



Threat Assessment

Threat assessment is the process of identifying dangerous or predatory individuals. These skills are utilized by military, law enforcement and security professionals, but are also useful for normal civilians to maintain personal safety.

Establish a Baseline

The first step of the threat assessment process is to establish a baseline for what represents normal behavior in the area that you're observing. There can be multiple behaviors that fall within the baseline behavior of an area. The following factors should be considered when evaluating the individuals in a specific location:

Environmental Context - The overall location that you are observing. This information can include country, state, city, neighborhood, weather, date and time of day. More specific information can include the street address, and even the specific floor or room of a building.

Activities - The focus, intent and actions of people in the area. These can include physical acts or simply the presence of people in a specific location.

Emotional State - The overt display of how people feel this can be shown with facial expressions, body language and voice tone.

Personal Possessions - This factor denotes any items that are being held, carried or transferred. They can include bags, backpacks or other items. You can also note if individuals are not carrying anything.

Clothing - The type, style and amount of clothing that people are wearing in the environment. Clothing can be categorized as climate compatible, loose/tight fitting or following a predominant style for the area.

Movement Speed - The pace or rate that people are traveling through the environment. Movement speed can be categorized as stationary, slow, moderate or fast.

Situational Awareness - The extent that people in the area are aware of, evaluating, and reacting to the environment. Situational awareness can be assessed by observing the head movements of individuals in a 90°, 180° or 360° range of motion.

Compliance - The general cooperation of people regarding rules, laws or social norms. People may appear compliant or non-compliant.

Observe Deviations

Once you establish a baseline for an area, you will be able to observe deviations. Deviations are behaviors that do not follow the expected baseline behaviors for a specific location. Deviations are not necessarily indicative of wrongdoing or criminal activity.

Some deviations are explainable. For example, a police officer may present an elevated situational awareness, unique clothing and unique personal possessions compared to the baseline of an area. These deviations are explainable though due to the duties and objectives of the officer.

Person of Interest (POI) - Unexplainable deviations can denote a person of interest. This is an individual who, by their suspicious activity, lack of an explainable objective or display of threatening behavior warrants caution and/or further observation.

Note Threat Indicators

Some specific behaviors and deviations can be used to identify potentially threatening individuals. Multiple threat indicators are often presented by subjects that may be trying to hide their objectives. These indicators include the following categories behaviors:

Concealment - A subject concealing contraband or a weapon may have a bulge in their clothing at the location of the item. The weight of a concealed item may create a crease or fold in the clothing. A subject carrying a contraband may attempt concealment by wearing loose or bulky clothing, which may stand out from the established baseline.

Security Touch - Subjects that are carrying contraband items or weapons will often repeatedly touch the area where they are hiding the item. They will tap the area over their clothes or place their hands in their pockets to maintain control of the item.

Firearm concealment - When a subject is carrying a handgun in their waistband moves, they will often adjust their belt and the gun on it to account for any shift during movement. A subject attempting to conceal a gun may also repeatedly pick or pull at their shirt or to ensure it's covering the weapon. If a handgun is concealed in a pocket or under tight-fitting clothing, a silhouette of the weapon may be exposed.

Scanning - This behaviour is evident when a subject visually searches their environment for any sign of danger or law enforcement. They may appear to be in a state of hyper-vigilance. This often presents as a subject repeatedly looking 360° around them.

Stress Responses - People often exhibit involuntary reactions to stress when they anticipate a fight or flight situation. Stressed individuals may present rapid breathing, wide eyes, perspiration, shaking and/or involuntary tics. Some highly stressed individuals also exhibit target lock, which is characterized when a person is not able to stop looking at something or someone they consider greatly important.

Dissipation Actions - Physical movements that are one method for the human body to dissipate the chemicals and hormones produced under stress. These include touching one's face, scratching, fidgeting, yawning, rocking and pacing. These actions are often repeated subconsciously.

Preparatory Actions - Anticipation of a potential fight or flight situation include behaviors which may prepare an individual for action. Prior to reaching for a weapon, running towards a location, or striking someone in a specific area, a subject may quickly look at that spot seconds or milliseconds before the act. A subject may raise their hands at stomach or chest level to shorten the reaction time to defend, strike or draw a weapon. This can be combined with the individual blading their body into a sideways stance. A subject that is perceiving a threat or victim nearby may maintain an adversarial distance to provide the optimal range to attack from. Prior to taking action, a subject may adjust their clothing to allow for improved mobility and/or access to weapons. In the presence of a perceived threat, subjects may deliberately move away in an attempt to distance themselves from danger. They also may prepare to escape by orienting their body to face away from a perceived threat.

Dissociation - When a subject believes they are being observed by an authority figure, or a similar threat, they may try to become hidden in place and may exhibit specific behaviors in order to go unnoticed. These behaviors include avoiding eye contact, looking at a cell phone, starting a conversation with someone else, expressing submissive posture and attempting to blend in with a crowd.

Take Action

If you recognize suspicious activity, your personal safety needs to be a priority. If possible, establish a safe distance from the activity. You may then choose to continue observation and contact the relevant authorities. Always maintain general situational awareness and don't get tunnel vision on just one subject. Understand your own personal biases and try to make objective observations when evaluating people of interest. Confronting a suspicious individual should only be attempted by military, law enforcement and security professionals.