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What is an Active Shooter Event?

An active shooter event involves one or more persons engaged in killing or attempting to kill multiple people in an area occupied by multiple unrelated individuals.

Active shooter events continue to increase in their frequency. In some situations, it is clear that those who would conduct such a horrific act of violence against innocent unarmed victims seem to be learning from both the successes and the failures of their demented predecessors. We will attempt to identify the common traits of these murderers and what motivates them to one-day wake up and commit mass murder.

The Shooter

There is no set profile of an active shooter. They come from all walks of society. Their motivations for committing such acts range from retribution for a perceived injustice, to a full-blown acts of terror, to achieving a social or political goal. Regardless of their motivation to commit mass murder, their mindsets appear to be similar in most events:



- **Deliberate:** Most are deliberate in their actions. Although all wake up one morning and initiate their murderous rampage, most have been planning or fantasizing about the act for an extended period of time.
- **Focused:** Once the decision has been made, they are focused on the task at hand. Those who target a specific person or persons will move with great focus to murder their targets and anyone who may get in their way.
- **Detached:** In many shooters' minds, they consider their targets as subhuman. They have dehumanized their victims in their own minds in order to accomplish their murderous rampages.
- **Bully:** Although many who commit such acts claim to have been bullied themselves, once they take on the role of executioner, they become what they claim is the reason behind their actions.
- **Suicidal:** Over half of the shooters commit suicide. Some appear to have taken their own lives once they murdered the target of their rage; while others appear to take actions to self-terminate once confronted by an equal or superior force.

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The Location

The location of an active event varies from case to case; however, one thing is consistent: the number of victims as it relates to the shooter's motivation. A shooter who commits workplace violence usually targets a specific person or group of persons to target. While a person, who targets a large number of persons usually has a grievance against society as a whole.

Active Shooter Event Locations over the last decade:

- 40% in Businesses
- 29% in Schools
- 19% Outdoors
- 12% in Other Places

Three Stages of Disaster Response

Denial, Deliberation, The Decisive Moment

In her book on disaster survival, Amanda Ripley (2008) identifies the common response patterns of people in disaster situations. She argues that three phases of response are commonly seen. These are denial, deliberation and the decisive moment. Each of these stages is discussed below:

Denial

Contrary to the common perception of people panicking and stampeding during a disaster, Ripley found that it was more common for people to deny that a disaster was happening. The investigation completed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (2005) into the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in 9/11/2001 found that on average, people on the lower floors of World Trade Center I waited three minutes to start evacuation and those closer to the impact floors waited an average of five minutes before they started evacuating. The occupants often indicated that they spent this time speaking to others about what was happening and gathering belongings. Clearly, this delay could have led to many more deaths had the fires caused by the impact been more severe or spread more quickly.

When people did start to evacuate, they did not panic or stampede. (NIST, 2005; Ripley, 2008). They moved purposefully to the fire exits and left in an orderly fashion. This is despite the fact that they had heard an enormous explosion that shook the building and the presence of smoke and fire on many floors. Ripley attributes this to normalcy bias. That is, our brains tend to interpret information as if it is part of our everyday experience. Because of this, people tend to underestimate both the likelihood of a disaster and the possible effects of the disaster.

It takes time for the brain to process the novel information and recognize that the disaster is a threatening situation.

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Deliberation

At this point, people in a disaster have to decide what to do. IF the person does not have a preexisting plan, this creates a serious problem because the effects of life threatening stress on your bodily systems severely limit your ability to both perceive information and to make plans.

Making Decisions Under Duress: Stress increases heart rates. This can have adverse effects on our ability to make appropriate decisions in a life threatening situations.

Condition White (60 Beats per Minute) Normal resting heart rate. This condition usually occurs when you are in a comfortable and secure environment.

Condition Yellow (90 Beats per Minute) Fine motor skills begin to deteriorate. This condition occurs when your body is at a heightened state of alert.

Condition Red (120 Beats per Minute) Complex motor skills deteriorate - peak physical performance in gross motor. You are stronger, faster and will bleed less an attack is imminent or in progress.

Condition Grey (150 Beats per Minute) Cognitive processing deteriorates, tunnel vision, auditory exclusion, time dilation. The environment is becoming overwhelming

Condition Black (175 Beats per Minute) System overload, freezing, voiding of bowels and bladder.

Human Brain vs. Lizard Brain:

For this training, we will view the brain as having two basic operating systems. These systems are the Human Brain and the Lizard Brain. The Lizard Brain corresponds to the older more primitive brain structures (emotional brain) whereas the Human Brain corresponds to the more modern brain structures (rational brain). All animals have a lizard brain system. Humans have the most developed rational brain of any animal.

When information is received from one of these senses, it splits into two streams. One feeds into rational system and one into emotional system. One of the advantages of Lizard Brain is that it is fast. The drawback to this speed is that it is limited to a set of pre-programmed responses. It is effortless. There is no need to think when the Lizard Brain is controlling something. It just happens.

When we are conscious about what is occurring, we are using the Human Brain. The big advantage of this system is that it is flexible. The Human Brain allows us to learn, weigh options and develop plans. This comes at the cost of speed. When it comes to reaction time, the Human Brain is much slower than the Lizard Brain. It also takes effort to engage the Human Brain, and the Human Brain does not function well under stress. Our brain has a series of alarm systems that activate to prepare us to deal with the threat. A loud noise, for example, may activate our startle reflex (which might cause us to flinch). In cases where a loud noise is a threat, the startle reflex starts the process of getting us ready to act. As the series of alarms is activated, (heart rate, breathing, blood flow to large muscles), our body becomes focused on the threat. These changes make us faster, stronger and more focused. This process is largely in the Lizard Brain. As stress mounts, the ability to think rationally decreases. Given enough stress, everyone becomes stupid. This is our Human Brain shutting down and our Lizard Brain taking the lead. At high levels of stress, people can only do that which is pre-programmed into the Lizard Brain. For many people, these actions are limited to fighting, freezing or fleeing.

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You may also experience several common sensory side effects of high stress levels that many police officers report experiencing during deadly force encounters:

Tunnel Vision - your field of focus may narrow to only the most immediate threat and you may not see peripheral details.

Audio Exclusion - you may stop hearing what is happening.

Time Dilations - things may seem to move in slow motion.

Out of Body Experiences - you may feel as if you are outside of your body watching the event happen.

Reduced Motor Skills - you may experience reduced efficiency of your fine motor skills.

These are side effects of your stress response system preparing your body to deal with a threat. These Lizard brain responses to threats developed during a time when man's most likely threat was going to come from single source that needed to be dealt with physically and immediately. For example - a tiger jumps out of the bushes in front of an early human. The human needs to either fight it or flee. The threat environment faced by people today is often much more complicated. A person might face situations where they are confronted with multiple armed suspects and innocent victims.

While the Lizard Brain has its uses, it is clear that the Human Brain is needed in many of the dangerous situations that a person may face today. The following section tells how to keep the Human Brain functioning longer.

Use Willpower: In the case of a violent encounter, the Lizard Brain is setting off a variety of panic alarms. By exerting willpower, a person is trying to get the Human Brain to override these alarms. This can be done, but it takes conscious effort. Willpower is however, a limited resource. IT can prevent or delay some stress situations but eventually it will fail. Combat Breathing can help utilize willpower. Breathing through the nose for a three count, holding the breath for a two count, breathing out for a three count, and then pausing for a two count before beginning the next breath has been shown to lower people's heart rates dramatically for a short period of time and can help circumvent the Lizard Brain alarms.

Take Care of Yourself: Research shows that people who are more fit are also generally more able to cope with stress. This may be due, in part, to a fit person's regulatory system being better able to deal with the physiological swings caused by stress, and part may be due to willpower. Exercising requires the use of willpower. Improved diet and sleep habits can also reduce your basic stress level.

Act: Freezing is almost always the wrong response. It leads to a feeling of helplessness. When people feel helpless, their stress levels increase, which further hinders functioning. Taking action - any action - can help give a sense of control and help reduce stress response.

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When The Human Brain is Compromised

No matter how much willpower you have, how good shape you are in, or how much you have planned or prepared, you will run into situations where your Lizard Brain overwhelms your Human Brain at least for a short time. Prepare for this. Here are a few tips:

Shift the Emotion: When experiencing feelings of panic and fear, it is easier to shift the fear response to anger than it is to restore control. Don't get scared. Get mad at the offender!

Prepare Critical Skills to Function when the Human Brain is Not: Train a skill to the point where it is automatic. Once you master a skill, it becomes a Lizard Brain function and requires no Human Brain activity.

Observe, Orient, Decide and Act (The OODA Loop): You must first see (observe) what is happening. Next, you must position yourself to respond (orient). Follow orientation, you must determine a course of action (decide); and finally you must perform that act (act).

Use your Human Brain to Develop Scripts: Finally, you can use your Human Brain when you are NOT under stress to think about what you should do in a stressful situation. It is possible to think through likely scenarios and the appropriate responses to those scenarios to prepare action scripts. When under stress, you can then access these prepared plans. The plan you have thought through beforehand is also likely to be of better quality than one you come up with on the spot. One of the cool things about your Human Brain is that you can use it to program your Lizard Brain when you are not under stress. This will ensure that your Lizard Brain will do a better job when you are under stress.

The Decisive Moment

Once a decision has been made, act quickly and decisively. Failure to act quickly can result in you remaining in a position to be injured or killed during an active shooter event. It is important to know your surroundings when you find yourself in a dangerous situation. The faster we can get through the phases of Denial and Deliberation, the quicker we will reach the Decisive Moment and begin to take action that can save your life and the lives of those around you.

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When Police Arrive

Understanding and Preparing for Police Response

The active shooter call will bring a multi-agency response. Uniformed officers will normally be the first on the scene; however, this is not always true. Detectives and other plain clothed officers will hear the radio call and respond to the call as well. Most plain-clothed officers will wear something that will identify themselves as police officers but these are sometimes subtle. It is important to understand this when the guy that looks like a drug dealer (because he is an undercover detective) is giving you a command and holding a weapon. Look at the person's waistband or around his neck for a badge or identification.

It is important for you to know that law enforcement works off priorities during an active shooter call. Their first priority is to move in, bypassing wounded and confronting the shooter. Once the shooter has been stopped, they will then begin providing medical aid to those most seriously injured, and clearing the remainder of the building of any potential threats and injured victims.

It is also important to understand that these scenes will be chaotic. Try to understand the scene from the officers' points of view. They do not know whom you are and have been trained to treat everyone as "unknown" until they have positively identified you as no threat. Officers will also be experiencing high levels of stress and, just like the general public; some handle these situations better than others.

It is vital that you respond to the officers appropriately. Keep your hands visible at all times unless otherwise ordered. Follow all commands, regardless of whether you think their commands are reasonable or not. You should be prepared to be handcuffed or restrained in your movement. If you know of another threat inside the area, notify officers of the threat as soon as practical. You may be asked to do something against your internal policy. The officer's orders trump your company or school policies. Do what they say.

Medical Issues

In most circumstances, emergency medical service personnel will not enter the scene until it has been deemed safe by law enforcement. This means that law enforcement and others trapped inside the structure will have to be the initial medical providers for many of the victims. Gunshot wounds and other penetrating trauma causes bleeding, sometimes massive bleeding that must be quickly controlled. You may be asked by law enforcement to assist. If you are willing and capable of helping, let them know and then follow their instructions.

Preparing for the Aftermath

Understand that this will be a traumatic event. Expect that even if you escape the event unscathed physically, you will more than likely experience both mental and emotional trauma. Many survivors of active shooter events report having symptoms of shock, nightmares, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and survivor's guilt. It is important that companies, schools and communities have critical incident stress management plans to deal with these often unseen wounds that occur because of the event.

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Be “That Guy” In Your Community

Most of us strive to not be "That Guy." Normally the term has a negative connotation associated with it and is to be avoided at all cost. And trust me; none of us wants to see you as the traditional "That Guy." However, we encourage you to be That Guy when it comes to understanding civilian response to active shooter events - what to do until - and when law enforcement arrives.

We want you to be That Guy when people need someone to turn to for information about how to respond to active shooter events. We encourage you to read through this Avoid | Deny | Defend™ information and share it with your friends, family, neighbors and community.

We want you to be That Guy who shares this lifesaving, rational plan for Avoiding, Denying and Defending themselves when faced with an active shooter event. Remember that "hiding and wishing for it to be over" are never the most effective responses for survival.

What you do matters. Spread the word.