



Spartan Firearms Training Group, LLC

Mindset and Psychological Resilience for the Armed Citizen

By Francis M. Duffy, Ph.D.

Carrying a gun in public isn't just about exercising a legal right—it's about accepting a serious personal responsibility. When you choose to carry for self-defense, you're saying that, if pushed to the edge, you're prepared to use deadly force to protect yourself or others. That decision should never be taken lightly. More than marksmanship or tactics, the armed citizen must develop a mindset rooted in clarity, composure, and commitment. This essay explores what it means to build psychological resilience and the kind of mindset necessary to survive—legally, morally, and physically—in a self-defense situation.

The Weight of Responsibility

Anyone who carries a gun must face a hard truth: the moment you strap on that firearm, you accept responsibility for the outcome of every round you might fire. The courts will hold you accountable, and so will your own conscience. The foundation of this responsibility is mindset.

Mindset is not about acting tough or being paranoid. It's about clarity of purpose—knowing when to act, when not to, and understanding that avoidance is often more powerful than confrontation. Jeff Cooper, the Marine colonel who founded the modern technique of the handgun, said it plainly: "Owning a handgun doesn't make you armed any more than owning a guitar makes you a musician" (Cooper, 1989). To truly be "armed," one must train the mind as rigorously as the body.

What Is Mindset?

Mindset, in this context, is the mental framework that governs how you perceive threats, how you prepare for violence, and how you respond under pressure. Cooper identified three primary traits in the prepared defender: alertness, decisiveness, and aggressiveness—each moderated by restraint and judgment. These qualities aren't innate; they must be cultivated through experience, reflection, and training.

Mindset is built on accepting reality. Violence happens. Criminals exist. Law enforcement may not be there in time. But mindset is not built on fear—it's built on resolve. It's the quiet confidence that comes from preparedness and moral clarity.

Psychological Resilience: More Than Grit

Mindset and psychological resilience go hand in hand. Resilience is your ability to bounce back from adversity, to stay functional under extreme stress, and to make rational decisions when your body is flooding with adrenaline.

The human stress response—commonly known as “fight, flight, or freeze”—can wreak havoc on your motor skills, memory, and reasoning. Under the effects of adrenaline, tunnel vision narrows your field of view. Auditory exclusion muffles sound. Time may feel distorted. In this moment, the body is reacting faster than the brain can process.

Dr. Alexis Artwohl, in her landmark study *Deadly Force Encounters*, found that officers involved in gunfights often experienced time slowing down, memory loss, and an inability to hear gunshots (Artwohl & Christensen, 1997). These effects are not exclusive to police—they apply to armed citizens as well.

Resilience means being aware of this reality and learning how to function despite it.

Training for Stress

You cannot train for a real gunfight in a classroom or on a square range, but you can train for stress. Resilience grows in discomfort. Force-on-force scenarios with Simunition (non-lethal training rounds), decision-making under time pressure, and high-stress drills build the kind of psychological calluses you need.

The military has long known this. Programs like Lifeline Training's Mental Conditioning for Combat emphasize the role of cognitive rehearsal, stress inoculation, and performance under duress. Visualization exercises, breathing control, and scenario-based training help prepare the mind to make decisions quickly and correctly (Lifeline Training, 2013).

Combat mindset trainer Lt. Col. Dave Grossman echoes this in *On Combat*: "You do not rise to the occasion; you sink to the level of your training. That's why we train and prepare so hard" (Grossman & Christensen, 2004). His point is clear—under stress, the brain defaults to what it knows best. If you've only practiced slow fire at seven yards on a paper target, that's what your body will revert to.

The Role of Moral Clarity

Resilience also requires moral clarity. You must know what you are—and are not—willing to kill for. The law is one boundary, but your own ethics are another. If you've never wrestled with the reality of taking a life, you're not ready to carry a gun.

Self-defense is not about vengeance or ego. It's about stopping a deadly threat. That's it. Anything more—and you're likely crossing legal or moral lines. This clarity helps reduce hesitation in the moment, but also helps with recovery afterward.

Post-incident trauma is real. Even justified shootings often leave psychological scars. Flashbacks, guilt, social isolation—these are not weaknesses; they're human reactions. But a person who has considered the implications beforehand, and who has moral clarity about their actions, is more likely to weather the storm afterward.

The Importance of Informed Situational Awareness

Basic situational awareness is inadequate because there is too much to pay attention to and not enough time. You need informed situational awareness (Left of Bang) whereby you pay attention to specific indicators of danger. Informed situational awareness is a pillar of the armed citizen's mindset. Simply put, it's the ability to see what's coming before it happens. It's not hypervigilance or paranoia—it's paying attention.

Cooper described this with his "Color Code" system:

- White: Unaware and unprepared

- Yellow: Relaxed alert—aware of your environment
- Orange: Specific alert—something is not right
- Red: Decision point—action may be required

Living in Condition Yellow means you're scanning your environment, noting exits, reading body language, and identifying potential threats—all without anxiety. The person who sees the threat first often wins without firing a shot.

Ego and the Dangerous Man

Ego kills. If you carry a gun to feel powerful, to impress others, or to settle scores, you are a liability. Armed citizens must be humble and restrained. They must walk away from insults. They must let others cut in line, steal parking spots, and mouth off without consequence. You are carrying the power of life and death—act like it.

Men, in particular, are vulnerable to the idea of being the “protector” or the “alpha.” But carrying a gun doesn't mean you're hunting evil. Most days, it means staying quiet and going home. If you're looking for a fight, you'll find it—and you'll lose, even if you win.

Emotional Regulation and Combat Breathing

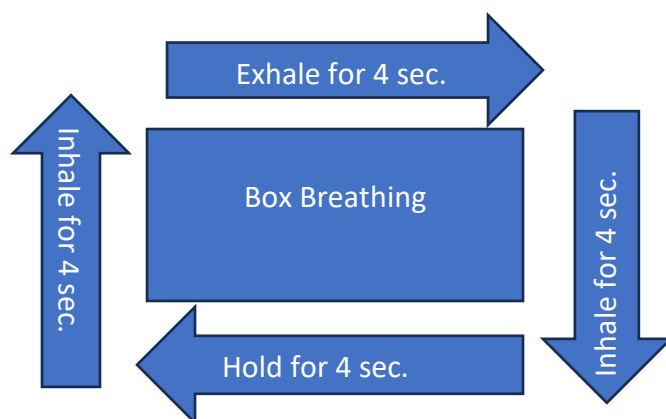
When adrenaline surges before or after a deadly force encounter, you need to be able to stay functional. That is challenging because you can't think clearly when your heart is racing, your vision is narrowing, and your hands are shaking. That's the reality of the body's acute stress response. If you ever have to draw your weapon—whether or not you fire it—you will likely experience a surge of adrenaline that can impair your judgment, fine motor skills, and perception of time.

One of the simplest and most effective tools for regaining control in that moment is **combat breathing**, also called **tactical breathing**. If you find cover, you can use this technique to regain some control over your emotions. It has been used for decades by military personnel, law enforcement officers, elite athletes, and emergency responders to manage anxiety, reduce the physical effects of stress, and maintain mental clarity under pressure.

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, in *On Combat*, describes this breathing method as a way to “control your physiology with conscious, deliberate action” (Grossman & Christensen,

2004). It's a method of self-regulation that shifts your nervous system from fight-or-flight mode into a more balanced state where you can think and act deliberately.

The basic method is often called **box breathing**, due to its equal-length phases:



This rhythmic, intentional breathing slows your heart rate, increases oxygen flow to the brain, and helps pull your attention away from spiraling thoughts or panic. When practiced regularly, it becomes a reliable tool you can fall back on in moments of crisis—whether it's the lead-up to a confrontation, a high-stakes decision, or the shaky aftermath of a defensive incident.

Grossman emphasizes that learning to manage your fear doesn't mean eliminating it—it means *controlling* it. "Fear is a natural and even useful emotion," he writes. "But left unmanaged, it can hijack your ability to think." (Grossman & Christensen, 2004)

As part of a well-rounded training regimen, you should integrate combat breathing into live-fire drills, decision-making exercises, and even everyday situations that cause tension—traffic jams, work stress, arguments. The more you practice under calm conditions, the more likely you are to remember and apply the technique under pressure.

However, you must know that if you need to respond to a threat immediately, you will not have time to use combat breathing. This is where you will fall to the level of your training rather than rise to the level of your expectations.

Post-Incident Psychological Recovery

What happens after a defensive shooting is often worse than the incident itself. Legal proceedings, media scrutiny, sleepless nights, social stigma—it can destroy you if you're not ready.

Having a support system is critical. That includes family, legal counsel, mental health professionals, and ideally, a network of fellow armed citizens or instructors who understand what you've been through.

Do not underestimate the need for professional counseling. Even the toughest people need help processing trauma. If you believe in being prepared, this preparation must include psychological self-care.

Final Thoughts

Carrying a gun in public is not about power. It's about protection. It's about responsibility. It's about doing the hard mental work now so that if the day ever comes when you have to draw your firearm, you'll do so with clarity, discipline, and moral conviction.

Mindset and psychological resilience are not fixed traits. They are cultivated, shaped, and reinforced over time through training, reflection, and experience. They are the difference between someone who simply has a gun and someone who knows when and how—and whether—to use it.

References

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About the Author

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He is a certified instructor for the NRA (rifle and handgun instructor), the Maryland State Police, and the United States Concealed Carry Association (USCCA). He is also a certified instructor in concealed carry in the District of Columbia.

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About the Spartan Firearms Training Group

The Spartan Firearms Training Group, LLC (www.spartanftg.com) is a Special Forces Veteran-Owned business formed in 2015. At the end of March 2024, we entered into our 10th year of business, and we have trained thousands of Maryland residents in a variety of ways:

- Concealed carry training
- Handgun Qualification License (HQL) training
- Emergency Casualty Care training
- Long-distance precision shooting training
- Private, 1-on-1 firearms training
- Private group training

Our training calendar can be found at the [SFTG Calendar](#).

YOU WILL FALL TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR TRAINING, NOT RISE TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR EXPECTATIONS WHEN FACING A LIFE-THREATENING EVENT. TRAIN THE WAY YOU FIGHT!