

LESSON 9 – MANAGING FEAR

Some people, especially if you have been the victim of violence, may find some of the subject matter contained in this article disturbing or traumatizing. If you are still in the process of recovering from violence and abuse, you may want to consult with a mental health professional before reading this content. The subject matter is also intended for an adult audience, and so if you are under 18, you should have an adult read the material first (parental guidance is advised for people under 18). This article addresses the subject matter head-on, so reader discretion is advised.

SYNOPSIS

When we are placed in potentially dangerous situations, our fear system kicks in and we become adrenalized. This cocktail of chemicals and hormones improves certain of our abilities and functions e.g. we become more tolerant to pain, etc., and reduces others - we lose our peripheral vision and get tunnel vision, etc. Most people rarely experience these sensations and so when they do, they often panic or freeze. In this module, we will look at how to control the body's natural responses to fear and how to work with them, in order to maximize their positive effects and improve our survival chances.

FEAR & THE ADRENAL RESPONSE

It used to be thought that you saw a bear, became afraid and then started to run. This was how the fear response was understood around 20 years ago however our understanding of emotional responses has changed - and with this, our understanding of the order in which we experience things has changed, also. We now understand that as you are running, you realize it's a bear, and due to that realization, you recognize you're afraid. That is, your body subconsciously reacts to a threat, and changes your emotional response, and then you consciously interpret that response (a "feeling" is a conscious interpretation of your emotional state e.g. when you say you feel afraid, you are recognizing the chemical changes in your body that have created an emotional state of fear). This is important to understand, because it will be this change in your emotional state that alerts you to the presence of threats and danger.

If you have ever been walking on a street, and you start to think/feel that somebody is walking behind you, it's because your "fear" system has subconsciously alerted you to the presence of

danger by releasing adrenaline into your system (you feel the hairs on your neck go up, and get the butterflies in your stomach, etc.) and directs your attention to the potential threat behind you. You interpret this information and change in your emotional state as being "afraid". I say "potential" threat because your fear system responds to certain actions and behaviors, and not necessarily the intent behind them e.g. it could be that someone who is walking purposefully behind you is looking to assault you, or it could be that they are simply in a hurry, or they may be trying to catch up with you to give you back something you dropped, etc. All your fear system will have picked up on is the sound of footsteps, closing distance on you, and it will have identified this as a potential danger. Once your fear system has informed you of the (potential) presence of danger and flooded your blood stream with adrenaline (to give you the added rocket fuel to aid you, should you need to run or fight), it hands the reins back over to the conscious you for guidance on what to do.

This is the time to make a dynamic risk assessment of your situation. It is important to make this assessment as soon as you become adrenalized, as the human mind has developed an ironic way of coping with the knowledge that it is in danger: denial. The first thing that the conscious mind does when it realizes it's afraid, is to deny the threat or danger. If you've ever felt that somebody was walking you behind you, you probably said to yourself that you were imagining it, and that you shouldn't be so stupid or nervous; this is denial. By immediately making a dynamic risk assessment of your situation, you are acknowledging that you may be in danger, and this is a much better place to be than simply denying the presence of danger and harmful intent. There are two potential outcomes/answers to your risk assessment: your situation is either a high risk one, or one that contains unknown risks - there isn't such a thing as a low risk situation, because if any potential risks do exist, it is definitely a high risk situation. Your fear system is never triggered without a reason - it is your job to ascertain the intent behind the behaviors and/or actions that have alerted it to danger.

At this stage, you are in the "Conflict Aware" phase on the Timeline of Violence. You know that there is potential danger in your environment, but you don't yet know if the harmful intent is directed at you.

It is important to be able to interpret your situation in a rational manner. If you have little experience of being adrenalized and/or in danger, you may find the sensation so foreign, strange and overwhelming that you start to panic or freeze. Both states are not good ones to be in, and so you need to be able to stay adrenalized but be mentally calm when in this emotional state. If you have the space and time, tactical breathing is the best way to take back control of your body. This sees you breathe in for a count of two, hold for a count of two, and then breathe out for a count of two

(you can change the count to be four, six, eight, or some other number). Regulating your breathing is the best way to tie your mental and physical states together in a controlled fashion.

You should also understand that your normal method of decision-making is inappropriate when adrenalized, and called upon to decide on a course of action quickly. Although we often make gut decisions in our day-to-day life, we normally apply a system of Rationalistic Decision Making (RDM) to confirm and settle upon our decisions e.g. if you are looking to make a decision over which house to buy from a list of three, you may look at a number of factors such as price, distance from where you work, number of bedrooms/bathrooms, size of kitchen, rate of appreciation, etc. Comparing all of these variables against each other takes time and mental effort. Under high emotional stress, your ability to think rationally is eroded (you can read more about this in the section on de-escalation, from the perspective of trying to effectively talk to angry and emotional people), and you certainly don't have the time to compare all your possible options - run away, turn and fight, verbally challenge, plead for mercy, etc. - against each other and work out the pros and cons of each. Rather, you will need to decide on the first effective solution available to you, rather than the best, and then apply it e.g. if running away will work - you're dressed appropriately, can gain distance before they respond, etc. - then you should run without considering whether aggressively, verbally posturing would be better. This method of choosing the first effective solution, rather than trying to work out the best is referred to as Naturalistic Decision Making.

The other thing to understand about being afraid, is that it is a particular interpretation of your body's emotional state, however you can interpret this emotional state differently - rather than being afraid, you can be angry. From an emotional point of view, anger and fear are exactly the same. From the body's perspective, whether it needs to engage with a threat, or disengage/run from it, it needs the same resources and abilities. If from a purely physical perspective you were to wire up and monitor two people: one angry, one scared, you'd find the readings so close that they might as well be identical. The upshot of this is that you basically have a choice as to how you interpret your emotional state and your situation: it can scare you, or it can make you angry. This phenomena can be seen in women who are threatened and capitulate to an assailant, only to become extremely angry and aggressive when their attacker turns their attention to one of their children or a relative or friend who may be present i.e. the actual threat or danger hasn't changed - it's the same aggressor - but the interpretation of the situation is different. Women, as opposed to men, tend to be particularly altruistic in this regard, accepting themselves as victims but becoming angry when others are targeted in the same way.

THE SURVIVAL PERSONALITY

Everyone is worth something, and that something is worth fighting for. Nobody has the right to verbally or physically challenge that; there are not some people who are worth more than others, etc. Just because somebody feels entitled to act and behave in a way that challenges somebody else, doesn't mean that they have that right. Predatory individuals believe that other people are placed in this world for their benefit, or are not worth thinking about. Most rapists don't recognize their victims when they are confronted with them in the court room. Most serial rapists couldn't tell you if their last victim was old, young, underweight, overweight, etc. - these aren't details that are important to them they're not interested in the person they're assaulting, they just need to satisfy urges, needs, emotions, etc. - that they feel they're entitled to satisfy. This can scare you or it can make you angry. It should make you angry. Nobody has the right to view other people this way. You have a choice about the way in which you view an aggressor or an assailant - you can be afraid, or you can be angry. You don't have to show them this, but you should determine what your response to their harmful intent will be, and should have adopted a survival personality before you have to confront them.

ACCEPTING YOUR SITUATION

When finding yourself dealing with aggressive and potentially violent individuals, you can ask "Oh God Why Me?", tell yourself that this isn't fair, or you can accept that bad things don't just happen to other people, they can happen to you, too. Just because you've never been the victim of an assault before, doesn't mean that you won't be targeted in the future. You don't have to "do things wrong" to be assaulted, you can just fail to pick up on the pre-violence signals and indicators and fail to step off the Timeline of Violence, in time. This can happen to anyone - even trained individuals. But when you find yourself having to deal with those that do mean you harm, you have to step out of denial and accept what is happening to you and deal with it. Every attacker will try to deny you time and distance, and it is pointless to waste what little of both you have questioning why and how you ended up here. You should actively accept the situation and decide to act in it, rather than deal with it in a resigned manner.

YOU ARE YOUR OWN SALVATION

Don't look around or expect any help - your focus has to be on dealing with the individual you are facing and the situation you are in, rather than hoping that someone will come and help you. In today's society, the chances that somebody will come and assist you is extremely unlikely - even if you are screaming and shouting. If a passer-by can explain away a situation to themselves, they

will e.g. that what they are witnessing or hearing is a domestic argument, etc. Even if somebody decides to call the police, they will take some time deliberating whether they should do this, and then there will be the conversation with the dispatcher and the time it takes for a car to get to you. All of this takes time. A rape can occur in under 10 seconds (this has happened on subway trains between two stops) so you should recognize that even if there are other people present or nearby, they may not have the time to notice or act. Just as you should accept the situation you are in, so you should also accept that you are the one person who can be relied on to solve it.

TAKE SMALL STEPS, ONE AT A TIME

When we face danger, we want to be out and away from it as quickly as possible. Often our fear emotion is so great that we simply want to act, without knowing how to act or what we should do - this is when panic sets in. Naval pilots who follow exhaustive check lists in order to land on aircraft carriers at sea, sometimes become overwhelmed by the need to just get the plane on to the deck. The goal becomes everything, and the method for doing so becomes forgotten. An aircraft carrier's deck from several thousand feet looks about the size of a mobile phone or cigarette packet - the task of landing a plane on it seems impossible. The task can seem so daunting, that even though a pilot has undergone the training and has the knowledge to complete the task, they begin to panic, just wanting the whole experience to be over - this is when they dispense with their checklists and just try to get the plane down.

When dealing with a verbally aggressive individual who we believe may want to harm us, there is an overwhelming desire to just be out of that situation. In such instances, we may forget that there is a process to de-escalating aggressive situations and start to hurry our responses, perhaps telling the person that we don't have time for this and that we have to leave (which is posturing and aggressive) etc. Our behaviors and actions which are an attempt to escape the situation could actually end up escalating it, instead.

From a physical perspective, panicking will cause your body to start to use up all of its resources and leave you depleted when your efforts come to naught. Accepting your adrenalized state and working with it using tactical breathing is a far more effective way to work (This is especially true if the assault involves you being pinned on the ground - struggling without any purpose will exhaust and dispirit you).

TAKE YOUR CONFIDENCE FROM SMALL VICTORIES

The aim of this women's self-defense course is not to turn you into a fighting machine that can take on and beat all comers, its goal is much more realistic: to enable you to stop an assailant from doing what they want to do to you. If you are dealing with a 250 pound aggressive male who wants to rape you, you should not be asking yourself how do you beat him to a bloody pulp and leave him lying there unconscious, as you dust yourself down and walk away. Rather, you should be looking at what you can do to prevent them from sexually assaulting you e.g. can you get behind a car, or other obstacle, so that they can't get to you? It doesn't matter if they keep trying to get to you but fail; each time they're not able to get to you is a win - the longer you can run out the clock and prevent them from getting to you, the better. You are not delaying the inevitable (this is something an aggressor will want you to think - many rapists will inform their victims that this is going to happen so it's not worth struggling or fighting back); you are putting your assailant under pressure.

Every time you stop them doing one of the tasks that is necessary for them to do what they are trying to do to you, take some pride and confidence in that. Most predatory individuals rely on the threat of violence and their victim's fear to accomplish their crimes. Predators want compliant, not difficult, victims - and they rarely have all the time in the world to commit an assault; every second you gain yourself puts them under more pressure. If you have made yourself a difficult target from the beginning and continue to be a difficult target, they will likely move on to somebody less prepared to deal with them.

PREPARE, PLAN & TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

I have car insurance because I'm a responsible driver; I don't intend to crash my car or be involved in any accidents, but I know the reality of driving e.g. I know that the roads get icy, that other drivers do stupid things, that something may distract me, etc. I know there's a chance that things that may be outside of my control can go wrong, and I'm prepared for this. No person is ever to blame for being assaulted, however there are things we can do to prevent ourselves from becoming a victim, and if we can do these it would be responsible for us to do so. Everybody has the right to walk through the seediest part of town late at night, or to leave their car and house unlocked, etc., but it wouldn't be responsible to do so. If when you hear of a crime being committed your first thought is "where were the police?" or similar, your head is in the wrong place. Criminals will create a crime scene that is favorable to them, not to you. If you can start thinking like a criminal e.g. where on your route to work would you mug or abduct somebody, etc., you will become more aware of your surroundings in general and be able to plan how you would act and respond if caught in such a situation. You can take this further and visualize and mentally rehearse what you would say and do in such a situation.

This is one of the key characteristics of the survival personality; making sure that you have done what you can to prepare yourself for dealing with the situations you may have to face, however unlikely you may think they may be. The fact that you are reading this, that you have taken the time to go through this course material, should demonstrate to you that not only do you care about and value yourself but that you are prepared to do something about it.

DEALING WITH A REAL LIFE ASSAILANT) - THE CONFLICT PHASE OF VIOLENCE

Part of this course/program's aim - if taught with the self-defense component - is to try and give you an emotional reference point as to what you are likely to feel and experience emotionally, should you find yourself in an aggressive and/or violent confrontation. However competent you feel about practicing the self-defense techniques in a classroom environment, it is another thing to have to use them when under duress against a non-compliant aggressor. The in-person component of the course, gives you the opportunity to work with an instructor who is fully protected, and work on experiencing the emotion of a real-life conflict in a safe and secure environment. The fact that you and the instructor are both wearing protective clothing (helmets, body protectors and the like), means that you can work at near or full force and don't have to hold back on your aggression. The instructor and the training is meant to adrenalize you, so that you learn how to function when in such an emotional state.

Rather than simply attack you, your instructor may set up scenarios for you to work through. The instructor and maybe some of the other students in the class will have roles to play, and depending on the situation/scenario that has been set up, may engage with you, or simply act as bystanders, etc. All of this will depend on your actions and responses as you work through the scenario. Not all scenarios inevitably end with the instructor attacking you e.g. you may be able to de-escalate a situation or disengage from it.

It is always worth remembering that scenario-based training is not just about practicing self-defense techniques, it is also about training threat recognition and decision making. If you can avoid being assaulted by the way that you act and deal with the situation your instructor has put you in, then you should count this as a successful outcome.

Also understand that in certain scenarios acting assertively can come across as posturing and actually escalate a situation that could possibly have been de-escalated and disengaged from. Try not to make the scenario fit a particular "plan of action" that you go in with, but instead make a series of dynamic risk assessments, based on the situational factors present and choose the first effective solution that can help you avoid being assaulted or having to use physical force. Shouting

at an aggressor will in some instances be effective e.g. shouting at a Power Assurance rapist, instructing them to stay back, etc., may be effective however it's not a universal answer and may in fact prompt an Anger Retaliatory Rapist to assault you. Listen and pick up on the cues and information that the instructor provides and frame your responses accordingly - just as you would in real life.

You can also consider acting preemptively and making a strike before disengaging i.e. "stun and run". Often there aren't any actual "right" answers to a scenario and the decisions that you make, and/or how you act. There will be a "debrief" session at the end of each scenario, where you will be able to talk and explain with the instructor your thoughts, feelings and ideas and why you made the choices you did. The instructor will add comments and suggestions but never criticism, and give you feedback on how you did in both the self-defense and self-protection components of the scenario.

You may find that under stress you forget how to perform certain techniques; don't worry about this. The most important thing is to do something. Remember the basic concepts and principles you were taught e.g. "nearest weapon, nearest softest target", if all you can remember is this, then keep attacking eyes, throat and groin - the instructor will perform their assaults with you by responding as if each of these strikes was thrown to these targets e.g. they will pull their head back when you strike the eyes, the hips back when you strike the groin, etc. Part of the instructor's job is to give you physical feedback when you make successful strikes, etc.

Try to avoid suffering from tunnel vision and forgetting your goal i.e. to prevent the instructor/assailant from doing what they want to do to you. One of the side-effects that you experience when adrenalized is tunnel vision (you see only your attacker and nothing else), which is fine if/when you are going to engage with them and fight. However, by having your peripheral vision restricted you might fail to see exit opportunities or other things in the environment that you could use, or things/people which may pose a further threat. Remember to scan, so your eyes can focus on objects that are at different depths of vision and thus break out from this tunnel vision.

Also, when you are engaged in "fighting", your strikes should be aimed at causing enough damage to disengage and escape whilst discouraging your assailant from following you. It is not uncommon during training for participants to break free of a hold, or escape from the ground, only to continue striking the instructor whilst he is on the ground and no longer a real threat to them. Once you have dealt with the immediate danger, you should disengage and get to safety quickly.

The most important thing is not to give up, either in training or real-life. Once you have decided to fight back, you should continue on with this. It doesn't matter how tired and exhausted you are. Keep working.

Our Women's Self Defense Program is a framework, for understanding how violent situations occur and evolve, along with the motivations behind them, so that it is possible to predict, identify and avoid them.

Our Women's Self Defense Free Online Course is an 11-course topic program taught by Mr. Maurice Gomez. The course has also been reviewed & validated by FBI Criminal Psychologist, Dr. Natasha Bullock with contribution from Ben Keren who is a security analyst & subject matter self-defense expert in Women's Self-Defense.

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