

Note: The following is the last installment in a three-part series on Situational Awareness. In the context of personal protection measures, Situational Awareness is often considered one of the most important techniques individuals can use to keep themselves safe. Including Situational Awareness training as part of a comprehensive employee Travel Security Program or Executive Protection Program is an important consideration in lowering risk for employees when traveling abroad. Please [contact IMG](#) if you would like more information on how you can best protect your employees during overseas travel or work assignments.

A Practical Guide to Situational Awareness, Part 3

By Scott Stewart

Finding the Right Level

Now that we've discussed the different levels of awareness, let's focus on identifying what level is ideal at a given time. The body and mind both require rest, so we have to spend several hours each day at the comatose level while asleep. When we are sitting at our homes watching a movie or reading a book, it is perfectly fine to operate in the tuned-out mode. However, some people will attempt to maintain the tuned-out mode in decidedly inappropriate environments (e.g., when they are out on the street at night in a Third World barrio), or they will maintain a mindset wherein they deny that criminals can victimize them. "That couldn't happen to me, so there's no need to watch for it." This results in their being tuned out to any potential threats.

If you are tuned out while you are driving and something happens -- say, a child runs out into the road or a car stops quickly in front of you -- you will not see the problem coming. This usually means that you either do not see the hazard in time to avoid it and you hit it, or you totally panic, freeze and cannot react to it -- neither is good. These reactions (or lack of reactions) occur because it is very difficult to change mental states quickly, especially when the adjustment requires moving several steps, say, from tuned out to high alert. It is like trying to shift your car directly from first gear into fifth and it shudders and stalls. Many times, when people are forced to make this mental jump and they panic (and stall), they go into shock and will actually freeze and be unable to take any action -- they go comatose. This happens not only when driving but also when a criminal catches someone totally unaware and unprepared. While training does help people move up and down the alertness continuum, it is difficult for even highly trained individuals to transition from tuned out to high alert. This is why law enforcement and military personnel receive so much training on situational awareness.

It is critical to stress here that situational awareness does not mean being paranoid or obsessively concerned about security. In fact, people simply cannot operate in a state of focused awareness for extended periods, and high alert can be maintained only for very brief periods before exhaustion sets in. The "fight-or-flight" response can be very helpful if it can be controlled. When it gets out of control, however, a constant stream of adrenaline and stress is simply not healthy for the body and mind, and this also hampers security. Therefore, operating constantly in a state of high alert is not the answer, nor is operating for prolonged periods in a state of focused alert, which can also be demanding and completely enervating. The human body was simply not designed to operate under constant stress. All people, even highly skilled operators, require time to rest and recover.

Because of this, the basic level of situational awareness that should be practiced most of the time is relaxed awareness, a state of mind that can be maintained indefinitely without all the stress and fatigue associated with focused awareness or high alert. Relaxed awareness is not tiring, and it allows you to enjoy life while rewarding you with an effective level of personal security. When people are in an area where there is potential danger (which, in reality, is almost anywhere), they should go through most of the day in a state of relaxed awareness. Then if they spot something out of the ordinary that could be a threat, they can "dial up" to a state of focused awareness and take a careful look at that potential threat (and also look for others in the area). If the possible threat proves innocuous, or is simply a false alarm, they can dial back down into relaxed awareness and continue on their way. If, on the other hand, the potential threat becomes a probable threat, seeing it in advance allows a person to take actions to avoid it. In such a case they may never need to elevate to high alert, since they have avoided the problem at an early stage.

However, once a person is in a state of focused awareness they are far better prepared to handle the jump to high alert if the threat does change from potential to actual -- if the three guys lurking on the corner do start advancing and look as if they are reaching for weapons.

Of course, when a person knowingly ventures into an area that is very dangerous, it is only prudent to practice focused awareness while in that area. For example, if there is a specific section of highway where a lot of improvised explosive devices detonate and ambushes occur, or if there is a part of a city that is controlled (and patrolled) by criminal gangs -- and the area cannot be avoided for whatever reason -- it would be prudent to practice a heightened level of awareness when in those areas. An increased level of awareness is also prudent when engaging in common or everyday tasks, such as visiting an ATM or walking to the car in a dark parking lot. When the time of potential danger has passed, it is then easy to shift back to a state of relaxed awareness.

People can hone their situational awareness ability by practicing some simple drills. For example, you can consciously move your awareness level up to a focused state for short periods of time during the day. Some examples of this can include identifying all the exits when you enter a building, counting the number of people in a restaurant or subway car, or noting which cars take the same turns in traffic. One trick that many law enforcement officers are taught is to take a look at the people around them and attempt to figure out their stories, in other words, what they do for a living, their mood, what they are focused on and what it appears they are preparing to do that day, based merely on observation. Employing such simple focused-awareness drills will train a person's mind to be aware of these things almost subconsciously when the person is in a relaxed state of awareness.

This situational awareness process also demonstrates the importance of people being familiar with their environment and the dangers that are present there. Such awareness permits some threats to be avoided and others to be guarded against when you must venture into a dangerous area.

Not everyone is forced to live in the type of intense threat environment currently found in places like Mogadishu, Juarez or Kandahar. Nonetheless, average citizens all over the world face many different kinds of threats on a daily basis -- from common thieves and assailants to criminals and mentally disturbed individuals intending to conduct violent acts to militants wanting to carry out large-scale attacks.

As we noted two weeks ago, some of the steps required to conduct these attacks must be accomplished in a manner that makes the actions visible to the potential victim and outside observers -- if people are

looking for such actions. It is at these junctures that people practicing situational awareness can detect these attack steps, avoid the danger themselves and alert the authorities to protect others.

As the jihadist threat continues to devolve from one based on al Qaeda the group to one based on grassroots cells and lone wolves, grassroots defenders -- ordinary citizens practicing good situational awareness -- become more important than ever before.

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