

## The Self Defense for Compassion Fatigue

### Noble Strength

I have loved animals since I was two years old and have spent much of my adult life saving as many of them as possible. I will continue to do this for the rest of my life, even though it can get very difficult at times. Several years ago, I was “hit like a brick” one morning with an anxiety attack. I have been battling anxiety and depression now since that time and have come to find out much of it is related to compassion fatigue symptoms.

When my brother Fritz died I experienced pain like never before. This little Doxie was my world and got me through my teenage years into early adulthood. A few years after he passed away, I started training in Go Ju Ryu Karate. 35 years later my training continues, but I have realized there is another incredible value to the principles of karate. I will introduce these principles as a self-defense against compassion fatigue. I promise you will not have to go barefoot or take a physical beating of any kind! Instead we will derive from the philosophy of martial arts and my AAA (Awareness, Attitude, Action) plan for self-defense. As always, my animal friends will be there to assist me.

Before we launch into the AAA plan for self-defense, it is important to understand our own make-up and why we are possibly seeing symptoms of compassion fatigue. Here, too, there is a similarity to studying self-defense. There is something in everyone’s personality that drives them to a dojo and immersing themselves into Martial Arts. So, what is driving us to rescue/care for animals in need?

As people who are so dedicated to rescuing animals, it is critical to know what brought us to this point.

Obviously, we care about animals, but there is usually more. For me as a child I was lonely and frequently bullied. Animals were always my safety net where I would find love and peace. Taking the time to evaluate your life and reminding yourself why you rescue animals is a good first step.

In a general sense, here are some issues that might drive someone to be a care taker. These are not specific to rescue, so a nurse, a doctor, Veterinarian and other professions would fit into these possibilities

- Having empathy and a commitment to make a difference
- Our own past issues, some of which may be unresolved
- Our personality styles

- Being a perfectionist, and very sensitive
- Having a root for the underdog mentality

Although these are admirable qualities, they can also contribute to the symptoms of compassion fatigue.

However, there are other matters to address that can be specific to those of us in rescue.

Other service professions, like health care and social services, see their members really respected by society. When we venture into rescue, many times we are labeled as part of the problem! Our society still remains very ignorant to the issues faced by those of us in rescue, so it is easy for someone to say, "Why didn't you just take that dog!" Or at times even worse, "You let that dog die!"

I must add in that although social media can be a great asset to saving animals, it has another side to it. Many people are only involved from "behind their computers" and therefore are very quick to criticize from this limited perspective.

So, our warm up before the AAA strategy is to recognize these issues, and try your absolute best NOT to engage them in any way, shape or form!

Consider this analogy. If someone is standing 10 feet from you and they throw a punch, it will not hit you. However, if you act and reach out to block the punch, you open yourself up to now truly being hit.

Although it is difficult to feel disrespected, keeping this imagery of martial arts in mind may help. It also helps to remember why we're here - the animals! Furthermore, I clearly understand that many days it is more than one person launching these punches from different directions, but like in martial arts we will start off with the basics, taking on one attacker at a time.

It is also very important to study the animals we save. Animals are very smart when having to take on a foe. Consider how many times they walk away, and not even engage in trivial matters.

Now that we have gotten our warm up done, let's launch into the AAA self-defense mindset.

Awareness is the first “A” in a self-defense plan I wrote.

If you demonstrate the right level of awareness, you will cut down the possibility of being attacked by over 80%. This sounds easy, but especially in today’s age of cell phones and other distractions, we are not as good as we should be in this important area.

Attackers look for this all of the time and only make a move when they believe a person’s awareness is not very effective, providing them with the best opportunity for success.

Compassion Fatigue can also be labeled as a potential attacker.

Similar is the case in being properly aware of the symptoms related to compassion fatigue. Our awareness takes a back seat to all of the tasks we need to do, like the next dog that needs to be saved, raising money to pay vet bills, and many others.

Following is a list of possible symptoms that could suggest you are starting to experience compassion fatigue.

- Trouble sleeping
- Excessive blaming of others and self
- Isolating yourself
- More angry outbursts
- Substance abuse to mask feelings
- Compulsive behaviors such as eating or over spending
- Poor self-care

What is very important to be aware of is to recognize if any of these behaviors have gotten worse lately. What I mean is you may not be a good sleeper as it is, but if that has become worse than normal then that is an additional “red flag”.

You may be an emotional person, but if all of a sudden you are overly emotional about more things and more often, it is time to pick up your awareness.

Having a heightened awareness of what is going on with yourself and events unfolding around you is the first important step in self-defense of compassion fatigue.

Now let's move to the second A, attitude

It has been said many times that the only person who can change your attitude is, in fact, you.

This is very true, and we are responsible for our attitude, but like awareness, it is a little more challenging than it is made out to be.

If accosted by someone on the street, it is most common for your attitude to be one of fear or anger. Neither of these attitudes are going to help, as a matter of fact, they are exactly what your foe is expecting. Instead, it is best to present a calm attitude, one where you can think more clearly and one which your foe is definitely not expecting.

As long as I have been training, this is one of several areas I can still see a need to improve on.

There is no doubt that Daniel The Beagle has the ability to teach this concept. Of all of the dogs I have seen in my life, I have never seen one with Daniel's attitude. He is always in a positive state, and nothing deters him from it.

When asked so many times how I think he survived the gas chamber, I always respond by saying, although nobody knows for sure, that I believe his attitude helped him immensely. We know that when we have an illness, if we carry a woe is me attitude, it never helps. If we take control with positive and calm thoughts our chances of getting better faster increase.

So, what can we do to work on this attitude?

There are 13 katas or forms in my style of Martial Arts. If a student came in and attempted the last one, which is also the most complex, their chances for success would not be good.

One of the many things I love about Karate is that there is a “return to basics” mentality no matter how long you have been active.

So, we will work on our attitude during the basic things in life, and record our observations.

The next time someone is late for an appointment, a driver in front of us is going too slow, it is raining out and we wanted to spend the day outside, and many other simple challenges, adjust your attitude from anger or fear to calm and positive. Take note immediately and build your good experiences.

Just like the martial artist who works on basics so diligently, when it is time for a more complex technique they are so much better prepared. This can be us as rescue/animal care workers.

Then, there is our breathing.

Our normal breathing is nowhere near what it should be in the sense that we take breaths in maybe down to the middle of our chest, at best. This is way too shallow than our breaths should be.

When anger or fear hits, our breathing becomes even more shallow, maybe not even half way down to the middle of our chest. This causes fatigue to hit very quickly.

In martial arts, deep steady breathing is practiced regularly.

Indulge me now:

Sit comfortably and take a breath in deep, throw your nose and feel it go back through your head, down your back and into your tandem (Belly button area).

Hold it there for a few seconds and then slowly bring it up your chest and out of your mouth.

This is proper and healthy breathing! It also is very cleansing for your body.

Do this at least 5 times a day for two weeks, then graduate up to 10 times a day every day as part of your daily routine.

Now that we have become keenly aware, when faced with one of the symptoms of compassion fatigue, perform this self-defense breathing exercise.

We have now covered some of the techniques for awareness and attitude so let's move on to the third A, which is action.

Without proper awareness or attitude, actions are not nearly as effective as they should be.

The action part of Noble Strength is centered around self-care. And by now I am sure you can see a connection of self-defense and self-care.

In my years of training and instructing Martial Arts, I held to the philosophy that when going over techniques for self-defense it is not a "one size fits all".

I always demonstrate a few different techniques to students so they can work on them and find which one they feel most comfortable and confident in case they ever need to use it.

Oftentimes we can fall into a trap to "do as we are told to do" or "be someone we are not". I know that there are times we must listen to others, but there are times we need to be who we are!

Animals are great at this. They never follow too closely to another's ways and they never try to be someone else.

This is leading up to an emphatic point about action and that is your self-care plan should absolutely fit you and you should make adjusting it a priority until it does.

It is also important to know that over time it could change.

At my age now I have deferred to different self-defense techniques than the ones I was confident in while in my twenties!

That said, I want to share some basics that you may want to consider for your self-care plan.

- Eat well
- Exercise
- Make sleep a priority
- Drink water
- Meditate/pray
- Take time away, even if it is only a few days or hours
- Realize that “No” is a complete sentence

These are the foundations but then there is also your personal self-care plan.

Examine what works for you and what does not. As an example, journaling is often recommended as a good personal self-care strategy. For me it does not work at all! I am much better expressing myself, even if it is to my dogs in my office!

As we have with awareness and attitude, let's start off with just the basics and make one self-care habit a week your goal for the next month. At that point, you will have 4. For the next 3 months, just work on those before introducing any others.

The best mindset for Martial Arts fits very well into battling this foe called compassion fatigue.

To succeed in Martial Arts one must have a nice blend of confidence, combined with the right mix of humility, to keep improving.

Most people believe that a black belt has reached the end of their training and can be called an expert. Nothing can be further from the truth!

The martial artist realizes to stay sharp against all opponents, including compassion fatigue, a lifelong training mentality is best.

Way back in the early history of karate, students only wore white belts and when they had been training for several years, the belt became dirty and turned black. As more time passed the black belt starts to wear and becomes grey and then actually almost back to white.

This “circle” of training mentality is what I recommend for those of us in rescue who can easily see the challenge of compassion fatigue as we save the animals we love.

Remember you AAA techniques, and thank you for all you do!

Assignment:

Develop a “living document” called “My self-care plan”

Place it somewhere where you will refer to it daily

Plan on updating it every month due to life changes/circumstances.

Approach it with an attitude of “what works for YOU” and although input is appreciated, only take and use what is best for you.

Share with me only if you desire to.