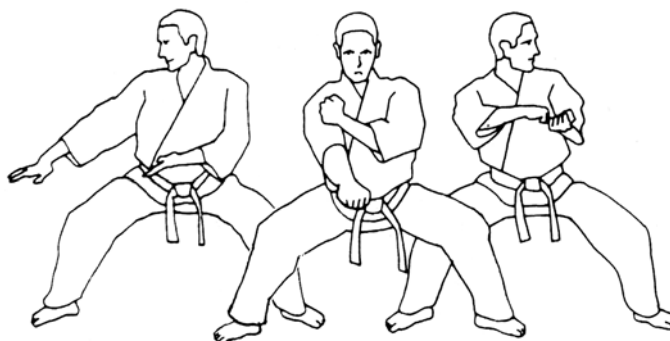


Common Problems in Learning Karate

Here are some hints regarding several problems that are typical of beginners in karate. The students who can get a handle on these early will have a head start in developing good technique.

1. **Keep your shoulders straight**

When fighting it is common, and helpful, to rotate the shoulders around as a punch is thrown, in order to increase the reach. However, there are a number of techniques in karate which are performed somewhat differently in kata than in kumite (fighting), and this is one of them. When performing kata and taikyoku, and when working out in standards class, the shoulders should be held rigidly straight and unmoving as left and right punches and blocks are thrown. This helps develop better punching muscles, for stopping and retracting the punch as well as for launching it. It also looks sharper, more powerful and more precisely controlled, which are important aspects when being judged in competition.



2. **Bend the knees**

The common (incorrect) white-belt horse stance looks like a triangle, with both knees locked straight. This is indeed the least taxing way to stand with your feet wide apart; but the purpose of your training is *not* to find and practice relaxing stances and postures! Standing in a good, low horse stance with the knees bent builds leg and lower back muscles essential to strong fighting and proper kata performance. These muscles are generally rather weak to begin with, especially in children, so don't be surprised if you can only stand in the low horse stance the way Sensei does for a second or two before losing it. Probably around two years will be required to build up those muscles properly, *if* you start now. Walking around in a low horse stance, like a sumo wrestler, is also a good exercise to do at home. Stick with it and you will succeed.

3. Use stopping power

It generally takes students a while to figure out that throwing punches in karate is twice as much work as it looks. An equal amount of energy should be expended in crisply stopping and withdrawing a punch as in throwing it out there. Many students soon learn to throw a fairly hard punch, but they let it stop itself by the springy elasticity of extended muscles and tendons or, worse yet, by banging against the lock-out point in their elbow joint. Not only does this look sloppy, but it can cause painful joint injuries to develop. Furthermore, it is very important to build punch-stopping muscles so that hard, controlled punches can be thrown against fellow students without painful impacts.

4. Keep your back straight

Fighting and kata should always be performed with the back straight up and down. This is a fundamental characteristic of karate which senseis have been hammering into students for centuries. Tilting one way or another throws off the balance, and weakens or makes impossible the rapid delivery of successive techniques.

5. Breathe!

The body burns oxygen every second, and quite a lot of it when exercising heavily in kata practice. Therefore it is essential to *avoid* holding one's breath while performing. Generally there should be a small, sharp but quiet exhale at the moment that each punch, strike, block or kick is thrown, and a shallow inhale between techniques. Of course, the *kiai* moves require a loud, strong exhale, but actually every technique should be delivered with what amounts to a small, quiet *kiai*. Not only does this keep muscles fully oxygenated, it also causes an abdominal contraction which helps to focus the entire body's muscular contraction/coordination for maximum power.

6. Visualize attackers

The critical difference between karate kata performance and dance is the applicability against a real enemy if necessary. Forget this purpose and you have lost the meaning of karate; your techniques will be of little use in a real encounter. Therefore, *always* visualize delivering techniques against attacking, murderous, drug-selling rapists/terrorists who deserve no mercy, and who are trying to kill you. This trains the mind as well as the body, so that real encounters, if they ever come, will not be so shockingly novel and surprising that you forget what to do. Furthermore, in competition, *judges can tell* if you are doing this properly in your mind or just performing a meaningless dance routine, and they will score you accordingly. Never let up in your visualizations, even when tired. Someday you may be attacked when you're tired.

7. Avoid toeing out

This is a problem which often persists well past green belt level, so the sooner a student can master it the better off he or she will be. The difficulty involves some unaccustomed bending required to keep both feet pointing directly *forward*, rather than splayed outward, when working from the horse stance and the forward-leaning stance. Although some other stances do involve splaying out the feet, these two do not, and they are probably the two most commonly used stances in the system. So it is very important that students learn to do them correctly and automatically. The only way is practice.

What feels awkward about the horse stance is that the feet normally want to point in the same direction as the thigh bone; the joints and muscles must be trained to bring them around forward for best balance and power. In the forward-leaning stance, the ankle of the back leg is usually not flexible enough to bend very far forward at first, so either the heel lifts up to relieve the tension, or the student will turn the foot outward and roll down on the side of the foot. This gives a much poorer grip on the mat. We're designed to stand on the *bottoms* of our feet, not the sides. It also puts too much sideways pressure on the knee joint. Stretching the calf muscles and Achilles tendons will help greatly with the forward-leaning stance, resulting in a better-looking and stronger functioning contact with the ground. Keep working at it, and the tightness will gradually diminish over a period of some months.

8. The Wind-Up

In fighting it is critical to avoid any advance movements, no matter how small, which might give your opponent a clue to your next strike. In other words, you don't want to "telegraph your punch." A common flaw which telegraphs is the wind-up. This is where the fist draws back or down a little before being launched forward. It wastes time and lets the opponent know what is coming. A technique should be launched suddenly, without any warning, on a straight line forward to the target. A wind-up of an inch or two is sometimes so subtle that you cannot sense doing it yourself, and only an outside observer can tell.

9. The Chicken-Wing Punch

The traditional karate corkscrew punch is launched from near the waist, with the fist initially held palm-up. During its travel forward to the target the fist rotates to a palm-down position or nearly so. It is important that the elbow remain in close to the body during the punch and not turn outward at all. Floating the elbow outward like a chicken wing not only telegraphs the punch, but it can cause the fist to rotate over too soon, and dip downward so as to look more like some kind of forward backfist. This is not good. The fist should not turn over until it is very nearly to the target, perhaps only an inch or two away. It is this last-moment snapping twist that gives extra power at the moment of impact, and it is wasted if it occurs too soon.

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