



SITUATIONAL AWARENESS—THE BASICS

By Michael O'Rourke

The recent vehicle-ramming terrorist attack on Westminster Bridge and at Parliament in London, and similar attacks elsewhere in Europe and Israel, provides a tragic backdrop to highlight the easiest way people can avoid becoming victims.

As a security management consultant who trains people on travel safety and security, I see much of the public reaction doing little to help the average traveler when the next time comes. My advice here is based upon years of training (I'm a retired Special Forces soldier) and current best practices in both the governmental and private sectors. It applies equally when considering terrorism, street crime, or active shooters.

First, a general feeling of fear, or the lack thereof, does not correlate to "ground truth" and is typically not beneficial. Being too afraid to travel because of something that happened in another city or country is simply a personal reaction to that event and is not based in fact. Refusing to fear anything, sometimes called the arrogance of over confidence, is essentially the same thing. One may prevent you from traveling altogether while the other could lead a person into a dangerous situation by ignoring the warning signs.

Here at Advanced Operational Concepts we tell folks that what they usually need is a mindset adjustment. Actually, we tell them our goal is to change the way they look at the world for the rest of their lives. For many this is a major and difficult paradigm shift due to their current state of denial (see #2 below) about the real world. However, this shift is essential to reach the understanding that YOU are responsible for your own personal security. Once realized, and this is key, you must then *accept* that responsibility. When seconds count, the police are minutes away.

After that the rest is much easier. It's a three-part process where each part interlocks with the others and it goes something like this:

1. Decide to develop and maintain situational awareness. Once you make that conscious decision the rest of the equation becomes possible. Most veterans who have been through force protection briefings are familiar with this phrase. Boiled down, situational awareness is being aware of your surroundings and identifying potential threats and dangerous situations. This is a mindset rather than a hard skill. You don't need to be a Jason Bourne to adopt good situational awareness practices. All you need is the will and discipline to do so. Key to this is recognizing that threats do indeed exist. Poor situational awareness is often a significant contributor to many accidents, criminal encounters, or terrorist incidents. You aren't paranoid; you're now living in a heightened state of awareness. If you find it more palatable, think of situational awareness as the defensive driving of everything.

How can situational awareness save lives? In London, the distance between the first and last people struck by the car on Westminster Bridge was approximately 400 yards, or 365 meters. We are convinced only a lack of situational awareness sees victims mowed down over a distance of four football fields.



2. Vanquish denial. Denial, already with an impressive body count, can kill you. Not believing a threat can exist, or that a situation occurring right here, right now, is really happening severely reduces the chances of avoidance and even survival. Bad things happen to good people. Accept it. Apathy, complacency, and denial are deadly. “It will never happen to me” and “nothing like that ever happens here” are among the final thoughts of people in denial. They also say those things while rooted in place watching a rapidly approaching vehicle running over people on the sidewalk 100 yards away. Then 50 yards. Then 10. Firecrackers do not go off in airports or malls. Those are gunshots until proven otherwise after you have escaped to safety. Don’t worry about people laughing later. The dead no longer have the luxury of embarrassment. Until you can vanquish denial you will always be at war with your natural survival instinct, which is the third component.

3. Trust your gut. A “gut feeling” is really that primitive hunter-gatherer part of your brain doing its Ice Age job of warning you of danger. It noticed those subtle signs that something isn’t right. Too many people ignore or deny (there’s #2 again!) their gut feelings. Why? Many victims have reported they didn’t want to be seen as profiling the person or people who ended up attacking them based on race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status. I encourage profiling, but profiling that is based on behavior, the situation, and the environment. If something seems out of place, or wrong, it usually is. Give yourself permission to listen to your gut. It could save your life.

The discipline part of situational awareness is making the constant, conscious effort to listen to gut feelings and being aware of what is happening around you while being distracted by other things. It takes time to make this second nature, but anyone can do it. Whether you are at work, walking between your car and the gym, or traveling in a foreign country, these principles are constant.

Here at AOC we do not blame victims. We don’t blame mindsets either because people just don’t know what they don’t know. While anyone can begin adopting good SA principles, more effective is training conducted by professionals who live their lives in that heightened state of awareness. You might think people who live this way are paranoid. Just the opposite is true. The most confident people you will ever meet are those in tune with their surroundings.

Being safe is not a feeling, it is a conscious act.

Situational awareness can be taught, and mindsets can be changed. If you would like to learn more, visit www.adopcon.com or write to us at info@adopcon.com.

About the author: Michael O’Rourke is the President and CEO of Advanced Operational Concepts, LLC, a global security management consultancy he founded after retiring from 24 years on active duty in the United States Army. As a US Army Special Forces combat veteran, Mike lives the Situational Awareness mindset and is passionate about teaching it to others. He can be reached at mike.orourke@adopcon.com.