFighters club.

Please contact us before launching your TransFighters project, and we will do what we can to coach you in the organizational process. It's also totally okay to use our protocols for a group that you're not intending to call TransFighters. If you use parts of our self-defense curriculum in such a group, we would appreciate if your students knew that you got the information from TransFighters or Traction Project.

including LGBTQ elders, trans women of color, and sex workers, 3 of whom died in the pursuit of this knowledge. We dedicate this curriculum to the people we lost, rest in power.

TRACTION PROJECT

Training Protocol & Class Management

So you want to practice self-defense with other trans women? Great, we need all the collaboration we can get with each other. This guide is intended to be a start for trans women and trans-fems to work on strategies to stay alive, whether you are at work, at a party, or just vibing with a partner or roommates.

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instinctively understand how to take care of trans bodies. We note that our classes only create a truly trans-supportive culture and community when they are lead by a trans person.

Can we set up a TransFighters club in [location]?

We don't want to discourage anyone from hosting classes and creating community in whatever discipline they want! But if you've made it this far into this guide, you can see how much work and care is required to actualize the ideals we've set.

If you want to specifically call your group TransFighters [location], we'll expect you to follow all the above protocols to the best of your ability, and also to preference our unique self-defense curriculum when you're teaching self-defense. If you're sport-focused instead of self-defense-focused, that's fine,

our guide or curriculum that seems relevant. On the other hand, we haven't had great results for the trans-fem students when a class is not created specifically with trans-fem protections, which is why we saw the need to make this guide.

This includes classes lead by a trans-masc teacher, which seem to eventually become homogenously trans-masc, even when following our curriculum. We still do love having the experience of trans-masc instructors, especially for classes that are not exclusively for trans-fems. We have also had good success with trans-masc head teachers when their primary teaching assistant is trans-fem, and there are trans-fems administrating the program.

Other Allies: While we have had good classes that were taught by allies who are not trans, we rigorously recommend that trans students attending those classes keep their emotional guard up, as cis people will not

What Counts As Self-Defense?

We See Self-Defense As:

- Whatever it takes to stay alive, including reducing the accumulation of traumatic experiences, so that our lives feel worth living.
- Having a wide range of techniques, so that we don't have to make hard choices in the moment about how and when to start taking action.
- Protecting ourselves without risking additional harm from our aggressor, bystanders, the state, or our community.
- Protecting the people in our communities, both physically and from the emotional, social, and financial pressures that put us in danger.

- Temporarily allowing yourself to do mean things that you wouldn't normally accept as ethical, like lying, cheating, manipulating, or injuring another person.
- Self Defense is not: manipulating or harming another person to make yourself feel better, or because they deserved it.
- Sometimes defending a space, like kicking transphobes out of a queer bar, falls within our scope of community defense. Broader political direct actions could also be defined as community defense, but because there already exist groups that teach high-visibility or militant skills, we don't include them in our curriculum.

yourself. If a student is still having an attack by the end of class, make sure they get home safe.

It is normal for some students to become overwhelmed in physical situations like a self defense class. But if many students are often stepping off the mat, please revisit our training protocols and make changes to your class.

Is it ok if trans-mascs (or other allies) use this guide?

We have seen other groups successfully set up self-defense programs for broadly LGBTQIA+ people, and be able to serve trans-masculine students well, without having to create a whole new curriculum (although our basic body & pronoun protocol is still warranted). If this is your goal, **we suggest just getting your people together and have fun**, and feel free to use anything from

aggressive. Keep your eye on students and be ready to interrupt their training in a sensitive way, as their training partner may not recognize the situation. An overwhelmed student usually just needs to sit out and regulate, rather than being comforted or coddled. It's good to have a designated safe no-interference space, like a bathroom, changing room, or even just a couch. You can pre-assign functions to different spaces, ie. "if you're on the couch, someone may come to sit with you; if you're in the bathroom for more than 5 minutes we will come knock, but not enter; if you take a break in the maintenance closet, we will leave you alone until closing time."

Nonverbal students are often able to communicate easier by typed phone text, or by being asked questions that are easy answered with a nod or a point. Students who are panicked or overwhelmed will know what is best for them in that state — try not to pressure them, rush them, or panic

Inconspicuous Self-Defense

Trans women are often dependent on their aggressors for housing and financial stability, share parenting responsibilities, or have a transactional relationship with them. Trans women may need to continue these relationships after the altercation is over. Most of our lessons present techniques that bullies and abusers won't recognize as threats.

Racism and transmisogyny can cause bystanders and police to intervene against a victim. There can also be significant repercussions even after someone has successfully defended themselves. Judges, juries, HR departments, and peer groups are very likely to rule against BIPOC trans women. Good self-defense strategies can still be built while avoiding techniques that will lead to adverse official judgements.

Tasers, mace, guns and fists can be options when racism or transmisogyny aren't a significant factor, but they won't be included in these lesson plans because we want to prioritize learning techniques for the complicated scenarios, not the straightforward ones. We do feel obligated to teach some lessons for knife work as a harm-reduction practice, because so many trans women choose to carry knives in spite of their poor performance history.

This class guide focuses on subtle grappling techniques that overlay well with verbal manipulation and teamwork strategies. As a system, these techniques can be scaled for mild de-escalations, along with other options that go all the way to brutal teamwork techniques that will defeat practitioners of one-on-one martial arts.

We're trying to de-emphasize focusing on the big, scary, once-a-decade altercations that,

If a student is sexually harassing another student, use your authority as an organizer to ask it to stop. Be mindful of your co-organizers and teachers if you think they are harassing students or each other, and use the power of the organizational team to tell them to cut it out.

What should instructors do if a student goes nonverbal?

Many students will just be or prefer to be nonverbal, unrelated to having an acute attack, especially once they feel comfortable enough in the class to stop masking. Lead class as normal, perhaps with an announcement to the whole class that some students are nonverbal.

Some students will become nonverbal or otherwise panic when they are overwhelmed, especially when pinned under a larger training partner, or paired with someone too

and resolve their past offenses. Possibilities include providing or recommending private tutoring (if that feels safe), giving them leads on self-defense youtube or literature, offering them feedback/advice, or pointing them to resources and giving them a plan that will eventually allow them to join the class.

If an abuser targets the class organizers directly, prioritize the health of the class over saving a single problem person. Cut off communication with the problem person, and redouble emotional support for the teachers/organizers if this happens.

What to do if couples get too affectionate in class?

Let the couple know that the class should stay non-sexual, as a trauma and accessibility issue. Support their excitement for the material, but have them explore it in their own time/space.

honestly, still catch us by surprise even if we have black belts and a collection of weapons. Instead, we're focusing on how to better handle the smaller harassments that happen to us several times a day, knowing that those skills will make handling the bigger events much more natural.

While it can be helpful to be prepared to fight, that's not the priority in these lessons. Instead, Traction Project's approach is more about knowing you have options to control a bad situation, and they are mostly less flashy, inconspicuous strategies. (And we get it—the feeling of getting ready to fight can be a comforting fantasy. But if training for a one-on-one physical confrontation is your main takeaway from this guide, you've focused on one of the less important parts of this class guide.) The lessons are designed to give you options so you don't get stuck because your skills aren't appropriate for the situation.

In addition, we need to be careful with How We Train:

- If we rehearse or role-play scary scenarios, we will trigger our fears and have to take breaks to recover. We will also create anxiety about returning to class in the future. We have found that students learn best and train longest when we separate the technique training from the discussion of how they apply to life scenarios.
- Having fun in class is more important than we give credit. We want students to associate class time with happiness and community, so that they return often and learn more.
- We don't bother talking about the seriousness of the topic of self defense. We assume our students are already entrenched in dangerous environments,

Provide plenty of emotional or financial support for the teachers and organizers during class conflicts. In our experience, perhaps 90% of our energy was spent supporting the teacher or mediator, for every 10% on resolving the original conflict. It's sad to lose a student, but when a teacher burns out everyone loses access to the class, so that was our priority.

What to do when abusers show up?

If students have alerted you of an abuser, and that abuser is not of a priority demographic, a class organizer should tell them not to come back, and resist the urge to involve the organization's resources in researching and resolving that situation.

If the abuser is a transfem who is BIPOC and/or a sex worker, it is important to try to find them training alternatives, while still avoiding using class resources to research

Because self-defense puts people in an elevated emotional state, directly reprimanding students for bad behavior needs to be done more sensitively than other types of classes. Even with care, expect that some students will rage-quit the program when they receive feedback — those students are probably the most at-risk to be victims of violence or suicide, so do your best to stay in touch and eventually invite them back.

Self-defense education is an emergency service, and where possible it should be provided to everyone regardless of how a conflict is resolved. Consider separating students who have conflict, or providing private tutoring to people you've removed from class (if that feels safe), or giving recommendations for other places to train at. Offer a plan for reintegrating problem students after they have changed their behavior.

so they don't need us to teach them hypervigilance or to trust their gut. We do still teach how to breathe and regulate when entering as a bystander into an emergency.

- Even when we're careful, classes can trigger memories about the worst days in someone's life, and handling those responses are also a part of class. Students often seek the instructor for support after class, but acknowledge that providing emotional support to multiple students is a bigger job than a single instructor can handle alone. We like to pre-emptively delegate the responsibility of emotional care to other facilitators, experienced students, and to students' community network.
- Not every technique will be interesting to every student. Strategies will have to differ according to each person's resources, race, gender, neurodivergence, mental health, physical ability, and other angles specific to the bullies in our lives.

- Just bringing trans fems together is one of the most important parts of self-defense work: trading phone numbers, knowing you can call someone for a walk home, to borrow \$20, to talk about your shitty day. Your gym friends can also quickly become a ready-made team for interventions, like monitoring unsafe workplaces or removing people from partner abuse.
- Protecting the community also means: wearing masks during class, feeding each other, organizing Narcan trainings, coordinating GoFundMes, organizing jail support, providing support after surgeries, staying up through the night with someone who has suicidal ideations, and organizing anti-carceral interventions to abuse within your community.
- Networking and community protection aren't just a bonus benefit of self-defense training, they are what we mean by "Whatever it takes to stay alive," and are topics and trainings that are essential parts of our classes.

For Administrators: Class Management Suggestions

How to handle conflict within the class itself?

The techniques-teacher can get easily overwhelmed managing student conflicts, even if conflict resolution is in that teacher's wheelhouse. We recommend designating at least one other class organizer who will bottomline class conflicts, and make that position known to students. Unless you have numerous, confident mediators as part of your organization, try to involve a broader community early on in the conflict resolution process. Bring in outside mediators and tap the support networks of the people involved, to take pressure off the teachers.

- There will be lots of autistic students, who may not declare their situation to you beforehand. Unless you know a student is comfortable with it:
 - Don't touch (ie. repositioning their limb to show a technique).
 - Don't put people on the spot.
 - Don't force eye contact.
 - If you notice frustration or panic, back off but don't abandon them.
 - Be ready to use alternative forms of communication if a student becomes nonverbal during class but still wants to participate, like phone-typed text, or one-sided verbal questioning that prompts an easy nonverbal response.

Expectation Setting

- Being able to manipulate a situation in favor of yourself and your friends will be useful more often than the hard skills of martial arts.
- The slow, subtle techniques of defensive framing and hip escapes (shrimping) will be useful more often than the dynamic techniques of fighting and disarms.
- Taking one self-defense class isn't going to prepare you. Self defense is muscle memory more than a learned knowledge, and that also includes the verbal techniques.
- Buying one self-defense weapon or tool isn't a substitute for consistent training. Besides that tools also require muscle memory to use, we don't often see scenarios where tools would control the situation better than other strategies, so they create a false sense of security.

- Even taking a 6-week seminar doesn't build or maintain muscle memory like regular training does. We see the biggest life improvements when students supplement our classes by training weekly in a fun martial art (especially a sparring-oriented grappling art like BJJ, judo, sambo or sanda), and work to build a crew. We like to think of training as an ongoing, lifelong activity.
- There are still so few trans teachers. Intermediate students should step forward to teach newer students. If a student really enjoys martial arts, the class's organizers should support them in becoming a teacher, financially, logistically, and emotionally.
- There are many teachers of martial arts who have since discovered that they are trans, and will want to help the rest of the trans community by offering their wealth of martial arts knowledge.

- If a person discloses their pronoun preference, please use that pronoun.
- If you don't know someone's pronouns, using neutral pronouns (they/them) is generally respectful – but only if you use them unilaterally with all people you don't know, trans and cis.
- Even if it is an innocent mistake, using the wrong pronouns can create distress and an unwelcoming environment.
- When you ask a person's pronouns, offer up your own as well.
- If you use the wrong pronoun, correct the pronoun, restate the sentence, and move on. Excessively apologizing for misgendering someone can draw an embarrassing level of attention to them.
- If you make pronoun mistakes often, try practicing on your own rather than asking a trans person for help or forgiveness.

body-sensitive modifications and then move on, without drawing extra attention to them like you would for cool/interesting modifications.

- It is common in other gyms to have accommodations for women, such as noting technique modifications that are “better for women.” Do not be tempted to replicate this practice using alternative terminology (ie. female, femmes, fem-bodied, AFAB, etc.) It is better to say that a certain technique or modification is better for specific body dimensions or abilities (ie. “this move is great for long-legged people”) while being careful that even that phrasing can trigger a trans person’s body dysphoria.
- You can avoid making pronoun errors by training yourself to use definite articles when coaching a particular student (ie. instead of “take his/her/their arm,” say “take the arm”)
- PRONOUNS:

While we appreciate the enthusiasm and community, the martial art practices that were developed for mainstream use are not the techniques that will benefit marginalized people. These potential teachers should take extra care to consider everything in our guide and curriculum before deciding if their expertise is relevant to the community’s true needs.

Training Protocol

Keep in mind that you may be one of the only spaces in your region where trans people can train combat sports. If a trans person doesn’t feel safe here, they may give up training completely.

Fitness Etiquette and Gender Protocol for Students

To make sure everyone is working together, we offer these guidelines to keep things smooth on and off the mat.

- All participation is optional. You are in control of what you do in the gym – you can step out of any activity, with no explanation needed.
 - If having an easy excuse makes it easier to step out, say that you need to use the bathroom.
 - Form a habit of tapping out for even small moments emotional distress. You will train longer and happier than if you wait to tap for physical pain.
 - For physical pain, tap early and often. Egos heal more quickly than the body.
- Where possible, also create an opt-in environment for your training partners:
 - Form a habit of asking after each demonstration:

student to struggle. Examples include: not being able to reach things because of size or length, not being able to squat or kneel, or having to work with another student who is too small for them.

- Assume trans students will have extreme discomfort about their own bodies, that goes beyond normal societal discomfort like being pretty/ugly.
- Common sticky areas for trans people are chest, hips, groin, height and weight. Some ways to avoid making students uncomfortable include:
 - When teaching chest-to-chest pressure techniques, modify the technique toward “sternum to sternum” or “shoulder to collarbone.”
 - Teach guard pass options that aren’t knee-in-the-groin passes, even if it’s the best pass for the situation.
 - Make body triangles a cool option instead of the center of a lesson.
 - Speak casually/confidently about

More Protocols for the Teachers

- Use an opt-in format (instead of opt-out)
 - Tell students that, after each demo, you assume they are sitting out unless they step in.
 - Between drills, reset the students' position to the outskirts of the mat, to make it clear that they're intentionally stepping back in.
 - Ask students to separate themselves by involvement (ie. "if you want to try the move you just saw, go to this side of the room; if you want to just watch this round, just stay where you are").
- Try to pair experienced students with new students, except where a student has brought a dedicated safe training partner.
- To help students with body dysmorphia or shame about a disability, anticipate technique modifications and offer those options early, rather than waiting for the

1. "do you want to keep working together, or switch partners?"
2. "how did that demonstration look to you? (scary/complicated/fine/fun)"
3. "do you want to try it first, or have it done to you first?"

- No biting.
- During drills, do not aggressively combat your partner when they perform the drill on you. Provide appropriate resistance when requested and check in with the instructors when there are questions.
- Know that if you hurt someone during sparring, they won't be able to continue to train that day, and will be compromised when defending themselves in their daily life.
- If you are larger than your partner, be mindful of how fast and willfully you are moving.
 - Match the strength used by the smaller partner. If you are often the larger partner, practice tai chi push-hands, contact improv, or handling

fragile objects, to improve your ability to work with smaller people.

- Use techniques to reduce the weight you apply downward on a smaller partner (posting an arm, putting a knee on the mat, shortening your sprawl), until they ask you to use more pressure.
- Be aware of how you are affecting the other person's emotional state, especially during techniques that involve compression, trapping, or enveloping.
- Check in often, and give plenty of opportunities for the training to stop or pause.
- Take good care of yourself by discussing your needs with your training partner before and during a drill or roll.
 - Announce your current injuries to your partner. Mark your bad joints with tape or braces, so they can track which one it is while you're tangled up.

- Declare any trepidation ("I think you're too strong for me to drill with", "I'm more tired than usual", "my rib is bruised, so i'm worried about big sweeps or being dropped")
- Say what your training intensity is ("I'm taking it easy today", "I'm training hard for a competition", "I'm working on top positions")
- Ask for adjustments: "slow down please, thanks", "we can go harder than this"
- The primary function of this space is for martial arts and fitness education. Class time is not an appropriate place to be looking for dates or flirting.
- Refrain from making sexual comments, jokes, or gestures, even if they're related to LGBT or sex-work culture. We want for students to participate without the added anxiety of self-consciousness or fear of boundary crossing.