

Lesson 1: Understanding Normalcy Bias

Host: Welcome to the first segment in our school safety and security audio series focusing on The Threat Within. Today Vaughn Baker from Strategos is helping us understand what Normalcy Bias is and how it affects a person's decision-making process during a crisis or a threat. Vaughn, what is normalcy bias?

Vaughn Baker: Well, normalcy bias is a phenomenon not too many people know about, but it's something we should all learn about, because it happens in every active shooter event and every active threat event. And normalcy bias, if we just want to put it in a layperson's perspective, you and I are biased to the normal that takes place each and every day.

Well, when the crisis begins, we're so biased to the normal, we have a difficult time accepting the abnormal, because we're not used to crisis occurring. Because we have a difficult time accepting the abnormal, we can't accept the crisis. We know there's no way you're going to effectively respond to a crisis you don't accept. We call that overcoming "the big D," and that word is denial.

Host: How have we seen normalcy bias play out in real situations?

Vaughn Baker: When we talk about normalcy bias, I can give you numerous examples...every single active threat event, if you look at Las Vegas massacre. People were used to the normal occurrence, and when the abnormal occurred and the shots were beginning to be fired, many people thought the sound system was malfunctioning. They couldn't accept the crisis.

If you look at a church in Dallas, Texas where an active threat event occurred, the attacker came into the foyer, victimized two people sitting on a bench, killed them. A male staff member down the hallway saw the first two homicides occur, and he said, "Lady, step out of the way. This guy's coming this way. He must be part of the skit."

Not only do we not accept the crisis, we actually rationalize the crisis away. We come up with substitute explanations for what's really happening. Unfortunately, that's a very irrational way to think, but it's a very natural way to think, absent training. We have to teach people what normalcy bias is, and if we just talk about it, just for a little bit, it's very easy to overcome.

By the way, it doesn't just happen in active threat events. It happens in all types of crisis. If you look at the videos from the Indian Ocean tsunami, many people were killed standing on the beach, watching the wave come in and they never moved. Because they couldn't accept the crisis. That's another example.

Host: Wow, it's hard to believe that people just stood there watching the waves in denial, instead of responding to imminent danger. So, how do we overcome normalcy bias?

Vaughn Baker: Well, normalcy bias, first thing we need to understand is that it is just an instinctual, very natural reaction. There's many instinctual reactions that we have when facing crisis. Unfortunately, many of those things that are instinctual in nature are not the correct response. So, people think your instincts are the highest level of performance. They're not. We train to overcome our instincts, not to reinforce them.

Just learning about normalcy bias and understanding it's a real phenomenon will allow us to overcome it. We may be caught up just for a moment in normalcy bias, but then we realize, "Oh, yeah. He said to overcome 'the big D,' and overcome that denial. I need to do A, B, and C because I have been trained, and I know I have to do these A, B, C, D, E, F, G tasks, that have to get done in a compressed timeframe."

Once we illustrate to them that it happens in every single incident, it becomes very easy for people to overcome.

Host: How do we train ourselves to recognize the threat?

Vaughn Baker: Well, what is training? I would submit to you right now, we're training, because you're learning about what's happening. We're doing mental scenarios on what could happen. Just the fact that you and I are talking about this right now is going to help you overcome normalcy bias. It's going to be different. If you're like me, you're a slower learner. But, it's going to be different for different people. But, just talking about it, understanding that it is a true psychological phenomenon that occurs in crisis will allow us to overcome it.

Host: Thanks, Vaughn. This is a fascinating topic. In our next segment we'll build upon what we learned here. Vaughn will talk about the difference training makes in responding to a threat. And you'll hear more about normalcy bias as Vaughn talks about the five stages of the untrained person vs the four stages of the trained person.

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