

Situational Awareness Exercises

Here are some hypothetical scenarios that allow your brain to understand what a situation looks like in order to build your personal Situational Awareness. These are designed to create a baseline, the preparational foundation on which everything that happens in a crisis will stand. After running through these hypothetical exercises your brain will come back to what you've rehearsed as an involuntary default setting so that, by repeatedly practicing, you can't help but do what you've rehearsed in a crisis. Think of it as mental muscle memory. It's one of the keys and secrets to special operations success and why we rehearse scenarios over and over.

A few additional rules for you to follow: First: Don't be overly serious or somber about it. As you sit with this book or in a restaurant or an office, you are not under a specific threat (at least let's hope not). Quite the opposite. You're opening yourself to a bigger world. One that you never recognized before but that exists all the same. Second: Take someone along with you—a friend or partner perhaps. Two people can observe and gain significantly more than one. If you prefer to do it alone or are traveling, that's okay too. Third: Be confident; trust yourself. You don't need to be an expert to see the world; you've done fine to date in your life. And finally, these are Situational Awareness exercises focused only on the two separate aspects of Situation and Awareness.

Exercise 1: Your Dinner with Andre or Andrea

Pick a nice restaurant, not fast food because you're going to be there awhile (as the name implies, fast food doesn't lend itself to spending time in observation, and anyway you deserve a better meal than that as you chart a new and safer view of the world). Once you're seated, ask yourself the following questions:

Is this place Familiar or Unfamiliar?

How many times have you dined here?

Do you know the neighborhood?

Do you think it's Safe inside?

Does anyone exhibit signs of hostility or danger?

Consider the restaurant itself. Really open your eyes to everything. Are the staff professional or sloppy? If you can see the kitchen, how does it look—clean and organized or dirty and haphazard? If you can't see the kitchen, get up and walk around the restaurant and see if you can (be forewarned: Looking at restaurant kitchens with open eyes can heavily influence your order or desire to return).

How about the entrance? Is it well lit? Is it wide enough for multiple people to pass through at once or is it a severe choke point—if you needed to rush out immediately, would you become jammed with the rest of the sheep?

Is it quiet enough for you to hear if something was happening at a nearby table or in the kitchen or entrance? Or is it a crowded bar where it might take longer for you to recognize a disturbance because you're shouting to be heard?

Use the bathroom. Think about the route you must take to get there. Is it down a long passageway? If so, is that well lit? Is it unisex or single person, so that you need to consider the quality of the door's lock? Could someone attack you there and get out of the restaurant by a back door or other means? Also, how clean is it? Really look, because in my experience restaurant bathrooms tell you much about the quality of the kitchen and whether you should actually eat there.

Less important to safety but indicative of your awareness, how's the décor? When you go to restaurants, do you even notice the art, colors, furnishings? What do they tell you about the place? If it's a chain restaurant you won't learn much, since they're homogeneous, but if it's privately owned you'll garner something, and better still, it adds to your dining experience, or at least it should.

Do you think it's Safe immediately outside? Are the people beyond the doorway bustling along with their day or is it a slower pace? Could someone mask their presence and observe you from among the throngs?

When you leave, is the way back to your car, hotel, or home Safe, or are there places that might concern you or strike you as At Risk?

You needn't spend a lot of time on all these questions—answer from your gut. Is it Familiar/Unfamiliar, Safe or At Risk?

Now consider your level of awareness. There might be some cheating involved here. Since you're paying particular attention to the subject, you're probably Attentively Aware, scanning for cues. The better question is: What should your awareness be? Should you truly be Unaware, staring lovingly into the other person's eyes or into your margarita? Probably not. Most likely the appropriate answer is Openly Aware. When you finish paying and leave, I'd like you to have a composite answer in your mind using just the three elements we've discussed. Something like: Familiar, Safe, Openly Aware. This allows you to simplify your assessment into something that's easy to process. And as you'll learn in later chapters, simplicity is key to safety.

Exercise 2: The Streets of San Francisco (or Anywhere Really)

Find a busy street in a city. Someplace that you can walk and where there are people present. I don't want you to seek out someplace that you know is Unsafe, but I do want you out and about

somewhere that's new or at least not familiar. Now, go for a fifteen-minute walk. This time we're going to ask questions that you should apply while you're walking. You may also notice that you can transition from Familiar to Unfamiliar within a few blocks or even a single block.

As you walk, are there places you can see or pass that might be riskier or possibly the opposite, particularly safe? Side streets, parks, café entrances, or stores are likely places.

If it's nighttime, how is the lighting? Adequate, or can you identify places that are dark enough that they could hide someone? Or are there places adjacent to poorly lit areas that could hide people, such as low walls or blackened doorways.

If it's daytime, see if you can answer the previous questions by projecting what the location would look like after dark. If you had to pass this way again at midnight, would you? Or is it a daytime-only location?

If you've chosen a major city, be on the lookout for surveillance cameras (London, it so happens, is the most surveilled city on earth, with the possible exception of some cities in China). These will be up on buildings, high enough that they provide unobstructed views, or else on stoplights and light poles. If you spot one, keep looking, as there are likely others, and keep a running tally. Do this simply because it opens your eyes to the fact that you're under observation more than you likely realize, and for that reason alone you're improving your awareness.

What are the people like? Strolling leisurely because it's a sunny Sunday along the Seine in Paris? Walking briskly in Lower Manhattan because no one strolls in that city that never sleeps? Try not to fixate on individuals (something we'll cover in Rule 2, Trust and Use Your Intuition) but rather, take in your surroundings as a whole.

However, if someone does capture your eye because something about them bothers or concerns you, perform a quick assessment using your new skills. What does their walk tell you?

Is it fluid and with purpose? Does it come across as ungainly? Are they angry? Is their body language tense, with clenched fists, a set expression on their face? You're not looking to make eye contact here, but as you'll also learn in Rule 2, body language is telling you who they are and what they're about. As important, you might discover that you are projecting your potential as a desirable or undesirable target to others, but for now, make note of these people and how they contribute to the situation. Are they adding to its risk? Or do they contribute to the overall safety?

When you're (safely) back in your car, or on the subway, etc., what is your assessment? As in the first exercise, I'd like you to create a composite picture of the three elements, something like: Unfamiliar, Safe, Attentively Aware. It's alright if you have several different assessments for different locations on your walk. In fact, doing so helps your learning curve because it teaches you that these aren't static assessments, but fluid and ever changing as you change locations or conditions around you change.

Exercise 3: The Devil Wears Prada

Shopping is a common situation that can bring you into contact with potentially undesirable humans. Grocery stores are close to your home, making it easier for someone hostile to follow you. Malls and high-value stores like jewelry or even sporting goods stores are also environments conducive to studying your situation and determining SA.

If it's night, ask, as in every nocturnal situation, What's the lighting like? Appropriate? If not, and this is a store you use regularly, look for the best parking space based on distance to the entrance and lighting.

In the store, don't single-mindedly fixate on your shopping list, the clothing rack, or the jewelry display. By all means enjoy your endeavor, but stop now and then, look around. Notice

who's around. Anyone in particular who stands out, is dressed inappropriately (whether over- or under-), or is paying attention to you should be noted. Should they be there? It doesn't mean they're a threat, but if you've done the preceding exercises you should be noticing things that stand out by now. It doesn't matter why they stand out, what matters is you're noticing. That's because when one of these things is not like the others, you should, to paraphrase *Sesame Street*, stop and consider why that is.

If someone was in your immediate vicinity with the intent to observe what you've purchased or where you're headed, where would they choose to be? It's usually behind you because that's what gives them opportunity to study you for longer periods without attracting your attention.

From inside, consider alternative exits. If the front door was blocked by robbers or the entrance wasn't an option because there's a fire, where's the back exit? These tend to be hidden or marked with "Employees Only" warnings, but in an emergency it's not going to matter, and you should make a habit of noting where they are whenever you enter a store.

While shopping, other basic safety rules should be kept in mind. As you walk out of that jewelry store you don't want to hold your hand out in front of you and exclaim for all to hear, "You shouldn't have!" Flashing new purchases of any kind is tantamount to a calling card.

When you come out of the store, stop, look around, take in your surroundings, whether it's a parking lot with your car in it or merely the exterior of the store. Better still, observe from inside. Who's around?

If your car is parked, observe it from a distance. Use that spot as a natural starting point and then look to the cars on either side of yours. Is anyone in them? If so, what kind of person? Soccer mom in her minivan or Rico Suave in his midlife-crisis Porsche? Expand your view to the

next cars. If there's a vehicle with someone who catches your eye, make note of the make, model, and color of their car. You don't need to try and remember plate numbers. But when you get in your own car, look in your mirrors to see if that car leaves when you do or ends up behind you.

When you've completed the exercise using several different stores, make an assessment for each one: Familiar or Unfamiliar, Safe or Unsafe, Openly Aware or Attentively Aware. After you've done that, think about the details (this works best if you actually make notes, if not on paper then your phone's notepad). If or when you return to that store, should you do anything differently? Was your assessment different than what you expected or have experienced in the past?

Exercise 4: A Star Is Born

This scenario amps things up a bit, with greater numbers of people, more sensory input, and more dynamic environments. Next time you go to a movie, play, nightclub, comedy club, or, better yet, a concert, consider these questions:

How's the parking? When the show's over, will it be lit? Lit enough to be able to see into the surrounding cars and ascertain if anyone's watching the crowd for potential targets?

What's the entrance like and the procedures for getting into the venue? Are they constricting choke points or can they facilitate a mass exodus?

Are exits easily identified? Or will you have to search for them in the event you need to leave immediately? Do they add to your safety or is there something problematic about their location, such as being behind a curtain or access to them being blocked by nearby tables or other furnishings?

How's the crowd? What's their collective energy level? Is there abundant alcohol that could serve as collective fuel for violence or frenzied panic (these are almost exclusively the two outcomes for a crowd taken by surprise)?

If a weapon or bomb went off in the distance, how would this crowd react? Would they immediately panic because they're already amped up? Or would there be a momentary stunned silence (this is a great opportunity to exploit, by the way; by being the first to respond, you gain an edge, as you'll learn in later chapters)?

Same with a fight: Would a fistfight spur the crowd to violence, causing an all-out soccer-hooligan brawl? Or would it produce the opposite effect, causing a recoil or retreat from the violence?

Let the physical conditions and crowd determine your level of awareness. Can you be Openly Aware, or should you be Attentive? Is the energy such, and your own involvement or enjoyment such, that you might already be at Threat or Thrill? Remember, this doesn't necessarily mean it's bad or dangerous, merely that you're objectively assessing the awareness level you should be experiencing. Keep in mind the mistake I made in Mexico, allowing myself to be less aware than I should have been because of the familiarity, or rather perceived familiarity.