

Bored To Death: The psychological threats to situational awareness



Analysis Highlights

Situational awareness is a building block of personal and collective security, useful in protecting against all types of threats, to include criminal, terrorist and intelligence threats.

Situational awareness is not an elite art only known to highly trained agents. It is simply an in-the-moment assessment of the risks and threats where you are. Anyone can practice good situational awareness, but it requires the right mental discipline. With this in mind, let's examine some of the common threats to developing and maintaining situational awareness: Denial and distraction. It's all in your head.

Denial runs deep and wide

Perhaps the most pernicious enemy of situational awareness, denial can manifest itself in several ways. We often associate denial with thoughtlessness or head-in-the-sand, willfully ignorant decision-making. The truth is that denial is often the result of a sophisticated intellectual equation (though sometimes split-second and subconscious). When we engage in denial, we're often, though not always, weighing experience against inference. It's really an exercise in trust: When we choose to trust our past experiences over what we perceive and infer in a particular moment, we're really telling ourselves that we don't, in that moment, fully trust our senses or our interpretation of what they might be telling us.

This is useful and sensible -- for instance, if you live in a rural, wooded area you don't call 911 every time you hear a gunshot during deer season. But if we let ourselves fall back too readily or lazily on habit or experience, it can, in the wrong place at the wrong time, be deadly.

Here are some manifestations of that intellectual equation we call denial.

It can't happen to me

This is denying you could be a legitimate target. Many people don't consider themselves wealthy enough to be targeted by kidnapers or robbers, but there's a wide array of criminals with a wide array of agendas. Some kidnapers consider a few thousand dollars a good take, and for most street criminals a purse, smartphone, gold chain or pair of expensive sunglasses is considered worth the effort for a snatch and run. Similarly, the man sitting alone at a bar on a business trip who is approached by an attractive woman may not consider himself important enough to be targeted by a honey trap.

And as we've seen from the wide range of targets in recent grassroots terrorist attacks, your social status, ethnicity or religion doesn't matter: You're only an additional integer in a high body count. Truth is, we're all targets. Denial can indeed be deadly.

It can't happen here

We depend almost entirely on our past experience when we're in our comfort zones -- home, school, office, etc. In certain locations we take our safety for granted. In these places we might hear what sounds like a gunshot, but think, "But this is Dippin Dots..." Or we might wonder whether a new romantic partner is genuine, but think, "Nah, that honey trap stuff happens in Moscow, Russia -- not here in Moscow, Idaho."

That is, in certain places we take safety for granted. We see the effects of this location-based denial in some of the recent subway and rail assaults and slashings. Victims might believe they're safe because they were on a train or in the station rather than being on the street where they were more vulnerable.

In fact, our experience of total safety is the exact vulnerability that terrorists exploit for shock value: The cultural shock we feel when we read about a truck plowing down a sidewalk during a holiday or gunfire breaking out in the middle of club music. And even in the larger context: This kind of thing happens in the Middle East, not America.

In the case of terrorism, recent experience is, sadly enough, slowly but surely modifying our blind trust in our security.

It can't happen now

“Not now” is a cousin of “not here.” This is our denial that an incident can take place at a certain time of day. Many criminals prefer to work under cover of darkness, true, but this doesn't mean broad daylight protects you. In fact, many kidnappings and assassinations happen during the morning home-to-work commute: Attackers know where you'll be and when you'll be there.

Political correctness

We can even classify our discriminatory/non-discriminatory behavior as denial. This happens when a victim dismisses the threat a person or group of people may pose because the victim is concerned with making an inaccurate judgment based on prejudice. We can disregard warning signals: “Not him.”

To be clear, we don't condone prejudice or profiling, let alone advocate for it as a security technique. We agree completely that we should evaluate individuals based on their actions and demeanor, not their identity. But that can cut both ways. Sometimes reality does indeed reflect a stereotype. Don't deny that someone might be an attacker based solely on who they are -- judge them by the signs and signals they send.

Distractions: Literally taking you off track

Distraction is tied to denial. We're far more likely to allow ourselves to become distracted if we have a “not me, not here, not now, not him” mindset.

Visual

Anyone who takes a subway or bus to work daily knows how easy it is to spot people so engrossed in their book, newspaper or screen they have no idea what is happening around them. This can make it very difficult to observe a demeanor and other indicators of the attack cycle progressing as a threat emerges. These signs are often very subtle, and it's hard to notice them -- even more so when your eyes are intently focused on something else.

Criminals can practice visual distraction, too, with scams that involve someone approaching the victim with a map or newspaper or even a smaller object such as a bank note.

Aural

Your sense of hearing can help you identify threats you can't see -- threats behind you or concealed by the dark or physical obstructions.

This is exemplified in people who run or walk with headphones on and can't hear threats approaching from behind. For instance, in October 2016 Mexican federal judge Vicente Antonio Bermudez Zacarias was assassinated while jogging with headphones on: A gunman ran up from behind and shot him. And in December 2013 American teacher Ronnie Smith was assassinated in a similar way: Jihadists shot him as he ran with headphones on in Benghazi, Libya.

We've also noted recent nightclub shootings, such as at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando and the Reina nightclub in Istanbul, in which survivors reported that loud music made it difficult for them to hear gunfire -- and when they recognized it for what it was, the music then made it difficult to determine where the shots were coming from.

And these days visual and aural distractions often go hand in hand. We see people everywhere -- in the park, on the street, on mass transit -- who are both visually and aurally consumed in a game, movie or TV show on their mobile device.

Situational awareness is not a river in Egypt

Good situational awareness doesn't mean you can't read a paper on the subway, go to a club, check your email in a park or listen to music on a run. But there are certain times and places where those things are inadvisable -- such as an American man jogging on the streets of Benghazi.

When you are doing these things in public, try take a measured and more cautious approach than you would if you were safe in your home. Go ahead and read a newspaper on the train, but pause occasionally to put the paper down and scan the car, especially after a stop when new passengers enter. Does someone deserve additional observation? If so, don't return to your reading until you're certain that person isn't a threat. If, after more observation, the person does appear to be a threat, you can take action to avoid that person rather than getting caught off guard.

As for jogs, depending the time of day, the surface you're on and the number of other runners around you, it might be just fine to run with music on at a low volume, as long as you can hear someone approaching from behind. If you want to truly stay in the moment, don't let your music or podcast take you some place far away from the here and now. Don't let your mind get so distracted that it denies the reality where you are.