



Principles and Justifications

**The WWG provides information to Aikido instructors and students to help them make informed decisions about their wellness.
This does not constitute ASU policy or medical advice.**

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Who Are We?

- Leslie Russek (Chair)
 - Musubi Aikido of Potsdam, Potsdam, NY: Lrussek@clarkson.edu
- Ania Small
 - Aikido of Maine, Portland, ME: aniasmall@comcast.net
- Ola Karasik
 - Shindai Dojo, Orlando, FL: olalak@gmail.com
- Robin Cooper
 - Aikido of Madison, Madison, WI: robin.sensei.aom@gmail.com
- Garth Jones
 - Allegheny Aikido, Pittsburgh, PA: garth@alleghenyaikido.com
- Cheryl Whitelaw
 - Abundant Peace, Edmonton, AB: cheryl@kindpower.ca

Please feel free to reach out to any of us if you have suggestions, comments or ideas. Or, access our anonymous Suggestion Box on the website, scan code below.

Where Can You Find Our Resources?

You can access our resources at
<https://asu.org/wellness-working-group/>
 Or use the scan code, here.



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The Wellness Working Group Purpose and Perspective

The goal of the WWG is to provide information and resources so that Aikido instructors and students can make wise decisions about their wellness with respect to their Aikido training and community. However, each Dojo needs to set its own guidelines regarding what works for them. Also, individuals should work with their healthcare providers (and maybe the instructors) to determine what is appropriate for them.

‘Best practice’ might vary by Dojo and individual, as shown in this example about dojo policies regarding taking water breaks during class. We should all agree that it is important for students to remain hydrated when exercising; this may be more of an issue in certain locations due to climate or aerobic nature of class. In some Dojos, leaving the mat to get water without informing the instructor could be hazardous if the individual leaves the room and has an injury or health issues. On the other hand, in a Dojo with large classes it might be impractical to ask the instructors permission to leave the mat. This shows why each Dojo needs to set its own guidelines and make these guidelines clear to students.

There is also variability among individual students. For some people, being thirsty is a minor discomfort that they can tolerate until the end of class. However, people with certain health conditions (such as postural, orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, or POTS) may have significant adverse effects from becoming dehydrated while exercising. Also, some students may use a water break for mental health purposes. Some students find it difficult to remain focused and taking a short “water break” may reduce the risk of injury to themselves and others by allowing them to return to class focused. These examples show how complex a seemingly simple situation might be. Our goal is simply to describe the issues and stimulate discussion about safety and wellness issues.

If we want to create Dojos that are safe and welcoming for all sorts of people, it is good to be aware of factors that may impact wellness. People who stay with Aikido for long enough to become instructors or Dojo Cho, are clearly physically and mentally robust. Instructors should remember that not all of their students share that robustness. The WWG strives to present a wide range of views.

To summarize what the WWG resources ARE and are NOT intended to be:

1. These ARE a compilation of reliable information and well-considered ideas to stimulate thinking and discussions about wellness related issues within the Dojo.
2. These ARE resources to help Dojos and individuals make informed decisions so that we can all train safely together for many years.
3. These are NOT ASU policies that each Dojo needs to follow. Each Dojo needs to consider the issues and decide on (and share with students) a policy that makes sense for them.
4. This does NOT constitute medical advice: individuals should discuss personal issues with their healthcare providers and make decisions about what is best for them.

What Is Wellness and a Dojo Culture of Wellness?

Wellness in the context of Aikido practice is the process of fostering the physical, psychological and social health of students and instructors, allowing them to participate and grow while training/teaching Aikido. Dojo wellness: a set of attitudes, practices and priorities that foster growth, health, and well-being in students, teachers and dojo community as a whole.

Physical wellness could be understood as being able to engage in practice in ways that are appropriate given one's abilities or limitations. It is fostered by a training environment that minimizes injury, with instructors and students being able to adapt practice in a way that allows for recovery and does not add to current discomfort or limitation.

Psychological wellness is the state of mental and emotional wellbeing that allows the student to participate and learn, positively adapt to challenges in practice, and participate in the dojo community. It can also be seen as a gradual process of developing mastery over dealing with the challenges that arise in training.

Social wellness is the ability to work with teachers and other students and clearly communicate needs and boundaries. It is fostered by a feeling of safety and trust between the students and teachers as well as amongst students.

Dojo Culture and Wellness:

Culture is typically defined as the beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, goals, and practices that characterize a group, institution or organization.

Dojo culture is the “feel” of the dojo, based on these shared beliefs, values, behaviors and goals. It is usually the teacher, dojo cho and senior students who set the tone. These underlying beliefs, attitudes and values inform our expectations and experience of the dojo. They also provide a framework for interpreting behavior as part of—or outside of the dojo culture. Dojo culture includes everything from how newcomers are greeted to clear guidance on the etiquette. Even a brand-new visitor observing class can note how the instructor treats students and how they treat each other.

A dojo culture that embraces wellness for instructors and students intentionally adopts values and practices that directly improve and/or maintain the physical, psychological and social health. It supports listening to and adapting movement and teaching to individual needs, and fostering internal motivation for growth, while clearly stating expectations for the rules of engagement. Dojo culture affects how or if individuals with limitations due to age or disability are integrated into practice, while also addressing the interests and needs of more athletic individuals wanting a vigorous practice. Dojo culture is how we create and sustain a community that fosters trust and supports individual wellbeing.

Healthy Boundaries for Safe and Productive Aikido Training: “Respect the Tap”

Introduction

Every person who steps on to the mat in an Aikido dojo does so with their own physical, psychological, and emotional strengths and vulnerabilities. A student may be dealing with a short- or long-term injury, carrying the weight of past physical, emotional, or sexual trauma, or navigating challenges such as social anxiety. All of these factors will affect their ability to engage in training.

It is important that everybody, from senior instructors to new students, recognize that Aikido training involves an intensity of interpersonal contact that is very different from the norms of society (this is written from an American perspective). Recognizing and respecting everyone’s boundaries is critical to safe practice. Equally important is creating an environment where people feel safe to express their own boundaries and know that they will be heard.

The dojo can be a challenging but safe environment, a laboratory in which we can explore technique and movement, and develop ourselves. That development will likely include exploring and expanding boundaries. If that exploration is done in a supportive, consensual environment, the results can be transformative. The following sections explore this idea in more detail. We cannot eliminate all potential stressors for all people; for example, we cannot eliminate physical contact or ‘attacks’. However, we can adapt how things are done to respect individual needs.

Physical Boundaries/Training Intensity

With beginners, instructors and senpai must pay attention to what new students can and cannot do, especially in the first few weeks as their abilities can change rapidly. Beginners who are overwhelmed, frightened or in pain should know that they can express their concerns, either immediately with their partner or at another time with an appropriate senior member of the dojo. The goal should always be to help them expand their physical capacity without stepping over the line into fear or pain. Everyone progresses at a different pace and should be supported and not judged for the speed of their progress.

The same principle holds true for injuries. Training through pain often leads to worse, long-term problems. If a partner cannot do something because of an injury that limitation must be respected. It is important to pay attention to your partners. If something looks painful, ask. If you have an injury or you are thrown or pinned too hard, speak up. Everyone learns to tap out when pins are applied. The bottom line is simple—always **respect the tap**.

Some students enjoy training at very high intensity. That is fine if both partners have agreed to practice at that intensity. Instructors also have a responsibility to ensure that all their students are training within limits they have consented to. And if a throw or pin goes too far, a complaint or tap must end the practice immediately. **Respect the tap.**

Psychological Boundaries

Everyone has limits to what they find frightening, upsetting, or triggering. In the context of Aikido these limits most often show up in how they are touched or grabbed. For example, a person who has experienced trauma may react badly to being touched or grabbed by the neck. Others may struggle with loud noises, such as kiai, which may feel aggressive or frightening. Or they may feel self-conscious if asked to kiai strongly. These are real boundaries that must be acknowledged for training to be safe and productive. In rare cases the reality of normal training (strikes, grabs, and throws) may be too much for a student, in which case their instructors need to have a careful conversation with them on how, or if, to move forward.

Students should be encouraged to let their partners and/or instructors know if something really upsets them. We should also all pay attention to our training partners. If they seem distressed, ask if they are all right. One note of caution: avoid asking why. The cause could be something fairly innocuous, like the fear of falling backwards, or something much more serious, such as trauma from past abuse. The root cause may be deeply personal, and it may not be something that the partner wishes to discuss. On the mat in the middle of class is not the place for such discussions.

Everyone comes into Aikido searching for something. Some may want to learn some cool joint locks or throws that look like movie fight scenes, and others may want to challenge their physical limits. More often, though, Aikido serves as a path of personal development. That path can be purely physical or it can be a way of addressing past trauma, overcoming anxiety, or learning how better to relate to other people. It is a powerful tool, but only if practiced with awareness and consent. But just like with physical boundaries, emotional boundaries must be respected. If someone is overwhelmed, there is only one rule: **respect the tap.**

Social Boundaries

Social boundaries include both individual needs and the shared norms of the dojo culture. Individual boundaries may involve things like standing too close, speaking too loudly, paying undue attention, pressuring for off-the-mat social interaction, or behaving in sexually inappropriate ways. There are always power imbalances in the dojo; junior students defer to senior students, who defer to instructors, and so on. However, when it comes to social boundaries, we are all equal human beings, and everyone has the right to have their boundaries respected. If boundaries and expectations are discussed from time to time and understood by everybody in the dojo, it will foster an environment of mutual respect and support. If someone seems uncomfortable with how you are acting, back off. If they speak up and enforce a boundary, follow the only rule: **respect the tap.**

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Social boundaries for the dojo might be better thought of as guidelines that promote good practice. These include how much, if at all, people can talk on the mat, how much help (teaching) to provide a partner when one is not leading class, and general etiquette. Each dojo will set its own tone, often shaped by the dojo-cho and senior instructors. What matters most is that everyone understands not just what these boundaries/rules are, but why they exist.

Safe Practice Resources for New Students

A key part of keeping Aikido practice safe, especially for beginners, is helping students develop the physical literacy needed to learn the core movements of the art. Aikido instruction typically focuses on teaching movement skills needed to perform techniques.

What is physical literacy?

Physical literacy refers to *the motivation, confidence, physical skills, knowledge, and understanding* needed to value and take responsibility for staying physically active throughout life. It includes four main pillars:

1. **Motivation and confidence**
2. **Physical competence**
3. **Knowledge and understanding**
4. **Lifelong engagement in physical activity¹**

When Aikido was first developed, most people were already physically active—whether through work, other martial arts, or daily activities like farming and manual labor. They arrived at the dojo with the foundational strength, coordination, and movement skills needed to take on the challenges and rewards of Aikido training.

Today, things are different. Many people live sedentary lifestyles, spend long hours sitting for work or screen time, and have fewer opportunities to develop basic physical skills. This shift can affect a beginner's readiness to learn Aikido. While it's normal to feel challenged, confused, or uncoordinated at the start, many new students stop training because it feels too difficult too soon.

For those starting Aikido later in life or after injuries, it may take more time—and a more intentional approach—to condition their bodies and build movement skills. However, with the right support, learning Aikido can be a safe and more enjoyable experience.

Our Role: Supporting Safe and Sustainable Training

As a Wellness Working Group, our goal is **not** to replace the teaching of the Sensei or the support of Senpai on the mat. Instead, we aim to provide **practical resources** that instructors and senior students can use to:

- Help beginners build the movement skills needed for Aikido.
- Reduce early drop-out rates and beginner injuries.
- Offer additional preparatory training for students who want to improve their physical readiness to train Aikido.

These tools can help create more accessible entry points for beginners or anyone with special needs, especially those who may need a little more time or support along their Aikido journey. Please let us know about resources that you think might be helpful.

1. <https://physicalliteracy.ca/physical-literacy/consensus-statement/>