

Why Kenko Kempo Karate for Happy Older Adults?

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Abstract

Martial Arts as a whole body and brain exercise is known for its health effects on older adults, and could diminish the growing load of chronic disease in the last 20 years of life. But seniors, the majority in European society, are currently hardly seen in the dojo of Germany or the Netherlands. Initiatives, such as OldStars Sport, try to attract people to newly devised age-appropriate sport variants. Maslow's pyramid of deficiency needs and a self-reliance classification of older adults for sport and exercise underpin the adaptation needed. The Kenko Kempo Karate method includes the requirements to be adopted. This way Jukuren, the experienced members of society, could fully enjoy the personal advantages of growing in skills and knowledge, while working on health.

Human Ageing, Quality of Life, Martial Arts, Kenko Kempo Karate

Zusammenfassung

Kampfsport ist als Ganzkörper- und Gehirntaining für seine gesundheitsfördernde Wirkung auf ältere Erwachsenen bekannt und könnte die zunehmende Belastung durch chronische Erkrankungen in den letzten 20 Lebensjahren verringern. Aber Senioren, die Mehrheit in der europäischen Gesellschaft, sieht man heute in den Dojos Deutschlands oder der Niederlande kaum. Initiativen wie OldStars Sport versuchen Älteren für neu konzipierte, altersgerechte Sportvarianten zu begeistern. Die erforderliche Anpassung wird durch Maslows Pyramide der Defizitbedürfnisse und eine Klassifizierung der Selbstständigkeit älterer Erwachsener in Bezug auf Sport und Bewegung untermauert. Die Kenko Kempo Karate-Methode beinhaltet die benötigten Anforderungen. Auf diese Weise können Jukuren, die erfahrenen Mitglieder der Gesellschaft, die persönlichen Vorteile einer Erweiterung ihrer Fähigkeiten und Kenntnisse voll auskosten, während sie gleichzeitig an ihrer Gesundheit arbeiten.

Alterung des Menschen, Lebensqualität, Kampfkunst, Kenko Kempo Karate

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1 Martial Arts and Seniors

Kenko Kempo Karate has been founded by Erich B. Ries in order to bring satisfaction and enjoyment in growing skills of martial arts to older adults (Ries & Wogawa, 2011). Kerstin Witte (2024) recently introduced the Magdeburg Concept for teaching a martial art, mainly restricted to reducing fall accidents at advanced age. Practicing martial arts for aspects of mental, physical or social wellbeing has a long tradition (Burke et al, 2007). The effects of Tai Chi Chuan and QiGong are undisputed for age classes 50 to 80plus. Quality of life increased by better self efficacy in daily life, increased cardiopulmonary fitness and greater bone strength (Park et al., 2023). No disadvantages were reported resulting from training (Rogers et al., 2009).

Successful projects with age-appropriate hard martial arts have been reported from different styles and regions. From karate in Germany (Magdeburg, see above) and in Regensburg (Jansen & Dahmen-Zimmer, 2012). Further from karate in Victoria, Canada (Mustafa et al., 2022) and Polynesia (Chateau-Degat et al., 2010), from judo, karate and kung-fu in Castelló de la Plana, Spain (Muiños & Ballesteros, 2013, 2014, 2015), and from WTF-taekwondo in the Netherlands (Pons van Dijk, 2015). These projects improved life quality of participants by better vision, diminished mental inflictions and a lower incidence of falling accidents. In one research, a karate program of eight weeks had more effect on emotional well-being and cognitive performance than mindfulness-based stress reduction. The positive effects were still minor, stressing the fact that martial arts training should continue (Jansen et al., 2017). In another study cognitive functioning improved more with karate as compared to fitness training (Witte et al., 2016).

Still, persons of advanced age are hardly seen training in the dojo. For the Netherlands in 2013/2015 only about 1% of active 36-79 olds participated (Elling et al., 2017). Several plans were drawn up to attract seniors to the martial arts community, but with little overall success, e.g. in France (Karaté Santé, 2025), in Germany (Jukuren, 2025) and in the Netherlands (Sekwondo, Lodder, 2012). In Sekwondo, training resulted in some minor injuries, but participants continued training in the project.

In this presentation we will first oversee need and complexity of martial arts participation for persons of advanced age, and secondly show the role of Kenko Kempo Karate in a sustainable participation by the target group, Jukuren, the Experienced older adults, as formulated in Germany for those over 35 years of age (Jukuren, 2025). Originally, in Japan, Jukuren denoted older higher dan-holders.

2 Ageing, Needs and Ambitions

Life is changing during the whole lifespan. First we call the process growth, later it is known as ageing. These lifelong changes concern physical, mental, cognitive and social functions of a person, as well as his/her desires and ambition. It is a complicated process that originates from changes in the brain, and is partly inherited, partly driven by lifestyle (including sports and exercises), as well as other environmental factors (Aleman, 2012).

Jukuren have a number of advantages over younger adults. This includes extensive (i) crystalized intelligence, (ii) wisdom, (iii) emotional stability, and (iv) vocabulary (Aleman, 2012). Disadvantages for martial arts teaching also exist: (i) slower thinking and learning, (ii) increased diversity among individuals, (iii) increased vulnerability, and (iv) a decrease of muscular power, including heart capacity (Aleman, 2012; Tanaka et al., 2001).

Muscle memory for movements of former routine tasks remains ready for at least fifteen years (Gundersen, 2016), which is both an advantage and a disadvantage in martial arts teaching.

Ageing statistics

Europe is ageing and will continue to do so for the next 25-30 years (European Commission, 2024). The median age is expected to rise from about 47 years in Germany and 44 in the Netherlands in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025) to 48 in Germany and 46 in the Netherlands in 2050 (Database Earth, 2024). From a martial arts point of view the majority of society consists of Jukuren!

In 2023 Dutch persons at the age of 65 had a remaining life expectancy of about 19 years (men) or 21 years (women). Unfortunately, most of this time will be spent in suffering from chronic disease: man for 15 years, women for 18 years (Statline, 2024). To fight the suffering, the Dutch Health Organisation, RIVM, in partnership with sports organisations has formulated effective sport and exercise '*interventions*'. Best known are OldStars Sport with adapted sport rules. It is based on the ten basic movement skills of the Athletic Skills Model, originally formulated for youth of AFC Ajax, Amsterdam. The collection of activities of OldStars should bring enjoyment and satisfaction to older participants and expand their network of friends (Wormhoudt et al., 2018; Graaf 2024). Martial arts still have to be included.

Personal Needs

Since Jukuren are just persons, Maslow's pyramid of deficiency needs (Figure 1) applies. For beginners in martial arts the addressed levels go from safety up to esteem needs, to contribute in time to reaching the top: self-actualisation. The higher the Maslow level, the greater the diversity among individuals.

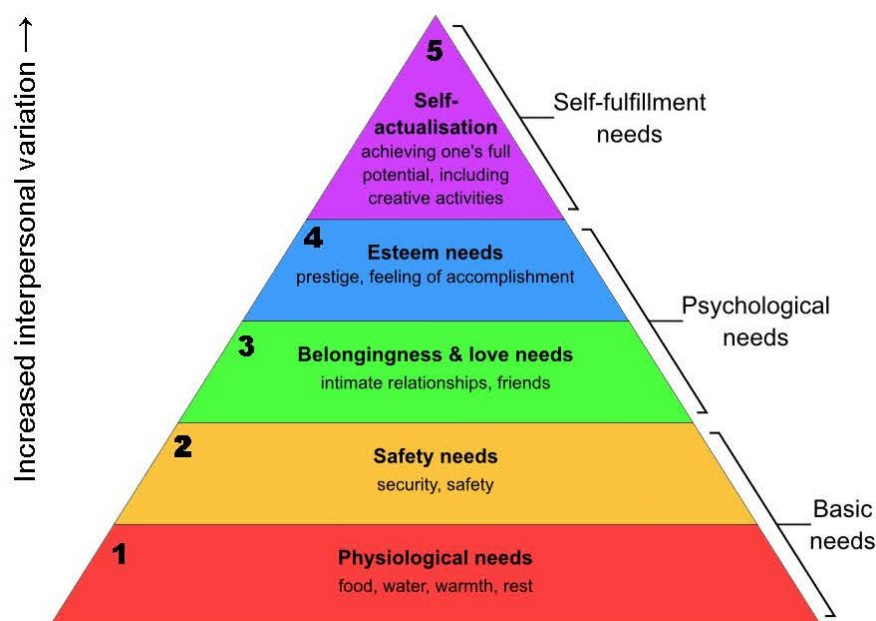


Figure 1: The pyramid of deficiency needs (Maslow 1943, adapted from Wikimedia Commons)

The way Maslow's deficiency needs may be addressed greatly varies among Jukuren, especially when the age rises, and more support becomes indispensable. In its curriculum and auxiliary materials the dojo should then extend support. Tollenaar & Bakker (2024) used a self-reliance grouping as a basis for options, needs and support in relation to sports and exercise. Teachers mentioned a variety of

helpful technical items for dojo practice (Table 1). Most teachers restricted training to Jukuren in the first two self-reliance classes. A few also included level-3 seniors.

Table 1: Self-reliance classification of older adults taking part in sport or exercise activities (adapted after Tollenaar & Bakker, 2024) and dojo support according to Dutch teachers dan-graded in Kenko Kempo Karate (Bronswijk, 2025)

Senior class	Description	Possible dojo support
1. Vital seniors	-Start to suffer from disease -No physical or cognitive limitations -Can manage well -Live independently at home	-Easily accessible -Proper temperature & ventilation -Proper lighting -Good acoustics -No irrelevant noise -No music and talking concurrently -Seats for short stay -Breast shields in self-defence -Adapted didactics -Coffee/tea together after training
2. Slightly vulnerable seniors	-Have at least one chronic disease -Can manage just fine -Might have some psychological complaints or little memory loss -Live independently at home, possibly with some support	-As above, plus: -Seats also for a longer stay -Knee and wrist braces to discuss -Allow cane use during training
3. Vulnerable seniors	-Suffer from (chronic) diseases -Cannot manage fully independent -Complaints in the physical, psychological, cognitive, or social domain -Need support and care at home or live in supervised housing	-As above, plus: -Seats for everyone during training -Reduced curriculum -Allow walkers during training -Storage walkers, mobility scooters
4. Frail Elderly	-Have serious complaints in several domains: physical, social, psychological, mobility or cognitive. -Need a high level of care and support -Live often in specialised care homes	Currently not covered by Kenko Kempo Karate dojo's in Germany or the Netherlands

Frail elderly (level 4 seniors) in Laren, The Netherlands, with extensive dementia were taught in a nursing home setting at weekly intervals. Together with the regular exercise teacher the mostly seated participants followed a reduced curriculum of arm and leg movements, with balloons and flexible foam rubber tubing for defence. Participants enjoyed the sessions. Autonomy increased. The activated nursing home inhabitants became a problem for the staff, and the experiment was terminated after three months (Bronswijk, 2019).

Ambition & Support

No Jukuren will adopt martial arts for the presence of seats or good acoustics, not even for only repairing one of Maslow's deficiency needs. It is as with the adoption of the endless stream of new (digital) technologies that are used less frequently by older adults as compared to younger generations. Gerontechnology, technology research and design to serve the ageing society, stands for the enhancement of daily life by answering and supporting active and dormant ambitions and needs of ageing people (Bronswijk, 2002, 2006, Bouma et al., 2009). Ergo: *The first ambition of our Jukuren is to have fun!* Martial arts bring (i) having fun together (level 3 of Maslow's pyramid), (ii) being respected (level 4), (iii) feeling more secure (level 2), and (iv) preserve health (level 1).

Gerontechnology also showed that rising levels of self-reliance loss need an increasing complexity of support. It runs from prevention and engagement (e.g. in martial arts: allowing a cane for support during training), over compensation and substitution (e.g. seated training), to care (e.g. a reduced curriculum).

Kenko (=health) *kempo* (=fist) *karate* (=empty hand) covers motivation and support issues mentioned above in a gerontechnology-sense. Only self-preservation, not competition is the aim. Keeping up motivation in the increasing divers Jukuren community is met by student and teacher together devising his/her individual teaching curriculum. The personal road from white to black belt is based on physical, mental and social growth, not on a mandatory technique list. This personal road depends on individual starting levels of health and capability. A thorough intake is advised. In a technique sense, one yellow belt is not comparable to another yellow belt, only to the white belt of the individual (Ries & Wogawa 2011, 2016, 2022).

According to the Kenko Kempo Karate method each lesson has a mixture of internal (meditation) techniques (QiGong, TaiChi) and external self-defence movements, in order to learn to balance relaxation and effort, inhaling and exhaling. Since the terms '*kempo*' and '*karate*' may sound too violent, other terms are also used, such as VITOK in the Netherlands, an abbreviation of VITale Ouderen door Krijgskunst; in translation: Vital Elderly through Martial Arts (see also, Bronswijk & Jüngen, 2023).

Under the Kenko Kempo Karate method rules each teacher bases his/her teaching on his/her own classical martial art or those of his/her teachers. Styles aiming at competition need extensive adaptation to become age-appropriate. Shotokan karate is a well-researched example (Emmermacher & Witte, 2012; Ries & Wogawa, 2022; Witte & Emmermacher, 2022). Among styles aiming at self-preservation, some are suitable as they are, such as Okinawa Shogen-Ryu (Dülp & Bronswijk, 2025).

Since teaching curricula for Jukuren in Kenko Kempo Karate are personal and based on growth in time, the teacher is also examiner as long as he/she has a valid licence of the Kenko Kempo Organisation e.V. Lateral entrants, teachers of classical Eastern Martial Arts, or others on request, are examined by the Shihan of the organisation.

This way of dealing with the art did not receive universal support from the competition-based martial arts community of teachers. Without mandatory lists of specific movements and techniques, and without regional or national dan-grading, there could be no real martial art! It is a threat to martial arts quality! From the same point of view teachers stated: older adults do not want to train martial arts, or: martial arts are unsafe for elderly, or: my program only contains safe movements without self-defence, but no one comes to train. Student who did attend age-appropriate martial arts classes, were pleased and fully satisfied (Bronswijk, 2021).

Kenko Kempo Karate respects martial arts from different regions as a basis for teaching, as long as teaching is age-appropriate, or better: appropriate to self-reliance level. In the end, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Okinawan, Korean and Philippine arts teachers were among the lateral entrants assessed for 1st dan Kenko Kempo Karate (Dülp & Bronswijk, 2024).

3 Jukuren Martial Arts

The results expected from applying the Kenko Kempo Karate method ranges from more pleasure, satisfaction and flexibility in daily life, over more self-knowledge, to a higher level of resilience (Table 2). And yes, also the risk of accidental falls goes down.

Table 2: A provisional list of martial arts related advantages for Jukuren, observed by the authors and their fellow teachers who are dan-graduated in Kenko Kempo Karate

Participant classification	Training advantages
1. Vital seniors	-Enjoyment and satisfaction while training -New social contacts for daily life -More pleasure in daily life -Increased resilience -Better coordination of complex movements -Increased body awareness -Better orientation in space -Awareness of physical-mental relationships -Diminished risk of accidental falls (better balance) -Better self-efficacy in daily life -Stronger bones and muscles -More flexible joints
2. Slightly vulnerable seniors	-As above, plus: -Support of independence and autonomy
3. Vulnerable seniors	As above
4. Frail Elderly	Not evaluated by lack of data

With Kenko Kempo Karate as a Martial Arts method, persons of advanced age (from vital to vulnerable) are thus offered a complete martial art for enjoyment, health and extended independence or autonomy. In short: for Happy Older Adults!

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