

Yanks....Situational Awareness....by Kevin Reeve, onPoint Tactical

I have a friend who stepped off the curb and was hit and killed by a vehicle running a red light. He was 40 years old and his life was over in one second. I almost made the same mistake. While in England, I checked for traffic and confidently began to step into the intersection, when my companion yanked me back. I'd looked left instead of right, the wrong direction in a country that drives on the left-hand side of the street. It was a near miss and my companion chided me: "That's why we call you Yanks."

I have spent a fair amount of time over the past several years trying to define and refine my understanding of the term "Situational Awareness."

Most of the written material deals with very technical definitions that for me hold little real world application. As I tried to make them fit my own experience with awareness, I realized that the academic approach was impractical.

So here's how I defined "situational awareness." It is: "paying attention to what is going on around you." How is that for practical? It is more than that, but the basic definition is the ability to scan the environment and sense danger, challenges, and opportunities, while maintaining the ability to conduct normal activities. In other words, to pay attention to your surroundings while not appearing to be paying attention.

Awareness is a choice. One has to choose to pay attention. But once that choice is made, the part of the brain responsible for monitoring the senses, known as the Reticular Activating System (RAS) takes over. It switches filters on and off that will fulfill your subconscious desire to pay attention. By simply telling yourself to pay attention to certain things, the RAS will scan for and acknowledge those things when it encounters them.

I have found three main obstacles to developing awareness. To understand the obstacles with awareness, let's define the most basic tenant of awareness: **BASELINE**. The concept of baseline states that our environment has a baseline, a homeostatic state of what things look like, sound like, feel like when nothing much is going on.

In the woods, this is reflective of the noise and activity level of the area when nothing much is happening. The normal state. For example, in the late afternoon, things are normally pretty quiet. The baseline is pretty flat. As we move into evening, the baseline changes a bit. Night feeders are coming out, day feeders are going in. The increase in noise and activity is still the norm. It is louder and yet still within the realm of normal. Suddenly a predator appears. All the prey animals react. Alarm calls go out, and the noise level suddenly

spikes. This is referred to as a concentric ring of disturbance because it radiates out from the source.

In the city, each neighborhood has its own baseline. In one area, people move at a certain pace, talk at a certain volume, stand at a certain socially acceptable distance from one another, gesture in a certain way. This combination of noise and activity constitutes that area's baseline. Depending on cultural or ethnic norms, it will be different in various neighborhoods.

Being able to develop awareness is dependent upon first knowing the baseline for the area you are in, and recognizing any variations to the baseline. These changes in baseline are learned from observation. One must know the baseline. One must recognize disturbances to the baseline, and one must recognize if those disturbances represent a specific threat or opportunity.

This requires knowledge of the environment, knowledge of terrain. It requires that one recognizes predator behavior. It requires one to see well beyond normal sight. For example, an aware person will notice things others may miss: a youth in a hoodie across the street whose movements mimic yours. Or a dumpster set in such a way that requires you to pass close to it. It can be threats or potential threats. You must constantly monitor and assess. Over time, this becomes almost a background activity, requiring little conscious thought.

The key to great situational awareness is the ability to monitor the baseline and recognize changes.

As I mentioned before, there are three main obstacles to situational awareness.

1. Not Monitoring the Baseline. If you are not monitoring the baseline, you will not recognize the presence of predators that cause a disturbance. Other events can cause concentric rings as well. Any unusual occurrence from a car accident to a street fight can create a concentric ring. One of the keys to personal security is learning to look for and recognize these disturbances. Some disturbances are dangerous, some are just entertaining.

2. Normalcy Bias. Even though we may sense a concentric ring that could be alerting us of danger, many times we will ignore the alert due to the desire for it NOT to be a danger. We want things to be OK so we do not accept that the stimulus we are receiving represents a threat. We have a bias towards the status quo. Nothing has ever happened when I do this, so nothing is likely to happen.

3. The third interrupter of awareness is what we define as a Focus Lock. This is some form of distraction that is so engaging that it focuses all of our awareness on one thing and by default blocks all the other stimulus in our environment. This is when someone is texting and walks into a fountain. The

smart phone is the single most effective focus lock ever invented. It robs us of our awareness in times and places where it is needed most.

To be effectively aware, we must do the following:

1. Monitor the baseline. At first, this will require conscious effort. But after a while, I find that I can monitor the baseline subconsciously.

2. Fight normalcy bias. This requires you to be paranoid for a while as you develop your ability. Look at every disturbance to the baseline as a potential threat. This will allow you to stop ignoring or discounting concentric rings and begin making assessments of the actual risk. But as you learn, people will think you are jumpy or paranoid. That is OK. It is a skill that will save your life.

3. Avoid using the obvious focus locks in transition areas. It is ok to text while you are sitting at your desk or laying in bed. But it is NOT ok to text as you walk from your office to the parking garage.

Any time you are drawn to a concentric ring event, do a quick assessment of that ring, then stop looking at it (the event), and scan the rest of your environment to see what you are missing.

Developing awareness is a skill. At first it will seem very awkward and self-conscious, but with practice, it will become seamless and subconscious. You will start to pick up on more and more subtle rings of disturbance, and more complex stimuli. Eventually, people may think you are psychic as they notice how you seem to sense events before they unfold.

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