

## SELF-PROTECTION

Forearm strike to throat

# AWARENESS IN SELF-PROTECTION

**Gary Stringer** explains why 'awareness' is the most basic and important weapon in our self-defence armoury and explains how it can be taught and practiced.

If you were to ask any martial arts instructor what they considered to be the most important aspect of self-defence, I would wager the majority would say 'awareness' and they would be right to do so. Awareness is the most basic and important weapon in our self-defence armoury. Without a good level of awareness any physical skill set becomes essentially useless. But, what is 'awareness?' and how can it be taught and practiced? Can awareness even be taught?

There are different types of awareness, for example, 'self-awareness' involves being aware of different aspects of the self including traits, behaviours, and feelings. Essentially, it is a psychological state in which oneself becomes the focus of attention. Marketing firms use and develop 'brand awareness' in order to try to increase the market share of a particular product or range of products 'the



brand'. A good example of brand awareness at work might be the 'golden arches' of McDonald's there are very few children that don't recognise this famous branding. What I want to talk about in this article is 'situational awareness'.

Situational awareness is being aware of what is happening around you in terms of where you are, where you are supposed to be, and whether anyone or anything around you is a threat to your personal safety. Our own knowledge levels, past experiences and education all have a hand in determining how we understand what is going on around us. Because we are all individuals and so different from each other then it follows that each person's situational awareness will potentially differ from our own.

Our situational awareness is only as accurate as our own perception of what is happening. How we read a situation may be influenced by many factors including the type of information we have been given, our own experiences, distractions and our current mental state, whether we are angry or frightened for example. Many instructors will also talk about the 'it will never happen to me syndrome' in which people see little value in developing situational awareness as nothing bad will ever happen to them.

The problem any instructor faces is that this statement is true! Statistically nothing is likely to happen to them. For example, advice I always give is not to walk through unlit and isolated areas during the hours of darkness, however, many people will do so every day of their lives and never have a problem. Does this render my advice useless? No, it does not, and this is why. One time, maybe once in many thousands of incidents, three factors will combine to give rise to an attack.

Palm heel strike and face claw to eyes



These three factors are  
1. A criminal / attacker, 2. A target / victim and 3. A place / opportunity.  
These three factors are known as the Crime Triangle. The majority of criminals are opportunists so if we remove the opportunity by being aware then we essentially remove the threat.





# SELF-PROTECTION

So back to awareness then: I define situational awareness as my ability to take in information about those around me, my surroundings and myself; to process and interpret this information and then take appropriate action accordingly. A good tool for developing situational awareness is a system originally developed by a United States Marine Colonel – Jeff Cooper, originally intended for use by military personnel, Cooper's Colour Code has been a staple in Police training worldwide for many years and is easily adaptable for use by civilians as an aid to personal safety.

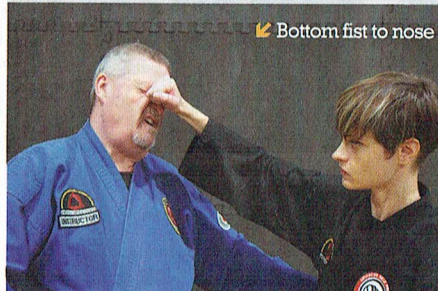
Cooper's Colour Code has several stages, each relating to a state of readiness or preparedness.

## Awareness of those around us

So how is this used in everyday life? Let's take an example of you being at a party where you know the majority of those present. You would be in condition yellow having assessed that no one in the room poses a potential threat to you. As the evening wears on a couple near you start to argue, quietly but they are arguing none the less and another male across the room has obviously had a little too much to drink and is becoming loud and aggressive, is it time to move to condition orange? You may move toward the exit or even decide it's time to leave altogether before things escalate.

## Awareness of our surroundings

Being aware of your surroundings is just as much about paying attention to what you don't see as much as what you do. It's about



Bottom fist to nose

comparing what is normal and recognising what is irregular. A topical example may be the following; you have been out to the January sales at the shopping mall. It's very busy with people wanting to grab a bargain. In one particular store you notice a backpack on the floor, partially hidden with no one near it. This strikes you as odd as you would expect someone to be close to the backpack. In today's heightened state of security you may have gone from condition yellow to orange maybe bordering on red. Do you report your finding? YES! Do you leave the area – definitely... it may simply that someone left their backpack, or something more sinister but your awareness has possibly saved you and others. At the worst you might have missed a bargain if you were wrong.

### White

In condition white, you are relaxed and unaware of what is going on around you. We usually enter this state when we are in a safe place such as at home or it can be induced through intoxication through alcohol or drug use.

### Yellow

Attentive but relaxed. Normal awareness state when out and about. Best way to keep threats remote, but also how we notice the nice things in life. If moving in a busy area you are able to avoid bumping into other people for example.

### Orange

Something has caught your attention. Your focus is directed at a potential threat. Ask yourself 'what would I do if the threat becomes concrete and imminent? Look for exits/escape routes and ideally avoid the situation/area altogether.

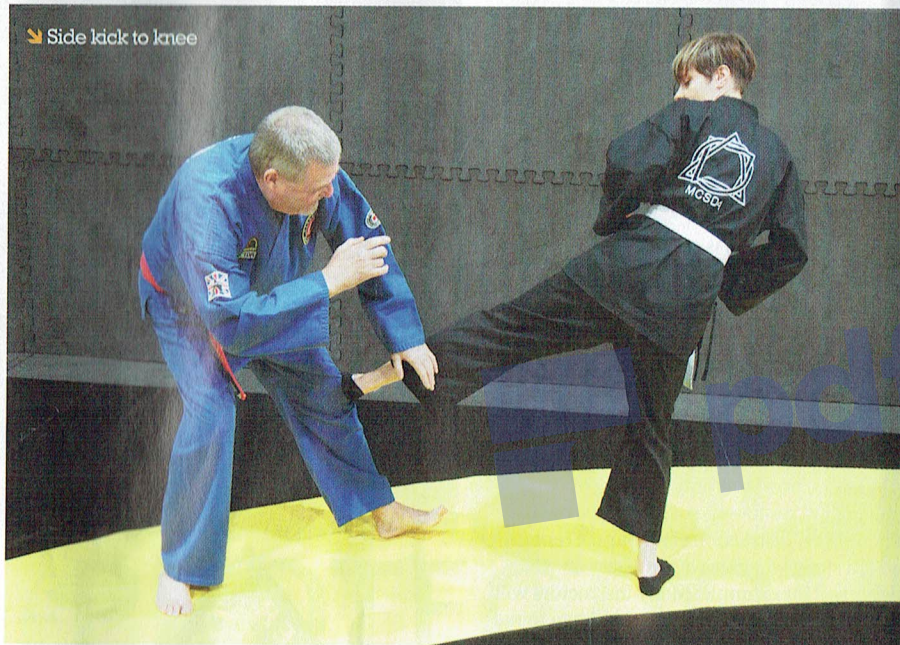
### Red

The threat is real! Immediate action is required, implement your decision whether to escape, fight or comply. Whatever your decision DO NOT HESITATE!

### Black

Total sensory overload causing the mind to shutdown resulting in blind panic. Taken completely by surprise, the adrenal rush is overwhelming and will trigger one of the three basic survival responses. FREEZE/FIGHT/FLEE

Side kick to knee



Another example of this type of awareness is a habit I have had for so long now that I cannot recall when I first started to do it, most likely very early on in my Police career when I was a uniformed constable. I never walk around a corner close to the wall or building but will always walk around giving the corner a wide berth so I can see what's around the other side sooner. This habit has saved me on more than one occasion.

Always look for exits and escape routes whenever you're out and about. Locate fire exits in any building you visit and always look for alternative routes out of an area, noting shop premises and other potential areas of safety.

## Awareness of yourself

There are often things that are picked up by our sub conscious mind that we don't always 'see' straight away if we see them at all. It's that nagging doubt about someone or something that doesn't appear right but we can't put our finger on exactly what the problem is. This is known by many names from 'gut feeling' to 'intuition' but whatever name you give to it when those internal alarm bells start to sound, do not try to silence them

with logic. Men quite often dismiss these 'feelings' unless they work in environments where their 'gut feeling' may save them or alert them to potential problems. I remember when I worked as a Door Supervisor before joining the Police, I soon developed a 'sixth sense' of when things were about to turn ugly in the club I was working in, this was also the case when I was a Police Officer, sometimes there was just that feeling in the air and we knew we would be in for a busy shift.

One piece of anecdotal evidence I hope helps to illustrate this point further is that whilst a detective I spoke to many women who had been assaulted. The one thing a great many of them always said was that they had felt things weren't right but they had ignored these 'feelings' as they didn't want to appear rude or upset someone. Instead of listening to that little voice and acting on it they had chose to ignore or suppress it and as a result had cause to regret it afterwards.

Sometimes awareness of one of these areas is enough to get you to take action, sometimes it could take more. One thing for certain is that the more you practice your situational awareness, the easier it becomes to notice

Beginner side kick from floor to shin



things that would normally have been missed. One should always try to practice situational awareness at all times, yes it's difficult and yes you may never experience a problem, however this may be down to the very fact that your situational awareness meant you avoided

any potential issue before it presented as a problem.

Awareness is really a combination of observation skills, mental and physical preparedness, and a willingness to take

responsibility for your own safety. Know who is around you, know where you are and know what you are going to do in the event of you having to act and do so without hesitation.

**Stay safe, everyone...**

## About the Author

**Gary Stringer** is an executive board member of the Kodo Butoku Renmei (Old Ways Martial Virtues Association). He is an international instructor for The World Street Combat Systems Organisation, a member of the World Association of Martial Arts Masters and of the World Sokeship Council - Seishinryoku Kai. Gary is the Lead Director/Chief Instructor at the Modern Combatives and Self Defence Academy [www.mcsda.co.uk](http://www.mcsda.co.uk) and a Fellow of the Institute for Martial Arts and Science.

