

Surviving a choke hold

Jim Wagner

Words are powerful. They are so powerful that they can land you in jail if you don't know how to talk to the cops when they arrive. Let's imagine that someone put you into a headlock. The suspect was squeezing so hard that he was cutting off your air supply. You panic and gouge out his left eye to free yourself. He has permanent damage. When the police officer arrives to the scene he asks you, "Why did you blind that man over there?" You respond, "Because he had me in a headlock and I couldn't breath." Many law enforcement officers will probably think to themselves, *So what? My big brother used to put me into a head lock all of the time and I didn't rip his eye out.* Then you will be asked to turn around and the handcuffs will be placed around your wrists.

The truth of the matter is that if an attacker places their hands or arm around your neck, and they are cutting off your air or blood supply, you have the right to use deadly force in order to stop the suspect from his attack. As such, you do not want to call the technique the suspect used against you a "head lock." The proper word is a "choke." So, when the officer wants to know why you gouged out a person's eye or stuck your metal pen through their rib cage you can articulate, "Officer, he had his arm around my neck. I couldn't breath and I was in fear for my life. I had no other choice and I stopped him. I was the only way I could stop him. I didn't mean to injure him," which is true. We have no intention of ever hurting anyone. We merely want to "stop" them in order to protect our self from injury or death. We also want to use the correct words to protect ourselves legally.

Obviously you have to use some common sense. If a 13 year old boy puts his hands or arm around your neck, who may be out of control at a wedding because he downed some alcohol in secret behind the building earlier, you probably would have a hard time justifying using deadly force against him. Of course, the definition of deadly force is any serious bodily injury up to, and including, death.

Besides the suspect cutting off your air or blood supply to the brain, which can happen in the minimum time of three seconds, another possibility is that the suspect squeezes so hard that he crushes your larynx or tears the esophagus. Such life threatening damage can be accomplished within one second by a determined attacker. Thus, if somebody has a good hold of your throat your life could end in a second.

The use-of-force continuum is a two-way street. If you decide to put your hands or arm around someone's neck then they too may feel panic and resort to deadly force. If you are a sport-based martial artist merely trying to put a hostile person in a submission hold you yourself could quite possibly cross the legal limit line and be accused of using excessive force. When you target the neck you are usually in the realm of deadly force. This is why most police forces have abandoned the carotid artery hold that I was taught in the police academy in 1991. I was in class 104 at the Orange County Sheriff's Training Academy in California. Back in those days it was done merely to cut off a suspect's blood supply just long enough to make him go unconscious, then you were to let go. However, like any technique that is banned, some accidental deaths occurred to bring about the change.

When it comes to defense against choke holds I go with only the simplest techniques, and follow the ABCs of Choke Holds that I created in my Reality-Based Personal Protection system. You've probably heard about the ABCs of first aid. They are Airway,

Breathing, and Circulation. The Jim Wagner ABCs of Choke Holds go like this: Airway, Break, and Counter. Too many martial arts systems throw strikes, be it a punch or a kick, while they are being choked, but what if the strike fails to make the suspect release his grip. You just wasted valuable seconds and you could end up suffocating as a result. Your very first move has to be to clear the airway. For example, if someone has you pressed up against the wall and is choking you with his two hands I recommend that you lift up one of your arms, trap his wrists in your arm pit, and rotate as fast and as hard as possible. Of course, this move is done all in a spit second. The beauty of this technique is that it relies on body weight and torque and not arm strength. In fact, that is how I test all choke escapes. I use the smallest female in my class. If she can do the technique against the biggest male and succeed, we keep the technique in the curriculum. However, if she cannot escape, then we throw it out. All techniques in the Reality-Based system have to work for our "lowest common denominator." After all, one day I could be that small female, so to speak, when a huge gorilla has his hands around my neck. There is always someone out there bigger than you are.

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