

Counterintuitive Strategies for Facing an Active Shooter

by Kevin Reeve, onPoint Tactical

After Paris and San Bernadino, people have asked me to explain effective ways to respond to active shooter situations.

It is an incredibly challenging problem to which there are no easy answers due to the individuality of each situation and the different types of targets, ie. malls, schools, churches, parking lots, trains, restaurants and sports stadiums etc., but here are some thoughts.



1. Getting a jump on the situation. Overcoming Normalcy Bias.

“Consider a turkey that is fed every day. Every single feeding will firm up the bird’s belief that it is the general rule of life to be fed every day by friendly members of the human race “looking out for its best interests,” as a politician would say. On the afternoon of the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, something unexpected will happen to the turkey. It will incur a revision of belief.” Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan*

One of the major problems humans run into with ‘Black Swan’ events, which are unpredictable and rare events with massive impacts such as an active shooter, is the inability to recognize the event, the inability to accept the paradigm shift represented by the event, and the inability to adapt to it. We call these failures “Normalcy Bias.”

Normalcy Bias is a significant problem. Reactions following an active shooter event include: “We thought we heard fireworks.” “I thought the gunman was an actor.” “At first I thought it was fake blood.” Failure to recognize an unfolding event represents a lack of awareness.

Failure to accept the paradigm occurs when people cannot wrap their minds around facing their new situation. It comes from a lack of mental plasticity, and the habit of linear thinking. A lack of mental plasticity is an inability to quickly accept change when it rears its ugly head.

I have experienced this in people who get caught up in the process and not the results. Linear thinking is defined as the inability to process random

information. If it isn't part of the current paradigm, it doesn't exist to the habitual linear thinker.

Mental plasticity and non-linear thinking can be developed. Organizational development guru, Ned Herrmann, taught me methods of lateral and flexible thinking. Another mentor, Sayoc MasterTuhon Tom Kier, took me through many mental exercises in what he describes as the Logical Order of Thought, or LOT. Tom helped me to approach problems logically but not linearly. This plasticity of mental processes promotes the acceptance of change.

2. Be an Early Adaptor

There are those who can recognize, accept, and adapt with astonishing speed and have the ability to not just adapt, but to prosper during a Black Swan event. Taleb calls these people "antifragile." Antifragile people can look at a 'black swan' event and have not only the awareness skills to give them the jump on others, they have the will, the skill, and the tools to prosper.

Having the will to not only survive but prosper comes at its most base level from the desire to protect one's self and loved ones. Surprisingly, this trait seems to be undeveloped in some folks. The will to survive can be further defined as a willingness to do whatever is necessary to protect your family and friends. Two terms come to mind here. Resilience and relentlessness: they represent the will to persevere.

The skill to survive and prosper comes from hard work. It is magical thinking to assume you will be able to perform under pressure without having learned the skills necessary to do so. I had a student once tell me that they did not need to practice with a firearm because they watched TV. Seriously. You must learn how to shoot from a good teacher, and you must practice, practice, practice. The same goes with every skill you desire to master.

Finally, those who can prosper in bad situations have the tools to do so. In an active shooter situation, throwing a can of Spaghetti-Os, as is recommended by some, is hopeless. Average citizens face the same criminals as police face. It doesn't seem logical to consider police without guns, does it? Be the good guy. Some of you will never be competent or confident shooters. That is ok as long as you have people around you who are. But do not abdicate your responsibility, rather redirect your ability to skills that are necessary, but different, like a heightened sense of awareness or skills in martial arts.

3. Be the Feeder

I have a friend who spent many years as a Delta operator. When I asked him the most important lesson he learned, he said something astonishingly simple. He said their Mantra was this: ***Movement is life.*** Let that sink in. Why is movement important? In our Scout Skills class and Advanced Scout class, we spend a large percentage of time focusing on effective movement strategies. Getting back to an active shooter situation, the worst-case scenario is being trapped without the ability to move.

Movement is regaining initiative. It is taking a positive step. Movement means you are beginning to dictate the situation.

During the Virginia Tech massacre, (in which our daughter lost her best friend, Emily Hilscher), one of the professors, Liviu Librescu, 76, an aeronautics engineer, held closed the classroom door while telling his students to jump out the second story windows. All but one of his students survived, unlike students in adjacent classrooms, who tragically, like most of us, might not have considered the counter-intuitive option.

Professor Librescu, a holocaust survivor from Romania, died in the massacre, and has been honored for his sacrifice and heroism. I would add to his honors, his presense of mind to tell students to jump out the windows, advice rarely given on how to escape an active shooter, but should be, as an excellent example of flexible, non-linear thinking.

Tom Kier calls this inclination to move and act, the feeder mentality. Forcing shooter to react to you, allows you to [slowly] gain control. You can reverse the situation on a shooter by not being where he is shooting. The shooter always has the initial advantage of surprise, but your decision to move, forces him to react. Military would recognize this as part of the OODA loop strategy, a fascinating topic which deserves it's own article.

My good friend, expert marksman and police trainer, Kelly Alwood, who teaches a class for onPoint Tactical called, "Surviving Deadly Contact," describes the four levels of cover. I won't go into all of them, but the first level of cover is return fire. By moving and shooting you are creating cover

for yourself and others. You are becoming the feeder, forcing the shooter to respond to you. And with proper training, the will to fight, and the tools necessary, hopefully you can end the situation.

I do not think active shooter situations, whether terrorist or loon, are going to stop any time soon. I expect that we will see many, many more. So who will protect you and your family in a Black Swan?

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Kevin Reeve is the authority on Urban Survival and Urban Escape & Evasion who has trained SERE instructors, as well as special forces, regular military, law enforcement, government and NGO aid workers, as well as average citizens. Kevin is also an expert in military Scout Skills, land navigation and advanced outdoor survival skills. onPoint Tactical, LLC has been in operation since 2004. www.onPointTactical.com