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Safe to fight: Lessons from counseling for grappling coaches

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Safe to Fight: Lessons from Counseling for Grappling Coaches

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Abstract

The following is a series of articles designed to help coaches respond empathically and effectively to the emotional needs of their athletes and to safety concerns in their club. The three articles discuss students who shut down when they train; students who become overly aggressive; and students or coaches who groom and prey on others. A review of the counseling literature is offered to explain the behaviors each type of student is likely to engage in. Counseling principles and technique are offered to provide a framework for coaches to use as they teach these kinds of students and address safety concerns. Specific interventions are then offered as examples of how to redirect maladaptive or dangerous behavior and keep all students and staff safe.

Introduction

The field of counseling has developed helpful approaches for assisting people who struggle with mental health challenges. Although the healing power of the therapeutic relationship is specific to therapy, the principles of that relationship can be helpful in other fields. The relationship between a martial arts coach and a student has the potential to significantly impact the student's growth and development, both physically and mentally. When coaches lack the tools to recognize and respond when their students are struggling due to a mental, emotional, or behavioral challenge, athletes who could excel may plateau or quit instead. These students are often the most in need of the social and psychological benefits of martial arts training, but they unnecessarily lose access to those benefits because coaches have been underprepared to help them train.

Below are three articles written specifically for grappling coaches to help normalize the discussion of mental health needs in martial arts training. The goal of the series is to make martial arts training safer and more accessible to people with mental health challenges. The first two articles explore how coaches can nurture a healthy relationship with their students by using empathy to build trust and by implementing strategies that help students feel safe while they train. The third article considers psychological safety concerns in training and responding to unsafe behavior. Each article presents an example of a common mental or behavioral challenge as it tends to present in a martial arts setting. Relevant research and techniques from the field of counseling are explained in order to help shape the approach coaches take with their students. To help make the research and techniques more concrete and relatable, the scenarios described, as well as the guidance provided, additionally draw on my personal experience as both a

martial arts student and coach. Though most of the scenarios described are examples from grappling sports, the research, principles, and guidelines are very applicable to the broader martial arts community.

In these three articles, I discuss students who shut down when they train; students who become overly aggressive; and students or coaches who groom and prey on others. My hope is to eventually publish these articles and encourage martial arts coaches and practitioners to read and engage with them. To that end, I conclude each one inviting coaches and students to comment their thoughts, questions, and stories regarding the topics discussed.

Scenario I: The Anxious Student who Won't Try

The Scenario

We've all had this student. They're a white belt and they're doing all the same things white belts normally do. They're unsure of themselves, they're sloppy with their technique when they drill[1], they tend to rush things and miss the finer details. Then they fight and their technique fails them. The sloppy drilling turns into sloppy fighting, they get passed, they lose position, and they get tapped[2].

That's when this student's specific struggle reveals itself. Unlike other students, this person quickly plateaus and stops trying to incorporate the techniques they drill into their fights. Instead, they abandon the technique entirely and develop a stalling game. My coach once described it as fighting like you're already dead. Clinging to their opponent, not skillfully shutting down their technique, but instead desperately and unsuccessfully trying to tie them up to just survive a bit longer, as if to avoid the loss they suffered when they took risks with new techniques. Lots of people try this for a time, but this student persists with this approach, even though it repeatedly fails them.

It's frustrating for coaches and for sparring partners. They know that if the student stopped worrying so much about winning and losing and started cluing in to the little wins, like the slight and gradual improvements in technique or the joy of trying something new, the student would be much better off. Often, both coaches and training partners will point this out. Initially the student starts to take some risks again, but they

[1] "Drill" - to practice the same technique repeatedly

[2] "Tap" - to physically signal by tapping that a person gives up the fight

can't seem to shake the habit of giving up when the technique seems to not work. It can be maddening. Sometimes they were so close.

Understanding Anxiety and the Freeze Response

So, what's going on? Why is it that despite reminder after reminder, the student consistently goes back to the same bad habit? They keep saying "I know, I know" but nothing seems to change. Everyone has training plateaus, but this person can't seem to get past the first few steps.

This student is likely struggling with feelings of anxiety. Anxiety is a natural and often helpful feeling that all people experience but can sometimes come on too strong and remain too long. Anxiety comes from that primal part of the brain, the part that's focused on keeping us alive (Persson & Zakrisson, 2015). Our fight, flight, or freeze response comes from that same part of our brain. Anxiety works a little differently than that response, but it's still concerned with that same priority: STAY ALIVE (Persson & Zakrisson, 2015). The primal part of our brain can overrule the part that does long term planning in order to save our lives quickly and not be delayed by more time-consuming processes like conscious decision making (Persson & Zakrisson, 2015; Arnsten, 2009). That doesn't mean that our primal brain is irrational, it simply has one all-consuming priority; it would rather be safe than dead (May, 2015, p.17). This means that in order to change our anxiety responses, we have to be willing to respect the root of the anxiety, the root of the fear, and not judge it even if it feels irrational to us.

Going back to our student, if we acknowledge that this person is struggling with feelings of anxiety around normal training risks, like trying a new technique repeatedly even when it doesn't initially work, then the next question is: What is the anxiety doing for the student? Anxiety is all about keeping a person safe (May, 2015, p.4), so what is the perceived threat that the person is avoiding by shutting down rather than taking risks? The simple answer is "losing," but often there's more to it than that. Sometimes people feel like a fool for messing up a technique and they fear a kind of social death: the judgement of their peers or coach. Sometimes they simply hold themselves to an impossible standard and then can't help but feel worthless if they don't meet it. Maybe they feel so helpless when they are submitted[3] that the fear of that powerless moment shuts them down. This is particularly likely if the person has experienced abuse or trauma, as certain positions or techniques may trigger terrible and debilitating feelings and memories.

Whatever the reason, the idea of taking a risk and trying the technique again sparks the anxiety that activates the sympathetic nervous system. This system then releases a slew of hormones that spike the person's adrenaline, putting them on high alert as their brain and body communicate the urgent message "This will kill you!" even though their life is not truly in danger (Persson & Zakrisson, 2015). In response, the student copes. They fight like they're dying because their brain is telling them that they're going to die. To push off death for a moment longer, they cope, in this case, by shutting down. Anxious behavior comes in many forms, but anxiety always pushes us to find a way to cope and survive (Goldstein, 2013). Even if the coping is ineffective long

[3] "Submitted" - when a person taps or gives up the fight due to pain or risk of injury, or when a person loses a grappling match due to falling unconscious

term, it still kept us alive for that much longer. They likely will not even be aware of what their brain is doing and wouldn't describe themselves as afraid for their life, but existentially and biochemically, their reaction is rooted in their survival response. This means that in most cases, purely arguing with the person or simply demanding that they do things differently will not result in lasting change. In general, anxiety won't be argued with; it learns predominately by experience.

Coaching an Anxious Frozen Student

Coaching anyone requires a healthy, trusting relationship between the coach and their students. The coach must attune to the needs of their students and identify what they do and don't know, what strengths and barriers they have, and what strategies will help their students grow. Coaches then have to communicate their understanding to their students and build trust through the patience, encouragement, and helpful guidance they provide. Beyond these building blocks for good coaching, it is also important that coaches demonstrate a genuine interest and care for the wellbeing of their students. Taking that extra step of noticing a player's state of mind and being willing to empathize with their struggle even for a moment to help them work through it and go back to practice goes a long way towards cultivating that essential trusting relationship.

Developing trust in the coaching relationship is especially important for anxious students. Having empathy for their struggle, especially if it is initially confusing or frustrating is essential for addressing this student's training barriers. That experience of receiving compassion instead of judgement will speak louder than any words you could say or any training technique you could try.

In the context of a trusting, empathic coaching relationship, it can then be helpful to slightly adjust your training approach with this student, just as someone with a physical injury might need adjustments to their training while they heal. One way to help this student is to change what it means for them to win and lose in class. The goal is to indirectly teach the person's primal brain to understand that losing is not a threat, and neither is the necessary risk taking that can lead to losing. In time, as they learn that the risk of trying new techniques is a safe learning opportunity, no matter the outcome of the fight, the anxiety will often begin to quiet down.

There are a number of ways to teach this. This example provides a framework to guide coaches as they think through how to help their students. The first step is to validate what the student finds difficult. It might be a bit different for each student but observe at what moment they shut down and validate how challenging that moment is for them. Listen well to what they say about what it is like for them in that moment and empathize with the stress, anxiety, or fear they feel. The validation is not predicated on the situation being hard for everyone, or the fear being present in everyone. All that's important is that the fear is very real for this student. So, tell them that you not only see their struggle, but that it is normal and happens to lots of people. Empathize with any frustration, fear, or discouragement they express, though try not to assume what they are feeling if you're not sure. Reassure them that you're going to support them as you together try a different approach.

Next, change what it means to live and die. Not by explaining, not by reasoning with them, but by validating their fears while also setting new expectations (Bergholz et.

al., 2016). For example, tell them you want to see them attempt that sweep or that pass with every person they roll[4] with that night, no matter the outcome. If the person seems truly overwhelmed, feel free to readjust and make the goal for that night a very small and safe step. You can even outline your longer-term goal of them completing a certain technique, and then work with them to come up with a comfortable but challenging first step they can take that day (Bergholz et. al., 2016). Make it clear that you're excited to see them try and you don't care if they complete the technique. If that brings up concerns in the person, validate those fears, acknowledge that it's intimidating, and stand your ground. Let them know that even though they're not sure, you're confident in them and you're excited to see them try.

After that, it's all about reinforcing. Every time or at least several times they attempt that sweep for the rest of the night, let them know that you saw. Resist the urge to correct their technique. That training can come later. For now, we're teaching their brain that it is OK to take risks. As they begin to try, call out "Good!" while they're rolling, not necessarily because they're doing the technique well, but because they're overcoming their fears well (D'Andrea et. al., 2013). If this student for you is a kid, make a HUGE deal out of it. You know yourself and your style -- huge can mean whatever it is at your club. For adults, don't go over the top and risk embarrassing the student, but make it clear you see them and you're happy, even proud (D'Andrea et. al., 2013). Your confidence in them becomes their confidence in themselves (Bergholz et. al., 2016).

Coaching a Survivor of Trauma

[4] "Roll" - a grappling fight

For students who are survivors of trauma, you may find that they shut down when they are put in a specific position such as being pinned down, having someone in their guard[5], being struck in a particular place, or being held in a particular way. It is also possible for students to have a more extreme response like a flashback or panic attack, though not everyone with a history of trauma will struggle with those reactions. If this does happen, it can be very confusing, as instead of just freezing or clinging to their opponent, they might begin to panic. They could stop moving entirely, start yelling or screaming, or begin to fight in ways that are illegal for the sport. Mentally, they could be somewhere else entirely, shut off from the present moment and instead re-experiencing the memory and feelings of a traumatic moment. They could alternatively be fully in the present, but breathing extremely rapidly, heart racing, feeling like they are having a heart attack, or that they are going to die.

Before discussing how to help someone who is experiencing a flashback or a panic attack, it is important to consider prevention and preparation. Helping students who have experienced trauma starts with getting prepared ahead of time by asking basic questions that help reveal a history of trauma and provide an opportunity to consider how to help the person feel safe as they train. In your conversation with them when they sign up, or in the paperwork they sign before they start, ask them "What made you decide to learn martial arts?" And "Do you have any concerns about the training causing you distress or panic?" If you feel comfortable, you can also directly ask if they have experienced any trauma or have any mental health challenges that they are willing to share to help you support them. Be sure to let them know as you ask that they do not have

[5] "Guard" - a position in grappling where a person is on their back with their legs around the waist of their opponent.

to go into detail, but you want to be able to plan ahead with them to ensure they can feel safe while they train. Though these questions may feel a bit awkward, at the end of the day, everyone has mental health just as everyone has physical health. Knowing about both physical and mental injuries can help coaches better train their students.

Whether you learn ahead of time that a student might struggle due to trauma, or you simply see them repeatedly shut down or panic when put in a specific position, helping them starts with an assessment of what they can handle. Whether this is through your own observations, or through a conversation, get a sense for what specifically causes the panic, and how shut down they get. Are they still aware of the present or does their mind seem to be a million miles away? Can they hear you? Can they identify what is around them? If not, then back everyone away from them, tell them to breathe and instruct them to tell you the color of the mats, the color of their pants or gi, other simple questions that require them to exit their thoughts and instead observe the present. Use a calm and steady voice, regulating your own emotions so as not to add to their panic. This will help bring them out of their flashback and back to the present. On a later day, you and that student would need to discuss whether or not it makes sense for them to continue training at this time, and if so, what precautions you all should take to keep the student feeling safe.

Example Intervention for Coaching a Survivor of Trauma

For most people, as you assess their panic, you will see their breathing is unusually elevated, and their eyes express fear, but they are still responsive to the present and are clearly still trying to fight with technique. My favorite intervention with these

students is to work with them myself, teaching them an escape or response for the technique they fear through a very intentional and gradual process. Although, with some students, it's best to start with a non-threatening technique and work up to the more stressful situations. Wherever we start, I explain clearly what I am going to do and what they will do in response prior to each step, being sure to continually check in with them and assess their levels of stress and fear. Communication, collaboration, and predictability are crucial to this process. The more the person knows what to expect and the more control they are given over the process, the safer they will feel ((Bergholz et. al., 2016).

I start by putting them in the more powerful offensive position while I demonstrate the defense. Then we switch, I provide no-resistance as they begin to practice the technique. Additionally, if the position they are triggered by is a pin[6], I start with both no-resistance and NO WEIGHT. Practicing pin escapes with no weight from their opponent is a particularly important step for survivors of sexual violence. Continue to assess their breathing and stress as you give them guidance and encouragement. If you're not sure how anxious they are, feel free to ask them: "On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being perfectly calm and 10 being I think I'm going to die, how stressed are you?" Anything from a four and up, pause, take some deep breaths together, and check in with them. Maybe all they can practice that day is the version with no weight or no resistance. Reassure them that this is a great first step and they can set a goal of going further another day. If instead they say they are calm, tell them you'd like them to try the defense

[6] "Pin" - a technique of holding someone on the ground by laying on top of them and making it difficult for them to move.

again, and this time make it a bit more challenging. Again, collaborate with them to assess their breathing and level of anxiety as you have them drill the technique.

If you check in, and they're calm and they've practiced the full technique several times successfully, tell them you'd like to do a light spar and that you will put them in that position so they can use their defense to get out. If at any point during this process they say they need to stop or you suspect they are getting too overwhelmed, respect their needs and stop. As you spar, put them in the position you practiced together. If they begin to get a little stressed, I find I can usually help them through the moment by telling them they're doing great and then asking them what position this is. They usually name it, and then I ask them how they defend that position. That usually is enough for their brain to click back into the memory of the defense and they will push through the fear and successfully escape. The feeling of strength, power, and confidence they get from overcoming their intense fears, anxiety, or trauma in this way is life changing for students.

Just as with other students who shut down, be sure to make a HUGE deal of what they just accomplished (D'Andrea et. al., 2013). It may have looked like all they did was learn a basic technique, but what really happened is you helped them fight through their terror and discover a resilience they never dreamed they had. Remember not to rush this process. For some students, the scenario I just described will take all of five minutes, but for others, it will take weeks or more. With patience, consistency, and empathy, they will more than likely work through their pain and fear and become capable and confident martial artists.

Final Thoughts

We all experience anxiety. A lot of us who stay in grappling sports have developed healthy coping mechanisms for our anxiety that allow us to move past some of these mental barriers. When a person can't move past it as easily, there's no reason they should quit. It's not that they're too weak to do this or that they'll have to be coddled. It's that their mind needs care and conditioning just as their body does. Everyone who comes to martial arts has to go through considerable physical conditioning to adjust to the demands of the sport. The unseen reality is that our minds will have to do the same, and just as we can develop exercises to target a student's physical barriers to training, we can develop strategies to target specific mindsets too.

As for our anxious student, strategies that consistently communicate connection and belonging no matter the outcome of the fight can help quiet their anxious response.

Comment below the strategies you've used to help this kind of student flourish at your club. If you struggled with this kind of anxious response, comment below what helped you gain a sense of safety and self-confidence.

Scenario II: The Talented Student with a Big Ego

The Scenario

At any grappling club, a ton of these guys will walk in the door, go through one day of training, get their egos bruised, and never come back. For lots of the guys I've seen, it's not even the grappling that does the bruising. Often the intensity of the warmups gives them such a hard time that they get embarrassed and can't bring themselves to go through it again, and that's ok. All forms of grappling are intense, hard work, and necessarily painful, so it's important for people who can't commit to be honest with themselves and find a sport that fits their needs.

For some students with a big ego[7], somewhere in the first class or two they get both themselves and their ego bruised, and they rise to the occasion. They're a little embarrassed, but rather than posturing, they ask a question and discover that a little humility helps them learn and be welcomed by the team.

Every now and again however, you get someone who comes in with a big ego who never really gets bruised. They begin their training with a bit too much arrogance and self-absorption that leads them to overestimate their skill. Maybe they've already had training in another related sport, they've got a natural gift, or they're just bigger and stronger than your average fighter. They definitely still lose, but maybe the majority of white belts or even a blue belt or two couldn't tap them, allowing them to hold onto their overconfidence.

These students quickly come to love the sport and throw themselves in. It can be exciting because they have so much potential and they're quickly dedicated (Roberts et.

[7] "Big ego" - arrogant, full of themselves. NOT the clinical understanding of ego.

al., 2015). They often can't get enough, and are constantly training, wanting to learn technique after technique. They push the pace of their training, not slowing down long enough to realize they don't yet understand the underlying principles of balance and control in the sport. In this student's mind, they're doing extremely well. People have a hard time controlling or tapping them, the advanced techniques they learned from the higher belts or off YouTube seem to work as they force the techniques during rolls, and they believe they're well on their way to the next belt.

What the coach and the more experienced players know is that this student is inefficient and sloppy. They've likely told this person to slow down and to drill a few things thousands of times, rather than practicing many techniques only a couple times each. They've likely told this fighter to focus on technique rather than muscling through everything, that good technique will help them out more down the road. They all know that our excited but prideful student will eventually start losing to the fighters that took the time learn the finer details of the sport.

This is when the injuries happen. Our student with an ego starts to lose, or maybe full on loses to someone who they think they should be beating. There's still time on the clock, so the pair fight again, and this time the ego-driven student tries to take their partner's head off. They go too fast, take things too far. They throw their weight around, force their way into a position, grab the nearest arm and yank as hard as they can in whatever lock they can manage. Worst case scenario, their partner is an up-and-coming white belt who has just begun to make real progress when they get an accidental knee in the face, a tear in their shoulder, or an overly hyperextended elbow. Best case scenario, they're fighting someone who can keep up with them, but now the pace has ramped up,

one fighter is emotionally compromised, and both are at higher risk of injury. Often our ego-driven fighter feels bad that their partner got injured, but the pattern keeps cropping up. More and more, they keep accidentally injuring partners, they keep pushing the pace during drilling and rolling, and over time, fewer and fewer people want to work with them.

Understanding Anxiety and the Fight Response

To help this student, it's important to consider what's keeping them wrapped up in their ego and unable to gain the humility, control, and then appropriate confidence that most grapplers learn. One clue into what's really going on for them is how it feels when you fight them. Most experienced grapplers can feel the difference between a confident fighter and an ego-driven fighter. Both can move quickly, aggressively, and powerfully, but a confident fighter does so with skilled, intentional precision, while an ego-driven fighter often does so with an intense, imprecise desperation. We can feel it in how they move, how they try to move us in a fight, and in their reaction to when they feel they are losing or winning. The confident fighter, for the most part, has a calm enjoyment, no matter the pace of the fight, whether they win or lose. The ego-driven fighter, despite their talent, size, or whatever gives them an extra edge, fights with a tense desperation.

It's that desperation that clues us in to their insecurity and anxiety. As we discussed in our first scenario, anxiety comes from the same part of our brains as the fight, flight, or freeze response, and its main job is to keep us alive (Persson & Zakrisson, 2015). Unlike our anxious person who freezes up, this time we have an anxious person who, once triggered, demonstrates an uncontrolled fight response. Since our ego-driven

fighter is desperate to be seen as intimidating and formidable, the risk of losing and looking inadequate feels profoundly threatening and triggers anxiety and aggression.

It might seem like it would be very useful to activate the body and brain in such a way as to use its natural survival fight response, but it is actually quite inefficient for grappling and very unhealthy for the person when it happens repeatedly. When the body's fight response is activated, "the body initiates a chain reaction of events to maximize muscular output and reaction speed" (Persson & Zakrisson, 2015). The response "stimulates respiration, maximizing delivery of oxygen to the bloodstream via the lungs" (Goldstein, 2013). The sympathetic nervous system and the endocrine system manage this maximized activation while also overriding the more rational decision-making part of the brain, since thinking might take too long and get you killed (Arnsten, 2009). Maximizing output from all these systems is effective for emergency survival, but in comparison to the precisely controlled activation the body initiates for prolonged exercise, the fight, flight, or freeze activation is a massive waste of energy for a grappling match.

During exercise, the body and brain are in constant communication "to precisely match systemic oxygen delivery with metabolic demand" (Qi & Levine, 2015). If that highly efficient process gets unnecessarily overridden by our body's emergency response, the result is a very inefficient, emotionally overwhelmed grappler who is overtaxing their body by fighting like their life depends on it. This is why you'll hear some of the advanced players talk about how their strategy for handling larger more ego-driven opponents is to play defense for a bit, let them exhaust themselves in the first two minutes, and then turn the tables and pick them a part.

When a person experiences the repeated activation of their emergency stress response, it will eventually result in health problems. Researchers have linked “heart disease, diabetes, multiple sclerosis (MS), Alzheimer’s, and autoimmune disorders” with the immunosuppressive and inflammatory effects of chronic activation of the fight, flight, or freeze response (Kendell-Tackett, 2010). Other studies point out how unrelenting exposure to stressors can reduce resilience **“**resulting in a burn-out and, worst case, mortality from stress-related disease” (Persson & Zakrisson, 2015). All of this is in addition to the worsening of psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and substance use.

Since activating the survival fight response is so inefficient and unhealthy for a fighter, we have to wonder why our anxious ego-driven fighter keeps relying on that response and taking things too far. It must be the case that this fighter feels profoundly threatened by aspects of the grappling training for the fight response to get activated. If a fighter at your club cannot bring themselves to slow down their drilling no matter how many times you’ve told them to, then there is something threatening about slowing it down. If they can’t lose to certain people, or to anyone, then they must perceive losing as a fundamental threat. Maybe they can’t even allow themselves to be thrown, pinned, or submitted in no-resistance drills without feeling somewhat threatened, and needing to crush their partner a bit when it’s their turn.

It might be tempting to tell this person to get over it, and just relax, but consider the kinds of experiences that make a person behave this way. Some might have been told their whole lives that anything less than being the best means that they are worthless and will be seen as worthless by the people that matter to them. Others are experiencing or

have experienced abuse or trauma that made them feel powerless and less than. Losing to a “weaker” or less experienced fighter may remind them of the terrible way the abuse made them feel.

Whatever the underlying reason, for this student, it’s not as simple as they don’t like losing. To them, being anything less than impressive or formidable leaves them feeling worthless, weak, or dismissible. Those feelings are uncomfortable to anyone, but to this student they are so intolerable that they fight desperately to keep those feelings away, even to the point of physically harming themselves or their training partner. This is rarely a decision they are consciously making. It is more often an automatic unconscious response that they are probably confused by as they struggle with self-control.

Helping this student is complicated and it depends on how aggressive they have become. It is very important to identify students with this kind of anxiety and egotism early, as it is then much easier to guide them down a healthier and more productive path. It’s true that for the majority of students that struggle with anxiety that presents as arrogance and aggression, the sport itself will eventually teach them some much needed humility, confidence, and self-control. However, they can get themselves and many of their training partners hurt first if their coach doesn’t intervene as soon as they begin to show a pattern of aggression. Allowing egotism and aggression to go unaddressed can cause a lot of damage to both your club members and your overall gym culture.

The Importance of Healthy Gym Culture

A great place to start when helping these students is to set norms in your gym that guide all students to practice safely from day one (Bergholz et. al., 2016). The two most

common and most essential rules are of course *protect your partner* and *respect the tap.* Help all your students understand that they can only keep growing if their training partners grow with them. Make these rules not only something everyone talks about regularly but hold people to it when they start to take things too far, take unnecessary risks in training, or hold a submission too long after the tap. Non-judgmentally remind students to take a step back when they're getting too emotional, sloppy, or aggressive.

The Gracie Barra club in their *7 Tips to Avoid Injuries while Training* take this idea a step further and remind people to "tap early to submissions" (Barra, 2015). Following this rule not only forces everyone to practice humility, it encourages them to train smart and prioritize good positioning over clever and risky last second escapes. Beyond just telling your students these rules, have them practice tapping early and responding quickly to a tap. This is particularly important for your students who can't stand to lose. One way to practice this is to pick a submission to teach, and as they drill with no resistance, explicitly have your students practice accepting the "loss" and tapping, while the person applying the submission practices responding quickly to the tap. Incorporating these norms into the training takes no time away from progressing in the techniques and helps everyone instinctually internalize that it is safe to lose and that a tap means quick release.

A less commonly talked about norm has to do with setting expectations for promotions. Rank is a complicated social phenomenon in martial arts. Since rank is usually very visible and often has a big impact on the social pecking order, many students or their parents worry about it constantly. Our anxious aggressive player is likely going to obsess about rank and will push to be promoted sooner than the coach thinks they should

be. They might go as far as to suggest they might leave if they're not promoted soon, which can be problematic for newer clubs that barely have enough members to survive.

Though our anxious, ego-driven student will likely demand promotion too soon no matter what you do, it helps to make explicit that progress towards mastery is the real criteria for promotion. Often students believe that the number one criterion for promotion is the ability to beat most of the other people at their current rank and maybe a few people of the rank above them. The other common misconception is that if they learn all the techniques designated as "white belt techniques," then they deserve a promotion. They haven't quite internalized or maybe even realized that a certain degree of mastery is the number one criterion for promotion. Coaches often are rightly looking beyond a person's ability to perform certain techniques and instead want to see the student clue into certain principles about control, balance, and flow as expressed through those techniques. Additionally, many coaches are looking for a certain mastery of self, signs that the student has learned some humility, gained some self-control, and has both self-respect and respect for others. Not only does this approach result in better fighters, research shows that a "mastery climate" or culture leads to "greater effort, enjoyment, satisfaction, persistence and lower anxiety" in the majority of students (Roberts et. al., 2015). Making mastery an explicit club norm will help to shape expectations and give your ego-driven student an opportunity to learn patience.

Building a Trusting Coaching Relationship

If you've noticed a pattern of aggressive behavior in a student, at some point, you need to pull them aside and have a conversation. Check in with yourself before you do.

Be sure to calm any of your own irritation, as it is difficult to calm someone else if you yourself are upset. Remember that you never know what a person's been through to make them the way they are. Having empathy for this person and communicating your genuine desire for their safety and wellbeing will help them trust and respect you. That foundation of trust will help the person value the coaching relationship you have with them and make it easier for them to follow your guidance and advice.

To have this conversation, find a spot or a time where you can be out of earshot of other students and, without judgement, tell them what you've observed about their aggressive behavior. Let them know you're not looking to judge or punish, and you want to understand. Listen to what they describe about their behavior or emotions and empathize with their experience. Express how you are concerned not just for the safety of their training partners, but for their safety too. Clearly set expectations that the club rules and norms must be followed, and then together come up with alternative ways of coping that you are both comfortable with (Bergholz et. al., 2016).

Strategies for Coaching an Anxious Aggressive Student

One commonly used coping strategy is to step to the side and take 10 deep breaths, paying close attention to breathing and actively relaxing tension in the face, jaw, neck, shoulders, and throughout the body. Taking a very conscious and active break to breathe encourages students to be mindful of their emotions, physical tension, and needs (Bergholz et. al., 2016). Specifically in response to aggressive behavior, the student could try identifying something they can complement their partner on, or identifying something

they learned from the fight, especially when they lose. This helps to reframe the loss as an opportunity for connection, learning, and growth (Bergholz et. al., 2016).

To help normalize losing while keeping their aggression in check, it is also important to have the student roll with more advanced training partners. Instruct the more experienced player to pause the training if things get too aggressive and point out the actions that are inappropriate or dangerous. Be sure to instruct your higher belts to show patience and empathy, as judging the student or getting angry with them will probably push them to be more defensive rather than increase their humility and self-control. If they're really having a hard time being respectful when they lose, set up a private lesson with them where they practice losing to you or another coach. Make it clear that there is no shame or judgement in losing and that you're proud of them for persevering and for maintaining a sense of calm. Though I have not tried private lessons to practice losing with adults, I found it very effective with kids.

Another approach is to put them in circumstances where they have to practice putting others first by coaching another student (Bergholz et. al., 2016). Make it explicit that their goal is their partner's advancement and give them positive feedback periodically as they go. The idea is not to punish, but to teach the student's anxious brain that it is safe to lose and safe to focus on others. It takes time, but this is a fairly non-threatening way to help them break out of their pattern of only looking out for themselves. It is healthier for you, your students, and your gym culture if you *focus on encouraging the behavior you want to see,* rather than primarily punishing behavior you don't want to see, especially with people who are anxious and insecure to begin with *(Westwood et. al., 2019; Wade & Nichols, 2008).*

Final Thoughts

There are any number of ways to help this kind of student succeed in martial arts, and every student will be a little different. The key to any approach is the relationship you have with the student. Strengthen that relationship by keeping an open mind that can notice and wonder about a student's behavior, remembering that *all behavior is communication*. From this mindset, coaches can both set the necessary boundaries that keep students safe and non-judgmentally explore what this student's behavior is communicating about their needs. This approach teaches the student that even though they are struggling, they are valued by their coach.

When in doubt, ask for help. If you have them, talk to your assistant coaches and get their thoughts and assessments of the student. Talk to more experienced coaches and explore how they handled students like this. Reach out to mental health professionals or behavioral health resources in your area to ask questions about difficult or concerning behavior you've seen, and to hear about empirically based practices for helping students with behavioral or mental health challenges.

Comment below the strategies you've used to help this kind of student flourish at your club. If you struggled with this kind of aggressive response, comment below what helped you gain confidence and control.

Scenario III: Identifying and Dealing with a Predator

Narcissism, Grandiosity, & Power Consolidation

If you stay in the martial arts world long enough, you're going to come across people who are dangerous. There are lots of incredible martial artists who are dangerous on the mats or in the ring, but outside the arena, they demonstrate empathy, self-control, and genuine respect for others. However, there are also people who are dangerous because they prey on others. These people behave in ways that exploit and damage the people around them and they lack any empathy or remorse for the extensive damage they cause. In my martial arts training, I have more than once been in the difficult position of being coached by, and having to work closely with, people who behaved as predators. They had been drawn to martial arts by their love of violence and the socially acceptable excuse the sport gave them to hurt people. Each one was a very talented martial artist, picking up on techniques easily, hungry to learn more and train harder. The problem was, the more they learned, the more damage they inflicted on and off the mats. People like this need so desperately to learn and value the sportsmanship, self-discipline, and respect that martial arts teaches, but too often they instead use the training to hone their skills of manipulation, exploitation, and abuse. People who behave like predators need social and psychological help that the martial arts community is not equipped to provide, and for the safety of the other students and coaches, predatory behavior should not be tolerated in martial arts.

The predators I've known were narcissistic and grandiose, but with a charismatic air that was initially very exciting and tended to draw people in. This is a common feature of people who are dangerously narcissistic, since being extremely likable, particularly

when first meeting people, ropes people in quickly and allows for easy access to social groups (Carlson et. al., 2011; Back et. al., 2010). They each would then use their charm and raw talent to manipulate, win people over, and put themselves in positions of power. Over time, they gained blindly loyal followers who took their word as gospel, even when faced with obvious evidence of lies or inconsistencies. Anyone who didn't come under their spell would often be demonized or undermined until they left. These themes of manipulation to gain power that is then used to control or alienate others are well documented tactics commonly used by people with high levels of narcissism (Carlson et. al., 2011).

Charisma, narcissism, manipulation, and power consolidation are not sufficient indicators to guarantee that a person is a predator. There are a whole lot of fighters who are very narcissistic and controlling, but at their worst are just unpleasant to be around and ultimately no real threat to anyone off the mats. What sets the predator apart is what they do with the power they have consolidated and the followers they have manipulated, as well as how they respond if anyone confronts them.

Grooming and Isolation

Each predator I worked with eventually targeted a specific vulnerable adult or child to groom. Grooming is a process of gradually desensitizing people to abuse by slowly gaining their trust, making the person feel special, then progressively adding more abusive behavior (Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Often this involves using coercion and manipulation to keep their target feeling trapped and help convince them that the abuse is normal. Grooming is so dangerous and important to understand "because it brings about

the appearance of cooperation from the athlete, making the act of abuse seem to be consensual" (Owton & Sparkes, 2017). The exact form of the grooming will look different depending on the predator and their target, though one example that I saw repeatedly was the use of crises to breach appropriate boundaries. Due to the social instability and impulsivity of most narcissistic predators, they are constantly in crisis (Back et. al., 2010). In my experience, crises were frequently used to excuse abusive, bullying, or possessive behavior, on and off the mats. No matter the approach, the goal is always the same: a predator wants to subtly break down the appropriate boundaries between themselves and their targets in order to take advantage and abuse them. This is true of many forms of abuse and can occur whether children or adults are the target.

In order to successfully groom and abuse their target, a person behaving as a predator will likely go to great lengths to isolate their followers from any other perspective that might challenge the status and power they have consolidated (Hogan & Fico, 2011; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). As a result, they will constantly bombard their followers with a very convincing and gradually more warped worldview. They will make themselves out to be perfectly innocent or even a victim, while making all others seem either untrustworthy or in complete agreement with their worldview (Carlson et. al., 2011). For instance, a common isolation tactic in the martial arts world is the promise that all other clubs or coaches are either weak or dangerous. Though few people will say this flat out, predators will ridicule others while self-promoting in order to shape the appearance of their own strength and everyone else's relative weakness (Carlson et. al., 2011). I've not only experienced the power of these claims subtly and progressively made by coaches, but I've watched as students and assistant coaches successfully turn club

members against the head coach and build an obsessed following from within their coach's club. Ultimately these tactics serve to isolate the followers from other perspectives that would present a more honest depiction of the predator, making it easier to groom and abuse their targets.

For many survivors of this kind of targeting and grooming, it can be immensely difficult to untangle from the toxic worldview impressed on them by their abuser. As just one example, I learned of abuse my coach inflicted on someone else, I heard about how afraid he had made that person and some of the pain he had inflicted on them, but it simply didn't cross my mind that I should stop training with him. At the time, I couldn't disconnect from those simple but powerful lies that he was the best coach out there and that his behavior wasn't abuse, it was justifiable and safe. It was when he was confronted, and I witnessed his rage, paranoia, and intense desire to hurt people for myself that I was jolted out of his worldview and began to understand how dangerous he was.

A Predator's Response to Confrontation

My coach's response to being confronted about his behavior was later echoed in both the research I found and the responses I later saw from other predators. Each one behaved manipulatively and aggressively when confronted. Several destroyed the property of whoever confronted them or tried to start fights. One was allowed to meet with the woman that came forward about his behavior, and he screamed at her until she recanted her statement. One who'd spent years preying on teenage girls at one club filed a lawsuit against the coach who eventually fired him. Some additionally reached out to their followers, spinning the story of what happened to keep as many people manipulated

into their worldview as possible. These reactions fit with what the research has shown about predatory behavior and their need for power and control. When their sense of control and their worldview is directly threatened, they will attack to regain their sense of stability. They will externalize the problem, blaming anyone and everyone else but themselves, and lack any empathy for the harm they have caused or are causing now (McEllistrem, 2003). These kinds of behaviors essentially serve to protect the predator's fragile sense of self while also giving them one last chance to dominate their followers and whoever confronted them (McEllistrem, 2003).

This response is one of the main contributing factors behind why narcissistic predators ultimately lose their grip on their position and their prey. The severity of their aggressive behavior when they are confronted leads them to struggle to keep a job and have few if any close relationships (Back et. al., 2010). Since these behaviors are so obviously antagonistic, people tend to quickly distance themselves from the predator when they behave this way. In fact, the better a predator is at patience and maintaining control over their intense emotions and aggressive actions, the more dangerous they are. This is why predatory behavior should not be tolerated in a martial arts setting. Predators who are allowed to keep training will learn the patience and self-control they need to become more dangerously effective at grooming others.

Do Not Tolerate Predatory Behavior in Martial Arts

It is a well known fact that martial arts teaches people self-discipline, patience, and confidence in addition to training them to fight effectively. The predatory coach I trained with had learned in martial arts how to have greater control over his emotions and

impulses, giving him the patience to manipulate and exploit gradually and get a better grip on the minds of his targets. He used the training as a socially acceptable excuse to practice dominating and hurting people, all while becoming an effective and dangerous fighter. I remember him saying excitedly that if anyone ever gave him a reason, he would put them in the ground. I didn't know enough then to understand how dangerous he was, but I knew he wasn't kidding.

This guy should never have learned martial arts, not just for the safety of others, but for his own mental health. Such a violent and predatory mindset left him financially struggling, socially isolated, and clueless of his own need for mental help. His skill at martial arts and talent for grooming and manipulation resulted in harm to dozens of students and likely dozens of others outside the martial arts community. This was true for each of the predators I met during my training and is likely to be true for all the predators who are drawn to the violence and control they are promised in the martial arts world. In order to help people who cope by preying on others, you must ensure they cannot practice their abuse in your club.

The Importance of a Conduct Policy

If you're a club owner or a coach, keeping people from practicing abuse in your club starts by having clearly outlined policies against certain kinds of behavior that, if violated, gives the coach the right to 1) refuse further services to that student or 2) take action against a staff member to keep students safe. This will not only help to shape your discernment when you observe unsettling or confusing behavior by students or coaches in your club, it will also help protect you legally if you kick someone out of your club for

violating these policies and they try to attack you through a lawsuit. Having these policies in place does not require you to jump to an extreme if a situation comes up, but they give you options if there is an ethical or safety concern.

The EEOC (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) has some very helpful language for crafting these policies. Though the outline they provide is specific to employees, the concepts are equally applicable to students or consumers. In their *Tips for Small Businesses,* the EEOC outlines how to craft a policy that bans all kinds of harassment, develop a confidential reporting procedure, and prepare to respond to reports (Harassment, n.d.). You can find their guidelines on their website, and can use their resources to draft both an employee and student policy.

For specific examples of language you can use for the policy, I found that a university code of conduct handbook is very helpful. Editing down the language of the harassment and bullying section of a college handbook and adding a few specifics to your gym will help you quickly craft a comprehensive policy for your students and employees to sign. One example from James Madison University can be found here. To be certain that your business is protected in the case that you have to take action against an individual in your club, you may wish to consult with a lawyer to help create comprehensive documentation that you are sure will hold up if challenged.

The Importance of Healthy Gym Culture

Beyond creating a policy that all students and staff sign, an essential aspect of keeping everyone safe is setting club norms that prioritize respectful behavior while making it clear that bullying behaviors or inappropriate boundaries are not tolerated

(Bergholz et. al., 2016). The first rule in all martial arts clubs should be “protect your partner” and a close second in grappling or MMA gyms especially is “be quick to tap.” These simple ground rules when regularly referenced and reinforced set the tone for your gym and make it easier to identify and redirect behavior that conflicts with those principles. If someone begins to continually antagonize, shame, or criticize other players or coaches, it’s easier to call them out if the gym has a norm of respect and care for everyone.

Similarly, if someone is using a form of power like physical strength, skill in the sport, their position of authority, or even attractiveness and sex appeal to intimidate, manipulate, or distract people, these behaviors interfere with both their own growth and the growth of others, which goes against the gym rules and culture. Noticing these kinds of behaviors early and setting appropriate boundaries quickly will help protect your students. Calling these behaviors out and directing people towards appropriate actions communicates to everyone that to belong in this gym, they must show respect and behave appropriately. Additionally, make sure your assistant coaches are modeling that proper demeanor and are prepared to redirect students from inappropriate behavior to something more considerate and productive.

Maintaining Awareness

Discerning whether someone in your club is preying on your students or staff comes down to being informed about what constitutes predatory behavior and then maintaining an appropriate awareness of the behaviors and dynamics in your club. A good place to start when raising your awareness is to notice how you feel around people.

If you naturally feel angry, uneasy, anxious, or afraid around someone, take that as a clue as to how they may be making others feel. Though this is not a guarantee that a person is dangerous, it is a sign that something may be off. As you coach, pay attention to signs of problematic behavior such as bullying, possessiveness by one student over another, attempts to isolate a student, or other concerning signs like inappropriate aggression or manipulativeness. Encourage other staff members and coaches to be aware of the behavior of their students and conscious of these signs that there may be a problem. Be sure to keep open lines of communication with your staff and invite them to share with you any positives and/or concerns they have about the club dynamics and student behavior. Sometimes you may notice or be told that certain students refuse to work together, and others almost always work together. Though this is not necessarily a problem, it is wise to make sure you know why your students are making those decisions. Usually, the reason will be perfectly reasonable, but it's important to be aware and be sure.

Remember that you are not the police and that you are not equipped to launch an investigation if you believe or know that someone is preying on your students. Not only could you put yourself at risk legally, coaches and gyms are just not equipped to maintain confidentiality or document evidence. Investigating your own could also put your safety or the safety of your students at risk. Instead, focus on prevention cultivate in yourself an awareness of what goes on in your club so that any problematic behavior can be quickly identified and resolved safely.

Addressing Predatory Behavior

If you believe you have a predator in your club or have seen some concerning behavior, one good first step is to call a crisis hotline like the U.S. sport helpline, SafeSport (720-531-0340), or the national child abuse hotline, ChildHelp (1-800-422-4453). You can describe your concerns to their trained crisis counselors and get advice on how to assess and handle the situation. You can additionally get some guidance from them on how to talk to and help anyone who has come forward about harassment, assault, or abuse. Check out the information on the RAINN website for some basic information on how to listen to and support a survivor. Though their organization is specifically focused on preventing and addressing sexual violence, their *Tips for Talking with Survivors of Sexual Assault* is a great framework to follow no matter the crisis being disclosed. Though a lot more can be said for how to talk with and help survivors, the key things to remember are to communicate that you believe them, that it's not their fault, that they are not alone, and that you're going to do your best to help (Tips for, n.d.). Communicating that will help the person stay calm, be honest with you, and stay safe.

Each situation will vary and discerning what to do can be difficult, but there may come a time when you decide someone is too big of a safety threat to be allowed at your club anymore. Having that conversation with them can be intimidating, but there are a few things you can do to help it go more smoothly. Start by checking in with your own state of mind. If you are unsure, afraid, angry, or hurt, those feelings are understandable and should be listened to and addressed before you meet with the person. If you're feeling unsure of your decision, you can get additional guidance from other coaches or a crisis line, or maybe gather more information about the situation. It can be tough to tell

the difference between delaying in an effort to not rush to conclusions and delaying out of dread of a difficult conversation. It helps to listen to yourself if you have doubts and acknowledge your fears, then identify what you need to move forward and keep people safe.

When preparing for the conversation, check in with all staff that will be present to make sure they too are in a calm state of mind and can present themselves as friendly and non-threatening while also holding firm to the boundaries you are about to set with this person. Remember that you are actually trying to help the person who is behaving like a predator by keeping them from continuing to damage themselves and others with their destructive behavior. Focus your thoughts on the goal of safety for everyone involved, rather than the desire for punishment, retribution, or even holding the person accountable. A predator will almost definitely respond badly to punishment or retribution, and it is unlikely they will hold themselves accountable (McEllistrem, 2003). Instead, focus on communicating the boundary you are about to set in terms they will understand.

When you meet with the person, make sure it is in a private space, away from other students and with only the staff that you want present. Start by setting the boundary clearly and firmly without room for argument, while also validating however it makes them feel. Make it clear that the person cannot train or work with you anymore, identify how that makes them feel, agree that it is an upsetting situation, and then make it clear that your decision is final. You may find that you are so angry with this person or so dislike them, that you are uncomfortable acknowledging their emotions. This is understandable and normal, however the feelings they have in that moment are real and acknowledging their reality will help them stay calm.

If you find them trying to argue with you about your decision, instead of arguing back, say something like, “I can see how upsetting this is for you. You really want to argue with me and find a way around this, but there’s nothing I can do.” Meet them where they are. They will probably blame other people or circumstances for their behavior and believe they are being unfairly punished or persecuted. Instead of trying to convince them otherwise, acknowledge how unfair this must feel, and then hold your ground. Find ways of coming alongside the person and empathize with their anger and distress, while still making it very clear that your decision is final, and the person cannot train or teach at your club anymore.

If the person tries to rile you up by verbally lashing out at you, your club, or other students, stay calm and use what they say as reasons why they wouldn’t want to stay there anyway. If they do escalate to destroying property or becoming violent towards others, call the police. Of course, defend yourself or others if you have to, but remember that you are not the judge, jury, or executioner, even if you are quite capable of fighting this person. Leave the containment, investigation, and sentencing to the justice system and call the police if the situation gets out of hand. You additionally have the option of calling the non-emergency police number prior to the conversation and asking if they could have an officer nearby if you already suspect the person may respond with physical aggression.

After the person leaves, take a moment to check in with anyone that was present for the conversation. Make sure they are ok and have a chance to process their thoughts and feelings about how things went down. As best you can, keep the details of what happened and why confidential from all other students at your club. That said, it may be

wise to review with all your students the club policies on harassment and bullying behavior, the club norm of "protect your partner," and details about what you want that to look like in your club.

If at any point you gain any knowledge or evidence that a child has been abused, assaulted, or molested by anyone, including parents, coaches, other students, or even other kids, call the police. Though there are a few options for most other situations, when there is child abuse, the only option is to call the police. You might feel like getting the police involved is a big step to jump to, doubt that you have enough evidence, fear that the person might retaliate against you, or fear that your business will take a hit if a child predator is discovered in your club. These fears are understandable and worth addressing, but it is important to remember that the top priority must be the safety of the child and all other children the predator might get access to if they are not caught. The police are not only the ones best equipped to investigate and keep the child safe, they can help you and your club stay safe from retaliation, and their involvement demonstrates to your club members that you take their safety seriously. Additionally, in most states, coaches are mandated by law to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect (Mandatory Reporters, 2019).

If my description of a predator sounds like your coach, leave that club and do not go back. No matter how amazing they are at the sport, they can do you and your teammates profound harm if you stay. I promise, despite what they have said, there are other coaches that are just as good and even better that are not a danger to you. If you are not sure, you're afraid of their response, or you just need help, try calling a crisis hotline like the national sexual assault hotline, RAINN (1-800-656-4673), or the U.S. sport

helpline, SafeSport ((720) 531-0340). Even if you personally have not been assaulted, their trained staff will help you think through the situation, assess your safety and options, and help you plan your next steps.

Resources

For more information on identifying and responding to predators, I'd suggest reading *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker. It has extensive information on how to identify different kinds of manipulative and grooming behavior that predators use to get access to their targets. The book additionally has a lot of helpful information for identifying, understanding, and addressing situations of harassment, stalking, and abuse.

A phenomenal resource to help prevent bullying, harassment, and abusive behavior in sports is SafeSport, a "non-profit organization focused on ending all forms of abuse in sport" (A Federally, n.d.). Their training courses educate athletes and coaches in mandatory reporting, sexual misconduct awareness, and identifying emotional and physical misconduct (A Federally, n.d.). Having all your coaches take their training will prepare the leaders in your club to protect your student body and protect themselves from getting caught up in any misunderstandings about student safety.

For more information about red flags of predatory behavior, sites like RAINN and NNEDV have very helpful information. Though their sites use language focused on sexual and domestic violence, the red flags they outline are still accurate and relevant to predators operating in a martial arts setting. RAINN in particular has helpful breakdowns for preventing abuse, observing warning signs for different age groups, and helping targets of abuse, harassment, and violence. Remember that predators can be any gender

or age, have any career or position, and be of any demographic background (Patrick, 2019).

This article by Daniel Pollack provides 10 guidelines for parents to follow to reduce the risk of a predator gaining access to their child (Pollack, 2018). Coaches can not only make parents aware of the article but hold themselves to those standards in order to help prevent child abuse in their club.

Comment below the questions you have, any helpful resources you've found, or share what worked and didn't work for you when managing and resolving these kinds of situations. Please remember to respect privacy and leave out all names.

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