

Surviving an Active Shooter

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An active shooter is an armed person who has used deadly physical force on other persons and continues to do so while having unrestricted access to additional victims. Active shooters often look for soft targets like malls, churches or schools due to their low presence of security and high access to potential victims. The active shootings at Columbine High School, Omaha Mall, Virginia Tech, and Fort Hood left a trail of victims because the shooters were far more prepared than those who suffered in those ordeals. Financial or emotional stressors, forced separation from a lover or a job, bullying or an overly aggressive manager or insensitive instructor may create the flashpoint which triggers workplace or school violence.

Locally, teen shootings are on the rise. While teen shootings haven't gotten much national media coverage, children are nonetheless being left as brutally victimized as those at Columbine. The increase in teen shootings also impacts innocent party goers. The low presence of security and easy access to potential victims make party scenes perfect soft targets. Does your child know what to do to increase the ability to survive an active shooter's mayhem?



Active shooters generally have a singular focus- cause as much carnage as possible. Shooters range in profile from misguided teenagers to members of highly trained terrorist groups. They often seek to block exits to increase the number of casualties and impede law enforcement's response. For personal protection, make a habit of identifying multiple exits upon entering a building, arena, stadium or other structure. Think about exits that may not be seen by the general public. Restaurants typically have an exit door in the kitchen which leads to the outside. During an active shooter situation, be alert that any exit may have been booby trapped by the shooter. Quick, accurate assessment of conditions is critical to surviving.

In an active shooter situation your choices are fight, flight or freeze. First try and assess sounds and their source. Freezing is not a realistic option; you become an easy target. Before deciding to fight, first consider fleeing. A tactical escape beats a tactical encounter every time. Remember the three E's – Evacuate, Evade or Engage. Only consider engaging the threat if imminent danger exists. If you decide to engage, fight like your life depends on it because it does!

Fleeing

Take Cover. Cover has ballistic stopping capabilities (brick walls, engine blocks, library books stacked back to back). If left without cover, move to concealment (hedges, clothes rack, and drywall). While concealment can't stop a bullet it can hide you from view. Exit the kill zone immediately. Move, don't huddle. Huddling makes you a bigger target and the shooter won't have to move the gun muzzle very far to target his next victim. Look to leap frog away from the shooter using cover as you retreat.

If the shooter has blocked the traditional exits, consider alternate escape routes. State fire codes and deliver requirements often require malls to have secondary exits; they're often in the back of a store.

These exits generally lead outside or to a fire escape corridor. If exit doors are locked intentionally by the perpetrator or for another reason, consider loading dock doors or lower level windows as an escape route (lower may mean the second floor).



If pinned down try to wait for a lull in the firefight, possibly when the shooter reloads or gets distracted. Call 911 and get help on the way. Give police as much detail as possible. From the initial onslaught you will be on your own, as the police will not be in a position to respond immediately. Don't rely solely on mall security, rarely are they trained to deal with threats of this level. After the initial shock and awe shooters often move to the clearing stages, hunting for additional victims. If you are unfamiliar with the layout of the location look for information such as mall directory maps or evacuation maps to identify exits. Many malls have directory maps located at intersections or inside of stores, often behind cash registers. A video camera can be a triple threat. The zoom feature can act like a set of binoculars; the low light setting can serve as night vision; the view finder and lens can work like a periscope to look around corners.

Barricading

If inside of an office building, school, library or similar facility consider barricading in an office as you take cover. Use filing cabinets, desks, bookshelves or credenzas to barricade an office door if it opens inward. Once filing cabinets are in place consider filling them with large books such as manuals. This will increase the ballistic stopping capabilities and a heavy filing cabinet will be problematic for a perpetrator to move. Placing a door stop backwards underneath the door provides additional security. If there isn't a door stop, consider folding a magazine or newspaper and placing it underneath the door. If the perpetrator breaches the door consider scissors to stab or vases, or wall plaques as impact weapons. Try to stay on the hinge side of the door as the perpetrator tries to breach the door. This will force him to lead with a body part or weapon which can be attacked, and potentially hide you from view.

Choosing to Fight

Don't go looking for an active shooter. Try to find cover and look to set an ambush. Stay quiet and be attuned to environmental sounds. You must be prepared to attack the perpetrator. This is a deadly force situation so be prepared to cause severe injury and possibly death to the shooter. If you are not a concealed carry holder, consider utilizing improvised weapons. A coat wrapped around your arm can serve as a shield to defend against an edged weapon attack. Attack the shooter's vitals (eyes, nose, throat, head, groin or solar plexus). A backpack, briefcase or suitcase stuffed with phone books can serve as a small arms impromptu bullet proof vest. Most retailers or offices have scissors and box cutters which can be used in your defense. The center pole from a clothes rack, stiletto or wedge heel, and leg from a desk or chair can serve as an impact weapon. A belt can serve as a flexible weapon to strike (belt buckle) or to strangle. If trapped with multiple people, work together to improve chances for surviving. Your goal is to get the shooter on the ground and neutralized.

If the shooter breaches the door you will only have seconds to mount countermeasures. Typically, when a person breaches a door he will look straight ahead first. Those who are in direct line or across from the shooter should move away from the team members who are positioned next to the door, to distract the shooter. Team members who are positioned on the side of the doors or at an ambush area should attack the shooter. One person forces the perpetrator's weapon down and to the side. Another person attacks the shooter's lower body, typically behind the knee taking him to the ground. Do whatever necessary to neutralize the attacker. Other team members should secure something to bound and gag the shooter while awaiting law enforcement. The most well trained person should secure the weapon and be prepared to help defend others. Move others into a position of cover away from the initial line of fire and prepare to defend. Do not leave a secure barricade with a firearm; you don't want law enforcement to confuse a victim with the active shooters.

Changing Paradigm

Prior to Columbine the traditional law enforcement response model was to attempt to cordon off the area and await SWAT. In most cases this allowed an active shooter to continue engaging innocent victims and caused more death and pandemonium inside the cordoned area. Police departments are moving to a more aggressive response, in which police immediately pursue, establish contact with and seek to neutralize the shooter. It is now recognized that the sooner the shooter is contained, captured or neutralized, the fewer the casualties.

Moving toward the sound of gunfire is a strategy only for highly trained individuals, not the average citizen. If your family is pinned down, try and help them escape and evade until police arrive. Consider texting to give directions while maintaining cell phone silence.

Interacting with First Responders

The first response team is typically a small unit of officers. They may be in uniform or plain clothes but will generally be identifiable as law enforcement either by uniform, badge or tactical vest. Do not run toward the officers, but listen for their commands. Keep your hands in plain view. Expect to be treated like a suspect until the officers assess the situation. Don't expect first responders to render first aid; their initial concern is neutralizing the threat.

After an incident seek counseling for yourself and family to help effectively process and overcome trauma associated with the event.