

ABUSE SURVIVORS IN AIKIDO CLASSES¹

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Many people who were physically and sexually abused as children come to study Aikido as adults in order to gain a sense of safety and a feeling that they are in control of what happens to their bodies and their lives. Aikido can be extraordinarily beneficial for abuse survivors, but they need special conditions to benefit from Aikido practice. There are special problems that abuse survivors bring to their practice, and there is special knowledge needed by instructors to enable survivors to practice safely and comfortably. (Though this article focuses on adults abused as children, many of the same issues arise with students who were battered or raped as adults.)

I first learned about the nature of child abuse and the requirements for teaching abuse survivors while doing bodywork with adults who had been abused as children. As I became sensitive to the special needs of survivors in the very intimate situation of bodywork sessions, I realized that the same needs were important in Aikido classes. Some Aikido students will identify themselves to the instructors as survivors and some will not. It is important to keep in mind that boys as well as girls are physically and sexually abused, and any student may be an abuse survivor. Aikido instructors could be much more effective in their teaching by keeping a few ideas in mind as they observe and work with all their students.

As a side note, the following discussion of abuse comes from the body-oriented viewpoint that I take in my work, but this approach meshes well and is quite consistent with the usual psychotherapeutic viewpoint. (For more information on the somatic education work I have developed, Being In Movement® mindbody training, go to www.being-in-movement.com.)

THE NATURE OF ABUSE

The special issues that survivors face in Aikido practice stem from the fact that the habitual responses developed by children in the abuse situation persist in later life and show up in Aikido practice when they are adults. If these responses are not identified and

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worked with, Aikido can be unhelpful at best and possibly unbearably painful or unsafe. This section will describe a number of issues that may affect survivors' behavior on the mat. If you keep these issues in mind, many odd behaviors will become understandable and you will find ways of helping students through significant difficulties.

The key issue for survivors is powerlessness. Power is the ability to control the environment to maintain safety and secure needs. Children start off powerless and incapable, dependent on the adults around them for their safety and for the fulfillment of every need. If children experience that they are loved and nurtured, this powerlessness is not a problem. The natural process of parenting is to lovingly encourage the development of a child's self-reliance and power so that one day the child is a confident, loving adult.

However, imagine what it would be like to be a child and be hurt by the adults or older siblings on whom you depend for love, nurturance and support. When children are demeaned and injured rather than respected and nurtured, they do not develop a sense of their own power and an ability to maintain their own boundaries. Instead they learn that they are weak and defenseless. They learn that there is no love and that they are not lovable. They learn that they have no boundaries, that other people can do what they want to them. Sexual abuse, especially incest, drives home this message most brutally because the child learns that even inside her or his body there is no safety.

Even when the abused child grows up to be an adult, this learning continues to be a fundamental part of the personality construct. This often comes to the surface during Aikido practice. Survivors often walk onto the mat scared and approach each technique with the deep belief that they are weak, awkward and cannot succeed. As a result, their movements are weak and ineffective, so survivors do indeed experience failure as they practice. Many quit Aikido because of this. Of course beginning Aikidoka actually *are* weak and awkward. Since beginners cannot actually keep an attack from penetrating their defenses, practice often reinforces survivors' feelings that they have no boundaries and cannot keep anything out. Aikido practice is often intolerable for abuse survivors because, having poor boundary control, they experience every Aikido attack as a deep intrusion rather than just a simple self-defense practice. It will help survivors if instructors encourage them to focus on small steps and small successes so that can begin to see themselves as making positive progress.

Survivors often find that situations or people which resemble their original traumatic events and perpetrators call up the feelings and behaviors they experienced during their traumatization. That means that their present actions are frequently loaded with emotions that are not appropriate to the present situations and people. When someone who has been seriously abused as a child confronts uke, s/he often reverts to being a child, feeling what they felt when they were hit and hurt then. Aikido instructors have to take care to watch for these emotional responses. Abuse survivors are not just learning shihonage. Aikido instructors can do immense good by helping survivors learn to stay in the present, in touch with what is actually happening right now rather than going into a trance state and experiencing the present as a continuation of past abuse. Reminding students to focus on the present details of their breathing and posture, and the moment-by-moment details

of their control of uke, will do a lot to help survivors stay in the present and out of trance.

It is terrifying to be held down and violated, to be hit and physically abused. It is terrifying to be hurt by the people who are supposed to be loving and caring and to know that your life depends on their will. Very frequently survivors experience Aikido practice as terrifying, and instructors should watch for this and treat survivors especially gently and kindly when they need it.

Very often children become enraged and struggle wildly against their abusers. Sometimes the experience of being controlled by sensei or by nage puts a survivor in mind of being controlled by an abuse perpetrator. It is important to watch for inappropriate anger and resistance and not to take this anger personally or as expressing disrespect for Aikido or for sensei. Of course, it will also be important to encourage survivors experiencing unde emotion to breathe and relax or even sit out for a few minutes.

The flip side of rage is defeat and surrender. The struggling child really is helpless before an adult's overwhelming power, and very often gives up, goes limp and just waits for the abuse to be over. This can become a habitual response to power. Sometimes survivors become limp whenever they confront any form of power, and such an automatic response would certainly make mastering Aikido difficult. It is important to offer gentle encouragement and remind survivors that they do in fact have the ability to do effective Aikido.

Children who are abused frequently feel worthlessness, shame and guilt. The child may feel that, if she or he is not loved, it must be because he is unlovable. Often abused children are explicitly told that they are bad and deserve the abuse, and they frequently internalize that opinion of themselves. Survivors doing Aikido may keep up a steady stream of thoughts or talk about their awkwardness and inability to do Aikido. This will interfere with their ability to do Aikido and will thereby strengthen their belief in their own worthlessness. Survivors may feel that they are wasting their fellow students' time. Treating a survivor with respect will go a long way to showing them that they are worthy of respect. Sometimes it can be helpful to ask survivors to stop telling themselves they are going to fail.

This sense of unworthiness may be accompanied by a rejection of their own power, and by extension a rejection of what they are learning in Aikido even though they want to learn it. Sexual abuse survivors often feel that they are dirty. They are ashamed of what they have participated in. Because they feel so bad about themselves, they often feel that they aren't worth protecting. Often they feel they should be punished for what they have done or been made to do and that being defenseless is part of their punishment, so they shouldn't learn Aikido and be safe. In an Aikido class I conducted specifically for abuse survivors, one participant was very clear about the fact that she would kill to protect a little child from being raped but she wouldn't even do an effective ikkyo to protect herself. She just wasn't worth it. It took her considerable work to hear and internalize my

message that she was as worthwhile as anyone else and deserved to be safe. Only after a long time of hearing this message could she put any ki into her techniques.

Another way in which survivors reject power relates to their early experience of power. They experienced brutality and saw it as power. Since they believe that power is necessarily vile, they reject gaining power even while they desperately wish to be powerful enough to feel safe. Often survivors are afraid that if they become powerful, they will act like the “powerful” adults who hurt them. It is important for instructors to point out to survivors that there is a difference between counterfeit power, which is harsh, rigid and insensitive, and true power, which is cultivated in Aikido and which is kind, yielding and empathetic. When survivors can see and understand that it is possible for power to be ethical and nurturing, they can practice Aikido without rejecting their own increasing power.

Another fundamental issue for survivors is “anesthesia”. Children who are neglected or abused have very little power to directly defend themselves and promote their physical survival and emotional comfort. Since they cannot change the world, they change their awareness of the world. The most pervasive method of handling abuse is mental dissociation and body numbness. Just as the pain of surgery is made bearable by anesthesia, so children suppress their physical and emotional pain by mental and physical anesthesia.

Dissociation is a process of “spacing out.” Survivors can walk and talk and do kotegaeshi but not really be there. They can be experiencing the process at a distance. They aren’t really concentrating on their movements, and they can hurt themselves or others as a result. In one instance of this, an abuse survivor was trying out her first Aikido class. The instructor, who was an excellent Aikidoist and a very caring person, didn’t know about dissociative processes and didn’t recognize that the student was dissociated. He was teaching the survivor a forward roll and was keeping up a steady stream of encouragement, suggesting she could do one more and get it right. However, that made the woman feel pressured to perform. She felt threatened by the power of a male instructor and couldn’t bring herself to tell him she wanted to stop. She left her body and continued practicing when she really should have stopped. She wasn’t able to control her movements and as a result, she hurt herself so badly on a simple forward roll that she wound up in the hospital. Needless to say, she never came back to Aikido, which was a loss for her and for all Aikidoists as well. If instructors see someone spacing out on the mat, they should talk to them, get them to focus on their breathing and grounding, and if necessary suggest to them that they sit out for a few minutes.

Body numbness is the physical equivalent of dissociation, and the two often go together. It is just what it sounds like, the condition of being partly or fully anesthetized in some area of the body. Very frequently, children who are sexually abused numb their whole pelvis so they can avoid the feelings of pain or arousal attendant upon being violated. Very often it is not just the pelvis but the whole lower half of the body that children escape from. Often the hands/arms or the mouth are numbed. Imagine attempting to do tenchi nage while you are trying not to feel your pelvis or cannot even feel your legs

or arms distinctly. The whole emphasis in Aikido on feeling hara may be threatening or unacceptable to someone who has been sexually abused and is trying to stay out of that part of the body.

Showing survivors how to center their breathing and posture can go a long way toward helping them overcome numbness and stay present. The more they do stay present and achieve effective Aikido techniques, the stronger and safer they will feel and the more willing they will be to stay present.

Paradoxically, the process of practicing Aikido and overcoming powerlessness and numbness may be unbearable precisely when it succeeds. If someone has been coping with an abusive childhood by blocking out the feelings it produced, what happens when they are helped to feel their body? All the feelings they have been protecting themselves against may pour out in a rush that they find overwhelming and unbearable. If they have built their lives on a damaged view of themselves, what happens when that self-identity is shattered by proof of their ability and power? They may feel lost and destroyed. Such feelings must be dealt with, and this will best be done in psychotherapy and/or bodywork sessions, but the instructor must at least be aware of the power of Aikido to bring up difficult feelings for survivors and be supportive if it happens. Survivors may rush off the mat crying, and it is important for instructors to show that they understand and that the survivor does not have to feel ashamed for needing to leave the mat. If unbearable emotions break through for someone during practice, take them aside, reassure them that they are safe and that they will be fully supported in their willingness to use Aikido to learn and grow.

It is important for Aikido instructors to watch for the feelings and behaviors that may stem from abuse even when the student has not identified him/herself as a survivor. I remember a time when I had just begun to teach, about twenty years ago, long before I had any awareness of the issues of child abuse and the depths Aikido can touch. I was teaching the Unbendable Arm in one class. One woman simply couldn't learn it. She could do it all right, but only when I was actually holding her arm and trying to bend it. As soon as I let go of her arm, she lost her ki extension. I was trying to explain that ki extension was not a reaction to being pushed on but an internal state of being that should be maintained independently of any external event. I grasped her arm and said, "Do you feel your arm now?" And she said "Yes." Then I let go of her arm and asked if she still felt her arm. I was expecting her to say "yes" so I could then point out that feeling her arm was an internal constant, and that ki extension was the same. However, she said "No." And I said, "Oh, I get it. You don't exist." She ran out of the room crying and never came back. Looking back, I wonder what depths I had touched and wish I had had enough awareness to help her gently and encourage her to find her existence.

TEACHING

How can an Aikido instructors help abuse survivors survive and benefit from Aikido practice? This section will focus on some common elements of Aikido teaching that need to be considered in the light of survivors' needs.²

Aikido is a marvelous opportunity for survivors to gain a sense of power and safety, which will allow them to begin feeling their bodies and their feelings. However, a certain amount of power and self-confidence are needed even to begin the tremendous task of Aikido practice. The first concern for Aikido instructors is to help survivors evaluate the practice and decide for themselves whether they are ready to begin. If they are not, they could experience Aikido as constant violation, which would reinforce all their feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. If they are not ready for Aikido classes, they should be helped to feel good about being clear and caring for themselves by not practicing. Making a survivor feel good about her/his own strength in deciding not to pursue Aikido could be an important gift from an instructor.

The key to helping survivors who do begin Aikido practice is to remember that they are often living two lives simultaneously. They are simultaneously practicing Aikido and (consciously or not) re-experiencing their abuse. It is crucial for survivors to be encouraged to set their own pace and own process of practice. Survivors should, in the beginning at least, be encouraged to do *LESS* than they can. This may sound strange. Ordinarily people are encouraged to do more, to go beyond their limits. But survivors most frequently don't have a clear sense of their limits or boundaries, and it is very important to encourage them to set clear boundaries. It is important to give survivors permission to do only a little. As they feel safe and successful in doing that much, they will be able to risk doing more. That may mean not rolling, or not practicing with people who scare them, or doing only warm-ups and then watching the rest of the class. Whatever limits they need should be encouraged.

It is important to remind survivors to notice their bodies. They have to learn to feel what they are doing as they do it. It will be helpful to remind survivors to check out their breathing, whether their muscles are tense, whether they are standing on both feet, and so on. Explicit instruction on body balance and postural efficiency is very helpful. A problem in Aikido is that the people who persevere in Aikido and get good enough to be instructors are usually talented athletes, and talented athletes cannot easily imagine what it is like to have no awareness or control of one's own body. Because of this, they frequently do not provide the simplicity and clarity of instruction that survivors need. It may be hard, but breaking things down to seemingly ridiculous levels may be the only way to help a survivor master Aikido techniques.

² For detailed instructions on how to do the basic breathing, body awareness, and centering exercises I teach, see the file *A Downloadable Script for the Eight Core BIM Exercises* on my website, www.being-in-movement.com. For much more information on how to teach abuse survivors, see my book *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*, which is available through my website.

Survivors often understand words but don't understand what the words are about. They may be so out of touch with their bodies and feelings that they cannot follow spoken instructions because the words don't connect to anything in their experience. It is important to meet survivors at the conceptual level on which they function. It may be necessary to break down instructions into simpler, more explicit statements. Many Aikido instructors teach in the non-verbal Japanese way. They demonstrate a technique a few times and then have students practice. This may work for some survivors, but many will be lost. Often survivors cannot remember series of moves or know what to do inside themselves to make those moves happen. It is important to offer clear, explicit and step-by-step verbal/physical instructions.

It will be important in working with survivors to watch for when they numb their bodies or dissociate mentally. There is a certain blankness or distance that is quite recognizable once you are aware of what it is. It is helpful for survivors to be encouraged to notice how they go away mentally when they are afraid, angry, overwhelmed or experiencing pain. In order to help survivors stay present, it may be necessary to slow the practice down and avoid causing any pain as part of the techniques. It is very helpful to remind survivors to keep breathing and to let their bellies and pelvis relax. Of course, it can also be very scary for a survivor to realize that someone can see these areas of their bodies or to hear someone talking about them, so be kind and gentle in offering these reminders.

Aikido is very intimate. It involves a good deal of touching. Many survivors will dislike being touched at all. They associate all touch with violation. Aikido touch is very penetrating. Rather than holding just the surface of uke's body, we extend our ki into and control our partner's core. Of course, this can be disturbing to a survivor, both in the roles of uke or nage. Conversely, if the touch used in an Aikido technique does not go deeply into uke, that could also be disturbing to a survivor. That kind of touch is a product of a superficial view of uke, one in which s/he is treated as an object instead of perceived empathetically as a conscious being, and that can be very reminiscent of the dehumanizing touch of abuse. It is important to make sure that the touch used in Aikido is powerful without being harsh, penetrating without being intrusive, controlling but also respectful.

Aikido techniques are combat. Our culture so mixes up power and violence that many people cannot see how a combat technique can be an expression of compassion. It is very important for Aikido instructors who wish to teach survivors to look inside themselves and see whether there is any hardening, anger or fear that is part of their Aikido. Survivors will pick up on that spiritual violence. They may copy it or they may be repelled by it, but it will put them in mind of the violence they experienced as children. It will be important to consciously maintain a kindness and gentleness in one's Aikido in order to provide a safe and healing environment for survivors to practice in.

It is also important to establish a dojo atmosphere in which people are encouraged to express their own perceptions and opinions about their learning and Aikido. This is different from the hierarchical nature of knowledge that is normal in Aikido. Usually it is presumed in the dojo that knowledge flows in one direction, from senior to junior. One

way of thinking about this is that seniors know Aikido while juniors do not and that juniors should enter innocently into practice. Another way of thinking about this is that it invalidates beginners' perceptions and thoughts and encourages them not to believe or express what they see, feel and think.

In most abusive situations, children are told not to reveal what is happening. Very often they are told that what is being done to them is good or normal. Very often they are told that they, in fact, really do like what is being done to them. Abused children learn to accept these statements and deny their own perceptions that what is being done to them is painful and wrong. I have had beginners point out to me instances in which they thought my technique was incorrect. When they were right, I benefited by listening to them, and when they were wrong, they benefited because that gave me the opportunity to help them correct a misunderstanding. Every human being has the ability to perceive and feel, and some people have high levels of skill in non-Aikido disciplines which allow them to see things in Aikido that most beginners would not. If the dojo atmosphere is one which does not respect each person's ability and right to have and voice their own perceptions, that will put survivors in the same situation they were in as children. (Of course, it goes without saying that students must keep in mind the real limits of their knowledge and express their ideas in a respectful and appropriate manner.)

It is very important to maintain appropriate teacher/student relationships in the dojo. It is necessary to be especially careful in assuming such a relationship with a survivor precisely because it mirrors the parent/child relationship. Survivors have good reason to distrust such relationships, and it is important for the instructor to be utterly trustworthy — as the survivor's parents (or other offending adults) were not. The role of the teacher is a very lopsided one. It is not a two-way relationship between equals. It is a relationship in which the needs and well-being of the student are the primary focus. It can even be looked at as a spiritual path of selfless service for the teacher. Survivors should not be put in the position of having to attend to the needs of the teacher. Survivors are accustomed to being used by others, and in order for survivors to benefit from Aikido practice, it must be clear that they are not being used.

As a general rule, instructors should not have a social relationship outside the class situation with survivors. And certainly an instructor should never be in a sexual relationship with a survivor who is an Aikido student. The power disparity between a teacher and a student makes any relation with a survivor very similar to that between an abusive adult and a child. A sexual relationship between sensei and even a non-survivor student is very questionable because of the power disparity and may make the dojo atmosphere uncomfortable for survivors (and others).

CONCLUSIONS

In order to teach survivors, Aikido instructors must be aware of survivors' special circumstances and take care to respect their pace of learning and their boundaries.

Teaching abuse survivors is almost a process of re-parenting. The focus of such teaching must be to empower the survivors to know and respect themselves and to be able to defend themselves against intrusions and attacks. The dojo should be one place where survivors are seen and respected as conscious beings and helped to develop their awareness and strength.

But in the end, the same could be said for all students. What is needed when working with survivors may well be what is most needed for all students. Thinking about helping people who were hurt as children may make it clearer what the spiritual path of Aikido is for everyone.

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