

Program targets sexual assaults

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A sexual assault awareness program at Ball State is changing the game when it comes to combating unwanted advances.

Dubbed Elemental by its creators, the program is equal parts prevention and self-defense, focusing mainly on how to deal with situations involving acquaintances, friends or romantic partners. It also teaches people how to defend themselves using martial arts.

"If you are faced with a potential threatening situation from a boyfriend, classmate or friend, you are less likely to use the standard self-protection that's taught," said Mellisa Holtzman, a professor of sociology at Ball State and the program's co-director.

Most sexual assault awareness programs have only a short-term effect — six to nine weeks — on participants, but Elemental stays with people for years, Holtzman said. Elemental differs from other programs because it has a self-defense element, which online articles or questionnaires lack, she said.

It also demonstrates that abuse can happen in same-sex situations.

The program, which is conducted as a seminar with about 200 students each fall, teaches people to use verbal skills to ward off advances from people they know.

Kayla Dalton, a residence hall director at Ball State, says people should use a "bad dog voice" when telling someone an advance is not welcome.

Oftentimes, people aren't likely to strike someone they know, she said. Those situations can require a different set of skills.

"Think about yelling at a dog and saying 'no' to a dog," Dalton said. "You want to have the same stern, confident voice if you need to say no to an attacker. ... It sends a really strong message to them."

Amber Riggle, 18, said she completed the Elemental training this year, and it was a confidence booster. She now feels safe walking alone at night because she knows how to fend off an attacker.

It's especially helpful to know what to do if the assailant is someone you know, the Ball State freshman said.

"Looking at the statistics, and since most of the assault cases are people we know, it's easy to punch out a stranger, but it's not always easy when it's someone you know," Riggle said. "Having appropriate responses for that is very handy."

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, victims know their attacker in about 80 percent of rape and sexual assault cases. Bureau data also show that 80 percent of female college students who are victims of sexual assault are unlikely to report their attack.

Elemental is in use at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and has been put in place at high schools in Ohio. Co-director Chad Menning, an associate professor of sociology at Ball State, said the project is constantly evolving, and he wants to improve its 94 percent success rate in a survey of participants who said they found the program useful.

The program is on deck to be shared at student affairs conferences in Kansas and Florida early next year and could be expanded to the Indianapolis area.

"We'd love for this to go national," Holtzman said.

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