

How To Be Safe in Crowds by Kevin Reeve

I have been asked several times since the Boston Marathon Bombing about how to manage risk in a large crowd environment. One answer is simple: Unless you are absolutely required to be in attendance, AVOID large crowded environments. Of course when there are times when you have limited choice and must venture into that environment, then use good habits of “situational awareness” and adopt a “bias towards action.”

Large groups of people will always attract a certain amount of risk. Never underestimate the volatility of people in large groups. Any significant event, even a “perceived” event, can result in a stampede. People are injured and die every year during Black Friday Sales events when they become victims of a frenzied mob. A fire, an explosion, an active shooter can all create a mob mentality that takes on a life of its own.

The KEY to surviving any event in a crowded venue will depend almost entirely on your ability to control personal panic, to assess the situation, and to take immediate action. If you panic, you drastically increase your odds of injury or death.

Here are a few strategies that will decrease your risk. Concentration is initially involved, but after practice, these habits can become natural and seemingly effortless.

1. Maintain your awareness. Keep your eyes up, off the smart phone, and scan your environment. This can be challenging due to the large volume of people. But try actively scanning. Look for “out of baseline” behaviors. People moving upstream, against the flow, for example, are out of baseline. People moving faster or slower than the baseline, or whose gestures or furtiveness do not match the event.

I have a friend who works in a department store in theft prevention. In a glance, he can spot someone about to shoplift. Their behaviors are out of baseline. A shoplifter will always stand right next to the shelf before he pockets the item, whereas a normal shopper stands back to be able to see the contents of the shelves. Out of baseline.

2. Identify specific threats or threatening behavior. Look for menacing behavior or people who by their looks cause you to feel uncomfortable. Trust your gut. There may be a valid reason why they make you feel uncomfortable. If you are in proximity, move away. As always, look for “orphans:” bags or packages without owners. Alert security if you see them, but do not stand next to them waiting for security to arrive.

3. Identify exits. Whenever I enter a room, or area, one of the first things I do is scan for ex-

its. Are there emergency exits? Are they alarmed? Are they locked? What about windows? Can they be opened? Is there a heavy object like a chair I can throw through the window?

4. Look for exits on the opposite side of the room from the entrance or at right angles to the entrance. Most people will bypass emergency exits in close proximity to them to go back to the entrance they came in through. This behavior has led to many deaths in ballroom and concert fires. People who are panicking seek the familiar.

5. Identify cover. Cover refers to safety from fire. A brick wall may stop bullets, but sheetrock walls will not. Solid furniture may seem solid, but even a two inch thick oak table will not stop a 9mm round. You must find something substantial if shooting starts. The engine block and front axle of a car for example may provide enough cover for one person. The car door, not so much. Inside a building, there is generally not much cover. Better to head for the exit.

5. When an event occurs, grab your family members and head for the exit. Pick up and carry children. Have your family members, (spouse, others with you) grab a hold of your belt. Move assertively towards the PRE-SELECTED exit. Move with the crowd “downstream” but also in a diagonal direction, until can reach a wall inside, or if outside, the edge of the crowd, where you can better control your movement. Do not be afraid to damage or destroy the fixtures or the building itself to get out, such as breaking open windows or kicking open doors, or breaking locks. Timidity will not be helpful. Your primary concern must be your family. Once they are safe, you can decide whether or not to render aid to others.

6. Carry essential gear. Essential gear for an outside event: Water bottle. First aid kit that includes a tourniquet. Knife. Multi-tool. Sun glasses that also provide eye protection. Indoor essential gear, add a small pocket flashlight which will penetrate smoke and haze, (a cell phone light will not penetrate smoke and haze.)

It is impossible to anticipate every event. However, most events will precipitate the need to **MOVE**. **MOVEMENT to SAFETY** will generally always be your highest priority. If the event is localized to your immediate vicinity, then safety generally lies elsewhere. The most important trait here is a **BIAS TOWARDS ACTION**. Take action to improve your crowd situation.

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