

## MENTAL REHEARSAL IN COMBAT AND FIREARM TRAINING



Visualize victory and achieve it with mental rehearsal!

Recently, a reader of this column e-mailed me for any help I could provide in explaining the process of visualization specifically as it relates to training in combat situations. He stated that he is a former firefighter and that he recently suffered some physical injuries that ended his fire fighting career and left him unable to function in the manner in which he was previously accustomed to functioning. He stated that his injuries had severely limited his physical abilities and that he felt he was also suffering from a mental block in trying to help his body heal. He wanted help in “clearing the blockage” from his mind so he could “convince” himself to perform physically in order to heal his body.

As a psychologist, I know a few things about learning. Furthermore, this reader’s request struck a special chord a few days later after I saw the movie, “World Trade Center,” which tells the story of two NYC Port Authority police officers who survived being buried in the rubble, and who overcame grave, permanent injuries. So, I want to begin this installment by

stating some good news for those of us old geezers (and youngsters too!) who want to overcome bad habits that are not conducive to survival. You can teach an old dog new tricks—even an injured old dog! Permit me to explain how. The answer Grasshopper lies in how we use our mind.

### “I THINK, THEREFORE I AM”:

The French philosopher, Rene Descartes, made the famous statement, “I think, therefore I am.” By this he did not mean to imply that his existence was necessary; he was saying that *if he’s thinking*, then necessarily he exists—that his thinking both confirmed and *made possible* his continued existence.

We make thousands of decisions every day. Most of them are subconscious and don’t require deliberate decision making. However, if we are confronted by an emergency, our conscious mind has to stop thinking about tomorrow’s meal and shift to the matter at hand. We must do something. Dithering can mean dying. In such instances, clear thinking is conducive to survival and cloudy, unclear

thinking is not. To think clearly, we must dismiss negative unhelpful thoughts and focus on solving the problem. This is a learned skill, and as with most skills, it does not necessarily come naturally—it takes practice.

### THE MENTAL PROCESS INVOLVED IN EMERGENCY DECISIONS:

The “OODA Loop” is a model of survival decision-making that was produced by the late American fighter pilot, Colonel John Boyd. He was known as “Forty-Second Boyd” given his record number of kills in the skies over Korea. He earned his nickname from the fact that no opponent ever lasted more than forty seconds with him during air-to-air combat. Most didn’t even last ten seconds!

The “OODA Loop” dissects the mental process involved in emergency decisions. *Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act*. As pointed out by my good friend, noted firearm trainer and author, John Farnam, the most important of the four steps is the second:

“As we view the universe, we look at it through the veneer of the totality of our lives’ experiences. All our prejudices and biases, our knowledge and concerns, are continuously displayed on our ‘map’, and we judge everything we perceive according to it. However, the problem with all maps is that they’re obsolete the day they’re printed! Our personal ‘map’ must be continuously updated, but the universe contains so much information, our map can easily become obsolete. Boyd pointed out that any delay, any speed bump, in ‘spinning’ one’s OODA Loop will slow one’s response, perhaps fatally. The most common delay is when a conflict develops between what one observes and one’s expectations upon orienting the information. Thus, one of Boyd’s rules was: ‘Reality’ always trumps expectation! Reality is always ‘right’.”

When we *orient* to an emergent problem, “if we cling to outdated expectations and dear falsehoods,” even when stark reality begs to differ, we will begin to *dither* (Farnam, personal communication). In fact, by clinging to outdated expectations, we might not even notice and *observe* the problem in the first place!

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In a combative confrontation, we can then be outmaneuvered and defeated.

Farnam points out that “you can’t get to the ‘Decide’ stage [of the OODA Loop] until you break through the ‘Orient’ stage, which, as noted above, functions as a roadblock for the unsophisticated. When a marksman continually fails to hit the target, it is never the fault of the target!” Blaming the target or the gun equals taking on the role of a *victim*. The marksman must take responsibility and make the necessary adjustments to hit the target square. Similarly, when our expectations conflict with reality, the problem does not lie with reality! That too is being a victim. As Farnam says, “Taking responsibility means that it is our map which must be updated, and the middle of a fight is a poor time to do it!”

In a self-defense emergency it is always better to do something than to do nothing—that is, to “dither.” However, in order to be able to *act* as opposed to simply *reacting* (which is what the untrained and the clueless do), we must update our maps well in advance of a confrontation, and mentally rehearse successfully navigating through the terrain using our new map.

#### **POSITIVE MENTAL REHEARSAL:**

*Positive mental rehearsal* refers to playing something over and over in your mind in a way that serves to program a

desired response. It plays an important role in any type of skills training, for example, in athletics. Sports psychologists teach athletes how to do it. It is just as applicable to combat and firearm skills training.

Positive mental rehearsal involves visualizing or imagining yourself successfully carrying out desired behavioral responses in a specific context. It is to be distinguished from negative and self-defeating, or neurotic, mental rehearsal which is also known as obsessing about one’s limitations and negative outcomes.

It is in our best interest to employ positive mental rehearsal on a regular ongoing basis. It’s not like going to a training event once a year. Regular positive mental rehearsal is a proactive response. In the context of survival and personal defense programming, you can’t think of what to do at the moment of truth when Mongo and his big brother are bearing down on you. You won’t have time! You have to mentally and physically practice the appropriate survival responses way in advance, and then you will do the right thing.

#### **REPRESENTING OUR EXPERIENCES IN OUR MIND:**

Whenever we *mentally rehearse* a behavior, response, or skill, we use some combination of mental or cognitive systems for representing the *doing of it* in our mind: visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), kinesthetic (tactile feelings), olfactory



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(smell), and gustatory (taste). For example, people talk about *seeing* it happen or seeing themselves doing it, *hearing* themselves saying such and such, *feeling* courageous and strong like a lion, *smelling* the sweet smell of victory, and *tasting* success.

We each have our dominant sensory modalities for representing our experiences. You can discover what yours are by taking a moment to recall a recent positive, pleasant experience, or an experience in which you felt a sense of mastery and control. What types of sensory impressions come up for you? What do you see in your mind’s eye, hear in your mind’s ear, feel, smell or taste?

After you have explored this, take another moment to recall a recent negative, unpleasant experience, or an experience in which you felt a lack of control or mastery. What types of sensory impressions come up for you now? Some of us will find that we automatically employ different sensory representational modalities when we recall positive as opposed to negative past experiences.

Now, voluntarily recall a different positive experience and identify the types of sensory impressions that come up this time. Next, recall another negative past experience and see what comes up. Do you find that one recollection leads into, or triggers, another? Do you find that negatives trigger more negatives and positives bring up more positives? That’s usually the case.

The same type of *chaining* of mental experiences occurs when you imagine events that haven’t happened yet. Just try it and find out. You’ll probably discover that anticipating or imagining a negative experience breeds more negatives, while anticipating or imagining positives breeds more positives.

#### **LEARNED OPTIMISM:**

Some of us are blessed with the habit of being naturally optimistic and positive, while many of us are burdened with the habit of being pessimistic and negative. However, both of these response tendencies are *learned behaviors* to a large extent. For many of us old geezers, we are talking about years of conditioned response training! Fortunately, it does not take years to re-condition our behavioral and emotional responses! The good news is that pessimism and negativity can be unlearned and optimism can be learned through regular practice, and one way, Grasshopper, is simply to practice *mentally rehearsing* how we want to act and be in different situations.



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**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:**

The process of visualization as it relates to training for combat involves quieting your restless mind, visualizing a scenario, and then using your dominant sensory modalities to mentally rehearse your desired outcome.

**You need a model:** First you need a *role model* of appropriate action and attitude. You can choose a model from a book, an instructional DVD, a movie you've watched, or by thinking of a master combat or firearm instructor with whom you've trained.

**Quiet your restless mind:** In order to practice visualization and mental rehearsal, your mind has to be quiet. Our minds are naturally active and restless. So, we must learn to discipline our mind. We must practice interrupting unhelpful thoughts. Be your own inner drill instructor.

**Meditation:** When preparing to do mental rehearsal, *meditation* is a great way to relax your body and quiet your mind. It's like being in a movie theater—cell phones off and a blank screen on which to project your own personal movie. To meditate so that you can create a blank screen on which to project material for mental rehearsal:

1. Sit upright in a chair, feet flat on the floor, or sit on the floor in a yoga lotus posture.

2. Close your eyes and take five slow deep breaths, inhaling to a count of six through your nose, exhaling to a count of six through your mouth, and pausing after you exhale to a count of two.


3. Then, just breathe normally and pay attention to your more relaxed breathing without trying to change your breathing. Your breathing will change naturally all by itself. If your mind wanders, and it will, when you are aware of mind wandering, gently shift your attention back to your relaxed breathing.

**Formal Mental Rehearsal:**

4. When you are feeling quietly relaxed, imagine in your mind's eye a movie screen or video monitor. Now project a scenario onto it. It's best if you've written the scenario out beforehand so that it is specific. Remember, you can work on anything, for example: marksmanship practice; IDPA or IPSC competition; sparring with a partner; dealing with an attack or combative scenario, etc.


5. First, see your *role model* performing the desired behaviors.

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View the film in color with sound several times. You have the power to run the scenes frame by frame, to slow down the action, to put the film on pause, to rewind, fast-forward and repeat any scene.

6. Next, imagine yourself in the movie right behind your role model shadowing his or her every action. Feel yourself magnetically attached to your model so that you feel yourself automatically doing everything he does.

7. Next, imagine becoming your model. Imagine merging into his body. Experience yourself with all of your *dominant sensory modalities* performing the necessary actions perfectly, just as your role model does.

Practice the above steps several times a day. Over time with regular practice, doing this will become a habit that you will naturally associate with your everyday activities. Soon, you will be able to do it on the fly in seconds.

**Some additional pointers:** Take baby steps. Break down complex skills into their sequential component sub-skills. Mentally rehearse each sub-skill starting with the first in the sequence. Then go on to the next. When you can easily visualize yourself doing each sub-skill, put them all together and run through the entire sequence.

In my next installment of this column, I will cover: (1) coping with disabling physical injuries, (2) how to convince yourself to perform physically in order to help your body heal, and (3) clearing limiting mental blocks from your mind.

### BOOKS AND DVDS:

If you can not take a live workshop, books and DVDs provide an excellent medium for learning new skills. However,

once you've read a book chapter or watched a DVD, you will need to physically and mentally practice the skills in order to make them your own. You will need to re-read the book and re-watch the DVD to clarify the material and understand it more fully, in conjunction with physically and mentally rehearsing the skills set.

When you employ mental rehearsal, you want to make sure to mentally run through the skills sequence perfectly. Practice alone doesn't make perfect. Perfect mental and physical practice makes perfect! Yes, I know this is work, but who ever said mastering complex skills is easy or simple?

Noted firearm trainer, author, and Concealed Carry Magazine contributor, Gabriel Suarez of Suarez International has some excellent close quarter combat DVDs on the market that are very worth having and studying. These include: *Close-Range Gunfighting: Reality-Based Firearm Training for Realistic Situations*; *Big Folder Fighting Skills*; *Die Less Often: Introduction to the Interface of Gun, Knife and Empty Hands*; and *The Tactical Advantage*. They are available from Suarez International:

Phone: 928-776-4492.

[www.SuarezInternational.com](http://www.SuarezInternational.com)

[www.OneSourceTactical.com](http://www.OneSourceTactical.com)

Noted edged weapon combat instructor and knife manufacturer, Ernest Emerson of Emerson Knives and Emerson Combat Systems ([www.EmersonKnives.com](http://www.EmersonKnives.com)) has two excellent training DVD sets that I highly recommend: *Unconventional Edged Weapons Combat I-V* and *The Complete Combat Karambit*. Both of these Emerson DVD sets are available from Personal Defense Solutions (Phone: 215-938-7283. [www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net](http://www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net)).

You can also purchase some excellent firearm training books and psychology books at the Personal Defense Solutions Bookstore.

### WEB SITES:

Reading articles with pictures on your computer has a somewhat different psychological effect than does reading hard copy. For some, it provides a better launching pad for their imagination which, as we discussed, is the foundation for visual imagery and mental rehearsal. For databases of information on concealed carry, I recommend that you take a look at several excellent web sites.

**[www.USConcealedCarry.com](http://www.USConcealedCarry.com):** The USCCA/CCM web site posts numerous, richly illustrated articles on concealed carry techniques. There is a member's only forum and a section that provides state-by-state concealed carry handgun law reciprocity information.

**[www.HandgunLaw.us](http://www.HandgunLaw.us):** For the most detailed and most current source on the web of concealed carry law and state-by-state reciprocity information, I recommend that you check out [www.HandgunLaw.us](http://www.HandgunLaw.us). This information rich website is a continuously updated online encyclopedia and almanac on concealed carry law, concealed carry techniques, right to carry information, firearm news, concealed carry articles, and Second Amendment information.

Last but not least, all of my previous articles are posted on our website:

[www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net](http://www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net) 

Bruce N. Eimer, Ph.D. is a board certified, licensed, clinical and forensic psychologist, NRA Certified Firearms Instructor, NRA Life Member, Glock Certified Armorer, a Utah Dept. of Public Safety Concealed Firearms Instructor and an Author in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As the co-owner of Personal Defense Solutions, LLC, Bruce teaches concealed carry classes and NRA Basic Pistol and Personal Protection courses, as well as offering individual shooting instruction. He also teaches CCW classes that prepare people to apply for a Florida Non-Resident Concealed Carry Weapons Permit which is honored by 28 states. For more information, he can be reached by phone at 215-938-7283 (938-SAVE) and by e-mail at:

[Dr.Bruce@PersonalDefenseSolutions.net](mailto:Dr.Bruce@PersonalDefenseSolutions.net)

or [CCWInstructor@PersonalDefenseSolutions.net](mailto:CCWInstructor@PersonalDefenseSolutions.net)

For a schedule of upcoming classes, you can log on to the PDS web site:

[www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net](http://www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net)

Bruce is also the co-author, with Stephen Rementer of the Pennsylvania Lethal Weapons Institute, of the *Essential Guide to Handguns: Firearm Instruction for Personal Defense and Protection*, which is published by: Looseleaf Law Publications - [www.LooseLeafLaw.com](http://www.LooseLeafLaw.com) 800-647-5347