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Situational Awareness

Scott Kirshner, M.Ed., SAS-AP

“It takes only one act of violence to dramatically change your world for the worse. Generally, you don’t get to choose the time, location, or circumstances. It matters not that you are tired, sick, injured, or distracted. You are either prepared to respond appropriately or you are not. There tends not to be a middle ground when violence is directed at you.”

Scott Kirshner

In the most basic sense, situational awareness means understanding what is going on around you. While such a statement, at first glance, appears to be simple there is much more to this concept. Understanding what is going on around you means you have to observe, gather, analyze, and potentially respond to information from your environment.

- Gather **too little information** and you will not have the full scope of your environment.
- Gather **too much information** and you will quickly have information overload which may slow down your decision-making process or worse will cause failure to see and respond to a threat.

It is vitally important to have the ability to determine which information is relevant and which information is meaningless. Situational awareness requires that you cognitively process numerous pieces of information simultaneously. Based upon the collected information you must then decide what course of action, if any, is necessary.

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Situational awareness is a term that is extensively used by the military. According to the Army Field Manual 1-02, situational awareness is:

“Knowledge and understanding of the current situation which promotes timely, relevant and accurate assessment of friendly, competitive and other operations within the battlespace in order to facilitate decision making. An informational perspective and skill that fosters an ability to determine quickly the context and relevance of events that are unfolding.”

The emphasis is on understanding actionable information and responding in a timely manner. While this definition is from a military manual it is still applicable to you. The military definition stresses factors that are applicable to everyone such as:

- Knowledge and understanding of the current situation
- Promotes timely, relevant, and accurate assessment
- Facilitate decision making
- Ability to quickly determine the context and relevance of the events that are unfolding

Whether you are a soldier, police officer, executive protection officer, private security, safety oriented civilian, or a soccer mom, understanding the process of situational awareness is critical. Failure to have, or the ability to maintain, situational awareness mitigates your ability to effectively solve problems. If the problem is violence you may very well be injured or killed. This is why it is important to acknowledge the potential for danger even if this possibility is remote. Ignorance of danger or denial of a threat increases your chances of becoming victimized and is not an acceptable safety strategy.

The ability to be aware of your surroundings (situational awareness) in order to identify potential threats and dangerous situations is more a mindset than a hard skill. Another

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important point that should not be overlooked is the ability to trust your instinct or your “gut” feeling. Your intuition is a form of self-preservation that should not be ignored or minimized. Often a person’s subconscious will notice subtle signs of danger that your conscious mind is not able to process.

It is not uncommon to hear stories of victims who state they felt something was wrong but chose to ignore such feelings. **Always, always, always trust your instinct even if you are not consciously aware what the specific problem is at the time.** Trust your intuition as there is a reason you are receiving this early warning signal.

Situational Awareness Needs to be Learned, Practiced, and Developed

Situational Awareness is a topic that is often discussed among law enforcement officers, personal protection professionals, and those interested in personal safety & security. Based on my experience of 30+ years of studying violence I have come to an undeniable truth when it comes to the reality of situational awareness:

Most people are not nearly as good at situational awareness as they would like to believe.

For many, this is a bitter pill to swallow and people will defend their “expertise” in situational awareness when confronted with the above statement. Such a claim is often viewed as a direct assault on one’s capabilities that must be quickly defended. The ego feels attacked and defense mechanisms kick in with a litany of reasons defending their competence in situational awareness. Psychologists call this rationalization. Others will say these are excuses. Regardless of the defensive statements used the reality is that it is impossible to respond to a threat you do not know exists.

A significant reason why situational awareness is often lacking is routine and routine leads to complacency! People are extremely predictable in almost all aspects of their lives. Spend one week evaluating your daily schedule and you will notice that you perform many of the same tasks daily, at the same time, in the same order, and often without any conscious thought of the process. When you leave the relative safety and security of your home it is not always the case that you “turn on” your situational

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awareness as a method of avoiding or mitigating violence. It is easy to use catchy phrases such as:

“Keep your head on a swivel.”

“Don’t get missile locked.”

“Scan the environment.”

“Head up.”

These phrases lose their effectiveness over time because they get said so often that they become meaningless. Situational awareness requires cognition and action. Situational awareness is work. Routine is your enemy and leads to complacency. Complacency evolves over time and slowly sneaks up on you day by day. Avoiding complacency is a daily task that begins with the belief that: *Today may be the day violence will be directed toward me or my client.*

Complacency is your Enemy

- ⇒ **Routine** leads to complacency
- ⇒ **Complacency** can lead to shortcuts
- ⇒ **Shortcuts** can lead to serious bodily injury or death
 - ☞ You are not immune to complacency
 - ☞ You must be proactive with your safety

It is easy to “*switch on*” when something is not right or you are expecting a problem. But the majority of your time is routine. A threat who wants to hurt you will take advantage of any opportunity where you are not ready. Remember, by the time you become “switched on” you may already be significantly behind in the OODA Loop. It doesn’t mean you are out of the fight but you definitely have work to do!

Situational awareness is a skill that needs to be learned, practiced, and developed. The reality is that too many people, even professionals, do not spend enough time practicing

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and developing situational awareness with focused intent. They go through the motions without much thought and without a goal of improving their skill level. Going through the motions may work the majority of the time especially when no incidents occur. It does not mean you will be adequately prepared the day you are face-to-face with a violent encounter. There is no resting on previous accomplishments when it comes to situational awareness. You must earn your safety and security on a daily basis. Your life may depend on it or the life of a client you are tasked with protecting.



Improving Situational Awareness

The phrase “situational awareness” is used so often it is easy to believe everyone has it or that it is a basic intuitive skill which needs little practice or development. This is absolutely incorrect. To improve situational awareness you must practice and develop your skills. Once you obtain the foundational skills of situational awareness it is critical that you implement these skills on a daily basis. A phrase I tell participants of my classes is: **Every Day; Every Task**. This means you must implement situational awareness every day with every task you complete. You must use purposeful intent with your actions in order to be safer. When it comes to personal safety, especially if you are

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hired to protect others, you do not get the option of being anything less than 100% ready and capable. This requires commitment and dedication. The reality is that the world is full of predators. There are individuals with evil intentions who are willing and capable of harming you, loved ones, and clients. Fortunately, there are many ways one can improve situational awareness.

Following are methods to improve situational awareness to avoid, mitigate, or respond to violence.

1. Mindset

Personal safety starts with having a proactive safety oriented mindset. The topic of mindset is a comprehensive subject that can fill volumes. For the purposes of this article, mindset in relation to situational awareness is that you will:

- ⇒ Acknowledge danger when it appears and never intentionally deny or rationalize away signs of danger or red flags
- ⇒ Never give up when involved in a violent encounter
- ⇒ Commit to practicing proactive safety measures to include situational awareness
- ⇒ Fight complacency on a daily basis
- ⇒ Not allow routine to lead to complacency
- ⇒ Continually learn, practice, and develop safety skills to include mindset, situational awareness, physical skills, defensive tactics/self-defense, firearms proficiency, trauma care, etc.

It is important to stress that without a survival oriented mindset your chances of surviving a violent encounter are significantly diminished even if you are highly skilled in other safety areas. As is often said: “*The will to win beats the skill to win.*”

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In my opinion, survival begins and ends with a never quit mindset that you will do everything within your power to prevail in a violent encounter.

The will to win beats the skill to win.

2. Trust your Intuition

What is intuition and why is it important?

Intuition is the feeling you get telling you something is wrong. It is important because it can keep you alive as long as you do not ignore it.

Why do we get this feeling?

Your environment continually bombards you with information. Your conscious brain cannot process all of this information. When you get the feeling something is wrong, your subconscious brain has picked up on danger cues in your environment that your conscious brain has not processed.

What does this mean to you?

It means that you must ALWAYS trust your intuition or your sixth sense. Something IS wrong and you need to change your course of action...immediately.

“Only human beings can look directly at something, have all the information they need to make an accurate prediction, perhaps even momentarily make the accurate prediction, and then say that it isn't so.”

Gavin de Becker, The Gift of Fear

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3. Use Your Senses



Vision

For most people, vision is the most used sense to interpret incoming information. Sight is our window to the world.

- ⇒ Identify the baseline for the location
- ⇒ Identify anomalies
- ⇒ What do you see in your environment that has safety implications?
- ⇒ What is the behavior of the crowd?
- ⇒ How are individuals and groups interacting with each other?
- ⇒ Is anything missing from the environment that should be there or is normally there?
- ⇒ Is anything in the environment that should not be there?



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Hearing

Along with vision, the sense of hearing is a significant manner in which we obtain information from the environment. In fact, vision and hearing are the primary senses which provide environmental information. These senses are especially important when it comes to personal safety and security.



- ⇒ What are you hearing in the environment that may have safety implications?
- ⇒ Is the area too quiet?
- ⇒ Is the area too noisy based on your observations?
- ⇒ When someone is speaking to you what are the paraverbal aspects of the communication such as tone, volume, and cadence and are there safety implications?
- ⇒ Are people communicating with you in a manner where there is a difference between the words they are using and the body language being displayed?
- ⇒ Are police, fire, EMS sirens close to your location responding to a scene that may impact your safety?

When it comes to the senses of vision and hearing always evaluate if there is congruence between what you are seeing and what you are hearing. If there is a disparity question why and then evaluate how it can impact your safety. Take appropriate safety measures when necessary. Typically, the sooner the better!



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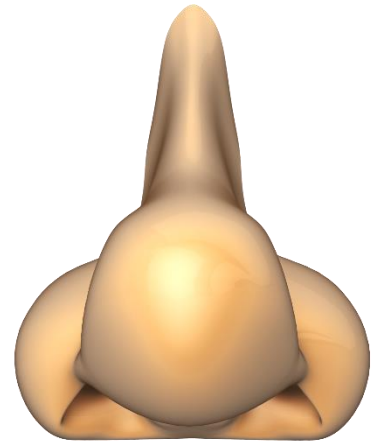


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Smell

Smell, while important, is not as important for the prevention of a violent attack as vision and hearing. The ability to “smell” a threat is not as valuable as seeing or hearing the threat preferably before the threat sees you. Yet, an effective sense of smell can allow you to detect:

- ⇒ Smoke from fires
- ⇒ Environmental odors such as gas which can have safety implications
- ⇒ Illicit drug use
- ⇒ People in the area that are smoking cigarettes but are out of visual sight
- ⇒ Chemical agents such as pepper spray that may have been deployed in the environment



Touch and Taste

Taste and touch tend not to be as important to personal safety as the other senses in regard to situational awareness and the prevention of violence.

4. Cognitively Process Information

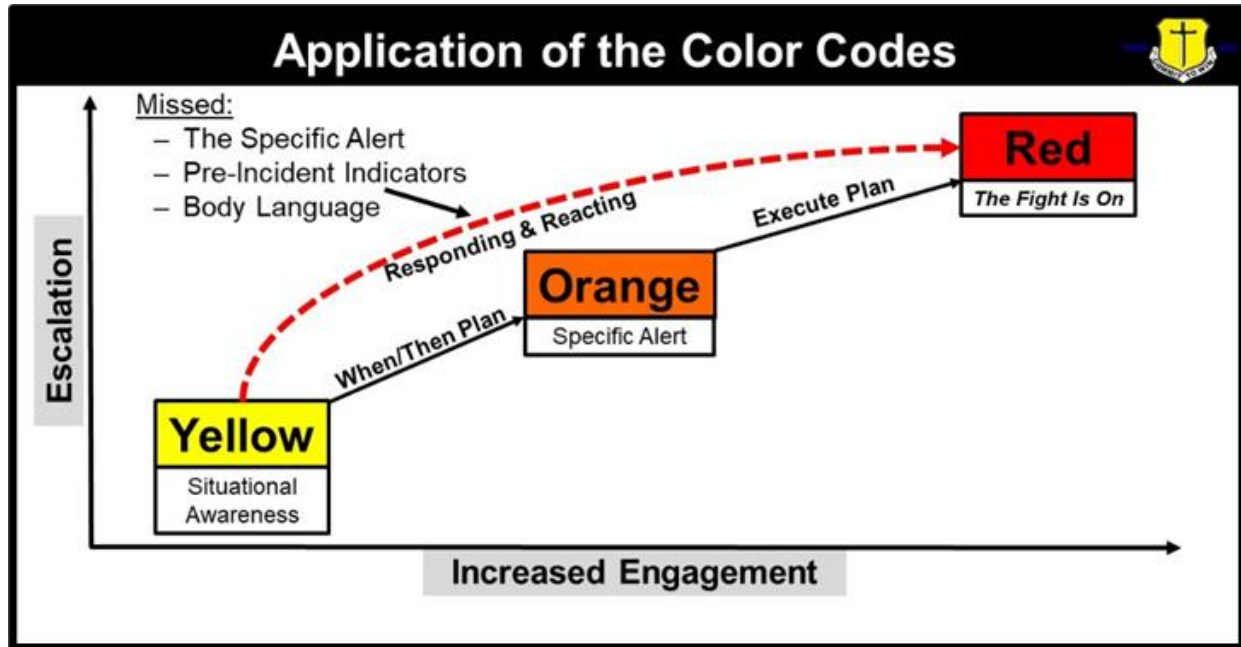
Failure to have situational awareness means you may not have time to develop a potential response plan prior to a violent encounter. When dealing with extreme violence this is a bad situation because you are responding based on limited information. The goal is to have situational awareness so that you are in Condition Yellow in order to:

- ⇒ Develop a response plan along with contingency plans
- ⇒ Be able to modify your plan as necessary based on changing events

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In the above graphic, you are responding and reacting without the benefit of an action plan. Depending on your level of training, skills, and experience this situation may or may not work out to your benefit. This means you may or may not neutralize the threat(s).

What is occurring in this situation is you started in Condition Yellow, but you failed to pick up on a specific threat that would have raised your awareness level to Condition Orange. In this situation you:

- ⇒ Missed a specific alert
- ⇒ Missed Pre-Incident Indicators (PII) of Violence
- ⇒ Missed reading Body Language indicating a potential problem

This is an extremely problematic situation especially if you have minimal training to resolve violent encounters. If confronted by a violent encounter in this situation you would go from Condition Yellow directly into Condition Red (FIGHT) without the benefit

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of formulating even a rudimentary plan in Condition Orange. Essentially, you are responding and reacting without a plan based on very limited information. If you have no formal training you may end up depending on luck to prevail more than skill. Remember:

Hope is not a survival strategy.

Luck is not a survival tactic!

5. Take Proactive Measures that will Keep you Safe

The main goal of effective situational awareness is the ability to recognize a potential problem before it escalates to an actual problem. In other words, situational awareness can allow you the ability to avoid a violent encounter. Avoidance though is not a guarantee even if you are situationally aware. Therefore, you must always have a plan of action that includes proactive safety measures. The more you practice situational awareness and the more you train the better you will be at determining all of the potential options that are available.

Proactive safety measures may include:

- ⇒ Avoidance
- ⇒ Leaving the Area
- ⇒ Utilizing Verbal De-escalation Skills
- ⇒ Calling the Police
- ⇒ Fighting Skills – With or without the use of a weapon
- ⇒ Combination of the above

It is important to realize that avoidance and de-escalation are not always options based on the actions of the threat.

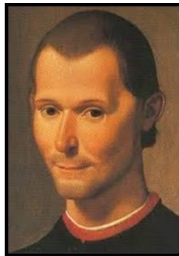
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6. Re-assess the Environment

Until you know your safety is absolute it is important to not become relaxed or complacent too soon after a violent encounter. Continue to reassess the environment for threats to your safety from the initial threat or new threats. This is especially important in venues with large groups of people.



“The temper of the multitude is fickle.”

— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Mob mentality can kick in and the situation can escalate quickly.

- ⇒ Is the threat(s) neutralized?
- ⇒ Is the scene safe?
- ⇒ Are other threats entering the environment?
- ⇒ Has anything changed that has safety implications?

*“But once it has begun, the raging mob has a life of its own. Deep-seated resentments, repetitive frustrations and long standing disappointments galvanize people into action. **And the mob provides cover, an anonymity that makes it easier to overcome one's usual reticence or moral scruples.** One is immersed, engulfed. And it can become an exuberant experience, a joyful release for long suppressed emotions.”*

Understanding Why People Riot
Ken Eisold Ph.D.

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7. Re-evaluate Your Proactive Measures

Violent encounters tend to be very dynamic events. Until the threat is effectively neutralized you must continually be proactive with safety. Develop a primary safety plan with multiple contingency options. Do not be afraid to change your plan as needed. Your overall objective is your safety or the safety of the client you are hired to protect. Be flexible and adaptable at all times. Avoid sticking with a plan that is not working.

- ⇒ Do you need to change your course of action?
- ⇒ Scan the environment for escape routes?
- ⇒ Scan the environment for cover and/or concealment
- ⇒ Scan the environment for weapons of opportunity

Conclusion

Situational Awareness is a skill that must be practiced in order to reach a level of competency. This takes time, effort, and consistency to develop such skills. While many people believe their situational awareness skills are exceptional, the reality is that most people have plenty of room for improvement. Step back and honestly evaluate your effectiveness with situational awareness. With a little honest self-reflection I am confident the vast majority of people can identify weaknesses in their current level of situational awareness. These are correctable with a plan, time, effort, practice, and consistency. The end result is worth the effort. It may even save your life!

About the author

Scott Kirshner, M.Ed., SAS-AP has been a Parole Administrator, Supervisory Probation Officer, and a Corrections Officer. He has extensive experience as an officer survival trainer and has been a lead defensive tactics instructor, firearms instructor, and use of force instructor. He is the author of numerous books on safety which are available on Amazon.com. Mr. Kirshner is the owner and Lead Instructor of Dedicated Threat Solutions, LLC. The author can be reached at: info@dedicatedthreatsolutions.com or to learn more visit: www.dedicatedthreatsolutions.com

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