



STRESS MANAGEMENT AND SHOOTING SKILLS

Firearms handling and marksmanship skills need to be habituated in low-stress, slow-paced situations before engaging in stress inoculation training.

BY FRANCIS M. DUFFY | PHOTOS COURTESY OF SPARTANFTG.COM

I served with the U.S. Army Special Forces for much of my military career. One of the activities we participated in was jumping out of airplanes. In fact, I jumped out of the first plane I flew in. It was a Korean War-era C-119, affectionately known as a “flying boxcar.” I recall the jump commands (stand up, hook up, and so on). I recall shuffling to the door and being the first man in the door. I recall the green light turning on and the jumpmaster yelling “Go!” To this day, the next thing I remember is looking up at my chute to ensure it was fully deployed. My mind blacked-out as I jumped out the door of that plane. I do not remember leaving the plane. Stress, as a product of fear, can play terrible tricks on your mind and body. That was my first experience with stress inoculation and I never blacked-out again; although I never got over my fear of heights.

SOURCES OF STRESS

There are many sources of stress. Your reaction to stress caused by: time constraints, extreme fatigue, fear, pain, and performance

anxiety in competitive situations can create a “shit show” in human performance. The brain dumps a cocktail of hormones into the body. According to the document, “Step to Health”, “The most important stress hormones are cortisol, glucagon and prolactin. However, it’s cortisol that has the greatest impact”. Vision may narrow, fine motor skills may deteriorate, tunnel vision may be activated, and time distortion is sometimes experienced. One special operations soldier I know said that when he was in gun fights it was like being in the movie “The Matrix” where the characters moved in extreme slow motion. Blood is forced into the large muscles to prepare a person for fight or flight.

Responses to stress vary. Some run, some fight, and some freeze in place with a “deer in the headlight” look. According to *Enhancing Performance Under Stress* by Robson and Manacapilli, people who have engaged in training that induces stress during firearms training tend to perform better in the face of future stressors.

STRESS INOCULATION

The ultimate stress inoculation training goal for CCW holders may be to develop the capacity to function under stress as well as they function in non-stressful environments. The only way to come close to accomplishing this is by training under stress, and this is often referred to as stress inoculation. The more stress constructively induced in training, the less of an incapacitating response it will trigger in the body when facing a deadly force threat.

Mike Tyson famously said, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” It is unrealistic for people to believe they will rise to the occasion to defend themselves effectively. Even if people train regularly, if they do not engage in stress inoculation training they will likely “fall to the level of their training instead of rising to the level of their expectations” (attributed to Archilochus, 650 BCE).

The best foundation for facing a stressful situation, in my opinion, is to have a “hard-wired” set of “clean” firearms handling and marksmanship skills (correct skills performed correctly) that are kept up to date

on a regular basis. Firearms handling and marksmanship skills deteriorate quickly. If you are using incorrect or outdated skills or performing “clean” skills incorrectly you should first focus on improving your firearms handling and marksmanship skills before engaging in stress inoculation training. Firearms handling and marksmanship skills need to be habituated in low-stress, slow-paced situations before engaging in stress inoculation training. After you demonstrate consistent proficiency you can start beneficially introducing stressors into your training.

My son and business partner at Spartan Firearms Training Group uses a familiar analogy to help our customers understand “solutions in the moment.” He says, “Your brain is a computer processor. It’s like being connected to high speed internet in non-stressful environments; it can respond to problems almost instantly. In stressful situations, it’s like the brain is on dial-up waiting for a connection to find a solution to the problem. Stress inoculation and mastery of firearms handling and marksmanship fun-

damentals uploads the correct responses to your brain so that it functions as if it has a high-speed Internet connection. The solutions in the moment become the go-to default under stress.”

If the stress inoculation drills are overly complex or if the training environment is too stressful, you will experience difficulty trying to learn the skills. You may also experience frustration and lose confidence in your gun handling and marksmanship skills. Therefore, it is important to use stress inoculation training based on an evolutionary learning strategy; that is, the training activities should be designed to build upon each other while spiraling upward toward mastery. This design strategy is known as phased learning and is featured in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* article Training For Task Performance Under Stress by Keinan, Friedland, and Sarig-Noar.

DRILLS

1. “Box Breathing” Although “box” breathing is not a stress inoculation drill, learning to control your breathing is a pow-

erful way to calm yourself. Here’s how it works. Visualize a square. Starting at the bottom left corner take in a 4-second breath as you imagine moving to the top left corner of the “box.” Then, hold your breath for a 4-second count as you imagine moving to the top right corner. Next, exhale for a 4-second count as you move toward the bottom right corner. Finally, hold your breath for a 4-second count as you imagine moving toward the bottom left corner. Repeat.

2. Shot timer alone or with others on a flat range. We use shot-timers in our range training with one of our instructors actuating the timer. Other times we use the shot-timers while engaged in our personal training. These devices are easy to use. A shot timer may be activated by the sound of a gunshot. You press the “start” button to hear an audible tone. The device then records when the first shot breaks. You can also set a par time which allows you to draw and break a shot before time runs out. The par time can be adjusted to help increase shooting speed.





3. Competition. Shooting tends to increase perceived stress caused by the need for speed and accuracy, and to avoid failure in front of others. We run competitions at the end of our range days. Invariably, some people who were good shots during the day run off the rails when the competitions begin. Learning to manage time/accuracy stress is important, not just in competition, but also for self-defense.

4. Timed shooting drills with movement and with verbal instructor stresses. On our range training days, we set-up a course of fire for our intermediate and advanced students that includes metal targets (moving and stationary), hostage targets, and “shoot/no shoot” targets. One of our instructors initiates the student’s movement with a command. There are time and accuracy requirements. The student must move quickly through the course while our instructor is applying verbal pressure while following closely behind the student.

5. Malfunction drills. It is possible to create deliberate malfunctions using dummy rounds. An instructor can load a few of these along with live ammunition into several magazines. The magazines are handed to a student who will be running a course of fire for time and accuracy. The student does not know at what point the dummy rounds will be chambered. As the student moves through the course of fire the gun will malfunction and he or she will need to perform immediate action (tap, rack) and emergency reload drills to carry on.

You can also set-up malfunctions when training alone by loading your magazines with live ammunition and dummy rounds. As you engage your targets you will encoun-

requirements can also be introduced. Drills like the ones former special operations soldier Pat McNamara popularly uses are beneficial for shooters in top physical shape. I



ter failure to fire malfunctions to resolve. Physical activity (running, pushups, etc.) followed immediately by shooting drills. Students should only participate in these strenuous training drills if they are healthy enough to do so safely. The physical activity can be simple like running 50 yards to a table with firearms on it to engage targets set at 15-25 yards from the table. The student runs to the table, picks up a firearm, and shoots at a target. Speed and accuracy

have seen him climbing ropes and pulling a car, among other things, and then shooting for accuracy.

6. Jiu Jitsu (combatives) focusing on firearms retention drills. My son and I have both trained in the Relson Gracie style of Jiu Jitsu through Rising Tide Academy in Maryland (<http://www.realjiujitsu.com/>). Jiu Jitsu is an effective self-defense system. We experienced weapons retention training where a training partner works hard to take

away an inert blue training gun. My son and I also did firearms retention training with Chad LeBrun, a former MMA fighter and a firearms instructor at 3 Range Combatives (<http://www.3rangecombatives.com/staff>). Even though you are sparring with a person who is not trying to kill you, learning how to deal with the stress of a physical attack where you might be struck with a gloved fist or choked out is invaluable. This training is also beneficial for learning how to breathe under stress.

7. Immersive 300-Degree Simulator. Simulator training can provide you with stress-inducing scenarios. The simulator we use for our training classes is at the Guntry Club of Maryland (<https://www.guntry.com/services/simulator>). You walk into the simulator room. Large screens surround you. A simulator technician operates the simulator by displaying various scenarios on the screens including role players shooting at you. You return fire with Glock 19 handguns modified to use lasers. If you are

feeling adventurous you can wear a belt that will shock you every time you get shot.

8. Simunition training. In my opinion, Simunition training is the most realistic stress-inducing training. Simunition rounds look similar to real ammunition, but are intended to be non-lethal. They are intended to be used under the supervision of trained instructors. The students and role players serving as “bad guys” don protective gear. Their handguns or rifles are retrofitted to shoot Simunition. Strict safety protocols are necessary.

Simunition rounds hurt. I still bear a scar on my left bicep where I was hit by one during one of our annual firearms training events at the Blackwater Firearms Training center (now Constellis) in Moyock, North Carolina.

CONCLUSION

Stress is not an event or thing, it is your reaction to these things and your reactions can be improved with constructive training. Facing a deadly force threat can induce sig-

nificant stress. Stress can create dysfunction in the human body. You can manage your stress levels to enhance your performance.

Overestimating one’s firearms handling and marksmanship skills or underestimating the effects of stress can have deadly consequences. Train safely with us at Spartan Firearms Training Group or with other qualified instructors, but don’t overlook your vulnerabilities. If you can safely and consistently shoot accurately and efficiently, it is time to start working on your ability to do those things while practicing stress management skills. ✓

BIO

Francis Duffy, Ph. D, is a U.S. Army Special Forces veteran of the 6th and 5th Special Forces Groups, a graduate of the Army Ranger School, and a combat diver. Frank is also a certified executive protection specialist and is the co-founder and vice president of the Maryland-based Spartan Firearms Training Group (www.spartanftg.com).

