

AWARENESS

The Difficult Art - By Dik Chance

People who train with me in martial arts classes or in self-protection seminars often ask questions like 'what is your favourite technique?' or 'I've got limited training time, what should I concentrate on?' These same people are sometimes a little disappointed with my answer.

My answer is always the same. You should be concentrating on honing your awareness skills. That's not to say that you shouldn't practise the physical skills too. Rather, it's an acknowledgement that most of us live in little cocoons of oblivion and denial. If you are practising martial arts for 'self-defence' but are not practising and improving your awareness skills, then you are guilty of this. As many as 99% of all potential situations could be avoided with good awareness skills.

Awareness is defined as *'having knowledge of something because you have observed it or somebody has told you about it' or 'mindful that something exists because you notice it or realize that it is happening'*.

In the context of your own personal safety, awareness is the foundation of all your abilities. Without it, you cannot hope to avoid a situation. Without it you can't possibly have a game-plan that extends beyond being lucky. Predators (muggers, rapists, abductors etc) are actively searching for people whose awareness is reduced. They can easily prey on such people using deceptive approaches or even just highly violent sneak attacks that paralyse you with fear.

Here's a practical exercise for you to try. Stand still with your back to a wall and observe people walking down the street. Look for people who aren't taking notice of their surroundings. People plugged into their MP3 players. People busily texting their friends or chatting on the phone. People happily gazing at the floor, the shop windows or simply contemplating their navels. These are people with little or no awareness. They are the vulnerable targets and it shows in their body language. If you can spot them so can others.

In its simplest form, this is what you need to avoid. You need to turn yourself into someone seen as difficult to approach. However, there are more things to consider. Awareness comes in different flavours. You need to think about your environment. You also need to have good knowledge and experience of how you react (adrenaline awareness) and also how attackers think and act.

In self-protection circles there is a widely used colour code method of describing awareness. Known as Cooper's Colour Code, it was first described by Colonel Jeff Cooper, a combat pistol expert. There are four states in this model; code white, code yellow, code orange and code red.

Code white describes the people that you were looking for in our earlier exercise. These people are completely switched off. They are victims in waiting. As an example of this I recently saw one of my students walking down a quiet, deserted street after training with headphones on. I pulled into the kerb next to her in my diesel van (not the quietest vehicle around), wound down the window and yelled 'CODE WHITE!' at the top of my voice. The shock was obvious and a good lesson was learned. However, in reality I could have done anything and taken her by complete surprise.

Code yellow is all about being switched on. You are calmly looking at your surroundings to assess them for potential threats. You know what and who is around you. You may be thinking of exit routes. There are a variety of different methods that you can

employ here to make yourself more aware. Think about assessing everything that comes into a bubble around you. Try imagining you have a radar that pings out and back. Have a commentary constantly running in your head. All these things can help you practise a higher state of awareness. Don't forget that this needs to be practised. You can't just change the habits of a lifetime.

Code orange is the state that you go to when something is not right. Your code yellow drills have identified something out of the ordinary. Your little voice has started shouting in your ear. Someone is lurking in the doorway. That ugly drunk guy is aggressively scanning the pub, trying to catch a victim's eye. You are deciding on the level of threat and danger.

Code red is the action code. You get up and leave the pub before it all kicks off. You cross the road and go the other way. You avoid if you can. If not you are into 'fight or flight' and you'd better do one or the other quickly.

Cooper's colour code is just a simple way of visualising the stages you can go through. Yellow, orange and red could also be described as 'ready, steady, go'.

Many victims of crime or attack have reported that they felt there was something wrong before it happened. All animals, humans included, have highly evolved senses. The problem is that in modern society, we often chose to ignore these feelings. We feel stupid or cowardly. We let our egos get in the way. However, this instinct or intuition is there for a reason. It is there to alert us and protect us from danger. An important tool in our awareness bag is

Some simple tips to give the impression of alertness and being a hard target.

- 1 When out, walk with purpose. As though you have somewhere to be and are slightly late.
- 2 Scan with your eyes whilst walking. Don't have your head down or your eyes fixed.
- 3 If carrying a handbag, wear it across your body and make sure it's zipped up.
- 4 If you regularly walk on your daily commute, consider wearing more sensible (running) shoes and changing when you get there.
- 5 Don't use your mobiles, MP3s, etcetera unless you are somewhere safe.
- 6 If using a cashpoint, don't stand with your wallet/purse in your hand. Get the card out before you arrive.
- 7 When you've finished using the cashpoint, don't stand and count the money. Put it straight into your pocket and count it later. Chances are the bank is closed and there's nothing you can do if it's wrong anyway.
- 8 Consider using supermarket cash back rather than cash-points.
- 9 Get some training.

giving yourself permission to listen to these feelings. Don't let ego or conditioning cloud this.

There are many inhibitors to awareness. Alcohol is one of the more obvious ones. There is a reason that we have strict drink/driving laws. Alcohol clouds judgement and inhibits response. If you aren't fit to drive, you aren't at the optimum level of awareness.

The 'homeward bound' syndrome is another one to be ruthlessly exploited by rapists and muggers.

Start developing your awareness skills. Here are some simple exercises.

1. Set yourself a target for the day (or for a journey). Count up everyone you see with a beard, or sunglasses, or hats. Count up red or blue cars.
2. Find something to trigger you into code yellow. Put a big yellow key ring on your car keys. Put yellow sticky labels on the door.
3. Leave your headphones at home. Instead play a running commentary of what's going on as you walk down the road.
4. Every time you make a call or text in the open, stand with your back to a wall. See how this makes you feel.
5. Get some photos of local places at different times of day. Study them briefly and then try to identify all the escape routes and all the places that someone could conceal them.
6. When out, spend a few minutes trying to think like a predator. Try to identify people in code white. Try to identify places that you could lurk. (Be careful with this one; don't give people the wrong impression).
7. Spend a few seconds looking at someone you've never met and then try to describe them.
8. Play 'what if' games. Think 'what if this person suddenly attacked me' or 'what if I needed to escape'.

About the author:

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Women are falling victims to rapists who've found it easier to select a victim from the hordes of people carrying bags, briefcases, laptops on their way home from work in the late afternoon or early evening. Your mind is more preoccupied and you are tired. You've slipped into code white.

Environmental awareness is only one aspect though. It is important for you to understand and experience how your own body reacts in these situations. Everyone's reaction is different although the physical responses to adrenaline are the same. The best way to do this is with adrenaline stress training (such as P.U.M.A.'s F.A.S.T. courses). Without this knowledge, you are risking a freeze response (which is exactly what the predator is hoping for).

Also, try to get an understanding of the attack rituals and methods that are used. There is a lot of this on the F.A.S.T. course but you must also independently research it for yourself. Read books like Geoff Thompson's 'Dead or Alive'. Geoff did extensive research by interviewing attackers to find out what they look for.

Also, investigate the news. Look at how recent attacks have happened. An example of this is the 'happy slapping' craze of the last few months. People are being randomly attacked whilst it is videoed on a mobile phone. This is a fine example of how different threats are emerging that you need to be aware of.

Awareness is an easy thing in principle, but is more difficult in practice. If you are serious about your personal safety, it is something you must cultivate. Many people ask if we are being paranoid. To me the answer is no. It's the same drive that makes me put up a smoke detector or making sure the brakes on my car are well serviced.

Awareness must be about seeing, recognising and identifying risks and threats, and then being prepared to act on them. To maximise your ability to take avoiding action, you must give yourself the best early warning system there is.

Until next time, train safely, respectfully and smartly with an open mind.



Texting often puts people in code white.



Your awareness needs to extend 360 degrees.



Predators will use a surprise attack to cause an adrenaline freeze.



When that internal alarm starts ringing, you need to listen.



A good try, but what has she done wrong?