

The Decision to Be Prepared

I am a licensed clinical psychologist, and I carry concealed. I take home defense seriously because I do not want to be a victim. Therefore, for me, the issue of psychological preparedness to use a gun for combat survival is just as real as it should be for any law enforcement officer — or anyone else. In an emergency, I'll call 911 as fast as possible. The fact is that the police (God bless them) cannot be counted on to get there on time to save you if you are attacked. That is why the police usually arrive after a crime has been committed. So, you must be prepared to deal with a criminal aggressor before the cavalry arrives.

The late Colonel Jeff Cooper and his student, master trainer Gabe Suarez, explain the best defense against an attacker. It's decisive, aggressive, lightning-quick, ruthless and vicious. In order to be ready, we must remain ever-alert. As individuals, we can never afford to let down our guard.

Use a Gun for Personal Security

Every law-abiding citizen has a stake in maintaining safety and a responsibility to do his or her part. That means being psychologically prepared to use a gun or other lethal force in defense of one's own life and limb. These beliefs led me to begin serious personal training in the defensive and tactical use of handguns, long guns and hand-to-hand fighting skills. Being serious about survival means knowing how to fight and being prepared to employ lethal force swiftly and decisively to stop an attacker intent on taking your life. This also entails knowing when the use of **lethal force in self-defense** is justified and when it isn't.

It bears remembering that because we good guys and gals act only in self-defense, we are likely to be a wee bit behind the time curve if some creep launches a deadly attack against us. Unfortunately, we are reacting to the bad guy's actions. His threatening behavior or attack is our cue. His cue is our apparent vulnerability. This is where alertness and situational awareness come in, but more about this in a moment.

Disarmed citizens are at the mercy of violent criminals. Only the strong survive. Strength comes from knowledge, skills, psychological preparedness and having the right tools for the job. The job is self-defense and survival. Being psychologically prepared for survival entails knowing how and when to use your gun and other weapons and having them when you need them.

However, having a weapon will do you little good if you are caught unaware and do not have the chance to employ it. Worse yet, if you are unaware and/or untrained in

weapon retention techniques, your weapon can be taken away from you and used against you. So, the first step in survival is situational awareness.

Situational Awareness

The first key element is **situational awareness**. This means being your own bodyguard. It means learning Col. Jeff Cooper's color codes and training yourself to tune into the appropriate level of awareness for the circumstances. Cooper's color codes comprise a system for cueing yourself into the appropriate level of alertness, situational awareness, readiness and activation to the circumstances. It is a continuum that ranges from "Condition White" (completely tuned out and unaware) to "Condition Black" (you're in a fight for your life).

It is important to point out that the rationale for the continuum is that you cannot shift directly and abruptly from "Condition White" into "Condition Black." Just as you cannot shift from reverse into drive in your car without first going through neutral, you must go through the intermediary states of awareness and readiness.

- **Condition White:**

This condition is never appropriate when you are outside the safe confines of your castle. Even if you are, it may only be wise to settle into this level of unawareness for brief periods. Certainly, when you are in a deep sleep, you're in Condition White. So, you'd better have good door and window locks and a good alarm system.

- **Condition Yellow:**

We should train ourselves to be in yellow most of the time. This does not mean being paranoid. It means remaining alert and aware of what is going on around us. Thus, if there is a potential problem that may need to be solved, we are ready to move up the continuum of alertness, readiness and activation. Thus, we need to train ourselves to seamlessly transition from Condition Yellow into Condition Orange should the need arise.

- **Condition Orange:**

Going into Condition Orange means that there's something up that feels not quite right. You've turned up the flame on the burner and you are ready if the situation escalates into a real and imminent threat. If the situation does escalate, you then go automatically into Condition Red.

- **Condition Red:**

In Condition Red, you are prepared for a fight. You expect there to be a fight but are not fighting just yet. All conditions spell go, and you are "red hot to trot," yet you remain cool because you are analyzing your tactical options. You've transitioned to this stage of activation through the continuum so you are

not taken by surprise. You are readying yourself to prevail and survive, and you are confident that you will retain the upper hand.

- **Condition Black:**

I like to use Condition Black as the last stage. It means you're in the fight. Recall that most fights occur in less than favorable conditions. Recall Murphy's Law? Remember that most gunfights occur in low or no light (i.e. in the dark)? So, if you have prepared up to this point, you're ahead of the game. You are employing every advantage at your disposal. Because street fights and gunfights are ugly and dirty and not fair, you do not give your attacker any benefit of the doubt or any chances to kill you.

Positive Self-Talk

Self-talk is the voice in our heads that tells us what's going to happen and what will happen if that does happen. Noted psychologist, Albert Ellis, has written that we are all born with a biological predisposition to think negatively, pessimistically and irrationally. If that's true — and I think it is — then we have to work at countering this. The bottom line is that if you think you're going to lose a fight, then you probably are. But it works the other way too. Assuming you have the requisite physical skills and training, if you think you're going to win a fight, you have a much better chance of winning. If you expect a fight, you must tell yourself, "I will NOT die today!"

It is a good idea to become more aware of your inner self-talk or voice. First practice asking yourself, "What am I feeling right now?" — scared, sad, mad, glad and so forth. Once you become familiar with identifying your typical emotional states or feelings, practice asking yourself, "When I feel this way, what am I thinking or telling myself?". By doing this, you will become familiar with the types of repetitive thoughts and mental images or pictures your mind generates in response to different situations. Then you will be ready to make a habit of asking yourself what are you feeling and thinking right now.

If your inner self-talk is negative and self-defeating, it is necessary to practice countering it with positive but realistic self-talk. For example, replace negative self-talk and self suggestions such as, "I can't learn to do this" with realistic, positive self-talk such as, I can learn this and I will learn. Replace negative mental images or pictures with mental pictures that program your subconscious mind for mastery, victory and survival.

Fear Control — Fight or Flight

Do not ignore, deny or stuff away fear. It needs to be acknowledged and then responded to. It is a signal that there may be a problem or threat to deal with. Your body and mind automatically respond to a perceived threat with fear. When you perceive an immediate, external threat and feel the fear, it's time to move from "Condition Yellow" to "Condition Orange," or as far down the color continuum as the situation dictates. However, if it turns out that there is no external threat, "fear control" allows us to turn off the fear response.

When we are confronted with a threat to our survival, our body is automatically prepared for fight or flight. The perceived threat triggers what Massad Ayoob has clearly explained as a physiological "Body Alarm Reaction" (BAR). When BAR is triggered, there's a massive adrenaline dump into the bloodstream. This stimulant hormone causes our heart to race, our blood pressure to rise, our muscles to tense, our visual and auditory focus to narrow and acuity to increase, and our breathing to quicken and become shallow.

If we are trained to fight and there is no opportunity to preclude the fight, our body is physiologically prepared to do so reflexively. If we perceive an opportunity to flee and avoid the fight, our body is also prepped to do that. So a BAR is adaptive to a point. However, if we are not prepared to fight and we perceive no opportunity to flee, we freeze. Freezing is fear getting the better of us. To survive, fear must be controlled.

Control Our Fear

For fear to be controlled, it first must be acknowledged. Remember that fear is a natural response and not a sign of cowardice. Once fear is acknowledged, the BAR must be controlled and harnessed to pump our fighting machine. BAR is physiological, but to control and direct it, use both physiological and psychological methods.

When our BAR is in overdrive, we feel that we may die. As a result, our muscles either tense up or go limp. We tend to hold our breath, feel tight in our chest, breathe shallowly or heavily from our upper chest, and hyperventilate, becoming dizzy or light-headed. Our body temperature drops and our hands and feet turn cold. Additionally, we may feel butterflies or pain in our stomach and lose bladder or bowel control. These feelings result in becoming more tense, vulnerable and out of control. But there are remedies.



Sequence showing a defense against an attempted gun snatch.

Remedy No. 1: Control Your Breathing

First, become aware of our breath-holding, erratic or shallow breathing, or hyperventilation.

Since these **types of breath** intensify a body's reaction, we need to control it. To learn breath control, take three to five slow, controlled deep breaths when you are by yourself in a safe environment (Conditions White or Yellow). You may feel somewhat light-headed at first. With continued practice, the light-headedness will disappear and instead you will notice that you feel more relaxed, alert and in control.

I teach my clients to inhale deeply through their noses to a count of five and hold the breath for a count of three. Then exhale forcefully through the mouth to a count of eight, blowing stress and tension out into the atmosphere. If this is too difficult, you can inhale as deeply as you can, hold, then exhale as forcefully as you can to lower counts. Work up to greater breath depth and higher numbers as you get better.

Turn down the fear and stress in critical incident response with slow, controlled deep breathing. It turns on the relaxation response. Practice this skill often throughout the day and enjoy how much more in charge you feel. It only takes a minute or so. Also, as you become more aware of your breath first in normal situations, then normal everyday stressful situations, you will eventually be able to employ breath control to your advantage in a crisis.

Of course, in the middle of a fight, you are not going to have time to focus on your breathing. But if you've practiced your controlled breathing, you'll automatically breathe away your unnecessary stress and tension.

Remedy No. 2: Use Your Prepared Positive Self-Talk

The second, psychological step was actually discussed above: "Positive Self-Talk." The idea is to talk to yourself in such a way that your body gets the message to turn down its BAR to a level that is optimal in the circumstances at hand. For example, faced with a home invasion in the middle of the night, you want to be telling yourself things like: "We've planned for this. We are going to follow our plan." Then talk yourself through your plan, knowing you will make it through.

Remedy No. 3: Mental Rehearsal

The third remedy to fear, "mental rehearsal," is also the fourth key element to being psychologically prepared for combat survival. Much like dry-fire practice, it enables

you to practice the above techniques. It is tactically training your mind enough times so that if the real deal ever transpires, you are ready. Competitive shooters, much like other successful athletes, use visualization techniques — mentally rehearsing how to handle a challenging situation.

It works best if you first put yourself into a relaxed state using slow, controlled deep breathing. By first relaxing, you calm your mind and can think more clearly. You are more alert and aware and in tune with reality. Mental rehearsal turns down the negative self-talk (which is often exaggerated and unrealistic) and allows your subconscious mind to be more receptive to positive impressions.

You can use mental rehearsal to run “movies” in your head of how you would handle a challenging situation. Go through the steps. Explore different scenarios, different variables, different tactics and different outcomes. You can slow your mental movie down and speed it up, run it forward and run it backward. Cut and splice segments.

Be Prepared: Practice Mental Rehearsal

One can also employ mental rehearsal as a means of learning techniques from an expert role model. First, you closely observe the expert performing the to-be-learned skill. Then you mentally put yourself in the expert’s shoes, so to speak. Using your primary senses (seeing, listening, etc.) you actively imagine what it would feel like to be that expert as he or she performs the skill.

You can also employ mental rehearsal to trigger a mini Body Alarm Reaction. Then practice employing breath control and positive self-talk to turn the BAR down and take charge of your body and mind. For example, practice desensitizing yourself to fear by purposefully seeking out and confronting uncomfortable and/or slightly risky and challenging situations that get your level of physiological arousal up.

For example, you can practice asserting yourself (not aggressively) with people who behave rudely or inappropriately. You can take advantage of situations that make you feel uncomfortable and practice handling yourself with aplomb in them. Be creative. The possibilities are unlimited.

Courage to Use a Gun Under Fire

Courage is often erroneously confused with fearlessness. You can be afraid and still be courageous. Courage means having the nerve, tenacity and determination to win the fight. “Courage under fire” means keeping your cool in a fight even though you are afraid. This is necessary in order to be able to use your brain to think and act

tactically and intelligently and not panic. When you are psychologically prepared for combat survival, you will keep your cool in battle.

So, train hard and develop confidence in your fighting skills and abilities, but stay tuned to reality. That means don't take things for granted and don't let your guard down. Feed your brain positive suggestions, control your fear, and keep rehearsing and practicing your skills. The winning attitude is remembering that you can't afford to lose the fight and doing everything within your power to win and survive!