

Situational Awareness – Be Familiar with Potential Dangers

Situational awareness is one of the most important skills to remain safe during a chaotic event. Even though many people think they have this skill, most people do not exercise this skill appropriately. We become complacent in areas that are familiar to us or that we perceive are safe. Then, if we find ourselves in a panicked, chaotic or fearful situation, our brains can freeze or even give us mixed messages on how to react.

These are the times when it is imperative to stay calm and rely on the information our brains have been trained to see.

People typically exit any area – a room, facility, open space, etc. – in exactly the same manner they entered. We have a tendency to forget other exits, doorways, safe rooms or routes that are different than the entry point. As creatures of habit, we repeat behaviors. If you are used to coming in and out of work the same way then that's where your brain will go (especially in a chaotic moment). Our brains revert to the familiar.

Be Familiar with Potential Dangers

Situational awareness means being familiar with the potential dangers in your area. It is a learned skill, is all about preparedness and has saved many lives.

In either familiar or unfamiliar places, be prepared for emergency situations by answering the questions:

- Do you know where all the fire extinguishers are located?
- Where are the stairwells?
- Which doors automatically lock once you exit?
- Do you have an escape route developed in your mind?
- What are the alternative routes from your familiar course?
- If out in the field working, do you know where you could run or hide if necessary?

I encourage you to be more aware and familiar with your surroundings at work. This doesn't mean you need to walk around in fear. You don't need to constantly worried that you could be the victim of an active shooter or a catastrophic event. However, empowering to know your first choice and a secondary route for a building exit. Also, consider a place where you could hide quickly.

The same situational awareness applies at movie theaters, shopping malls, your place of worship or any public places that you visit frequently. When I'm out to dinner, I always sit with my back against the wall. Why? So that I have a very wide view of the restaurant and the entrances. To sit in a position where I have a very limited view makes me extremely nervous. I find myself looking over my shoulder a lot – unable to relax and enjoy the meal and my dinner companions – defeating the purpose of going out in the first place!

Using situational awareness gives me a sense of strength and allows me to be completely comfortable in my surroundings.

I can think of countless stories where situational awareness was lifesaving. On the flip side, I have sadly seen many incidents where it could have saved people from a violent or unpleasant encounter. It is a skill that is very important and empowering. All it takes is practice and persistence – just like learning anything new.

– Written by Carol Cambridge, Workplace Violence Expert