

Security is a state of mind and body

«Oxygen masks will automatically drop from the ceiling in front of you in case there is a loss of cabin pressure...» If you are working in the humanitarian or development cooperation sector you certainly know most of the in-flight mantras by heart. And you remember that you should put on your own mask before helping somebody else. And don't forget to breathe!

Unless you are a pilot, you probably drive in a car more often than you fly. Now, if you are behind the steering wheel, do you instruct passengers behind you to wear their seatbelts? Do you wear it yourself when you are seated at the rear? And do you know where the nearest emergency exit is, not in an airplane, but in the last hotel you have checked in?

Check and rehearse

And here comes the killer question: after you have deposited your suitcase in the room, do you usually and consciously check whether it is equipped with a smoke detector, the location of the nearest fire extinguisher and the emergency staircase? Be honest: do you do this even if nobody tells you to do so?

If you want to keep yourself safe, being aware of the threats that lurk around you is a good start. The next step consists in visualizing clearly what you would actually do in case the threat materializes. And if you are really serious about it then you should go for the third step: rehearse.

Well, I do not exactly recommend here that you actually practice inflating your life vest and opening the door while the aircraft is still on the tarmac. Breathe and don't forget that in a plane you will still receive instructions by experienced people about what to do and when to do it. But let us come back when you are the captain and you are just on your own.

Did you know that speeding was not the main cause of traffic accidents? No, the main cause of traffic accidents is sudden braking. But why then would you have to break suddenly? Because you did not anticipate enough! Sudden gestures, and these are the ones that make you twist an ankle or bump into a tree, only happen when you have to react fast. And this usually happens because you did not see something coming.

Awareness and anticipation

Safety and security can be summed up in these two words: awareness and anticipation. Life insurances, helmets, airbags, spare keys, scans of important documents and contact lists, etc... can also be counted as anticipation, or foresight if you prefer that word. They all contribute to limiting the damage and making the recovery faster and easier should you run into trouble.

Anticipation, or preparing yourself against all kinds of dangers, such as computer viruses, malaria mosquitoes, potholes, slippery stairs, pickpockets, drunken drivers and drugged soldiers is relatively easy. Most threats in this class are predictable. They can be warded off with a few precautionary measures that are at reach for any cool and rational brain.

Dear reader, are you getting impatient because in all this security talk we still haven't spoken about cross fire, car jacking, kidnapping and suicide bombers? Well there is a simple reason for that: statistically speaking, there are many more people falling down, injured in traffic accidents, caught in fires and infected by diseases than there are victims of the latter «serious» threats that make headlines in the newspapers.

This is also why basic security training should start with the basics, and not necessarily with a simulation of a hostage taking. Coming back to the notion of rehearsing, how long should a hostage taking simulation last until you somehow learn how to «manage» it? Five minutes? Three days? Six months?

Simulations are useful to develop the second important element of security, which is awareness. But what is exactly awareness? Maybe it is easier to say what it is not: unawareness is not paying attention to your surroundings. For example, when you are jogging on the street with loud music playing in your ears. Or when you keep your nose down in your smart phone in a crowded bus. If you are unaware or absentminded, how will you be able to notice a pickpocket, or even just an elderly person looking for a seat, which again is much more frequent?

Entertainment and meditation

Do we need to be entertained all the time? Well, if you are relaxing in a quiet and stable place there is certainly nothing wrong with having your mind onto something else. But if you are moving in a dangerous environment, being unaware acts like a magnet for attracting disasters.

Awareness means being present, awake and alert. You probably forgot that you were breathing while reading this article. Relax! Noticing that you are breathing is a good way to start increasing your awareness but soon you can turn your attention to something else, like your surroundings. Where are you now? What do you see in front of you and on your sides? Do you smell anything? Do you hear any noise? Can you feel what is behind your body now? Do you feel safe now?

A Tibetan Buddhist monk once told us at a conference that meditation, which is another word for practicing awareness, was not popular with Westerners, especially young people, because it was just the opposite of entertainment. «Meditation is boring» he said with a big smile. Well, once you start practicing awareness and attention, you will discover that it is anything but boring. And you will start noticing so many things you never paid attention to before: sounds, colours, textures, a different quality of space and time, and much more.

Being aware of your body and of your own emotional state are also the first steps to managing your own stress. Now feel your shoulders, relax, and don't forget to breathe before reading the next question: Did you know that poor relations with your colleagues, especially with your superiors, the absence of positive feedback and an inadequate workload distribution in a team constitute greater causes of cumulative stress than working in an environment with curfews, military check-points and the sound of gunfire?¹

Getting enough sleep, watching your diet, your alcohol consumption, exercising and laughing (which amounts to breathing out with more energy) are other easy measures to adopt if you want to stay healthy and fit, especially in a dangerous environment. As Louis Pasteur, the French pioneer of microbiology who invented a vaccine against rabies supposedly said: «Le microbe n'est rien. C'est le terrain qui est tout.» (The microbe is nothing. What matters is the terrain (the condition of our body).

If you can combine a healthy body with a state of heightened alertness, you will become like a gazelle in the savannah: you will feel the leopard approaching and start moving before it is too late. You will start sensing whether walking in that dark street or entering that dingy little bar in the middle of the night is safe or not. Some of the threats will of course still be there, but if your attention is intact you will smell them before they get close.

¹ Based upon statistics about stress factors carried out by the Health Unit of the ICRC

Now I will have to shut down my computer, stow away the tray table and put my seat back in an upright position as we are about to land. Isn't it nice to have a friendly voice instructing you how to make sure you stay safe?

In our cinfo Managing Security and Stress training course you will learn how to keep your feet firmly on the ground. You may not earn any travel miles but you are entitled to a reduced fare if your organisation is a member of the cinfo network. Besides, breathing consciously, fully and deeply to feel how much you can be and stay alive is offered to passengers in all our classes, whether you booked first, business or economy.

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