



Critical Decision Making Under Stress

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Introduction

Whenever defensive firearms training is discussed, very often the focus will be on physical skills: accuracy, firearm manipulation, movement, and speed and while these skills have value, there is another skill which is often overlooked or neglected which can be even more important. The ability to make sound critical decisions while under extreme levels of stress.

While an individual can be technically proficient within firearm and shooting skills, it is still possible and in some cases common to make poor decisions within a rapidly developing confrontation. The bio-effects of on both the body and mind can effect perception, attention, memory, communication, and physical coordination and within a violent confrontation, the ability to recognize not only what is happening, but to determine the safest, most efficient, appropriate and effective options available to counter the situation cannot be overstated.

Therefore the goal of defensive training should be more than developing a faster shooter, it should seek to prepare the mind to respond when the physical skills are needed.

The Effects of Stress on the Mind

The human mind and body have evolved to respond rapidly whenever danger is perceived. Whenever the brain identifies a potential threat, it can activate a response identified as “The Fight-or-Flight Response” which is a physiological reaction which prepares the body to confront a perceived threat of danger or move away from it. In some circumstances however, an individual may experience a “Freeze Response”, in which they temporarily become immobilized or have difficulty deciding what to do. An example of this can be found in the phrase “A Deer in the Headlights” look where a deer crossing the road in front of an oncoming car will sometimes simple freeze in place as if it does not know what to do.

When the “Fight or Flight Response” is triggered, the body will release stress hormones into the bloodstream including adrenaline, cortisol, nor-adrenaline and others which will increase the heart rate, breathing, muscle tension, and alertness. All of these physiological changes are part of the body's natural survival system and are intended to help prepare the individual to respond to an immediate or imminent threat.

Unfortunately however, the same physiological response that prepares us for action can also affect how we perceive and process information under intense stress. For example: Attention and focus may become narrow (which is often referred to as “Tunnel Vision”, peripheral information may be overlooked, and fine motor control may become more difficult. Memory, communication, and complex decision-making can also be affected.

This narrowing of attention as as identified above as tunnel vision can cause an individual to become too intensely focused on the perceived threat while failing to notice other important information within the environment.

It is important to understand that the effects of severely elevated acute stress can and will vary considerably from one individual to another and will likely be influenced by various factors including experience, fatigue, familiarity with the environment, and the intensity of the perceived threat.

With defensive training, understanding this Fight-or-Flight Response is extremely important because it highlights a fundamental reality: Which is to say that until an event occurs, it is extremely difficult to impossible to know how we will react or respond. Additionally, we cannot assume that we will think, perceive, communicate, or perform under extreme stress exactly as we do within a calm and controlled training environment.

It is for this reason more than any other that effective defensive preparation be extended beyond technical skills, including the development of situational awareness, practicing sound decision making, understanding when to disengage, and learning how to both recognize and adapt to an ever changing environment and circumstance.

The objective is not to eliminate the body's natural stress response, as this is not possible as this response is deeply ingrained within human physiology. Rather, the objective of effective training should be on preparation for these effects and learning to work with them.

Speed vs. Decision Making

Far too often within the “tactical” and defensive shooting communities, significant emphasis is placed on speed at the expense of other critical considerations.

While there is certainly a place for measuring speed. Within a controlled training environment, faster times can provide a useful objective measure of performance and can help identify areas for improvement. However, speed alone does not equal competence.

An individual who can perform a shooting task extremely quickly but does so at the expense of accuracy, situational awareness, or sound judgment may actually be creating additional risks rather than demonstrating greater proficiency.

Before any decision to use a firearm is made, there are numerous questions that should be considered, including:

1. Is there actually a threat?
2. What is happening around me?
3. Can I safely disengage or retreat?
4. Are other people in danger?
5. Has the situation changed?
6. Does an opportunity to avoid or de-escalate the confrontation exist?
7. What response is lawful under the specific circumstances and applicable law?

These questions illustrate why defensive performance cannot be measured solely by how quickly a physical action can be performed.

A fast response to the wrong situation is not a successful response. Likewise, speed that comes at the expense of accuracy, awareness, or judgment can create consequences far more serious than a slower but appropriately considered response.

Therefore the goal of defensive training should therefore be competence rather than simply speed. Technical proficiency, accuracy, awareness, judgment, communication, and decision-making all have a place in a well-rounded training program.

Threat Recognition and Response

Whenever responding to an active threat, it is critical to first recognize and understand what is actually occurring. While this may sound obvious, real world confrontations are rarely clear or predictable. Confusion and uncertainty will often be among the first reactions experienced when an individual is suddenly confronted with something unexpected or threatening.

It is within these moments, when the mind is attempting to rapidly process a large amount of information, where sounds, movements, verbal exchanges, and other behaviors of other individuals can easily be misinterpreted. Under the effects of stress and heightened emotion, assumptions can develop quickly, potentially leading a person to reach an incorrect conclusion about what is actually occurring.

For this reason, a sound defensive mindset should include a willingness to pause long enough to assess and identify the situation whenever the circumstances safely allow.

This does not mean hesitating when an immediate response is required. Rather, it means resisting the assumption that every unusual, aggressive, or threatening-looking situation requires the same response.

A person yelling in public, someone moving unexpectedly, or a rapidly developing confrontation may look threatening without necessarily presenting an immediate need for defensive force. The ability to distinguish between an ambiguous situation, a developing threat, and an immediate threat is therefore an important component of decision making.

Avoiding the “Action Bias”

A feeling of extreme stress can create a feeling of pressure to do something immediately.

Sometimes identified as “Action Bias” or the feeling that taking immediate action is preferable to waiting, even when waiting or disengaging may be safer or more appropriate. Sometimes the decision to simply leave the environment if this is possible is the correct decision, while other times the situation may require direct intervention, and the most important skill to have here is being able to distinguish between these two times.

Stress and Tunnel Vision

As discussed earlier, one of the most significant challenges that can occur during a high-stress event is the narrowing of attention commonly referred to as “Tunnel Vision”. With this phenomenon, an individual may become intensely focused on the perceived threat while unintentionally overlooking other critical information within the surrounding environment. This can include failing to recognize the location or actions of bystanders, changes in the environment, or other developing hazards.

It is for this reason that within a well rounded training program, the importance of developing and maintaining environmental awareness will be implemented.

The objective, however, is not to become overly paranoid or to constantly be searching for potential threats, but rather to develop a level of awareness that allows an individual to remain oriented to their surroundings, even when confronted with something unexpected or hyper-stressful.

Reducing the Cognitive Load with Pre-Planning

Again, the focus should never be on becoming paranoid or constantly anticipating danger. However, one of the most effective ways to improve decision making under stress is to consider potential problems before they occur.

This involves mentally considering how you might respond to a circumstances and given the options available to you. This is not say that, should a similar situation develop in reality, you should automatically respond in exactly the same manner as you imagined as real world circumstances are rarely identical to what we anticipate and new information may require a completely different response.

The value of this type of preparation is that familiarity with potential problems and available options may reduce the cognitive load associated with making decisions under stress. Rather than having to identify every possible consideration for the first time during a rapidly developing or evolving event. This can potentially reduce hesitation and allow an individual to process new information more effectively.

Attempting to predict every possible scenario is not possible and no amount of preparation can account for every circumstance an individual may encounter. Instead, simple and practical preparation can make certain decisions easier when the unexpected occurs.

For example, when entering an unfamiliar environment, it can be useful to consider:

1. Where are the exits?
2. Where could I go if I needed to leave quickly?
3. Who could I contact in an emergency?
4. What obstacles might affect my ability to move?
5. Where are other people likely to be?

Because preparation will create familiarity with the environment and the options available within it. This familiarity can help reduce the amount of information which must be processed from scratch during a stressful event, potentially allowing an individual to devote more attention to understanding what is actually happening and determining the most appropriate response.

There is No “One-Size-Fits-All” Response

Because real world encounters rarely unfold according to a predictable script and there may be multiple individuals involved, which will cause the environment to be crowded and information may be incomplete while the perceived threat may change rapidly.

For these reasons, defensive training should avoid teaching the idea that there is one perfect response to every confrontation.

Better Decision Making Should be the Ultimate Goal

In the end, defensive training should not be about creating individuals who react to everything faster, but rather the creation of individuals who recognize problems sooner, think more clearly, avoid unnecessary confrontations and make better decisions when circumstances become highly stressful.

While speed and technical proficiency will always have their place, these principles should be supported by sound judgment rather than replacing it.

In Conclusion

In the end the presence of high stress changes the way an individual will generally perceive and respond to the world around them. This makes decision-making one of the most important and unfortunately most overlooked components of defensive firearms training.

Continue Your Training Journey with Grey Wolf Consulting, LLC

We encourage you to continue exploring the Grey Wolf Consulting, LLC training resources and educational articles to help you build a stronger foundation of knowledge and skill.

At Grey Wolf Consulting, LLC (www.greywolfconsulting.us) our slogan reads Knowledge – Integrity – Discretion – Honor, It is these principles in addition to our belief and philosophy that the selection of proper equipment is only one part of developing a responsible and capable mindset. While tools are extremely important, they are only truly most effective when combined with proper knowledge, skill and attitude coupled with sound judgment, and quality training.

Our training philosophy is built around developing well-rounded individuals who understand that personal safety and professional performance require more than simply equipment alone. Awareness, critical thinking, communication, and disciplined decision making skills remain the foundation of effective preparation.

Through continued education with Grey Wolf Consulting, LLC, students can further develop their understanding of:

- The role equipment plays within a broader preparedness plan
- How stress impacts critical decision-making and performance
- The high value of consistent professional training and continued education
- How the correct mindset will impact informed decisions within high stress environments

Whether you are beginning your training journey, expanding your knowledge, or seeking to refine your existing skill set, Grey Wolf Consulting, LLC (www.greywolfconsulting.us) is committed to providing high quality professional firearms and tactics education focused on professionalism, responsibility, and continuous improvement.

About the Author

Brian S. Williams is a professional firearms instructor, tactical trainer, and executive security consultant with greater than 35 years of experience in firearms instruction, use-of-force training, and protective operations. As the founder of several firearms training and security organizations, he has developed and delivered firearms, tactical, and instructor certification programs for civilians, law enforcement officers, military personnel, and licensed security professionals throughout the United States.

Over the course of his career, Mr. Williams has trained and certified more than 10,500 Connecticut pistol permit applicants, instructed more than 2,000 civilians and hundreds of law enforcement and security professionals in advanced firearms and tactical applications, and provided remedial firearms training to military and correctional personnel. He served as a Marine Police Officer and Watch Commander with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection and was appointed to the Connecticut State Police Firearms Advisory Council, where he contributed to firearms training and policy discussions.

Mr. Williams holds numerous professional certifications, including NRA Training Counselor, NRA Law Enforcement Firearms Instructor, General Dynamics Simunitions FX™ Instructor, The Heckler & Koch International Training Division and Sig Sauer Academy Instructor certifications, and USCCA Concealed Carry and Home Defense Instructor. He is the author of *Welcome to the Real World: A Dangerous Place to Be Caught Unprepared* and has been recognized as an expert in firearms by the Connecticut Superior Courts. His work continues to emphasize responsible firearms ownership, sound judgment, lawful use of force, and practical, reality-based training.