

Situational Awareness Training – KD5BJ for Lee Co ARES

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Situational awareness is an important part of training for members of the military and law enforcement, but can be just as important for anyone who wants to ensure they are one step ahead of dangerous situations before they unfold. Situational awareness is the ability to identify and process prospective dangers in your environment; put simply, it is your ability to comprehend what is going on around you in a defensive mind set. Increasing your situational awareness can give you an opportunity to escape or mitigate the danger presented by people or scenarios that could cause harm to you or those around you. Having increased situational awareness does not mean looking for trouble; in fact, it means quite the opposite. The most effective way to win a fight is to avoid it all together.

The first part of having good situational awareness is to assess your surroundings for threats.

Assess your surroundings for threats. The first step to increasing your situational awareness is to assess your surroundings in full. Look around you and take account of the type of situation you are in. Different environments will require different levels of focus to maintain high situational awareness.

Be aware of what should be normal in your situation. The environmental baseline is what you've experienced in similar environments and situations. Determine what should be considered normal sounds, behaviors and sights in your current situation so you have a frame of reference to compare unusual behavior to.

Identify and gauge the danger of elements around you. Once you have established what you feel the environmental baseline of your surrounding area is, look around to identify and consider any possible sources of dangerous situations.

Use your imagination to plan for different situations. While it's not always good to let your imagination run wild about possibly dangerous situations, you can use it to establish scenarios in your mind and plan for ways to address them.

The second part of having good situational awareness is controlling your focus and attention.

Don't assume abnormal behavior doesn't pose a threat. Because most people live fairly safe lives, we tend to believe things are going to work out. People often wait to respond to abnormal behavior because they are unwilling to recognize it as a threat. "Normalcy Bias" is the act of ignoring prospective threats because it seems unlikely that a dangerous situation might occur. As I said previously, do not think "This will never happen" or "This cannot be." I read a report saying that people in the church near San Antonio and others during active shooting incidents thought the "pop pop" they heard were from a car's carburetor, not a gun, and therefore they were slow to respond. And that might have cost some of their lives.

Don't get distracted. When you focus on one thing so hard that you are too distracted to identify potential threats around you, that is referred to as "focus lock." Focus lock is a perfectly normal thing to do, but it can significantly hinder or reduce your situational awareness. One of my instructors during a TDEM training told me that he set up an exercise where First Responders were to deal with a man, unconscious in his car, surrounded by downed powerlines around him. Twenty of those First Responders were declared dead because they did not notice broken tank with a deadly gas escaping right there.

Fight against complacency. In the military, a common phrase used in training is "complacency kills." Complacency occurs when you become so comfortable in your current situation that you no longer work to actively identify possible threats around you. Have you ever caught yourself reading messages on your phone while filling up at a gas station?

Use your peripheral vision to identify threats. Sometimes you may draw unwanted attention by looking directly at a possible threat. In some extreme cases, a possible threat may become a real one if they interpret your looking at them as engaging them in some way. Because of this, practice looking at things from the sides of your vision.

The last part of having good situational awareness is being aware of dangerous situations.

Try to predict upcoming events around you. By establishing a situational baseline, you create an idea in your head of what normal should look, sound, and smell like where you are. Use that baseline to predict events that will occur around you so they don't take you by surprise.

Trust your gut feelings. Sometimes you've identified the situational baseline in your mind, assessed any possible threats around you, have a strategy to get away from anything that may happen, but you still can't shake a sense that something's wrong. Trust that feeling.

Position yourself to easily identify threats. Where you stand can be extremely important to your ability to maintain situational awareness. If you are in a crowded environment with too many people to keep track of, for instance, you may want to position yourself with your back to a wall so you can see anyone approaching you as they come.

Immediately identify dangerous factors of those who enter your personal space. In crowded city streets, it will likely be more common for people to come into your personal space that it might be in a grocery store or at a park. Personal space is commonly considered to be a circle around you at arm's length. If anyone comes into that area (close enough to make contact with you) quickly identify any possible threat they may pose.

When we're faced with a threat people do one of three things... fight, flight or freeze. By applying these principals and maintaining good situational awareness you can hopefully avoid freezing and greatly increase the chances of getting out of a bad situation.