

## **Make a punching bag out of stressful emotions**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

JUMPING up and down on the spot, hands wrapped in boxing gloves, I feel like a feather-weight version of Rocky as I prepare to have my third full-on encounter with the enemy -- my boxing teacher.

Kick-boxing is one of the most popular growth areas in personal fitness.

Having finally sampled the craze that has smitten so many people I know, I admit that my imagination has been captured by the early-morning training sessions where you roll out of bed and before your first coffee you punch, punch -- upwards, sideways, left hook, right hook -- as the trainer ducks and weaves around the room.

Today I'm in hot pursuit, left, right and now the icing on the cake -- kick, kick, right knee, left knee, shin and shin, bang, bang. It's exhilarating, breathy stuff. But exhausting. The sweat pours off my body and my limbs are quivering.

I need to stop but the trainer insists I keep going. Right hook, left, and suddenly I can't lift my arm. Twenty minutes into the session and all the energy from the first flush of excitement has faded.

How to keep going? And then it comes to me. A problem that's been making me angry. Bang, bang, bang -- the energy returns, the aggression is suddenly flooding my body with adrenalin and testosterone, bang, bang, bang.

"Phew!" says the instructor. "Where did your mind go?"

I tell him what I'm thinking. He tells me that many women clients have told him that they conjure up old arguments with husbands and lovers, or the face of an ex, to get themselves into a pumped-up state.

And I begin to think about relationships and kick-boxing. So many people are trapped behind the picket fences of suburbia with no healthy way of expressing pain, anger or their grievances.

I'm a huge supporter of therapy and counselling, but having talked and talked my way through many conflicts, I can see that talking has limited capacity when it comes to releasing anger.

In fact, there have been situations I've been in where the talking has only created more anger, particularly if an experienced adjudicator like a therapist is not present. Those domestics that happen late at night can end up in slanging matches and misinterpretations that can further debilitate a relationship, rather than rejuvenate it.

Yet as I kick and punch and throw my body-weight around, I can feel a huge sense of relief from the emotions I've been carrying. And the more the putrid, toxic stuff comes out in a healthy barrage of right-left hooks, the more my heart seems to open to allow love and compassion to flood back in. My teacher, Pete Morgan, says that he often recommends to couples that they get a punching bag and hang it in the garage or the spare room for times when the tension and the problems with partners and kids gets to breaking point.

Far from encouraging physical aggression, the boxing and kick-boxing teaches people how to release in a healthy and fair fashion.

They get to understand that hitting people can result in broken bones, or someone falling and smashing their head. No one wants to end up in prison.

So the boxing becomes a way to harness negative emotions and channel them appropriately. Effective dialogue can then follow.

He says that it's also a way to control verbal abuse that can often be as damaging as violence. Words shouted in rage or pain can never be taken back, and many a relationship has hit the pavement in the wake of hurtful words spoken.

"If it were up to me, every household would have a punching bag," he smiles.

Also trained in martial arts, he says that couples can learn to practice other elegant forms of fighting such as kung fu, tae kwon do or karate, which not only exercise the body, and help release stress and tension, but also create a sense of harmony and balance through control of breath and stimulation of energy meridians.

Aikido is a Japanese martial artform he recommends that actually teaches the art of falling down, and of flowing with the punches so that one is trained to follow nature: weather the storms, bend like the trees, or scatter like leaves, in order to hold one's power in life.

I agree with my trainer that there is only so much that talking can achieve.

Whether through boxing, or an Eastern martial arts discipline, when we move energy with our bodies, hormones flow, emotions are expended, and it's fulfilling and very healthy.

Back to the boxing.

Each time I grow tired I conjure up all my bad feelings -- fear, grief, anxiety -- and release them into the colour pads in front of my eyes as my cardio-vascular fitness improves and my muscles become more defined.

There's nothing as wonderful as good communication when things are flowing.

But when they're not, it's good to know what we can do to avoid using partners, friends, children, work colleagues or the family dog as a proverbial punching bag.

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 20 MAR 2004