

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

BY JEFF GONZALES

What if you could predict most violent encounters seconds before they occurred? Change the question into a statement and now think about being one step ahead as the event unfolds. I can assure you this is not only possible, but also actually quite simple. It is called by many names, but basically it is nothing more than paying attention to your surroundings or situational awareness. The purpose behind such techniques can be summed up as, "Avoid being surprised." If we are surprised our ability to affect a successful response is greatly hindered. Surprise adversely affects a successful response. Situational awareness increases our response time by letting us begin sooner. When we can increase our response time by starting to respond earlier, we gain control over a portion of the event and our actions. Understanding situational awareness, the different types of environments and

pre-incident indicators can allow you to create contingency plans, which increase your level of safety.

Situational awareness starts with focused attention. Stay focused on the current situation, such as driving to work or walking to the bank. This focus is directed at your surroundings, being mindful of what does and does not belong. Take the time to actually look at things and not just glance over them. Pick up the subtle differences, or the folks who are not paying attention to you. Remember your personal safety doesn't just center on violent encounters, it also encompasses daily activities. I see the greatest benefits to situational awareness while driving. Paying attention to the road is only part of it—paying attention to the other vehicles around you while on the road is the key. This situational awareness takes on a different attitude. This attitude is proactive in nature and intended to

identify potential dangers in advance. Ultimately we want to avoid distracters, which can come in a variety of forms. Anything that takes your focus off the situation is a distracter: a cell phone call, changing the channel on your stereo, or someone asking you for directions, etc.

An important aspect to understand is that the environment controls the level of awareness. In other words there are areas where your alertness must be high and there are situations where it can be low. Identifying these in advance will allow you to be in the appropriate condition at the time. It boils down to understanding the totality of the situation—the big picture. There are different levels of safe environments and you need to correctly identify them.

Let us talk about safe havens. Your home, place of work or other familiar environment may provide a level of security which permits less alertness.



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Here you can let down your guard to some degree.

On the other side of the equation are danger areas. These are locations you have identified as having a higher element of risk. In these areas you must be on high alert or an alert proportionate to the situation. Once you have identified your safe havens and danger areas you can be in more control of your focus and direct it better. Keep in mind that just because you have identified something as a safe haven or danger area doesn't mean it will stay that way for eternity—be capable of assessing and reassessing as necessary.

The next step is looking for pre-incident indicators. These are the subtle clues that something is awry. There are several different examples, but anything that attempts to manipulate you requires greater scrutiny. In the same breath, anything that is inappropriate to the situation should also get a closer look. If you have your hands full walking to the car and somebody asks you for the time, it is inappropriate. There will be a great deal of intuitive recognition, which is nothing more than honoring your instincts. You need to identify

some important survivor signals, such as suspicion. Why is it you are suspicious of the person/event? Apprehension is another. Why are you apprehensive and looking over your shoulder? And, the most important one, fear. Why is it you are afraid? While some folks will look at fear in a negative context, you should only if the fear paralyzes you. If your fear has taken over your body so that you cannot respond, that is obviously bad. However, fear can also be used very effectively when properly harnessed. You really have to be in touch with your feelings to follow through on any of these aspects. Many people worry they will be judged as over-reacting, but a degree of prudence is in order here. It is far more prudent to be cautious than careless.

Once you have obtained this directed focus and manage to pick up something out of the ordinary the natural progression will be developing contingency plans. Use the, "if he does this, I will do that" thought process. These do not have to be elaborate or time consuming, but you should put some thought into what you are going to do with the information you have gathered. If you

had to select only one important contingency I would encourage you to look for escapes/exits. At the very least you should be looking for cover and/or concealment. It is at this point where I see most folks who execute good situational awareness falter. They tend to forget the information they just gathered.

So, the first step towards increased safety is knowing something bad is about to happen. You may actually see the event occur, but did you have any warning? Only through consistent exercising of situational awareness can you avoid being surprised. Maintaining a focus on the present and not the past will allow you to discern the subtle clues. Adapting the level of alertness to the environment will provide a thorough layer to your security measures by selecting an appropriate focus rather than an all or nothing attitude. Picking up on the pre-incident indicators and listening to your intuition will provide you some time to execute a contingency plan you formulated based on the available information.

In the end, you cannot do much if you don't see them coming. ☉

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