

The Color of Safety: *Awareness Color Codes and Self Reliance*

By Gert Grohmann



The Color Codes of Awareness.

Too many people move through life unaware of the world around them. They are so caught up in their own thoughts of work, paying bills, texting, talking on the phone and other issues, that they never really understand their immediate environment and therefore do not recognize potential threats to their safety. By not paying attention to their surroundings they place their safety at risk every day.

One of the benefits of living in civilization is that it provides a fairly safe and benign environment. You can be careless, inattentive, and oblivious in your day-to-day life and somehow avoid harm's way for years, until one day you run out of luck and get hurt. Perhaps your mind wanders as you start to make a left turn in traffic and get hit broadside by another car. Or you are arguing while slicing tomatoes and cut your finger badly. It only takes a moment of inattention to create a serious situation.

The same principle applies even more to spending time in the backcountry. You can be careless, inattentive, and oblivious but eventually, Mother Nature or Mr. Murphy will catch up with you. It is amazing how easily you can get lost, injure yourself, or get caught when the weather turns nasty.

You can reclaim a large measure of control over your fate through learning to observe your environment, constantly evaluating what is happening, and reacting appropriately based on this

information.

One tool that is taught under many different names is the color codes of awareness. This tool was initially used by the military back in WW II and Korea and later adapted by Col. Jeff Cooper, as well as other self defense instructors, to the civilian and law enforcement world. The color code system assists you in evaluating your state of mind and puts a color to it. This allows you to do a mental check on where your awareness is on a graduated scale and evaluate your readiness to respond to a potential threat.

The concepts behind the color codes translate well to back country activities as well as your daily life. Many people freeze when confronted with a traumatic situation because they never see it coming and they are surprised and overloaded to the point of paralysis at the instant that it happens. One reason that most emergency response personnel do not freeze is that they are responding to a situation that

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Which color code is appropriate for this situation?

they already expect and understand is bad. Another is that they have already initiated a plan of action in their heads that they will execute on their arrival.

The original military system utilized 5 colors: white, yellow, orange, red, and black. The original 5-color code was developed prior to, or early in, WWII. Col. Jeff Cooper refined it down to 4-colors in the 1950s, combining red and black. Ray Chapman went back to the 5-color code subsequently, as did John Farnam and Massad Ayoob. The 5-color version is as follows:

- **White:** You have total lack of awareness
- **Yellow:** You are at a relaxed level of alertness
- **Orange:** Your radar is up, you sense something is out of place
- **Red:** You are actively confirming that there is indeed a threat
- **Black:** You are taking immediate action based on the confirmed threat.

Why are the colors important? Simply stated, the earlier that you detect a threat to your safety, more effective your response can be.

White is where most of the world spends its time. At this level you are unaware and not watching for trouble. People in white are the ones that walk into doors and don't notice other people as they approach. They take wrong turns because they were driving on autopilot and walk off of bluffs because they didn't look around.

How many times have you been driving somewhere and after you arrive you don't remember how you got there? The next time it happens to you, understand that you were operating in white when that happened.

But you say that you can't be "on" all of the time? When is it acceptable to be in condition white? When you are at home with the doors locked, the alarm system on, and you are relaxing with your





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dog at your feet (most dogs are in condition yellow all of the time). Now you can turn your mind off because you have plenty of early warning systems in place. If you leave your home you should be in condition yellow.

Yellow is a relaxed state of general alertness. You are not looking for anything or anyone in particular; you simply have your head up and eyes open. You are alert and aware of your surroundings. You are difficult to surprise; you identify problems before they require your immediate attention. You don't anticipate a date with Mr. Murphy today but, if he shows up, the odds are that you will see him before he sees you.

In yellow, you might notice that your hiking partner is starting to slow their pace; you might notice that the geography isn't matching the map that you are following. Once you sense a possible problem you move to condition orange.

Orange means that something seems out of place. Not enough for you to immediately change your actions, but enough that you are paying

attention to the feeling. Your awareness is heightened and more focused. Your partner is starting to develop a limp. When checking your map, that ridge up ahead shouldn't be there.

How do you know if something is a threat? You need to look at the totality of the situation. Use all of your senses, look around for clues, listen, feel the change in temperature on your skin. Smell odors that don't belong.

When shifting to orange, you are paying more attention to a potential threat, but without losing sight of the potential that there may be other threats in your immediate area. You cannot afford to suffer from tunnel vision at this point. Continue to take in your surroundings, but pay extra attention to the item that is making you feel uncomfortable.

Here is where you start to plan your when/then scenarios. "When this happens, then this will be my reaction." You have not confirmed a threat at this point, but you should be formulating a plan based on the totality of your situation. Start determining what your assets are and what your



liabilities are. With even a simple plan already in place, you are miles ahead of where you were in yellow. If you believe the situation is an actual threat, you then escalate to Condition red.

Red means you are confirming the threat and readying your body to respond. You have verified that your instincts were correct and that there is an actual threat. You are not engaged in an active response, but you are mentally preparing to do so. Many times, even though you are in condition red you will not have to do anything because the perceived threat doesn't pan out. In those cases you just de-escalate to orange or yellow. The key is that you are mentally prepared with a plan of action and are ready to implement that plan if you need to escalate to black.

At this level, you are also determining a "trigger" that will immediately force you into action at the appropriate time. This is how you achieve the decisiveness necessary to survive. By setting your trigger, you can physically and mentally react quickly enough to deal with the problem before it deals with you. The reason that many people fail to react to a bad situation is that they never have a hard and fast triggering event, so when a situation arises, they don't react until it is too late. Most people are in denial that a situation is getting bad to the point that their safety is at risk.

If you are caught in condition white, you may never become aware of a threatening situation until after disaster strikes. Under the very best of circumstances, you will need six to ten seconds just to realize something is happening, and then you still have to get your wits about you and respond. The reality is you simply do not have that amount of time in many situations. By disciplined use of the yellow, orange, and red stages of awareness, your reaction times can be reduced from tens of seconds to nearly instantaneous.

The final Condition is black. At this point, one or more of your mental triggers has been tripped

and there should be no hesitation on implementing your plan of action. You are actively engaged in dealing with the threat.

If/then vs. When/then thinking

In order to assist with your transition between the color codes, begin to live your life thinking not about if/then scenarios, but when/then scenarios. People that fail to react to bad situations tend to think in terms of if, not when. "If that person drops over in front of me then I will do this." The individuals that react effectively will look at the situation differently. They assume that the bad thing WILL happen and they determine how they will react based on an element of certainty.

Always remember, it is best to see a bad situation developing and avoid it. Awareness of your environment comprises the majority of situational awareness. Trust and pay attention to your instincts and confirm any potential threat they perceive. If you cannot avoid the situation, then mentally prepare, have a plan, and do not hesitate: execute with full confidence and purpose once the threat has manifested itself.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the more aware you are, the more trouble you will avoid. As with any other principle or skill, the more you practice and rehearse the better you will react when the wolf is at the door. Practice using the Color Codes and if/when thinking daily, integrate them into your life and into your daily activities and hopefully you can avoid a trip to your local emergency room.



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