



4 Star Self-defence

questions@4starselfdefence.ca <http://www.4StarSelfDefence.ca>

Awareness is the first line of self-defence

The best form of self-defence is to avoid any and all situations where self-defence concepts and skills might be required. This may not always be possible, but it definitely isn't possible if you are blissfully (or otherwise) unaware of walking into those situations or the clues that indicate when those situations might be developing. Our ultimate objective should be to equip thousands of individuals with self-defence tools they never have to use because they are always able to avoid the situations which make them necessary.

Our purpose in discussing how to recognize a threat or a potentially dangerous situation isn't to make people paranoid. In fact, it's just the opposite. We firmly believe that the more capable and confident people we get out on the streets, the safer the streets will be. We want to equip as many people as possible with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be out and about confidently, making our streets and neighborhoods safer for everyone.

And, who knows, by educating more people about how to recognize potentially threatening locations and situations we may eventually convince those with the position and power to effect change to eliminate some of those locations and situations.

Teaching awareness in a world that is full of distractions is not an easy task, but if we accept the premise that awareness is the first (and best) form of self-defence, it is an essential task.

Learning how to recognize a threat

Some potentially dangerous situations are obvious. It doesn't take the perceptions of a finely honed martial artist to recognize dark lonely spaces as high risk areas, especially during hours when very few people venture out. This can include parking lots, poorly lit spaces almost any area which features lots of dark, shadowy alleys, nooks and crannies where potential assailants can lurk, awaiting an opportunity to strike. That's easy. You may not always be able to avoid these areas. If you have to venture through such a space you need to do so "on alert." This means eliminating distractions that filter out your immediate surroundings or focus your attention on a single point: no headphones or earbuds, you might want to have your cellphone at hand and ready, but you should definitely not be texting, checking email or otherwise allowing yourself to be distracted, including with a conversation. You also want to position yourself to maximize buffer space, especially on the periphery of and outside your immediate field of vision.

Buffer space is the space between your position and any potential threat or an object or area which could conceal a potential threat. This could mean walking out in the street instead of on the sidewalk or taking a less direct route through a parking garage to avoid dark spaces or places where an assailant might hide.

Those dark, lonely spaces are scary and obvious, but most assaults don't occur in dark, lonely spaces. The same principles of maximizing your available perceptive resources applies to any location where you believe there to be a greater than normal risk, whether or not it's dark or lonely. Awareness in a location that you consider risky is all about identifying approaching threats and maintaining your buffer zone while you move through to a safer area.

However, in addition to risky locations, we need to be able to recognize risky situations. These can develop outside, inside, at work, at home or anywhere in between. There are several main types of situations we need to be able to recognize and, hopefully, either intervene to defuse or extricate ourselves before the potential for violence is realized.

The first is **confrontational behavior**. The confrontation may be physical or verbal, but whenever one person (or group) initiates a confrontation there is a potential for violence to develop and it is

important to be able to recognize a confrontation as it is developing. Some of the easiest clues to recognize are shouting, rapid, staccato verbal interchange, people aggressively invading each others' personal space (in your face behavior) and, of course, actual physical confrontation in the form of pushing or even striking. If you are a neutral third party it may, in some, but by no means all, circumstances be necessary to attempt to intervene to cool things down (see our piece on "Understanding Conflict") but if you choose to do so, it is strongly recommended that you avoid engaging physically and that you intervene from a safe distance (outside the threat circle as defined in our piece on the "3 Circles"). If you are not comfortable intervening or you don't believe you will be able to do so successfully, you should extricate yourself from the situation and, especially if the situation appears to be escalating, quickly seek out and enlist the assistance of someone with the authority and capacity to intervene.

Another type of situation where the threat of physical violence exists is **escalating conflict**. In many ways a situation of escalating conflict is similar to one involving confrontational behavior. If you are a party to the escalating conflict it should be easy to recognize. What is more difficult when you're directly involved is finding a way to cool things off or extricate yourself. In this case you need to pay very close attention to the behavior, tone of voice, body language, etc. of the other party (or, if you're not directly involved, both parties) for hints of intent to attack or sudden changes in any of the above. Buffer space becomes very important as does displaying and attempting to elicit non-confrontational behavior (don't confuse non-confrontational behavior with either submissive behavior or feigned indifference, neither of which can be counted on to diffuse an escalating conflict). The most effective form of non-confrontational behavior is seeking mutually acceptable solutions, but enlisting a clearly neutral third party can also be effective – but only if the third party is not perceived as being aligned with one side or the other in the conflict.

If violence is going to occur as a result of confrontation or escalating conflict, or in some cases when violence erupts apparently spontaneously, **erratic and irrational behavior** becomes a very obvious indication. When you become aware of, but not directly involved in, such a situation the recommended course of action is to attempt to extricate yourself and seek out professional intervention.

If you are directly involved or if it isn't possible to extricate yourself for some other reason, you must be prepared to put your self-defence skills to use, but remember, engaging on a physical level is always the last resort.

Learning how to avoid becoming an attack magnet

Another type of risk situation occurs when you become or appear to be what we refer to as an **attack magnet**. Let's be clear: by using the term “attack magnet” we're not blaming the victim or saying that if you don't want to be bullied or attacked just don't make yourself an attractive target. When we're lost or otherwise disoriented, or visibly fearful we send out behavioral signals every bit as clear to human predators as those an injured animal emits for predators in the wild. When you find yourself in a scary or disorienting situation it's desirable, but not always possible to stop and calm yourself. But the first step is to recognize what's happening and that your situation calls for a heightened level of awareness. Panic and disorientation can often result in a tunnel vision type of response, creating an impression of hyper-awareness, when, in fact, rather than broadening your perception, you are, in fact, startling and flitting from stimulus to stimulus. Abrupt, nervous behavior can make you an attack magnet. Keep your scanning measured and controlled and strive to present a calm, confident exterior, whatever you may be feeling on the inside.

Scanning

By scanning we mean the art – and it is a learned and practiced art rather than an innate ability – of both expanding and “cycling” our range of perception. If you have learned to drive defensively and haven't forgotten those skills, you probably already practice a form of scanning. Your eyes never stay directed to a single spot, but move from the road ahead to the rear view mirror to the side view mirrors, etc. With scanning for self-defence awareness we take things a step or two beyond defensive driving. For one thing we're not just talking about visual perceptions. Sound is equally important, and, in some cases, even smell and touch enter into the picture. For another thing, we're talking about paying increased attention to the periphery and expanding the periphery by slowly turning our head to increase our range. And don't just think side to side – you need to be aware

of up and down as well. For instance, a tripping hazard can not only result in a painful fall, but can also expose you to attack. A threat can also come from above.

So what are we scanning for? Potential threats, of course, but we're not just on alert for potential attackers. Possible escape routes or safe havens are important, as are culs-de-sac or other potential traps. We're also on alert for objects which we might employ as defensive or counter-attack tools or which could be used as weapons against us as well as possible allies.

Are we suggesting that you always walk around on high alert? Of course not. But if you occasionally practice scanning in non-threatening situations you'll be better at it when the circumstances actually require it. You'll probably find that honing your perceptions has all kinds of other benefits besides expanding your self-defence repertoire.