



© Timon Studier

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

DON'T BECOME A VICTIM OF CRIME

Our lives move at a considerably faster pace these days, often encountering a number of distractions along the way on a regular basis. This combined with the rise of sophisticated crime is undoubtedly a call for greater situational awareness. Security expert Ed Hill provides guidance on how to avoid being in dangerous situations and even identify criminal behaviour by simply being aware of your surroundings.

Street crime is all around us and has sadly become a daily occurrence, particularly for those of us who live in a big city. From sexual assault to violent robbery, street crime has almost been accepted as the norm. The UK's capital has been hit by an epidemic of knife crime, acid attacks and, with around 60 moped crimes per day, London's crime wave seems to be spiralling out of control. With controversial cuts to policing and a reduction in police powers to stop and search, it appears that our streets are more dangerous than ever.

Despite the regularity of these incidents, our perception is that these things always seem to happen to someone else. However, the reality is that none of us are immune from becoming a victim and I often see a significant shift in an individual's attitude and mindset after they have become a victim of crime. Naturally, the victim does not want a repeat of that traumatic experience, so they become more cautious, but prevention is always better than cure; by becoming more situationally aware, you can reduce the likelihood of becoming yet another crime statistic.

What is situational awareness?

Frustratingly, I have yet to see a standardised definition of situational awareness. To put it in layman's terms: it is being in tune with your environment and knowing what is going on around you. The term has often been used within military circles due to its ramifications for effective combat decision making within an operational theatre.

Although it may sound somewhat regimented, it is worth noting that situational awareness and being aware of your surroundings whilst having the ability to simultaneously identify potential threats and dangerous situations is more about mindfulness than having an acquired skill. It is basically the application of common sense.

Situational awareness is not something that is instilled into highly trained law enforcement agents or elite military units. It is something that can be practised by anyone, provided they have the discipline and desire to do so. Situational awareness is not only important for individual self-protection but also serves to identify suspicious criminal behaviour, think bank heist or an act of terrorism.

How many times has someone bumped into you on the street because they have been texting on their phone? That person is fixated on their handset and has bumped into you because they are not paying attention to their surroundings. They are not being situationally aware.

How many times have you witnessed an altercation between two people in a bar and moved away for your own safety? You have noticed behaviour that could potentially cause you harm and taken action to avoid it. That is being situationally aware.

How to be more situationally aware

The very first element in developing a more situationally aware mindset is to acknowledge that threats do exist. Ignorance or denial of a threat leaves you vulnerable to becoming a victim and significantly reduces the chances quickly recognising an emerging threat and appropriately responding to it. There are some malevolent people out there, so ignore these threats at your peril.

It makes sense to do your homework on an

“Situational awareness is not something that is instilled into highly trained law enforcement agents or elite military units. It is something that can be practised by anyone, provided they have the discipline and desire to do so.”



© Luke Stackpoole

area that you are unfamiliar with. A high crime rate merits extra caution so think about whether it is worth wearing your diamond necklace or Rolex watch when you are in an unfamiliar area.

A second main element of developing and practising the right mindset is to recognise and accept the need to take responsibility for your own security. You need to understand that the police, your boyfriend, husband or whoever will not always be there to protect you. You are on your own in this big bad world so be prepared for what you may encounter.

One of the most important factors of this mindset is learning to trust your instinct. This is something that women are often more attuned to than men. Sometimes the subconscious mind can identify subtle signs of danger that the conscious mind has problems registering. Trusting your instinct and acting on it may temporarily inconvenience you but there is usually a reason when something does not feel right.

Conversely, a vital factor to bear in mind is the damage that can be done to your own mental well-being by constantly living in a state of paranoia. This is not only mentally draining, but also affects your ability to perform when under pressure. Your ability to move up and down to varying levels of alertness should reflect the use of car gears, if a car consistently operates at the same gear it will either fail to function or eventually burn out. Your mind is the same.

Levels of Awareness

Throughout our daily lives our natural instincts take us through varying levels of mental awareness. This is an in-built self-preservation mechanism that helps to keep us safe from potential harm. Former Marine and self defence expert Jeff Cooper realised that the human mind goes through a natural process of various levels of alertness. Cooper believed that the most potent survival tool was the mind and to help prepare the mind for danger, he formulated the Cooper Colour Code. This Code highlights the different states of mental readiness the human mind goes through that enables us to deal with certain situations.

Cooper's Colours of Awareness

White	Unaware, unprepared and unready to take action.
Yellow	Prepared, alert and relaxed. Good situational awareness.
Orange	Alert to potential threat. Ready to take action.
Red	There is a definite threat.
Black	You are actively fighting.

What level should I adopt?

The human struggles to change mental states quickly. Like car gears, many people struggle to make this sudden shift and consequently freeze through panic. Even highly experienced military and police personnel can struggle to make this quick adjustment.

Alternatively, trying to operate in a constant state of high alert is not the answer. The human body and the human brain are not designed to operate in a constant state of high stress as this will at some point result in that individual burning out. Even highly skilled professionals require time to rest and recover.

The basic level of situational awareness that should be maintained for most of the time is "relaxed awareness". This is a state of mind that can be sustained without the added stress and fatigue associated with being on high alert. Relaxed awareness is not strenuous, and it allows you to remain comfortable whilst still being conscious of what is going on around you.

By adopting a calm demeanour, you will not bring any unnecessary attention to yourself. Walking around aggressively, looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Terminator movie, will undoubtedly get you noticed which is not what you want.

In the event that something unusual catches your attention, remaining in a state of relaxed awareness gives you the ability to "shift gears" to a state of "focused awareness" that allows you to examine that potential threat before deciding on your next move. When you are in a state of focused

awareness, you are far more prepared to handle the jump to the next level of high alert if the threat changes from potential to actual.

Should that threat prove to be inoffensive or a false alarm, you can then shift your mindset back to relaxed awareness and carry on as normal. If, however, the potential threat becomes a feasible threat, spotting it in advance allows you to take action to avoid it. In this instance, there is no need to elevate to high alert as the problem has been avoided at an early stage. Again, when the potential danger has passed, it is easy to shift back down to a state of relaxed awareness.

Animal behaviour

Criminal behaviour often resembles the behaviour of animals. Animals are creatures of opportunity and they will often only attack another creature if it looks vulnerable. Lions for example, will go after younger, sicker or older gazelles because they are easier to catch. The same goes with humans. Criminals will generally target a person who appears vulnerable, whether the victim is physically weaker or will simply be easy to catch off guard. Therefore, you have to be ready.

Practicing situational awareness goes a long way in keeping you from appearing like an easy target. When you are out and about, look alert and be alert. Remove your headphones and get your nose out of your smartphone.

When you are walking home through a dimly lit area at night, constantly scan your surroundings and remain vigilant. Remember, the less vulnerable you look, the less likely it is that someone will prey on you.

Ed Hill is a former Royal Marines Commando and founder and Managing Director of Intrepid Risk Management, a London based security and risk management company that specialises in high-end security services to superyacht owners and high net worth individuals.
ed@intrepid-risk.com