

# Adventurer's MK

## SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

### Situational Awareness

As the name implies, situational awareness is simply knowing what's going on around you. It sounds easy in principle, but in reality requires much practice. And while it is taught to soldiers, law enforcement officers, and government-trained assassins, it's an important skill for civilians to learn as well. In a dangerous situation, being aware of a threat even seconds before everyone else can keep you and your loved ones safe.

### How to Develop Situational Awareness

What exactly am I looking for? How do I know if I'm paying attention to the right things? Are there behaviours or warning signs of an imminent threat that I should know about?

### Observe + Orient = Situational Awareness

The OODA Loop is a learning system and decision-making process. The four steps of the OODA Loop are **Observe, Orient, Decide, Act**. In a head-to-head competition, the person who can cycle through the OODA Loop the fastest wins.

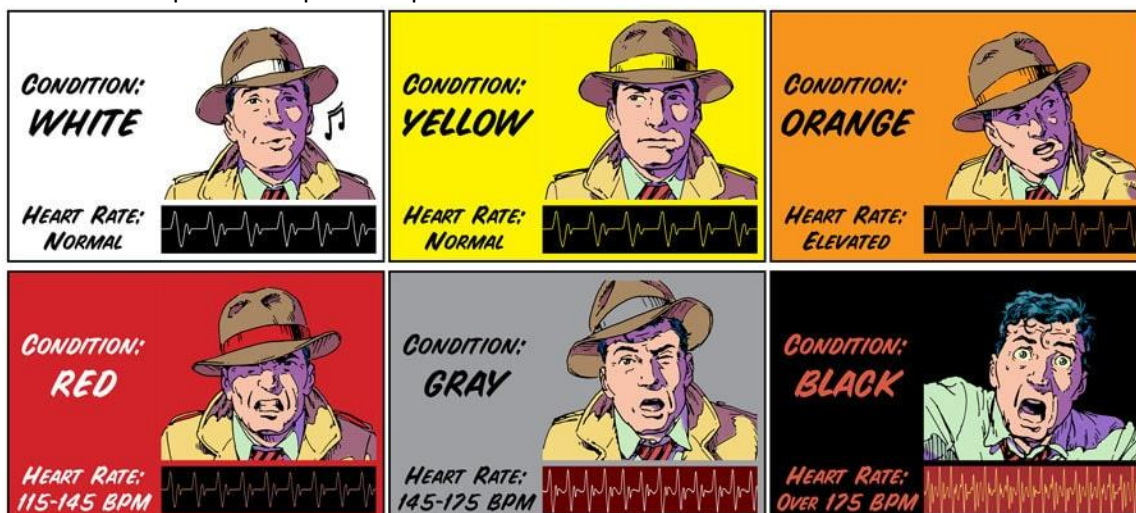
The Observe step in the loop is what most people associate situational awareness with. But it's the second step in the OODA Loop – Orient – that answered the questions about what developing situational awareness actually involves. Orientation tells us *what* we should look for when we're observing, and then puts those observations into context so we know what to *do* with the information.

### So Observe + Orient = Situational Awareness.

But how can we become better observers so that we can improve our situational awareness? And how should we orient ourselves so that we observe the right things and understand the context for what we're seeing?

### Observe: Stay in Condition Yellow

Each colour represents a person's potential state of awareness and focus:



Condition Yellow is best described as “relaxed alert.” There’s no specific threat situation, but you have your head up and you’re taking in your surroundings with all your senses. Most people associate situational awareness with just visual stimulation, but you can also learn a lot about a particular scenario from the sounds (or lack thereof) and even smells in the environment.

Even though your senses are slightly heightened in Condition Yellow, it’s also important to stay relaxed. By adopting a calm demeanour, you won’t bring any unnecessary attention to yourself. If you look antsy and your head is swivelling frantically while you scan your surroundings, people are going to notice you. Additionally, staying relaxed ensures that you maintain an open focus, which allows you to take in more information about what’s going on around you. Research shows that when we get nervous or stressed, our attention narrows, causing us to concentrate on just a few things at a time. A narrow focus can therefore cause us to miss important details in our environment.

Look up from your smartphone, don’t zone out, open your eyes, ears, and nose, and calmly scan your environment to take in what’s going on.

Besides staying in Condition Yellow, here are a few more tips to improve your observational abilities: **Put yourself in a position for optimal observation.** To achieve effective situational awareness, you need to be able to observe as much of your surroundings as possible. Positioning yourself in obstructed spots will inhibit the flow of information coming in. For example, something might be in your way that prevents you from seeing a bad guy enter a theatre or restaurant. You also don’t have eyeballs in the back of your head, so you can’t see what’s going on behind you.

So whenever you enter an environment, put yourself in a position that will allow you to see as much as you can. Finding a place where you can view all or most of the exit points, and that allows you to put your back to the wall. This position readies you to make a quick getaway, and eliminates the possibility of failing to see a threat materialize behind you.

Granted, this isn’t possible in all situations. You don’t have much control as to which table a restaurant hostess seats you at on a busy night, and you’d likely get a lot of strange looks if you stood with your back in a corner while you’re waiting in line at Five Guys. So do your best within the given circumstances. In that busy restaurant, you might not have control of your table location, but you can choose which seat you take. Pick the chair that gives you the best view from your table. When you’re standing in line at a fast food restaurant, just nonchalantly look around and take in the scene.

**Hone your observation skills by playing the A-Game.** or Awareness Game, to help you strengthen their observational skills. To play, when you go into a business, make note of a few things about your environment: the number of workers behind the counter, the clothing and gender of the person sitting next to you, how many entry/exits there are, etc. When you leave, ask yourself questions like “How many workers were behind the counter?” “Was the person sitting next to you a man or a woman?” “What colour was his/her shirt?” “How many exits were there?” It’s fun to play, but more importantly it’s training you to be more mindful of your surroundings.

**Master memorization.** Another fun activity that will help improve your situational awareness is to practice memorizing things. Place random items on a table and memorize what items you have and in what location they are in.

## **Orient: Baselines, Goals, and Action Plans**

Being more observant isn't enough to master situational awareness. You have to know what you're looking for, and then put that information into context so it has meaning and becomes actionable. That's where the Orient phase comes into play.

The Orient step provides three things to help us achieve situational awareness:

- 1) baselines and anomalies for our particular environment,
- 2) mental models of human behaviour we should look for, and
- 3) plans of action depending on our observations.

## **Establish a Baseline Wherever You Go**

Every environment and person has a baseline. A baseline is what's "normal" in a given situation, and it will differ from person to person and environment to environment. For example, the baseline at a small coffee shop will usually entail people reading a book or working on their computer or speaking in hushed tones with their friends. The baseline at a rock concert would be loud music and people looking at the stage while either jumping up and down to the music or swaying their bodies to the beat.

We establish baselines so that we can spot anomalies. "Anomalies are things that either do not happen and should, or that do happen and shouldn't." Anomalies are what direct our attention as we take in our surroundings and what we need to focus on to achieve situational awareness. So the first step in orienting ourselves is to establish baselines so that we can direct our attention to anomalies. How do we do that on the fly? you mentally ask yourself these questions every time you enter a new environment:

- **Baseline Questions:** What's going on here? What's the general mood of the place? What's the "normal" activity that I should expect here? How do most people behave here most of the time?
- **Anomaly Question:** What would cause someone or something to stand out?

## **Behavioural Clusters to Look For**

Our inability to pay attention to everything all at once makes it impossible to obtain complete situational awareness. The human mind can only handle so much information at a given time. Thus in the domain of personal safety, where things unfold quickly and seconds are often the difference between life and death, how we direct our attention is paramount.

So we need to focus on a few things at a time that provide the most bang for our attentional buck. And we do that by relying on heuristics. Heuristics are quick and dirty problem-solving and decision-making mental shortcuts our minds use to figure things out when minimal information is available and time is limited. Decisions made from heuristics aren't always perfect, but in the context of your personal safety, they're usually good enough.

There are six domains of human behaviour that Profilers use on the battlefield in order to quickly determine whether someone is a friend or foe. To get an idea of what you should look for in everyday situations, the most important category of clues is what is called kinesics, an area of behaviour that involves people's conscious and subconscious body language.

Within the domain of kinesics, three clusters of body language are of particular interest for situational awareness. They are:

- dominance/submissive behaviour,
- comfortable/uncomfortable behaviour, and
- interested/uninterested behaviour.

**Dominance/submissive behaviour.** Generally, most people try to get along with others, so for the most part people act in accommodating and submissive ways. dominant behaviour “is an expression of the limbic system’s fight response” and often manifests itself in “gestures and postures that make a person look larger to intimidate ‘smaller’ individuals into submission.” Smaller vs. bigger here doesn’t just apply to physical size, however, but also relates to relative positions of power. Because most people get along to get along, dominant behaviour often constitutes an anomaly, and the person displaying it deserves more attention.

If someone acts in a pushy, authoritative, or overbearing way, it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re a threat; context matters. You’d expect a boss to act dominant in relation to their employees and the employees to act submissive to their boss, but seeing extreme dominant behaviour exhibited by a customer towards an employee isn’t as common. That’s something to keep an eye on.

**Comfortable/uncomfortable behaviour.** Most people are going to look relatively comfortable in most situations. Think about a bus or a subway ride — passengers generally appear pretty relaxed while they stare out the window or read a book. If someone looks uncomfortable, that’s an anomaly that warrants extra attention, but it doesn’t mean they’re necessarily a threat. They could be distressed because they’re late for work or maybe they just heard some bad news about a relative. Again, it’s just something to keep your eye on.

A common display of uncomfortable behaviour you’ll see from individuals up to no good is that they’re “checking their six.” This is when a person looks over their shoulder to see what’s behind them or generally scans their surroundings. People who are comfortable generally don’t do this because they don’t feel any threat. So if you see a guy looking over his shoulder a lot when he should be standing there aloof, that’s an anomaly that should get your attention.

Now obviously, “checking your six” is something that situationally aware good guys do too. If you’re doing it right, it shouldn’t be noticeable to others, but it takes practice, and some guy with his head on a swivel might still be green. But until you verify that through further observation, be suspicious. On the flipside, someone acting comfortable when everyone else is uncomfortable would be an anomaly. One of the ways law enforcement was able to identify the Boston Marathon bombers was that they noticed in surveillance footage that the men looked relatively calm while everyone else was running around in a panic. The reason they looked calm was because they knew the explosion was going to happen and thus weren’t surprised by it, while everyone else was caught off guard.

**Interested/uninterested behaviour.** Most people aren’t paying attention to their environment. They’re too caught up in their own thoughts or whatever it is they’re doing. So individuals who are showing interest in a particular person or object that most people wouldn’t be interested in is an anomaly that warrants further observation.

These three body language clusters establish baselines for every situation in which we find ourselves and allow us to direct our limited attention towards things that are potentially more important and/or dangerous. If a person’s behaviour across these clusters fits the baseline for that particular circumstance, you can pretty much ignore them. If their behaviour doesn’t fit the baseline, they’re an anomaly and you should observe them more closely.

#### **Other Behavioural Threat Indicators**

Besides the above three kinesic clusters, Profilers are taught to look out for a couple other behaviours that could apply to civilian situations as well:

**Shifty hands.** Military and law enforcement officers typically check the hands first on any person with which they’re engaging. This is for two reasons.

- First, “checking the hands of a person ensures that the person is not holding a weapon and is not preparing to strike,”
- Second, hands often telegraph hidden nefarious intentions. People who are concealing something they don’t want discovered, like a gun, knife, or stolen object, “will often touch or pat that area on the body where that object is concealed, as if to ensure the object has not been lost or is still hidden from view.”

**“Acting Natural.”** It’s difficult to “act natural” when you’re not completely focused on whatever it is you’re really supposed to be doing. People “acting natural” will appear distracted and over- or under-exaggerate their movements. Insurgents in Afghanistan will often try to act like farmers, when they’re in fact attempting to collect information on U.S. military patrols. Profilers are trained to look for these “farmers” who appear to be trying too hard.

### **Have a Plan of Action Based on What You Observe**

You visit your favourite coffee shop and a bad guy with a gun decides to drop in as well. But because you’ve followed the principles above, you’re the first to see him as a threat. Great. But what are you going to do about it? Seconds matter here. You don’t have time to formulate a well-thought-out plan. What’s more, the stress of the event will muddle your thinking and decision-making.

In addition to asking yourself the baseline and anomaly questions every time you enter an environment, ask yourself a third question: “What would I do if I saw an anomaly?” In other words, come up with an action plan.

So let’s go back to the coffee shop example. Let’s say the anomaly for which you want to create an action plan is “guy comes in with a gun.” The best course of action in this scenario depends on a few things. And knowing what those few things are requires you to be situationally aware. If the robber came in from the front door and you’re near the rear exit, your best action would be to book it out the back door right away. On the other hand, if he entered through the back exit near you, your best action would be to immediately close the gap between him and you and incapacitate him.

Establish baselines. Look for anomalies. Have a plan. That’s what situational awareness comes down to.

### **Situational Awareness as a Preventive Tactic**

Animals are creatures of opportunity. They’ll typically only attack another creature if they look vulnerable. Lions will go after younger, sicker, or older gazelles because they’re easier to catch. The same goes with humans. Criminals are typically going to go after a person who looks vulnerable, whether the victim is physically weaker or will simply be easy to catch off guard.

Practicing situational awareness goes a long way in keeping you from appearing like an easy target. When you’re out and about, look alert. Get your nose out of your smartphone. When you’re walking back to your car at night, have your keys at the ready and constantly scan your surroundings. The less vulnerable you look, the less likely someone is going to mess with you.

Here’s another tip on not looking like a victim, Always keep a tactical flashlight on you and bust it out at night-time. Having a light allows you to better observe in the darkness, but it can also act as a deterrent to would-be bad guys. Because law enforcement officers are usually the only ones shining flashlights down alleys and under cars, if you’re shining your light as you walk to your destination or back to your car, the bad guys are probably going to think you’re a cop and will likely just leave you alone. If worst comes to worst and you do end up getting jumped, you can use the tactical flashlight

as a defensive tool by blinding your would-be attacker with the bright beam or even hitting him with the bevelled edge that's often built into the handle.

### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

Situational awareness is a mindset that you have to purposefully cultivate. You want to get to the point that it's just something you do without having to think about it. To get to that point, you have to practice it regularly.

How many trees do you pass each day on your way to school or the park? How many street lights? Recognising and taking a mental note of the things around you will increase your situation awareness. When you pass someone in the street – ask yourself what clothes they were wearing and what colour? Then turn around and check.

Consciously remind yourself to look for entry/exit points whenever you enter a new building. Start observing people and establishing baselines and generating possible anomalies while you're at school, at the gym, or on a date. And then start coming up with action plans on what you would do in that specific situation if you see a possible threat. Don't be paranoid, just mindful. Do that day in and day out, and situational awareness won't be something you have to intentionally think about, just something you do naturally.