



OBSERVE

“Intuition is always right in at least two ways: it is in response to something and it always has your best interest at heart.”

GAVIN DE BECKER, *THE GIFT OF FEAR*

OBSERVE MORE, FEAR LESS:

A Primer for Day-to-Day Safety

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I have been teaching personal safety for many years and always emphasize the importance of being engaged and aware of the place and situation you are currently in be it a jog in the park, walking the dog, or something as routine as heading out the front door to your car. Acts of physical violence occur everywhere but especially to people who are not prepared for it nor see it coming. Being observant of your surrounding environment and recognizing what belongs, what does not, and what just does not feel right is vital for safety and survival.

Celebrities, public figures, and judges often experience the fixated individual, threatening communication, or dangerous behavior. Many have been stalked, assaulted, or killed; some of their family members have suffered a similar fate for no other reason than being in proximity at the time of the attack.

Victims of domestic and intimate partner violence are deeply familiar with these types of threats. They, too, are in an at-risk group, and know fear and courage all

too well. Fear being that brief signal in the presence of danger and courage the choice made in the face of it.

All of us, every day, are potential victims. Sadly, our antennas to danger are often turned off or dismissed allowing acts of violence to occur more easily. Situational awareness, observing, listening and acting upon that inner voice telling you that something is wrong are primers for day-to-day safety.

Situational Awareness

Being situationally aware simply means being aware of and engaged with your immediate surroundings. Baseline behaviors and their deviations become recognizable once this engagement happens.

For example, just the other day my son and I were walking to my vehicle, hands filled with bags, when two men abruptly step off the sidewalk from across the street and walk directly towards us as we neared the vehicle. I get the “this just does not feel right”

bell in my head and tell my son to follow me, which confuses him because we were a step or two from the driver and passenger doors, but he follows my request anyway. By the time the two men were near my driver side door, where I would have been, I was now just off the rear of it. I turned my head to see where they were, and they turned their heads for the same reason. For too long of a second our eyes met, they kept walking, and nothing happened.

A baseline of behavior is a starting point in which to measure consistency in a group, person, and environment while accounting for cultural and contextual changes. Deviations to that norm become distinguishable because they are out of place, allowing one to process its meaning. And just because something deviates from the norm does not mean it is a threat, *it could just be different.*

Only when you recognize the baseline can you make an informed decision, based on the factors before you, on what to do for safety. This could simply mean move in the opposite direction, call out for help, and/or get ready to defend. None of the reactions can happen though without observing first because if this is the case, we might skip to the stress response of freeze and miss the active defense opportunity to fight or flee.

Unlike animals in nature who are free of bias and judgment, we often deny ourselves information that can protect us. This is to our detriment. *Can you imagine an animal tuning out their sense of sight or hearing on purpose?* As humans, we diminish our sense of hearing, and alert to a potential attacker that we cannot hear them approach, because they can see that our headphones are in. Our eyes are so glued to our cellphones for news and social media posts that we do not see the glass door, the stranger walking too closely behind us, or the oncoming train. We

unwittingly set ourselves up to be easy prey by being tuned out.

Knowing Without Knowing Why

If you have ever had a gut feeling or the hairs on the back of your neck stood up, thought that a person seemed “off”, then you have received an intuitive signal and experienced **knowing without knowing why**. These are examples of intuition, your conscious mind receiving a signal from the subconscious mind. It is an early warning alarm, a change to what you know as normal based on a constellation of internal and external factors experienced in your life and in the context of your current environment.

"Understand that fear itself can shut down the part of the brain designed to solve problems where we lose touch with the most primal nature of ourselves causing us to look for others to guide and save us."

PATRICIA HALEY, PRESIDENT OF PWG LLC

Why did I act the way I did towards the men in my earlier example?

The location this took place was outside my son's off-campus apartment at a Florida college in a residential neighborhood. In processing my decision and actions afterward, several baseline deviations

came to mind, which I made sure my son understood: I saw that their clothing was disheveled, and it was far too warm to be wearing the type of coats they had on; and almost in synchronization they stepped off the sidewalk, far too assertively, moving towards me at the same moment I was slowing down at the car door.

In hindsight other factors, those signals from the subconscious mind, came into focus and were part of the decision making. My son had told me about some petty crimes in the area and that on a few occasions he felt he was being followed at night on this same street. Due to that, I had given him a small tactical flashlight to carry, the kind that can disorient using a strobe feature. We then went over some “what if” scenarios if he had to flee or defend himself.

The opposite of intuition is denial. The biggest mistake I could have made would have been to dismiss the information I was receiving and said, “Oh, it’s probably nothing.” I did not think for a moment that they were going to help my son and I with our bags, or the keys out of my pocket, and being nice was not on my mind. Niceness will not immunize you against violence. Ulterior motives are often veiled by that attribute.

The point of this story is that nothing did happen because their deviations allowed me to observe them letting me to intuitively decide to keep walking and not stop at the car door. My long stare at them was simply a message letting them know “I see you.”

Preventing (Further) Victimization

I realize it is impossible to be prepared for every situation that you may find yourself in. According to Patricia Haley, President of PWG LLC, former U.S. Marine Corps Officer and FBI Field Agent, and my business partner, “Understand that fear itself can shut down the part of the brain designed to solve problems where we lose touch with the most primal nature of ourselves causing us to look for others to guide and save us. Here, a dangerous trade occurs when we abandon our intuition for the dependency of others without trusting our gut or trying to be our own hero.”

Ms. Haley further comments that you must “understand an attacker wants either your body, property or your life and may wait for you to be alone or try to dissuade your mind and confidence to physically hurt you. Just know that your story is not over and there is good news for you. Solve problems without trading for harmful substances and toxic situations.”

Studies showing that victims of sexual violence and stalking know their attacker or pursuer and that slightly more than one-third of nonfatal violent crimes (rape/sexual assault, aggravated assault, simple assault, and robbery), are being committed by strangers. Listening to and acting upon intuition and being situationally

aware can go a long way in mitigating victimization. By no means are they panaceas, just foundational pillars for survival.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so the saying goes, with that here are additional tips that Ms. Haley and I teach and want you to consider and practice:

Mix up your routine. We tend to go the path of least resistance in our day-to-day activities. Predators, abusers, and stalkers will utilize this routine to their advantage so leave work at a different time, walk the dog in another direction, shop at an off hour, eat at a different lunch spot, etc.

Mentally and physically practice “what if” scenarios. What if I am being followed at night? Visualization works wonders in preparation but follow it up with practice. Buy yourself a flashlight, or walk on the well-lit side of the street, or walk to your location from another direction, you get the picture.

Learn how to defend yourself using verbal de-escalation, setting boundaries and being assertive. Now is the time to be clear. Be comfortable hearing the sound of your own assertive command voice. Use universally understood language like “no” or “get back”.

Devalue yourself to an attacker by using verbal tactics. An example of this is best explained by self-defense expert Tony Blauer: If, in your observations at a gas pump or ATM, you notice danger coming towards you, emotive outward anger towards your bank or credit card company for not having money in an account. This act tells the potential attacker that maybe you are not a worthy target anymore. And even though you are acting out your anger towards the bank you are also projecting strength towards the adversary.

Be aware that impairment, whether medical, drug or alcohol can blur judgment. So, while out make good decisions and be sure to use the “buddy system” for safety.

Learn how to physically defend yourself.

You do not have to become a mixed martial artist. Learning how to stomp a foot, strike soft-tissue areas, push away, and get out of someone’s grasp can be a lifesaver. In a struggle, most injuries are broken arms or scratches. Be fast and use the element of surprise, strike strong, quick and get away.

Cultivate a safety-net of friends and family

that you can trust and talk to, who will check on you at specific times and support you no matter what you confidentially need to share.

Use a code word or gesture that alerts family and friends of trouble.

Social media postings act as free information for pursuers.

It may be your greatest weak link. Short of canceling or suspending your accounts, be mindful of what you put out there and what others are posting about you.

Use your technology to help you. There are safety applications, physical locator tools, and video applications to automatically keep track of you, your friends, children or elders

Encourage bystander support when you need help. Achieve commitment by making eye contact, directly asking someone to help you, warn others, call the police.

Keep a routine of preparedness (this is different than being routine, above). Keep snacks to stay energized, gas in your tank, good walking shoes in your car, phone charger, and small bills separate from large amounts of cash.

Rely on safety tools that you comfortably trained with, would use in your environment, and that are legal. A tactical pen, hairbrush or pepper spray must be available quickly in an attack. Know that some locations like schools, aircraft and specific states prohibit carrying knives, pepper spray or firearms.

We are all living in a time of collective panic. If you feel stuck, know there is a path out. Start small,

make one daily choice to change your situation, give yourself the gift to start a new practice that your old ways will resist but eventually will develop into muscle memory.

I hope this information has been helpful and that you share it with your children, colleagues, family, elders, and friends. Be your own hero. If you have any questions or want to share a story, please feel free to reach out to me at the below emails.

Be safe.



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