

## **OVERCOMING FEAR IN A LIFE-THREATENING ENCOUNTER by Gabe Suarez**

If you suddenly found yourself in a life or death crisis and had to make a decision that could either save your life or end it, would you make the right choice?

Most people have never faced such imminent, lethal danger and can't possibly know how they will react to the extreme fear that will confront them.

In the next few paragraphs, we'll explore some of the realities and myths of dealing with fear and some constructive techniques for confronting debilitating fear and coming out on the other side alive...

What Is Fear?

The dictionary defines fear as "the physical and emotional result of a lack of preparation, awareness or confidence". To understand how fear works we must first understand a little about the human brain's physiology.

There are two distinctly different aspects of how our brains function. At one level it functions at an instinctive, autonomic level. We don't have to think about breathing, walking or other reflexive functions which frees us to exercise the other level, the more cognitive, higher reasoning brain.

The instinctual level is very tightly coupled to the sympathetic nervous system. We have very limited control over this type of brain function. A tiny organ in the center of the brain called the amygdala is where we experience the primal feelings of fear. Responses that originate in the amygdala are literally hardwired into the nervous system and occur almost instantaneously when a threat stimulus occurs.

An example of this response is your "Startle Reflex". This primitive survival response is part of the "flight or fight" mechanism which triggers rapid physiological changes designed to help you escape or overcome potential threats.

Consider a bungee jumper about to take his first jump. Looking over the precipice, the instinctive brain considers its chance of surviving such a fall and immediately kicks into survival mode.

Norepinephrine is dumped into the bloodstream causing respiration and heart rate increase. The blood pressure rises and capillaries in the extremities contract keeping blood near the core organs. As the stress hormone levels in the blood increase, they provide an anesthetic effect in the event of injury and cause glycogen levels in the blood to rise providing additional fuel for extreme muscular activity.

All this originates in the amygdala and begins in an instant. And then the jump occurs. For an instant all senses are on overload and the instinctive brain floods with abject panic. We are literally out of control. Many first timers later remember screaming uncontrollably.

Then, a few seconds later the jumper is bouncing at the end of a long rubber band and the conscious mind realizes it has nothing to fear and the body starts to relax and return to normal.

While we all envision ourselves being fearless and calm in the face of a lethal threat, in reality, most people have little if any ability to predict or control their reaction under extreme stress, unless they have been there before.

The million dollar question is "what can I do to avoid the panic and complete loss of control that so often occurs in the face of extreme danger and overpowering fear?"

Here are the best techniques you can use to learn to combat and control fear:

### **Habituation**

One of the most powerful tools used to combat fear is the process of "habituation". By constantly exposing yourself to things that produce fear you can reduce the intensity of the response. Typically the process starts with low intensity exposure and then ratchets up the intensity level to higher and higher levels until the thing that causes a fear response is familiar and becomes the new 'normal'.

Think about the wildlife we see around shooting ranges. We see them go about their activities normally. Birds land on berms, rabbits nibble the grass underneath shooting shelters, oblivious to the gunfire on the range. Yet a bird not accustomed to gunfire flies in a panic when a shot is fired.

Consider our bungee jumper after a few dozen jumps. Standing on the edge preparing to jump, while possibly still exciting, no longer elicits the same fear response.

Habituation, while powerful, is somewhat specific as it requires repeated exposure to a particular stressor to be effective.

### **Reframing**

Unfortunately, in many situations, the amygdala in your brain gets to decide what it is afraid of. It generally makes this decision without involving any cognitive processes. Simply put, it reacts.

Having a lack of knowledge or familiarity with a threat often results in a heightened level of fear. On the other hand, more familiarity can result in an ability to reframe the situation based on past experience.

I recall my own first close encounter with a rattlesnake in my yard. It was a little scary as I had never seen one up close and personal except in a zoo. While the encounter ended badly for the snake, I gained a better understanding of the behavior and motivations of the snake. Having had many more experiences with rattlesnake since that time, my brain has reframed the experience. Now, coming upon a rattler is a situation that requires caution, but no longer evokes fear.

### **Assessment**

Recognize the situation for what it is and be realistic about the assessment. Denial only serves to delay the ability to execute useful action in a situation. Immediate, decisive action in the face of a threat is essential in your ability to shape the outcome of the event.

### **Action**

The less control people feel they have over the situation, the greater the stress level. People that feel they have some level of control in a situation have much lower anxiety. Those that are able to take action to solve the situation reduce stress even further. You are simply too busy executing to worry about the outcome.

## **Emotional Redirection**

In situations involving high stress, it can be nearly impossible for the cognitive system to regain control over the instinctive survival behavior of the brain. However, it is very possible for other primal emotions to override the fear response. Anger is particularly effective at canceling fear. By redirecting fear into anger, the fear response can be diminished and the physiological responses can be refocused in a more positive direction. If controlled effectively, the enhanced speed and strength associated with the stress response can provide real advantage in a fight.

## **Combat Breathing**

Controlled breathing has long been associated with relaxation techniques. Yoga and transcendental meditation have a long history of using controlled breathing to slow the heart rate and increase mental focus.

SWAT teams and Spec Ops teams worldwide have recognized the value of this technique and use 'combat breathing' techniques to counteract the stress encountered in violent confrontations. The simple technique of inhaling, holding the breath for four seconds, exhaling and then holding the breath again for four seconds has been proven to significantly reduce stress levels, regardless of circumstances.

## **Physical Fitness**

Physical fitness also seems to have a positive impact on a person's ability to handle themselves under stress. In 2008 and 2009 two studies showed that individuals with enhanced fitness levels and lower body fat percentages showed both physiological and cognitive resistance to the impact of stress.

The bottom line is that scientific study tells us that individuals can physically and mentally deal with stressful situations more effectively if they are in good physical condition.

## **Training**

Another powerful tool to control fear is training. Training is a critical element on many levels as it performs several vital functions:

It raises the level of awareness regarding what the full set of outcomes might be.

It provides guidance on what actions will produce desired outcomes.

It helps to identify skills that will produce the desired outcomes.

It teaches you those skills.

It reinforces those skills.

It stress-proofs those skills.

Remember that definition of fear? Fear is caused by a lack of awareness, preparation or confidence. Training certainly addresses all of these by helping you understand what you will likely be up against, teaching you the skills required to deal with the situation and provides you with a high level of confidence that when called upon, your skills will be up to the task.

## **Over-learning**

A key variation on the application of training is the development of essential skills through the process of 'over-learning'. In this type of training, skills are practiced well beyond the point necessary to master the skill. Continued repetition 'burns in' the skill to such an extent that conscious thought processes are no longer required to perform the action.

In a series of studies around the turn of the last century, two psychologists, Robert Yerkes and John Dodson found that these over-learned skills could be effectively employed during extreme stress. They found that by over-learning, we simply default to the behavior learned during training without the need for thought or analysis. This philosophy is neatly captured in the phrase, "The more you sweat in training, the less you bleed in combat".

A key variable in this type of training is insuring that the core skills have been solidified before stress is introduced into the equation. Mark Taylor, a psychologist with the Naval Health Research Center in San Diego concluded after an exhaustive study of Navy SEAL candidates, that an individual must achieve at least an intermediate level of the desired skill before introducing stress into the process.

In order for over-learning to work properly, there must also be some method to insure that the skill being practiced is done correctly. Clearly there is much to be said for constructive feedback from an instructor or coach during the over-learning process.

## **Confidence**

Achieving a high level of skill as part of the training process provides an additional benefit. It gives one a level of confidence that studies have shown leads to greater effectiveness in dealing with critical situations. Confident people feel empowered by their skills and feel that they are up to meet any challenges that may come their way. In psychological studies, confidence has been shown to deliver benefit in crisis situations often beyond that associated with simply possessing the skills to handle the situation. In addition, continued success in the application of a skill under stress increases confidence. There is much truth in the saying, "Success begets success".

## **Mastery**

As one continues to train, the ultimate objective is complete mastery of the skills necessary to insure survival in a violent confrontation. Mastery is achieved when the level of skill goes beyond the cognitive processes and enters the realm of instinctive response. You no longer have to think about what to do in a situation. You just 'know' what to do and execute the skill in a flawless way.

Consider for a moment the ability of "Sully" Sullenberger, the US Airway pilot that was able to ditch a wide-body jet in the Hudson River with 154 passengers on board without a single fatality.

While he was undoubtedly fortunate, the fact that he had 30,000 flight hours over a 40 year flying career and a deep background in flight emergency management enabled him to execute perfectly when the situation called for it.

He 'knew' exactly what he needed to do and though he later admitted to being scared out of his wits, he was able to suppress his fear and get the job done. He was not flying the plane at a cognitive level so much as the plane's controls became an extension of himself. He executed a picture perfect landing in the most extreme conditions imaginable. This is what true mastery is all about.

What you can do...

In nearly every situation discussed above, we can achieve the desired results through the effective application of reality-based training in conditions that simulate as nearly as possible those that will be found in real world situations!

Suarez International is the only training venue available to civilians that want this type of training experience. We aren't "gun camp". We are a place to learn real world skills that will keep you alive in a gunfight. Our training curriculum is designed to start you down your path to Mastery whether you are a beginner or a more advanced shooter.

The next time you think about the importance of training and it's role in survival of a life threatening encounter, remember this:

The key to survival in a life-threatening encounter is overcoming fear and the key to overcoming fear lies in having developed the mindset and skills necessary to overcome your adversary.

Training is not just important...it can save your life!