

# Body Usage in Self Defense

Your attacker reads your body language long before you begin your defense. Typically in self defense training, we focus on specific fighting skills. Body usage, or how you hold and maneuver your body, contributes to your ability to perform a specific skill such as a kick, parry, joint lock, etc., but often we forget how fundamental our body usage is to the effectiveness of the technique.

In general how we hold and use our body influences potential attackers whether they are on a training floor, in the street, working with us as business associates or simply friends and family. As a result, our body signals and the psychology behind them become extraordinarily important. Both researchers (psychologists, sociologists, etc.) as well as martial arts masters have written about body usage. It can be very instructive to compare the information and learn from it.

Certainly Gichin Funakoshi, founder of Shotokan karate, understood the importance of body usage. The mind and body, he said, should be trained and developed in a spirit of "humility" which is a somewhat old fashioned term for respect and unpretentiousness. In fact, it is in the fundamental aspects of self defense such as standing position (natural stance), moving position (the transition between stances), and orientation to others that body usage is most important. Let's begin by examining the natural stance to discover the implications and significance of body usage to both the martial arts training floor and the "real world".

From a psychological point of view, the natural or ready stance is an opportunity to practice projecting power or authority in order to control a potentially threatening situation. Police officers, for example, are trained to exude an image of authority in order to control criminals. Likewise, Joan Nelson in her hands-on self defense practice book, *Self Defense, Steps to Success*, recommends projecting "an unvictimlike, confident and vigilant demeanor" in order to discourage attackers from selecting you.

John T. Molloy, of "*Dress for Success*" fame, researched and reported on body usage in *Live for Success*. In a chapter on power in the workplace, he points out that "authority is as much nonverbal as verbal." He goes on to discuss the basic authority stance which he describes as "almost military in nature: the shoulders squared, the head erect, the jaw muscles tight, the mouth closed and unsmiling, feet planted firmly on the floor and eyes steady."

As you can see, the ready stance has similar dimensions for martial arts, business, military/police, and practical street defense. For a better understanding of why and how the ready stance works, let's look at some of the specifics.

## Eyes to front (not down or averted)

Police reports confirm that a potential attacker will often "test" you through eye contact. If you show submissiveness by looking down or to the side, you may find yourself mugged. Likewise, criminals have told researchers that they prefer to attack people who are looking down. This is such a common attribute of mugging victims that psychologists have labeled it the "downcast demeanor".

Keeping your eyes forward is a sign of attention and intent. If a person acts distracted, with behavior such as brooding, staring at the sidewalk, searching through a purse or bag, or reading a map, Joel Kirsch, a consultant with the Los Angeles Police Dept., found he/she were more likely to be attacked.

**Another cue that assailants seem to notice is head and eye movement. People with exaggerated or furtive eye movements or sweeping side-to-side head movements - which may imply fear, preoccupation, or being off guard - are more likely to be assaulted.**

**Historically, women in many cultures have been taught to use the position of the eyes to define their position in life. In approximately the 1870's, a woman's version of the ready stance appropriate for street behavior in Atlanta, Georgia, included the admonition: "A lady never bows."**

### **Chin in (so the head is not tilting back)**

**The goal here is to keep the neck relatively straight and upright. The head, which weighs about 10-15 pounds, is a wonderful self defense tool and can be used to strike forward or backwards. For optimum balance and comfort to the neck, however, Alexander Technique teachers recommend allowing the head to be "poised lightly on top of the spine". The common saying, "it's a pain in the neck" illustrates how easy it is to create discomfort here.**

**Alexander Technique is a body usage training system that teaches people how to move in the most natural and easy manner. Judith Stransky, an experienced and skilled practitioner in Santa Monica, CA, describes it as "a mind-body experience that unlocks the flow of physical, mental, and spiritual energy to higher levels of well-being and effectiveness". Alexander Technique training is much in demand by people in the performing arts (including martial artists) and is frequently prescribed by medical specialists to relieve pain that other treatments have not been able to address.**

**One of the guiding concepts of Alexander Technique is to mentally repeat to yourself the following body usage mantra: Let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen. Letting the chin drop allows the top of the head to lift upward and the neck to move freely.**

**Royalty and successful warriors returning to their home cities are often described as entering with "head held high". Thus the chin/neck/head position conveys stature and maintains your health.**

### **Shoulders lowered slightly in a natural posture (not raised, not slouched, not hunched)**

**Often we raise our shoulders to shrug (a sign of uncertainty or disinterest) or to indicate surprise. Tension in the shoulders will also cause them to appear raised. All of these attributes - tension, surprise, uncertainty, disinterest - illustrate unreadiness which translates into vulnerability. By following the Alexander Technique, guidance of neck free, head forward and up to let the back lengthen and widen, the shoulders will find their natural, lowered position without turning inward in an ugly, unhealthy, hunched shape.**

**Typically in upper middle class homes, children are taught to sit and stand up straight because that is correct and appropriate behavior. Slouching or slumping are habits associated with lower status or position in life. Indeed, we call someone a "slouch" when we want to imply that they are awkward, lazy or inept. Likewise, a slumping or hunched posture is associated with low energy, poor body coordination, and low self-esteem. In martial arts, having your shoulders lowered but upright presents an image of confident ability.**

### **Lower abdomen flexed slightly**

**A goal here is to avoid arching the lower back, but rather to let it release into length. Height is a natural deterrent to aggressors. Supporting this concept, research at the University of Helsinki, Finland, found that taller women conveyed more authority. Likewise research by Pauline Bart which she describes in *Stopping Rape* showed that women who were able to avoid being raped by an attacker were more likely to be taller.**

**Although you can't increase your height, standing with a straight posture can give you a taller appearance. Molloy points out that when you have an erect, what he calls an upper-middle-class body posture, other people, regardless of their background, find you more attractive, intelligent and competent - all of which are likely to deter an attacker both on the training floor and in real life.**

**Another goal of flexing the belly muscles is to create a sensation and attitude of readiness. Like a spring, a slight tension as opposed to total relaxation of belly muscles prepares the martial artist for action. This activity is as much mental as physical since any manifestation of tension will be interpreted as weakness and will impede action. Body connection is another martial arts way of phrasing the desired result to be achieved by flexing the lower abdomen. Again, both mind and body are involved to create a consciousness of total effectiveness and the appearance of effortlessness.**

### **Legs straight without being locked at the knees**

**As with flexing the lower abdomen, an important body usage aspect here is the avoidance of tension. Too much tension in the muscles around the knees constricts blood circulation which can cause you to be light headed or even to faint, a situation that has embarrassed some men at their own wedding.**

### **Right foot about a half step from the left and toes pointed outward slightly**

**For good body usage, the placement of the feet should always optimize balance. In a standing position, this means that each foot should be under the corresponding shoulder which, as Funakoshi directs, is approximately a half step apart. Turning the feet outward a little achieves a slightly broader base, further improving balance.**

**From a self defense point of view, Nelson suggests you should "keep your body motion to a minimum." This means you should consciously stand still rather than shifting your weight from one foot to the other. Shifting your weight can be interpreted as uncertainty, a sign of vulnerability.**

### **The fists about two inches in front of the upper thighs, fingers toward the thighs**

**Keeping your hands free and in front of your body conveys readiness on your part because it is clear that you can use your arms and hands to block or strike if necessary. In addition, Nelson points out that you should keep your hands and arms close to your body because large gestures can be misinterpreted as insults. Likewise, avoid crossing your arms or shoving your hands into your pockets as these may be considered threatening behavior.**

**The great Okinawan karate master Gichin Funakoshi is quoted, "that one should stand calmly, ready to react to any circumstance". Wherever we are, combining our knowledge of body usage with Funakoshi's instructions will allow our standing position to de-escalate potential problems in the real world.**

**From the website: <http://www.armchair.com/defense/bw/bw9.html>**

About the author. **Bernd Weiss was a psychologist, reserve police officer and college professor. He was chief instructor of the nonprofit Topanga Karate School in California and practiced martial arts from 1955 until his untimely death in November, 1998. He was a 7th degree black belt in Shotokan Karate. His unique mix of skills, training and profession ideally suited him for writing on a topic where body awareness, psychological perspective and physical training are important in the practice of the art. We greatly miss him. Yet, in these articles he has left us with a part of himself to learn from and help improve our lives.**