Learning Jiu-Jitsu Forced Me to Reckon With My Abusive Past — and Helped Me Heal

Content warning: This article contains descriptions of physical abuse.

The day I got my blue belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, I found myself flat on my back, crushed under the 6'4", 190-pound frame of my coach, who was also my husband, John. But as I'd already learned, when it came to this 2,000-year-old martial art, being down didn't mean you were out.

I clenched John's arm and pinned it between my legs. I lifted my hips into the air and began to hyperextend his elbow. If I kept going, the joint would dislocate. When I felt three taps on my thigh, I released his arm. He had given up, and I had completed the last step of the skill test I had to pass in order to earn my blue belt.

Applause engulfed me as I stood to my feet. John and I bowed to one another. From within his gi jacket, held in place by a black belt, he withdrew my new blue belt and fastened it around my waist.

By that day, I'd marked countless hours of training, mostly with men who were bigger and stronger than I was. I'd proven to myself and others that I was tough, that I could endure being smashed and find the strength to keep going.

John cupped my face and squeezed me close. A mom of one of his students in the audience said she cried. I called it "my blue period" when I posted the photo on Instagram.

That day, I put forward the part of me that felt powerful. I was thrilled to have earned my blue belt, in part because I thought that if I excelled at this martial art, I was still in control. But there was another story happening below the surface, one that I tried as hard as I could to ignore. During that test, as in so many of the hours of practice I'd undertaken, part of me was scared, and even afraid for my life.

My father had physically abused me as a child, culminating when I was 16 when he chased me into my room, tackled me on my bed, and forced my pillow over my head. He pressed down and my neck cracked. I couldn't breathe.

Even though he eventually let go, a wound remained deep in my body. As an adult, I'd suddenly find myself floating above my head, feeling utterly detached from my body. These episodes could be triggered by many things: the harshness of a boss' s feedback, a gruesome movie scene, witnessing a parent striking a child at the grocery store.

Later, a therapist would diagnose me with PTSD, which helped me make sense of my symptoms. But when I first discovered jiu-jitsu, I didn't have that context, and instead I tried hard to bury the responses that came up when I was on the mat. I wonder now if some part of me knew that within a year, I would abandon jiu-jitsu, feeling burned out and beat up, physically and mentally.

How I Found Jiu-Jitsu

When John and I got together, jiu-jitsu was a huge part of his life. A lifelong athlete, he'd dedicated more than a decade to the martial art and ran training sessions at his gym in Florida.

At first, we kept our interests separate. But we grew closer and more comfortable with one another, and after nearly two years, I began to accompany him to gyms to see him spar. I watched him be promoted to brown belt, then to black belt, and compete and win gold, silver, and bronze at subsequent World Master Championships run by the International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federation.

Due to my job as a journalist we moved frequently, and he found new jiu-jitsu gyms in each of our new homes. When I came to cheer him and his teammates on at tournaments, I was sometimes asked if I was going to train too. The answer was always no. This was his thing.

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After eight years, John saw the opportunity to start his own gym. I wanted to support him, and I was curious to understand more intimately what attracted him to the martial art. What better way than jumping on the mat myself?

He was wary, wanting to make sure I understood how rough the sport could be. I have a brother, I reminded him, and we wrestled all the time as kids. "Yeah, but this isn't the same," he said. "It's intense."

I convinced him that I'd be fine. I was stubborn and tough. I'd interviewed murder suspects and scoured crime scenes as a journalist in Florida. Persistence and dedication were two of my most commented-on attributes.

Plus, despite his cautions, John had also taught me that jiu-jitsu translates as "the gentle art." This form of wrestling that originated in Japan, before being modified when it was brought to Brazil, emphasizes submitting your opponent as quickly and non-violently as possible. Because it didn't contain the flying kicks or dynamic throws of karate or judo, there were less opportunities for injury. (Or so I thought.)

The first time I donned a gi, the pajama-like outfit favored for martial arts, my balance teetered on the mat's soft surface and I tingled with a mix of excitement and nerves. John paired me with a young male training partner, and I was not prepared for the force with which he grabbed my wrist and swept me to the ground. My neck snapped and my body tensed. The shock reminded me of something I didn't want to admit.

"That's why you have to breakfall," John said. He didn't hug me, or comfort me. (Though later he would tell me he was proud of me.) He was no longer just my husband — he was my coach.

Learning the Art

I kept going. I learned to pummel my arms around an opponent and trip them, smacking the ground as we fell to minimize the impact. I practiced squeezing my legs against my partner's torso and widening my arms so they couldn't buck me off. If I got swept to the ground, I unlocked newfound strength to cross my ankles around my partner's midsection, grab their arm and pull them to the side so I could wiggle onto their back. Two minutes of intense sparring left me sputtering, sweat-drenched, and tingling with endorphins.

I got used to strange bruises and mat burns on my knees, as well as the smell of sweat when it combines with the thick gi material (a scent I can only compare to cat pee). In training I got closer physically than I had ever been to any workout partner. Sometimes, their head bashed my jaw, or their feet dangled in my face. If I ever felt annoyed or scared, I shoved those feelings away and tried to get back on top.

I appreciated that the usual rules of fighting don't apply to jiu-jitsu. Even though I was smaller and less strong, I could catch my opponent unaware. I honed my favorite move, where, if I didn't manage to extend my partner's arm in an arm bar, I would shift my body and squeeze my arms around their neck to choke them. Instead of admonishing me for being rough, or yelling at me for being "too mean to the boys," as my grade school principal had, John would shout, "Boa!" the Portuguese word for "good," a jiu-jitsu rallying cry. Even my opponent would congratulate me after he'd tapped.

John eventually enlisted my help co-teaching his kids' classes, and I loved watching the little ones — especially the students who came to John because they'd been bullied, especially the girls — uncovering newfound strength. I reveled in their stories of playground showdowns where they stood up for themselves. Only later did I realize why: I wanted their stories to re-write my own.

But when I became a blue belt, everything shifted. Being promoted has a certain amount of cache. The eyes of my training partners, particularly new sign-ups, stayed on me, an added weight every time I stepped onto the mat.

In my mind, I couldn't afford to be cautious. I had to prove that I was good enough. I became reckless in training, hurting my partners with my aggressiveness, putting myself in dangerous situations and refusing to tap. I got a concussion. My knees, wrists, and elbows frequently ached from being pulled into submissions. I used them as excuses so that I didn't have to spar.

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It even became difficult for me to reckon with John as my coach versus my husband. I lashed out at him at the gym for coaching me too forcefully, for telling me what to do.

I didn't talk about my past abuse with my training partners. I was starting to float above my head on the mat. I didn't remember whole minutes of training and had taken to closing my eyes while on the ground, trying to shut it out.

One day, John told me a prospective student had emailed him that she'd survived domestic violence. John asked if I thought it was risky for her to train. I told him it would be empowering but afterwards I wondered if this was actually true for me, or if I was just putting myself through situations that mirrored my abuse — being pressed to the ground under the weight of a man's body — to show I could survive.

All this tension built to an explosion one weekday night. Lined up on a crowded mat, John asked us, one by one, to come in front and demonstrate a technique. When it was my turn, the eyes of my classmates burned into me, magnifying the pressure I felt being the highest belt, but also the smallest and the only woman. I knew before I started that I wouldn't do the move effectively.

I kicked my partner's ankle as I attempted a take down and hurt flashed through his eyes. I bent his arm into the arm bar I'd used in my blue belt promotion. "Good," John said, but his voice had an icy tone, not the loving warmth of my husband. I was seething and couldn't even look at the group. I bowed, but instead of taking my place in line I walked off the mat.

A central rule of the gym was that you didn't leave the mat unless you'd cleared it with John. If there was tension or injury, physical or mental, you dealt with it together.

That day, I didn't care. I left the gym and didn't look back.

Taking a Step Back

I waited for John to come home that night, my breath swelling inside me like a balloon. He didn't say a word about what had happened. We barely talked until a few days later when he told me I wasn't allowed to come back to the gym. "What you did was incredibly disrespectful," he said. "I wouldn't allow that from any of my students."

I tried to explain my point of view, how I felt put on the spot. "You should have told me," he said. I didn't know how to tell him that doing so would have meant I'd lost control, that I wasn't strong. That the abuse had won. The silence extended for months, forming a wedge between us.

I put jiu-jitsu out of my head, which was easy because I had plenty of distractions. I got my MFA in creative writing. My mother died after a long battle with cancer. The COVID-19 pandemic started and the world shut down.

John had to close his gym for three months. It re-opened with socially distanced protocols that limited training to one partner. During the solitude of the pandemic, John researched science-based learning methods that encouraged training in more supportive ways. More diverse students, including more women, joined his gym.

In the world of international jiu-jitsu, women began to gain prominence, with phenoms like Gabrieli Pessanha and Ffion Davies joining stalwarts like Bea Mesquita to headline jiu-jitsu fight cards and win world championships. I cheered these women on, feeling sad that I wasn't benefitting from what I'd worked to achieve with my own training.

Meanwhile, in my own mind, grief, anger, and frustration about my past, the world's tenuous situation, and my lack of control in all of it built into a cyclone. I'd been in therapy during and before my training and thought I'd come to terms with my abuse, but in my training I'd discovered that the rage was still there. My inability to handle it made me feel like I'd lost my power. I asked myself where I could work through the emotions that surged through me.

A little voice inside me answered: the jiu-jitsu mat.

Returning to the Practice

The first time I went back to jiu-jitsu was a cold winter night. I needed interaction with people, and I knew I'd find them there. I didn't get on the mat, though, and instead watched the activity from the sidelines.

After that, I came to unscheduled sessions called open mats and wrestled casually with John, testing my emotions. I attended tournaments and got to know John's new students. Some were women who often asked if I trained. "I did," was my answer.

John began talking about the need for more experienced women to help beginners. I knew I wanted to try again. Although I could see now that jiu-jitsu had brought to the surface memories and emotions that I hadn't been prepared to handle, nothing replaced the rush and emotional release I got from sparring — or the pride I felt in myself when I matched my opponent's skill.

Still, I was scared. I was afraid my rage would erupt if I didn't get my way, that I'd lash out at someone or hurt them. I also worried that I would have a triggering episode while sparring and my lack of awareness would lead to injury.

Additionally, coming back to the mat meant that publicly, everyone would know I hadn't succeeded the first time. I'd have to confront that healing sometimes meant failing.

Then, I thought of a situation I'd witnessed that winter night when I returned to the gym. One of John's aggressive and experienced male students asked the woman he trained with, "I'm having trouble with this move. Can you help me?" I'd watched, stunned, as she agreed, and they slowed their movements to transition through each intricate shift of their bodies.

My definition of control included knowing how to do everything perfectly — or never admitting that you couldn't. That student showed me the opposite. He was vulnerable. He asked for help, but he was still powerful and strong.

I asked John if I could come back. "Will you help me learn to be a better partner?" I said.

"Of course," he said. We agreed to check in more, and he encouraged me to err on the side of ending early. He was quiet for a moment before he said, "You have more control than you think. You never have to do anything you don't want to do."

I kept John's words in my head as I stepped onto the mat one afternoon, hands shaking.

I slapped hands with another woman student, snaked my arms around her waist, and pulled her to the floor. A fire flickered inside me. I'd forgotten how good it felt to let my intensity out.

My opponent matched me easily, squeezing her legs around my waist and grabbing my arm. I marveled at her strength and tenacity. I even told her, "Good job," until her arms locked around my elbow. I felt a familiar, painful ache that would intensify to a stabbing jolt. My hand tapped her thigh three times.

My head began to float and fill with whispers of "How could you lose to her?" I sat back on my heels. I took several breaths and told those whispers that this was part of the process. Losing didn't mean I wasn't powerful. Tapping out didn't mean I couldn't overcome the abuse I'd been dealt.

I focused on my partner, who talked earnestly about how she wanted to learn a move I'd done to pass around her legs. I slapped her palm with the hand I'd used to tap. Then, I stood to help her, just as she'd helped me.