



Module 2



VirTra – Virtual Interactive Coursework Training Academy (V-VICTA®)

*ATAK:
ACTIVE THREAT / ACTIVE KILLER*

VirTra



MODULE 2: DECISION MAKING IN ACTIVE THREAT / ACTIVE KILLER

Module 2A: Columbine & Marjory Stoneman Douglas

COLUMBINE & MARJORY STONEMAN DOUGLAS



- The two high school shootings play a stark contrast with each other.
- LE responded to Columbine with methods that were trained and expected at the time.
- The results of the initial response led to drastic changes to the training and decision making behind an ATAK response.





- Many argued that the initial response to Stoneman Douglas HS (2018) was not consistent with training and principles that we hold today.
- Ultimately, the mitigation of loss of life hinges on **initial decision making** related to the event.



MODULE 2: DECISION MAKING IN ACTIVE THREAT / ACTIVE KILLER

Module 2B: Decision Making



This course is a foundation of **understanding decision making** and how that process can be compromised as well as how to **mitigate** those compromises.



MODULE 2: DECISION MAKING IN ACTIVE THREAT / ACTIVE KILLER

Module 2C: Skillsets vs. Equipment

“SOFTWARE”



- The ATAK program is overwhelmingly about the “software” needed to respond, not the hardware.
- It is easy to focus on the equipment when responding to any type of LE event.
- Items can be a false hope if it is believed the equipment is the solution.



“SOFTWARE”



- All the high-tech equipment in the world is useless without the skillset and the willingness to use it.
- The primary focus should be on the software of the officers, not hardware.
- Hardware can make a task easier but it cannot **do** the task.
- Not every agency has the access to the same hardware.





A skilled & well-equipped team can make a difference, but the focus should be on **skills first** and **items second**.

ITEMS TO ASSIST



Long gun (rifle/shotgun)

- Handguns are carried by LE not because of effectiveness, but for convenience. They are also more socially acceptable.
- Rifles provide major advantages, including in ATAK incidents.
 - Accuracy, capacity, penetration
- In locations that do not allow officers to use a patrol rifle, a shotgun with a rifled slug is an alternative.



ITEMS TO ASSIST



- Go bag
 - Water, extra ammo, marker, rope or cord, chem lights
- First-aid supplies
 - Tourniquet, gauze, occlusive dressings/chest seals
- Plate carried in quick connect configuration
- Ballistic rated helmet





MODULE 2: DECISION MAKING IN ACTIVE THREAT / ACTIVE KILLER

Module 2D: Parts of “Software”



“SOFTWARE” PARTS



1. Physical skills
2. Understanding of legal parameters
3. Decision-making abilities

PHYSICAL SKILLS



- The trained actions that are needed to effectively complete a task.
- We should strive to train these skills to a level of automaticity.
- Where training opportunities may not allow this, it should still be the goal.



TRAINED ACTIONS



- Weapon
 - Marksmanship
 - Handling
- Movement to and around thresholds
- Movement during entry

UNDERSTANDING OF LEGAL PARAMETERS



- These taxing and difficult situations still require that officers fully understand the framework that guides all uses of force.
- Use of force in these circumstances must align with:
 - Federal law – Graham v. Connor, Tennessee v. Garner
 - State law – varies from state to state
 - Departmental policy – Full comprehension of and the ability to apply these standards in training are critical to the outcome.



PRIORITY OF LIFE SCALE



- The priority of life scale¹ has been applied to the concept of active threats.
- It is not a catch all that applies to every LE situation
- Part of an acquired mindset that gives the officer the best chance to mitigate the risks to the majority of parties involved
- A rank order guide of who LE is to protect first.

¹ <http://www.lexipol.com/news/priority-life-building-better-model-perfs-first-guiding-principle/>



1. Hostages/Victims

- At the most immediate risk
- Are not free to leave



2. Innocent Civilians

- Also at risk
- Have the ability to flee the area



3. First responders

- EMS/Fire and police



4. Hostage taker/Assailant

- Their life is important as well
- An assailant that is shot will receive medical treatment when it is safe to do so

DECISION-MAKING ABILITIES



- Decision-making schemes include more than one method.
- In an ATAK situation it is possible that the officer will have to vacillate between the methods based on time demands.
- Some of the methods include:
 - Ecological rationality
 - Analytical decision making
 - Recognition primed decision making
 - Fast and frugal heuristics





- Ecological rationality supports that the process people use to make decisions are matched to the environments within which they make these decisions.²
- It is based on three basic decision making tenets.³
 1. The mind's decision strategies are adapted to particular environments
 2. In some environments, simple decision strategies are able to compete with complex ones. Less is sometimes more.
 3. Humans respond adaptively to task and environmental characteristics.

² Bennis, W.M., Pachur, T (2006) Fast and Frugal Heuristics in Sports, Psychology of Sport and Exercise. Vol 7, 611-629.

³ Mata, R. Et al. (2012) Ecological Rationality: A Framework for Understanding and Aiding the Aging Decision Maker. Frontiers in Neuroscience 6:19

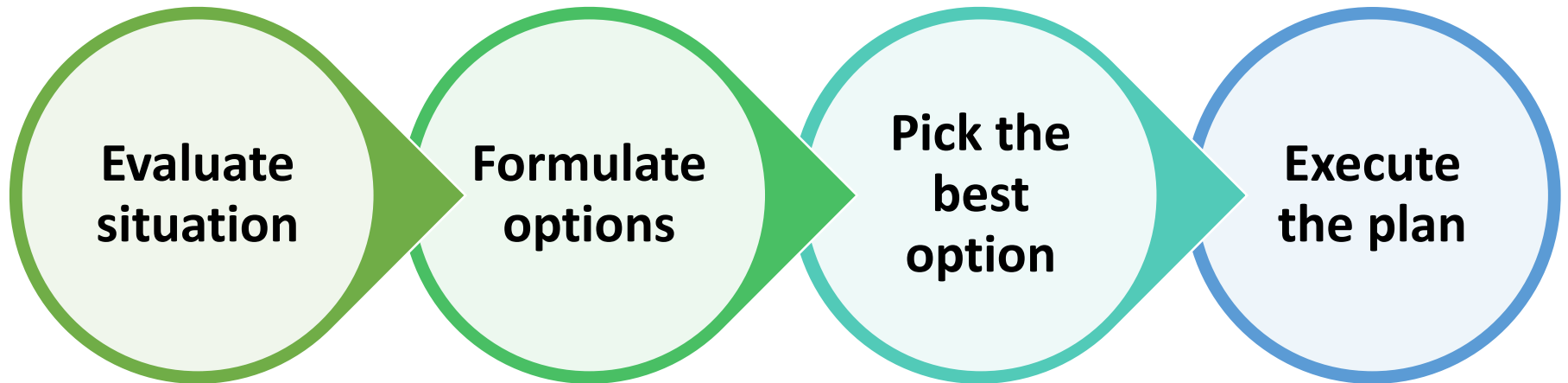


- This is why it is critical for ATAK events to consist of scenario-based training.
 - Can help establish schema that officers can draw from to help find solutions is critical to better outcomes.



- This method falls under events when we have discretionary time.
- Not often a luxury that LE has in an ATAK event.
- This criteria is often incorrectly used to judge an officer's action.
 - This was addressed by the SCOTUS in *Graham v. Connor* (1989).
 - Officers must make decisions under “tense, uncertain and rapidly evolving circumstances.”
 - SCOTUS guarded against judging an officer's actions with the luxury of “20/20 hindsight.”

ANALYTICAL DECISION MAKING STEPS

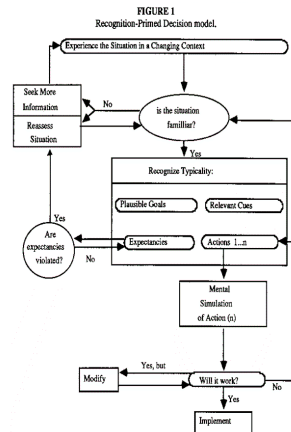


We want to create **additional discretionary time**, then use that time to make the **best decision**.

RECOGNITION PRIMED DECISION MAKING



- RPD occurs rapidly but is still applied when seconds count.
- The leading researcher of RPD is Dr. Gary Klein.
 - Klein worked with military, firefighters and LE, dealing with how they made decisions when faced with uncertainty and time compression.



RECOGNITION PRIMED DECISION MAKING



- Process

- Mental simulation
- Experience
- Training
- Action script → selection or rejection
- If rejection, then alter the script
- No comparison of alternatives
- Uses the first option that “satisfices”

Recognition-Primed Decision Model

Is an excellent decision making tool, when time is critical

Regular training in finding practical resolutions to a critical incident

Ensures good decisions can be made in times of pressure

RPD works well where a quick decision is essential, goals are poorly defined and information may be incomplete.

FAST & FRUGAL HEURISTICS



- Heuristics occur within fractions of seconds and allow people to make quick decisions even with time constraints, limited information and limited cognitive capacity.
- The gaze heuristic ability, which gives baseball players the ability to judge the trajectory of a ball while running, falls under the same capabilities.⁴

⁴ Bennis, W.M., Pachur, T (2006) Fast and Frugal Heuristics in Sports, Psychology of Sport and Exercise. Vol 7, 611-629.

FAST & FRUGAL HEURISTICS



- Exploit evolved human capacities – usually biologically evolved or based on individual learning.⁵
- Exploit structures of the environment.
- Made of a set of process rules
- Simple, but can be prone to fail

⁵ Rieskamp, J., Otto, P (2006) A Theory of how people learn to select strategies, Journal of Experimental Psychology/ 135, 207-236



MODULE 2: DECISION MAKING IN ACTIVE THREAT / ACTIVE KILLER

Module 2E: Challenges to Human Performance

MENTAL RESOLUTION



- A challenge to human performance is the mental resolution to solve the problem – the will and dedication to complete the task.
- The willingness to respond to an ATAK equals courage.
 - Courage is not the lack of fear, but the willingness to do what's right even when you are afraid.
 - “Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.” – Nelson Mandela





Active threats are inundated with goal-conflict.

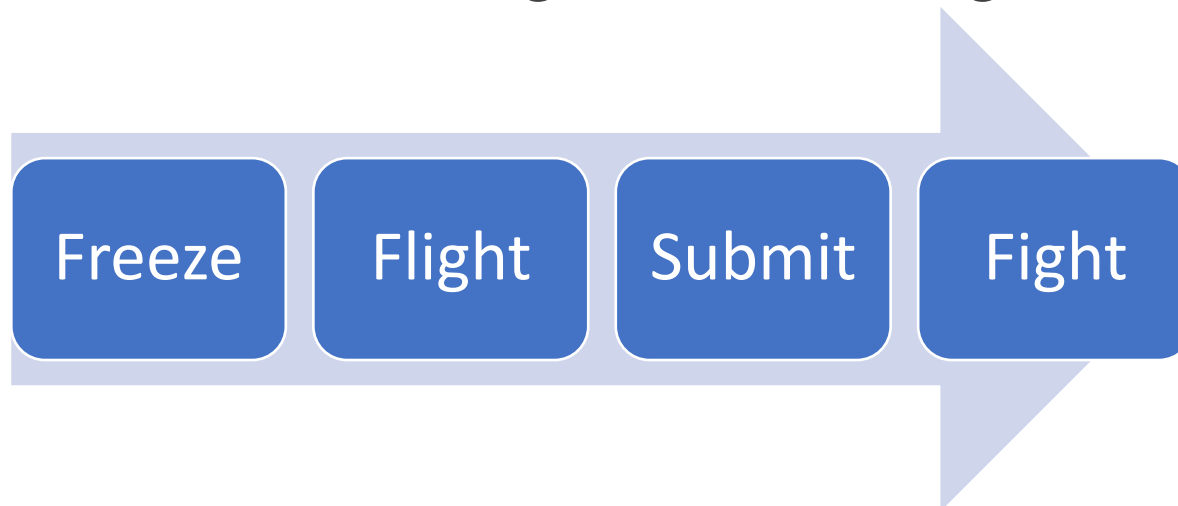
- Stopping to treat someone bleeding out is in conflict with driving to the threat and stopping it.
- It is the choice of the responding officers if we are going to lose little or lose big.
 - Delaying the response to an ATAK increases the chances of losing big.
 - Doing little or waiting until SWAT arrives means you will most likely lose big.



NATURAL RESPONSES



- As human beings, we respond to threats in specific ways established through evolution.
- This acute stress response is focused on the immediate, not the long term.
- If we do not have a pre-programmed response set up, we might engage in a specific pattern of response: Freeze, flight, submit, fight.





- Freezing is seen in the animal kingdom and has served to diminish a predator noticing prey because it has not moved.
- For us, it is a tactical pause that allows us to process options, process information or escape detection.
- It may only last fractions of seconds, or it can be longer depending on our training, context and mindset.
- Freeze is not a guaranteed response, the presence of a flinch disproves that we always freeze.

FLIGHT, SUBMIT, FIGHT



- Taking flight, submitting or fighting are potential responses engrained in our response from evolution, and appear in most animal species as well.
- Part of the drive behind the response taught to civilians: run, hide, fight.

ACTIVE SHOOTER RESPONSE
LEARN HOW TO SURVIVE A SHOOTING EVENT



FLIGHT



- A high survival response that allows us to remove ourselves from the environment where we are being exposed to danger.
- There is a powerful emotional drive to flee the threat.
- Other people fleeing an ATAK will be running **away** from the area they believe the threat is located.



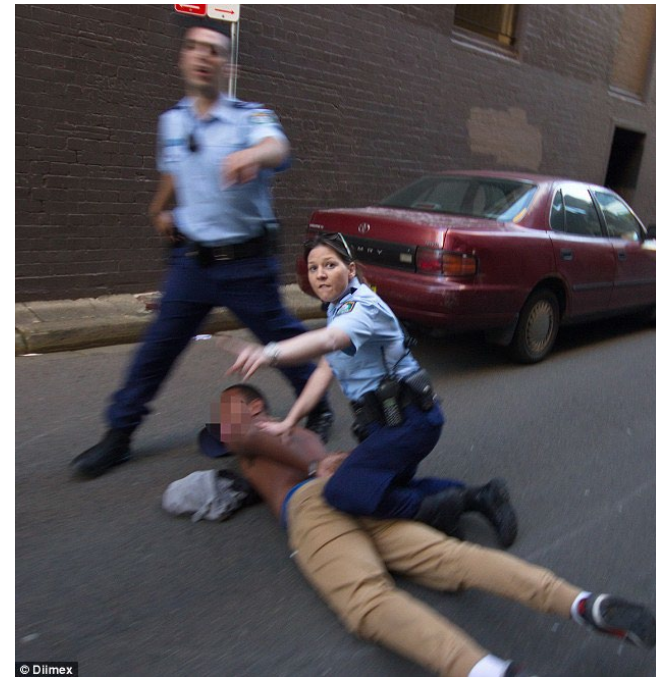


- A risky prospect that relies on the good will or awareness of the threat.
- Submitting and being non-threatening may lower the threat's evaluation of you as a risk...
- ...But it also leaves you defenseless and at their mercy for your fate.

FIGHT



- May not be the first response of most people, but it is often the right response for LE.
- We are more likely to engage early in this response if we are trained to respond.



INEFFECTUAL BEHAVIOR LOOPS



- These responses are usually seen as a repetitive action that is not effective or continues ever after the desired result was achieved.
- Many of us have seen officers engaged in repetitive verbal commands that are not effective or appropriate. Example – officer screaming “drop the knife!” over and over.

INEFFECTUAL BEHAVIOR LOOPS



- Acute stress response can cause high activation of the amygdala, creating factors leading to compromise of the prefrontal cortex.
- This can result in compromised error detection and regulation of inappropriate responses, and the ability to direct attention effectively.⁶
 - If you don't attend to it, you don't see it.
 - Inability to detect an error can lead to repetition of behavior patterns.



⁶ Arnsten, Amy. 2009. Stress signaling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function. Nat. Rev Neurosci 2009 10(6) 410-422



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Module 2F: Combating the Compromise to Decision Making



- Silo style training that focuses on individual tasks should not be the majority of training time.
- Integration of skills with real world pressures are needed
- Repetition paired with emotion has long term transfer effects.⁷

⁷ Kandel, Eric. (2007) "In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind". W.W. Norton & Company (1st edition)

I GOT THIS



- If you think you can or you can't...You are right.
- The detrimental effects of acute stress response are decreased if the actors believe they can control the stressor.
- Even if, in reality, they cannot control it, the negative effects of stress response are negated if they think they can.
- “I got this!” mindset. If we believe we have control, we can improve our performance and positively affect the events.

BLLT – BREATHE, LOOK, LISTEN, THINK

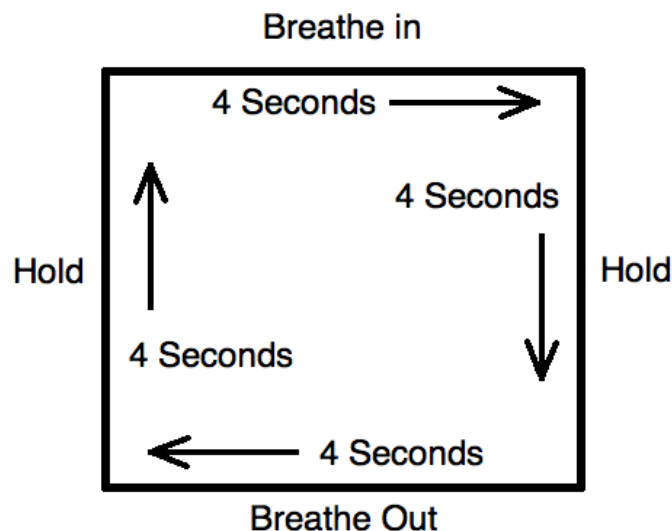


- There are two factors you have both conscious and subconscious control of: breathing and blinking.
- Controlled, deliberate breathing patterns can yield good results.
- It is often used in martial arts and yoga.

COMBAT BREATHING



- Combat breathing consists of a 3-4 count breath cycle and can bring your physiological response to stress under better control.
- Most notably pushed by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman.⁸



⁸ Grossman, Dave (2008) On Combat, The psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace. (3rd edition).

COMBAT BREATHING



- This breathing strategy is to be incorporated inside the use of SBT/SET
- Training is not what we say we do, it is what we **actually do**. Sitting in a classroom and practicing does not mean we will use it when we need it.
 - We can engrain it by incorporating it with actual skills under realistic settings.
- At a minimum, we want to pair the action of placing an implement in our hand with the use of this breath pattern.

THE CYCLIC SIGH



- Cyclic sighing involves practicing controlled breathing exercises that emphasize longer exhalations and a specific inhale/exhale ratio.
 - The exact ratio varies, but a common approach is to exhale for twice the duration of the inhale.
- A Stanford University study shows cyclic sighing can lower stress levels.¹⁰

¹⁰ Balban, M. Y., Neri, E., Kogon, M. M., Weed, L., Nouriani, B., Jo, B., Holl, G., Zeitzer, J. M., Spiegel, D., & Huberman, A. D.. (2023). Brief structured respiration practices enhance mood and reduce physiological arousal. *Cell Reports Medicine*, 4(1), 100895. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xcrm.2022.100895>

VISUAL SCAN PATTERNS



- The head and eyes should be scanning until critical information can be picked up.
- Scanning from the weapon sights violates basic firearm safety rules. It also narrows our perspective on the world.
- “Head on a swivel” – Scanning with your head and eyes is faster than trying to track sights.
- The gun cannot cover a location, your attention and intention should be behind its movement.



ONLY MOVE AS FAST AS YOU CAN SHOOT



- The effects of acute stress response may push officers to go faster than they should.
- A team member may try to set the pace faster than another officer can function.

ONLY MOVE AS FAST AS YOU CAN SHOOT



- If you are moving so quickly that it is effecting your ability to pick up detail, it is too fast.
- Motion impairs perception
- Do not move so fast that you cannot visually process the environment, or your ability to make good decisions will be compromised.
- Better decisions need the salient points of an event taken into account to be effective.



Decision making is critical to moving toward the best possible outcome in an ATAK event.

To improve decision making, we need to expose people to similar events to build schema and ensure they are using coping skills to mitigate compromises.



Lon Bartel

VirTra – Principle Researcher

email: lbartel@virtra.com | **office:** 480.968.1488 | **direct:** 623.512.9329
fax: 480.968.1448 | **web:** www.VirTra.com