

Situational Awareness and De-Escalation



*Code Administrators Conference
March, 2026*



Instructor:

Dave Forsythe

Background / Experience





Previous Training provided:

Police Ethics

Criminal Justice

Church Security

Interview / Interrogation
Report Writing

Officer Wellness

Firearms

Courtroom Testimony

De-Escalation

Emergency Vehicle Operations

Scenarios

Situational Awareness

Death Investigation

Crisis Intervention

Youth



Overview of Conference Training:

- Introduction
- Awareness / Vigilance
- Personal Safety/Security Basics
- De-Escalation
- Real- Life Response
- Action vs. Reaction
- Being A Good Witness



Caveat

This course **will not make you an expert.**

Hopefully, it will **give you an awareness** of certain Situational Awareness and De-escalation techniques, ideas and suggestions to **better deal with potentially dangerous situations.**

It should also help those in attendance to **be more vigilant** to stay away from potentially dangerous situations; but to prepare to deal with them if unintentionally caught in the midst of one.

Proactive thinking and actions are stressed and a “**survivor mindset**” that can be used in many everyday scenarios is explained and encouraged.

Some of the program content may be uncomfortable to some people or may trigger unpleasant memories or thoughts.

Some Potential Scenarios

A person who seems “out of it” at the local park

A disruptive person at your Sunday church service

An intoxicated person at the softball game you’re watching with your family

An angry driver in a “road rage” situation

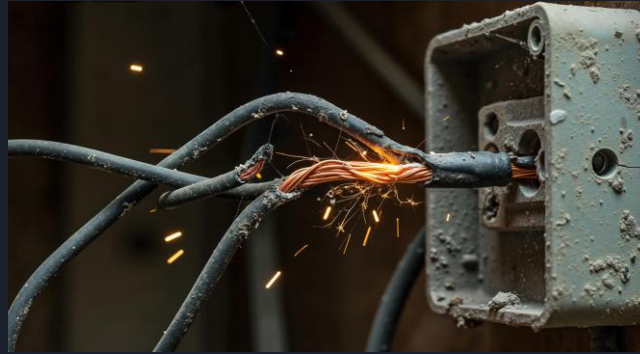
A domestic violence incident that spills over into the workplace

Something that doesn’t seem right in a code enforcement situation

An active shooter or terrorist “making a statement”



Be proactive... What do you see as potential safety/security/medical issues as Code Enforcement Professionals?





Do unto others....



T R E A T

others

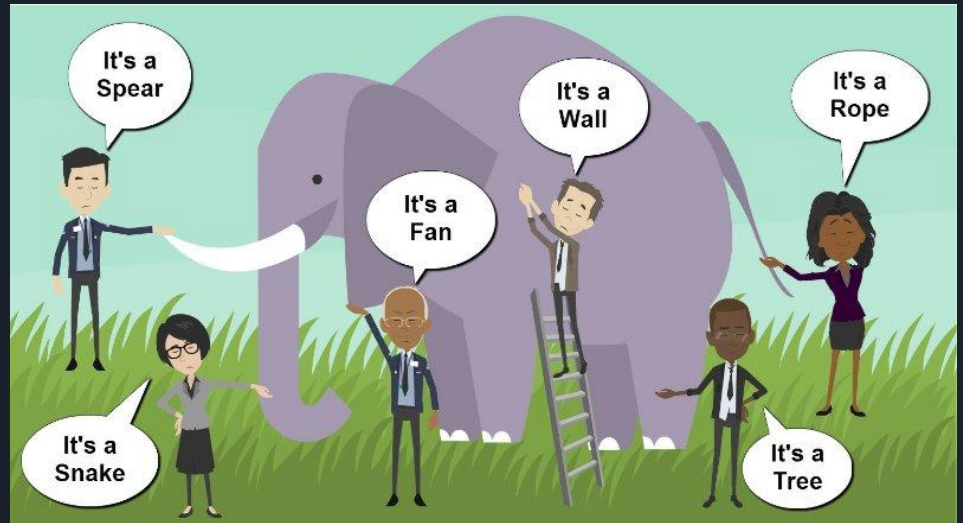
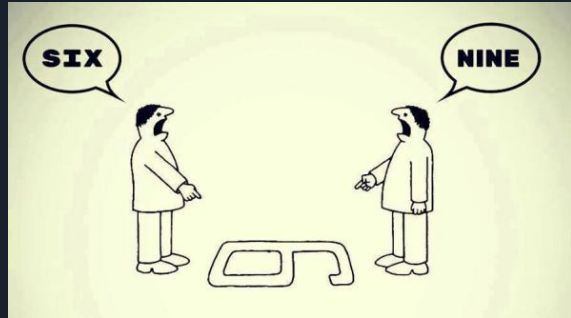
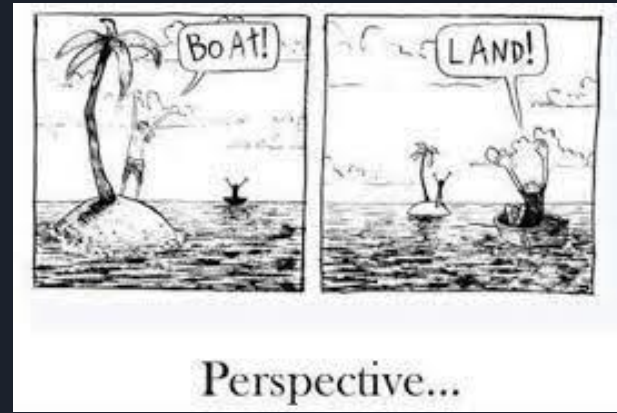
T H E
W A Y

you

W A N T
T O
B E

treated

It's all about
.....perspective.





“Awareness” Defined

“the state or condition of being aware; having knowledge; consciousness, informed; alert”



“Hypervigilance” Defined

“the necessary manner of viewing the world from a threat-based perspective, having the mindset to see the events unfolding as potentially hazardous”.

- Kevin Gilmartin’s “Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement”






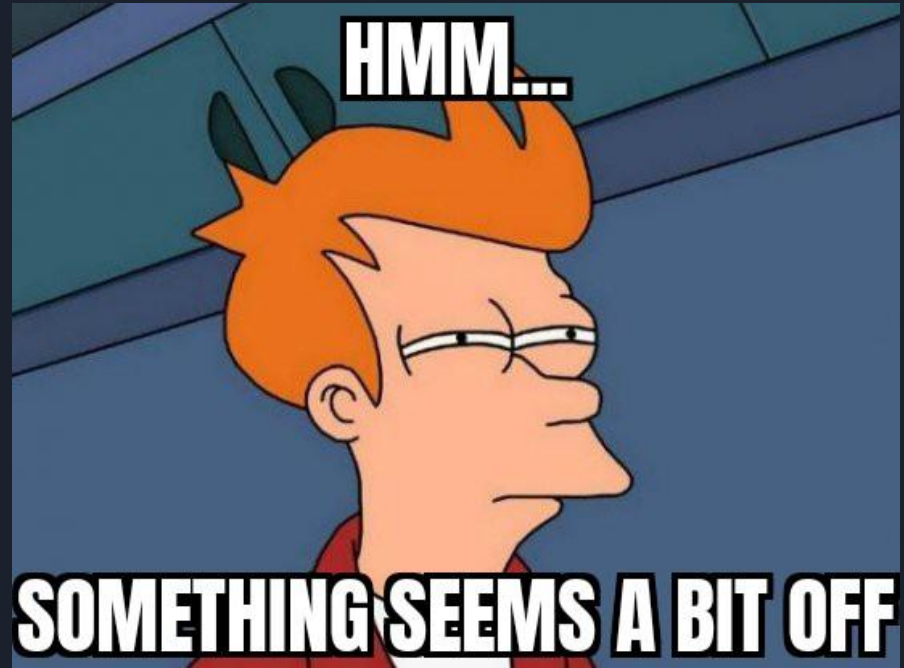
“Vigilant”

“keenly watchful to detect danger; wary, ever awake and alert”





Trust your instinct, gut, inner voice, intuition, hesitation, etc.



Be aware of manipulative charm / niceness






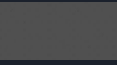
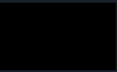
**WHEN IS
CHARM?
A WARNING SIGN?**

REAL KINDNESS	vs.	MANIPULATIVE CHARM
RESPECTS YOUR BOUNDARIES		FAST-TRACKS CONNECTION
EXPECTS NOTHING IN RETURN		BLURS PERSONAL BOUNDARIES
AND NEVER PUSHES		OVERRIDES YOUR GUT INSTINCTS



Arousal Conditions - Color Coded

(David Grossman)

-  - Oblivious to surroundings
-  - Basic alertness and readiness
-  - Optimal survival / combat performance
-  - Potential breakdown in performance
-  - Catastrophic breakdown in performance

(Similar to Jeff

Cooper's Levels of Awareness)

You never know how you'll react until you're in a real-life crisis.

“If there’s an active shooter, all you have to do is push the button”

(Weston High School, Sauk County WI - Sept. 2006)

Principal's slaying stuns school

Student shot Klang 3 times, authorities say





BY SCOTT BAUER
The Associated Press

CAZENOVIA — Those who knew John Klang said it's no surprise that the principal put himself in harm's way Friday by confronting a student who burst into his school with two guns and declared his intent to shoot someone.

Students, teachers and residents in this rural community are grieving the 49-year-old's death after he was shot three times by a 15-year-old inside the main entrance of Weston Schools.

The father of three was shot in the back of the head, chest and leg by ninth-grader Eric Hainstock.

A girl weeps Friday as she is led out of Weston High School in Cazenovia after a 15-year-old student allegedly shot and killed the



Custodian Dave Thompson describes how he took a shotgun away from the shooting suspect.
Morry Gash/AP

school student killed in a car crash just minutes before the shooting. Stammen said that death was unrelated to the shooting.

While no one was prepared for such a violent act, Klang's response appeared to catch no one by surprise in this town of several hundred about 70 miles northwest of Madison.

"He's always thinking of the children first," third-grade teacher Terri Smith said just hours after the shooting rocked the small school.

Weston Schools have 365 students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. He was a friend to all," Stammen said, "with one exception."





Be Proactive!



Mental Crisis Rehearsal / Scenarios



“If-Then” / “When-Then” Thinking
Leads to quicker decision-making
when needed.



“It’s good to have a lifeguard, but ultimately, it’s better to know how to swim.”

-Sam Rosenberg in “Live Ready”





Selective Attention / Focus

(Force Science Institute)

- Your brain can only do so much!

Blinking an eye - 18/100 second

Reaction Time - 37/100 second

Practice always improves performance and lots of practice can create “muscle memory” and speed up decision-making / actions taken!

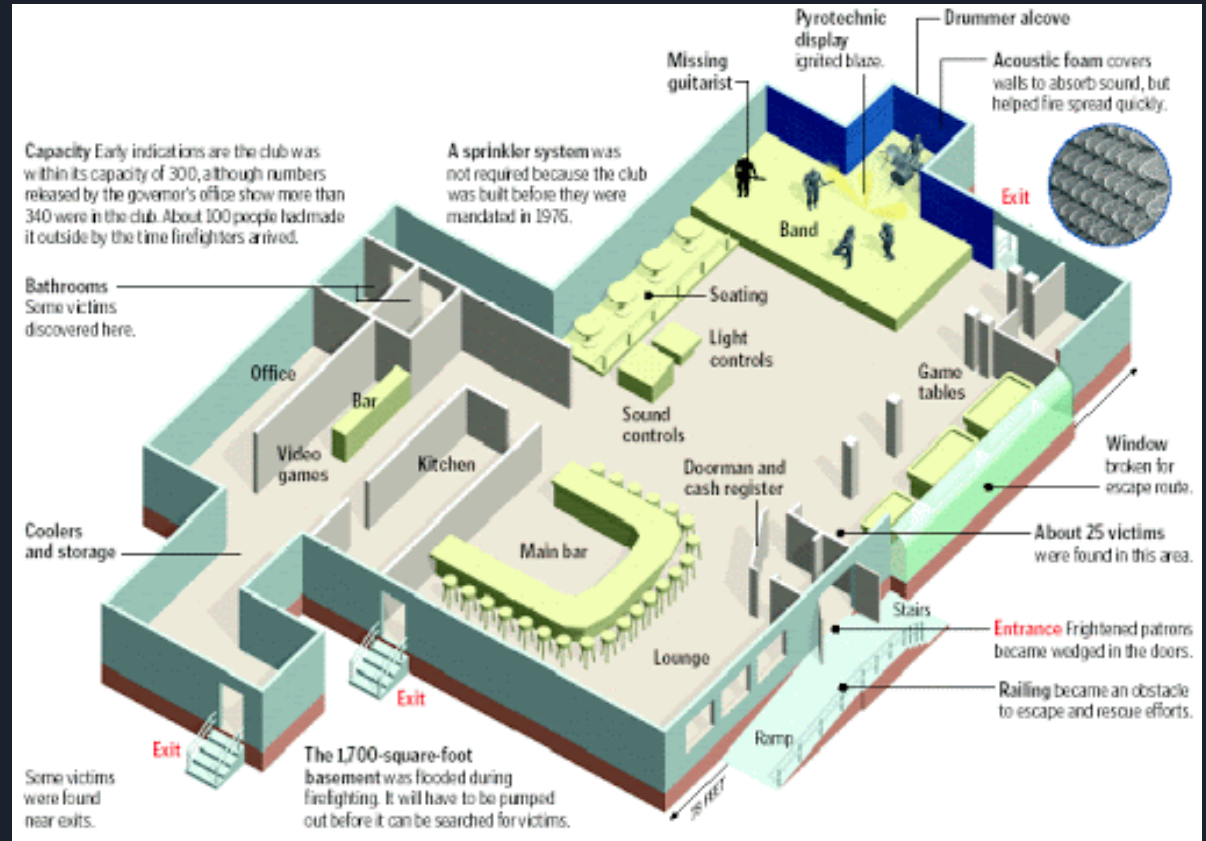
Anticipation can reduce reaction time.

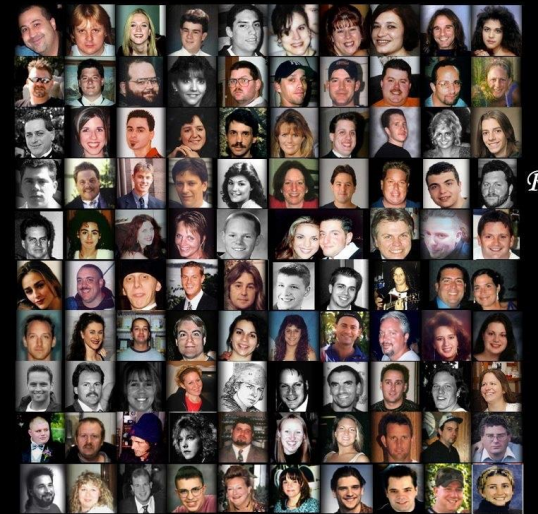
The Great White Concert Fire -

Rhode Island.
2003

100 Killed
230 Injured

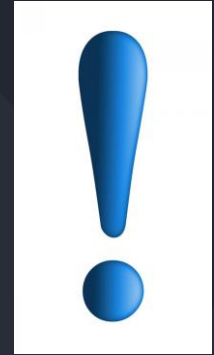
(Capacity 404)





*We
Will
Remember*

*Feb 20
2003*



You don't want to make decisions when your fine motor skills are minimal, there's high stress/adrenaline dump and you have to react.

***Think of potential crisis situations at common locations (home, work and favorite restaurants will cover 90%) .

Potential exits, potential weapons that could be used against you or by you, potential hiding spots, etc



Sympathetic vs. Parasympathetic Nervous System

The Autonomic Nervous System

Sympathetic NS

Norepinephrine and Epinephrine

Fight, Flight or Freeze

Increases

- Heart rate
- Respiratory rate
- Blood pressure
- Pupil dilation

Decreases

- Digestion
- Urine production



Parasympathetic NS

Acetylcholine

Rest and Digest

Increases

- Digestion

Decreases

- Heart rate
- Respiratory rate
- Blood pressure
- Pupil dilation

What would you do?



Don't judge a book by it's cover.

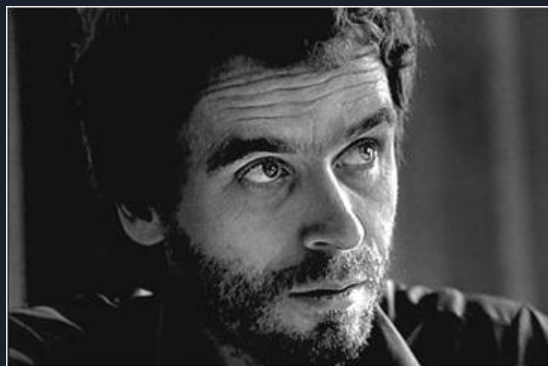




Antonio Barbeau



Dennis Rader - "BTK Killer"



Ted Bundy



Aileen Wuornos



Jim Jones



How aware are you?

Situational Awareness ???



“Who called 9-1-1?”

COURTESY: ISP

HEAT ADVISORY
MADISON



13 EYEWITNESS NEWS

CHURCH BUS CATCHES FIRE

13

GREENFIELD NOON TEMP: 91° FORECAST: HOT AND HAZY 11:13 83° WTHR



January 2015





***** If you think you might need Law Enforcement /
Emergency Medical Services / Fire Dept - CALL!**

**They'd much rather be called off because the situation
resolved itself, then to not be called until it escalated to
a crisis / emergency.**



What to watch...



- The hands (and what's in them) can hurt / kill you.



Hidden threats



Sheep, Wolves and Sheepdogs.... (David Grossman)



“Sheep”

Kind

Gentle

Productive

Don't hurt anyone unless it's by accident or extreme provocation

Live in denial

No capacity for violence

Often fear sheepdogs until they're needed





“Wolves”



Feed on sheep without mercy

Evil

Capacity for violence and no empathy for others

Aggressive sociopaths





TIME

- May Trigger

A school shooter “wolf”

“Sheepdogs”

Protect the sheep

Confront the wolves

Capacity for violence and deep love for fellow citizens


Never harm the sheep



Always be aware and ready to respond

What would you do?





Even if you're a sheep....
proactively, think tactically....

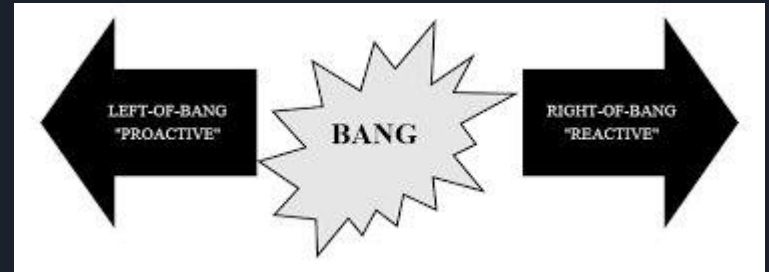
- Autogenic breathing.

You can choose.





“Left of Bang”



“Left of Bang” means *before the bad stuff happens.*

You want to be there – alert, ready, prepared to respond to protect yourself and your loved ones.

“Left of Bang” – Van Horne and Riley



“Left of Bang” requires two things –


A mindset and mentality to actively search your area for **people/things that don't fit in.**

The knowledge to know **what causes someone/something to stand out from the crowd.**

It's about being *proactive*, not reactive!

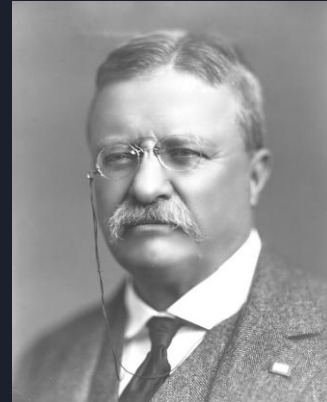


Florida - February 2020



“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”

- Theodore Roosevelt



“Think dirty!”

If I wanted to shoot this place up, how would I do it?

If I was going to stalk my ex-girlfriend Abduct a child....

What could be used against you / by you as a weapon?

Where are the weak spots?

How can you harden targets?

Think outside the box.....





Teamwork





De-Escalation

“The body cannot go where the mind has never been.”

“The greatest victory is that which requires no battle.” (Sun Tzu)





De-Escalation - on one slide

Use your experience / training

Be proactive

Listen

Distract

Refocus on positive

Change the subject

Motivate

Empathize

Give choices

Get rid of barriers



Caveat:

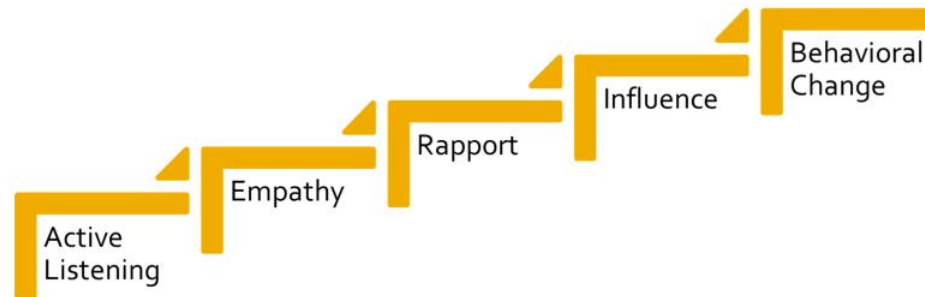
Safety is the highest priority!

Nothing works 100% of the time (i.e. humor)

You have to be confident and capable.

Force continuum

The goals of De-Escalation



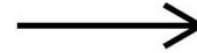
Use of Force Continuum

Understanding Force Continuum Laws for Citizens: A Guide to Responsible Self-Defense

**Center For
Violence
Prevention And
Self
Defense**
Confidence - Safety - Empowerment
Online and Live Training



Compliant



**Officer Presence/
Communication**

Passive Resistance



Physical, Soft

Defensive Resistance



Physical, Hard

Active Aggression



Less-lethal Tools

Deadly Force



Deadly Force



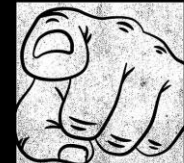
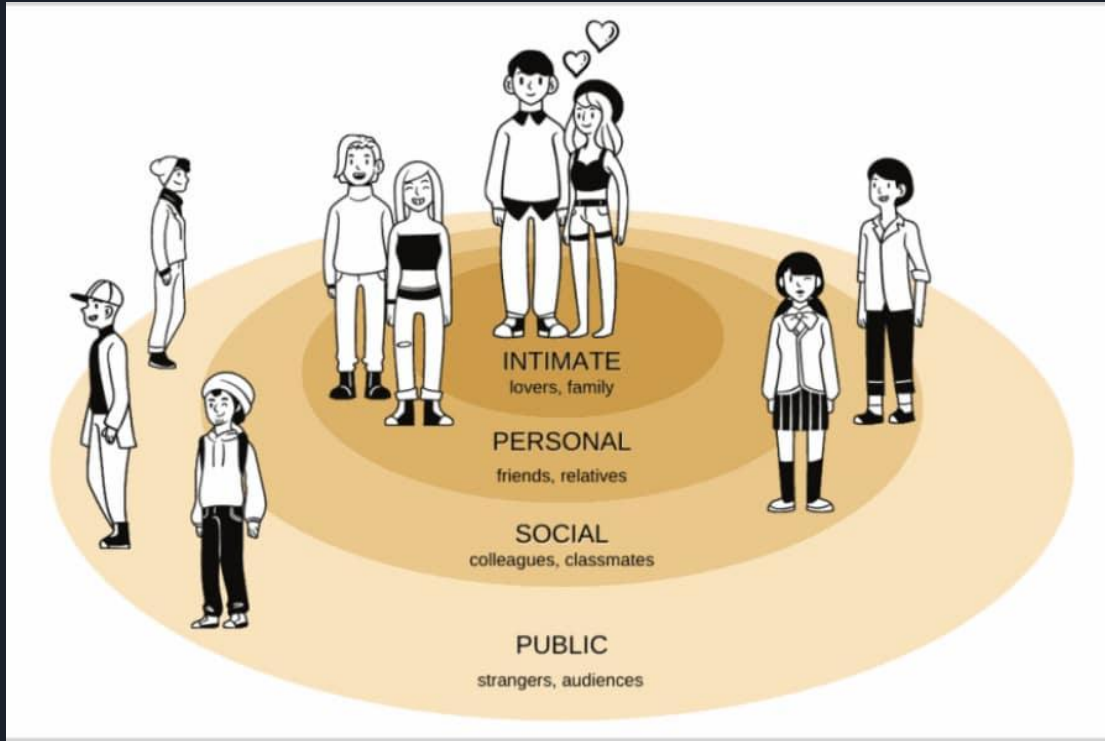
The importance of body language in De- Escalation ...

Your Physical Presence

Relaxed, Neutral, Aggressive



Personal space



YOU'RE INVADING
MY PERSONAL
SPACE



Moving towards a person who might be in crisis or escalated...

Ask if it's okay to approach them, sit down, talk to them, etc.

Do you want or not want any barriers?

How are they reacting to your arrival?

Does something seem off?

Are they trying to draw you closer?

Be careful....



Be aware of the power of touch



It can help someone who needs reassurance

It can trigger a person dealing with trauma

Consider asking first, before touching



Breathing and movement

Slow your breathing, speech and gestures down - this projects calm and helps regulate you and others. It's not weakness. It's tempo control

Fast, jerky motions trigger alarm.
Smooth, deliberate movements convey control and project calm authority.

A slight forward lean in a relaxed way signals empathy.



Tactical Empathy lines...

(verbally acknowledges their feelings and helps to build trust)

“I can see this really upsets you.”

“It sounds like you’ve had a rough day.”

“I get why you’d be angry about that.”

“You’re just trying to be heard, right?”

“I don’t blame you for feeling that way.”

- You’re showing that you understand their emotional world without saying they’re right.



Labelling

(use a calm, low key and matter of fact tone)


Naming things, situations, or emotions that are at play

Use phrases like “It seems like...” “It sounds like...” and “It feels like...”

“It seems like you had a bad day”

“It sounds like you feel disrespected”

“ It feels like you really want to fight”



Mirroring - Repeating the last few words the other person said to encourage them to elaborate.

The more the aggressor talks, the less they act

“You think you can bump into me and just walk away?” “Walk away?”

“You almost hit my car, you idiot!”

“Almost hit your car?”



Calibrated Questions -

Open, non-confrontational questions that start with “how” or “what” and prompt the other person to think instead of act.

“Get out of my way!”

“How do you want me to do that?”

“You’re not listening to me!”


“What do you need from me right now so we can stop yelling?”



Paraphrasing

Restating what the other person said in your own words to show a deeper understanding of both their facts and feelings.

“So, what I’m hearing is that you felt disrespected when that happened. It sounds like you’re saying this whole thing feels unfair. Am I right with that?”



Minimal Encouragers - the little things we say or do to reassure the person that we're paying attention.

Nodding your head as you're listening.
“Mmm hmm”. “Ah”. “I hear you”.

Know when to let silence work for you.

The goal is to stabilize the situation, then redirect or disengage.



Be proactive with de-escalation

Try to prevent escalation

Watch for agitation (pacing / not pacing)

Unusual behavior? What's the norm?

What's world in the past?

Intervene sooner vs. later

Does someone on your team have a good relationship with the person from prior contact(s)?



Preparation...

Slow things down

Do you know the person? Prior contact?

Can you get information about him/her?

How many staff do you need? Usually less is better if possible.

Do you have a code word or signal?

(“10-96”, colored file?)



Contact / Cover concept

One person talking at a time

Introduce yourself

Look for cues (positive / negative) from the person.

Facial expressions

Verbalizations

Body language



Your presentation....

Your body language should match your words

Appear relaxed, but be ready

Bladed stance with your hands free

Take time to get to eye level - Don't rush



Location of contact

Know your exit routes

Don't get cornered or corner your client

Be aware of potential weapons



Take your time, if possible

People will know if you're rushing / insincere

Do you let them vent or not?



Your tone should be calm and reassuring

Don't talk down to him/her

Evaluate if your tone is working or not.
Change your tone if necessary.




Trauma Informed Technique

Don't ask "why"?

Ask "What happened?" vs. "What's wrong?"

Use I and we instead of you.



Ask open-ended questions and let them finish their answers.

Involve them in the process - ask how they'd like to see the situation resolve.




Be calm and reassuring.

Rephrase what they're telling you.

“What I hear you saying is..”

Stay in control of your emotions and tell them you want to help them.



If you believe there are drugs or alcohol involved, consider getting law enforcement involved if necessary.



Never lie.

It could damage your credibility as well as this and future contacts.

Say, “I can’t do that” and try to come up with other options/alternatives.




Things to avoid...

Direct eye contact

Sudden movements

Showing frustration

Telling them to “relax”, “calm down” or
“I know how you feel”.



Pay attention to the person for potential mental illnesses, drug or alcohol involvement, behavioral issues etc.

What do you see, hear, smell?

Consider if you need EMS, Police



Be aware of significant danger cues...

“1000 yard stare”

Suddenly stops moving and/or talking.

Target glances.

Clenched fists and/or facial muscles.



Your safety is first priority!

Scenarios



What
would
YOU
DO





How would you respond to this?

Dealing with people on drugs

Stimulants – Cocaine, Methamphetamine, etc.

Depressants – Alcohol, Heroin, etc.

Psychedelics – LSD, MDMA, etc.

Others - Bath Salts,



Universal ways to deal with people on drugs

Keep your distance, bladed stance and hands in front of you

Talk calmly, quietly and slowly

Don't make sudden movements

Be aware of the potential for violent mood swings

Be aware of potential for hallucinations

Make sure someone else is aware of who/what you're dealing with



Person on “bath salts”



“Go for the goody two shoes church girls...”



“Ghost SWAT Team”, “Crank Bugs” and “Red-Eyed Squirrels”





School board meeting

Action always beats reaction!

Proactive planning can help
speed things up.

WIN - What's Important Now?

A decorative graphic on the right side of the slide, consisting of a series of dark grey, 3D-style rectangular blocks arranged in a staircase pattern. Two blocks are highlighted: one in light green and one in blue, positioned at different levels of the staircase.



Body Response During Crisis

Heart Rate

Tunnel Vision

Auditory Exclusion

Loss of Motor Skills

Hyperventilation



*How you train is how you'll act / react in real life.

Pre-Attack Predictive Behaviors

(FBI Report)

Things to look for:

Significant (real or perceived) personal loss, humiliation or setback

Pervasive, persistent fantasies where offender victimizes others / revenge

Problematic / concerning interpersonal interactions with others

Increased isolation / depression, withdrawal

Escalated interest in firearms / explosives, tactical gear / etc

Increased sense of recklessness / disregard for consequences

Dramatic change in appearance and hygiene



Be aware



Hmmmm...



Be a good witness!

Describe the person who was on the left

Describe the vehicle. Color? License plate? Stickers?

White? Black? Hispanic? Asian? Indian?

Hair color?

Glasses? Facial Hair? Tattoos? Scars?

Clothing – Type? Color?

Shoes? Style? Color?

Accessories? Description(s)?

Other details?

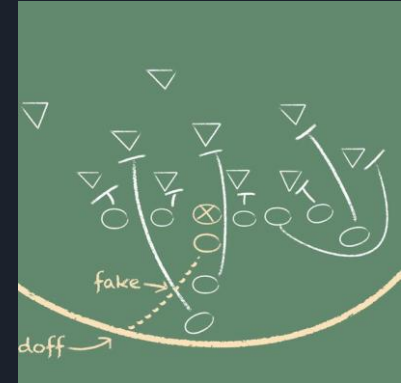


Be aware of potential distractions!



Why? What could be hidden?

What could the real “target” be?





Personal Safety Basics

Distance is your friend

Stance matters

Hands up

If-Then Thinking / Contingencies/Mental Rehearsal

Mindset makes a difference

Cover / Concealment

“Fatal Funnel”

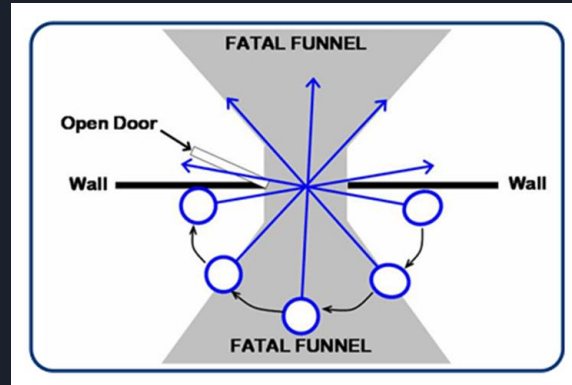
Cover vs. Concealment



COVER can hide you AND protect from bullets. Concrete or brick walls, the front of a car where the engine block is, thick wood door, cabinet or table, soda machine, copy machine.



CONCEALMENT will prevent someone from seeing you, but it will **NOT** stop bullets. Hide behind curtains, bushes, in a locked closet or room, [read more](#)





RUN



HIDE



FIGHT

In that order?

With or without thought? Blindly?

Tactical running, hiding and fighting

Preparing for what might come next

Don't follow "the herd"

HOW TO HANDLE ACTIVE SHOOTER SITUATIONS

AVOID



Finding a safe exit is the best option. Students should always have an exit strategy for the buildings they spend the most time in.

DENY



If finding a safe exit is not possible students should then deny entry to anyone seeking to cause harm. If the door does not have a lock, furniture can be used to block the door.

DEFEND



As a last resort, physical defense against the attacker can be used.

If you had to defend yourself, could you?





Is it “murder”?

To protect yourself from a deadly threat?

To protect someone else from being killed?

Think about it ahead of time so you don't hesitate....





“Survivor Mindset”



Credit to:

