

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COMBAT

SWITCH ON, TUNE IN, OR GET PSYCHED OUT!

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Much of current officer safety training focuses on 'skill acquisition'. A key aspect often overlooked is combat psychology. Understanding how the mental and emotional elements are relevant to a successful outcome in violent confrontations is critical. Also critical is assessing this aspect in officers during training.

This article examines two key psychological factors relevant to surviving violent confrontations – mindset and fear. For officers this will provide critical information about personal safety, and for instructors it will provide important considerations for training and assessment.

Understanding Fear

In violent confrontations there will always be fear. Everyone feels fear, even experienced officers. This fear can take many forms, including fear of:

- getting harmed
- failure to protect bystanders
- harm to fellow officers
- legal litigation
- procedural inquiry
- judgement by others
- issues relating to religious beliefs
- causing harm to the subject

These fears can all exist simultaneously, clouding the focus of what needs to be accomplished. A key factor in managing fear is being prepared for reality, mentally and physically.

Fear of harm to self is a natural protective

instinct, but by undergoing appropriate physical training officers will realize that pain is a relative thing, and that they can withstand 'pain' and still function effectively. Officers should encounter a range of threats during training requiring a range of responses – from compliance to resistance involving deadly force. The training should adequately prepare officers for the reality and dynamics of physical violence, whilst ensuring they are not injured in the process.

Fear of harming the subject is a very real fear, despite the fact that the subject may cause the officer harm. This aspect should also be assessed during training well in advance of an officer encountering real violence on the street. There are three things essential to officer survival – the tools, the skill and the will to win. The tools are empty hand, baton, firearm, and such like. Skill is developed by training. But what about the actual will to use those tools? To be effective in using force to control violence, officers must know when to use force lawfully, know how to use it effectively, and be able to use it when required. To develop and assess this attribute in officers, proper training with realism and stress inoculation are required. If an officer is unwilling or unable to make appropriate force decisions in training, he should probably not be placed in an operational role where violent confrontations are likely. To do so may not only put that officer

in danger, but also other officers, support personnel or innocent bystanders.

Investigation, public scrutiny and legal process are possible consequences feared after the fact, and officers should prepare for this eventuality also. Knowing when to act is as critical as knowing how to act. Officers frequently wish the theory component in training was reduced, but when prompted many officers do not really understand their lawful justifications for using force. Appropriate debriefing should



accompany every scenario, so officers receive positive reinforcement for things they did correctly, and understand those areas where they could have made better decisions.

Despite common belief, fear and pain are positive instincts designed to assist us to survive. Gavin de Becker, a world expert on predicting violent behaviour, states that "pain tells us that there is something 'not as it should be' in our bodies. However, we can feel pain without 'suffering', which is the negative mental state we manufacture in response to pain. Likewise, fear is an instinctive wakeup call that we are in severe danger, a positive message that can spur us to incredible acts of strength, speed and determination to survive. Worry, the negative emotion, is the reaction to fear that we manufacture, and it serves us no good at all. Worry will not bring solutions, but is more likely to distract from finding solutions". Recognize fear and pain as positive survival messages, and eliminate pity, suffering and worry as unnecessary emotional baggage.

If you are involved in a violent incident you will likely experience many emotions. Coping effectively with this phase is critical to ensuring continued quality of life and ability to continue working. The immediate after effects for an officer in a violent incident can include:

- Doubt – concern that he was justified and operated lawfully
- Denial – refusing to concede the incident actually happened
- Self-questioning – questioning personal morals and ethics
- Fear – for his future, family, opinion of colleagues, society, and so on
- Grief – remorse over actions and outcomes

Officers will receive varied opinions about the situation, their actions and the outcome. Most of these will be from people in society who have little or no experience in managing violent confrontations. Proper debriefing and counselling are essential, as is positive support from colleagues. Properly documented reports are obviously critical in fair and accurate representation of officer conduct during the incident.

Survival Mindset

Whilst officers must develop adequate physical skills, a strong positive mindset is a critical component in the toolbox for officer safety. One of the key disadvantages for officers

is that they must play by the rules. Subjects do not always adhere to the constraints that dictate 'reasonable' behaviour, and with social desensitization to violence through the media, and social reluctance to punish people who commit violent acts, the subject has a definite advantage.

Leading international tactical trainer Tony Blauer points out that it is the subject, not the officer, who controls the fight. The subject chooses if, when and where the fight happens, and the duration of the fight. He explains that officers typically approach violent confrontations with a competitive mindset - they want to 'win' the fight and subdue the subject whom they view as their competitor. Subjects, however, often have a different mindset - seeing officers not as a competitor, but an opponent. They want to destroy the opponent. Competitors seek to win; opponents seek to destroy. This is a big difference!

Officers must only react to subject action, putting officers at a disadvantage in a violent confrontation. Officers must think "When I am in a violent confrontation", not "If..."

Since it is difficult to identify with the level of violence that is incurred, officers may under-react in violent confrontations for a number of reasons:

- Moral repulsion against using force
- Mental unpreparedness; officers do not expect a violent confrontation, so they have no plan and are unprepared to act
- Failure to understand the dynamics of violent confrontation
- Lack of confidence and unfamiliarity with their equipment

Because violence is a realistic possibility, officers must prepare mentally in order to win. This is called crisis rehearsal and involves the following strategies:

- Formulating a plan before the incident.
- Evaluate the things that can go wrong prior to the event, and visualize successful management.
- Live the experience in your mind's eye...

Mental preparation is critical to winning a violent confrontation. Without the officer's mental preparation, the subject holds all of the cards. As stated in the ASP tactical baton and restraint training manual, 'the goal of officers in a confrontation is control of the subject. It is imperative that this control not be a 50/50 balance. The officer must prevail and not just 50% of the time. If half the confrontations result

in a failure to control a subject, the officer and the general public are put in critical danger'.

In mental preparation, officers can learn tactics and techniques that become instinctive during a violent confrontation. Mental rehearsal creates a learned response in the mind so that under pressure, the subconscious guides the physical actions.

The following suggestions, combined with comprehensive Reality Based Training, assist in preparing officers for likely violent confrontations. These simple principles include:

- Understand lawful justifications – stay up-to-date with agency policy and legislative reviews.
- Play 'what if' – mentally rehearse crisis situations.
- Train – be honest about your abilities and remember that skills are perishable.
- Practise tactical breathing – control heart rate to improve performance under stress.
- Use positive self-talk – tell yourself you will always win and survive, no matter what.
- Develop a support system – use peer and family assistance for emotional survival.

Ultimately, personal safety is personal responsibility, and officers should prepare in advance for their safety and survival. In the final analysis it boils down to how much officers value their own wellbeing. Officers must educate themselves so they know, with certainty and clarity, that they should act, can act, and will act with a positive response during a violent confrontation. The cost to officers of anything less than 100% success is unacceptable. ■

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