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Face the Fear: Lessons From Newtown

CrossFit subject-matter experts George Ryan and Tony Blauer explain how fear-management and positive action are the keys to any crisis situation.

By Hilary Achauer

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Courtesy of Tony Blauer

Combatives expert Tony Blauer teaches fear-management strategies and believes preparation is key to success in any stressful situation.

A feeling of helplessness tormented most Americans in the wake of the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn. In the face of so much horror and injustice, some argued for more gun control, while others called for a heavier gun presence in our schools. Many brought up the need for better mental-health services.

Our country has been locked in debate on these issues for years. Change, if it comes at all, will be slow and incremental. While we wait, is there anything that can be done to make our children safer? Can the average person defend him or herself against a determined killer with gun?

When Nidal Hasan opened fire on the Fort Hood military base in 2009, he killed 13 people and wounded 29, many of them members of Lumberjack CrossFit. Military personnel attempted to stop Hasan but were shot and killed in the process. How can we expect our teachers to do better?

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Courtesy of Tony Blauer

Schools don't need to get this realistic with their scenario-based training, but Blauer says they should have a plan of action.

There are no easy answers, but there are some strategies that can help.

CrossFit works with two experts who teach civilians, military personnel and law-enforcement officers how to deal with attacks. Tony Blauer, the self-defense expert who runs the CrossFit Defense course, has spent his career teaching fear management and personal-defense readiness through his company, Blauer Tactical Systems. George Ryan, a full-time SWAT officer and creator of the CrossFit Striking Trainer Course, has been teaching law-enforcement officers around the country about proper responses to active-shooter incidents since 1999.

Both Blauer and Ryan think there are things we can do. And they say the CrossFit mindset is an important piece of the puzzle.

Start With a Plan

Blauer said the first time he saw the workout Cindy written down, he thought it was a joke. It was before Blauer did CrossFit himself, and when he saw the workout was 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups and 15 air squats for 20 minutes, he said, "Are you guys kidding me? You're having trouble doing this?"

It wasn't until he started CrossFit and repeated those seemingly simple movements at high intensity for 20 minutes that he understood what it felt like.

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It's the same with any kind of disaster or survival situation. Teachers and students know what to do in the event of a fire because they practice three times a year. In the midst of the panic and confusion, the brain latches onto the plan and relaxes.

"Statistics show that no children have died in a fire at a school in over 50 years," Ryan said. "This proves that school fire-safety measures—including the right equipment, training and drills—are working. Prevention and preparation have made a tremendous difference in the case of fires. These key principles can be applied to school shootings as well."

Ryan feels that teachers and school administrators should participate in scenario-based training that replicates an active-shooter scenario.

"They should involve local law enforcement and use role players. Afterwards, everyone who participates in the training should conduct an honest and thorough debrief to see where they can improve. Such training needs to be ongoing, as it will help develop proper conditioned responses to an actual active-shooter event," Ryan said.

What about the concern that preparing for such an awful occurrence would upset the children?

"As for drilling the children, schools have long since found a way to put children through fire, lock-down and natural-disaster drills without causing the children fear and worry," Ryan said. "The children simply learn do 'this' when your teacher says 'this' or when you hear 'this kind of bell.'"

In most cases, there is very little time to react. Everything happens quickly, and if the teachers and students know exactly what to do, they will be able to execute the plan without discussion.

"Doing nothing ensures that the worst will happen," Blauer said.

"You can have all the skills in the world, but most people don't shoot well in an ambush," Blauer said. He believes the reason the military suffered so many casualties at Fort Hood is that they were taken completely by surprise. Blauer said this is a lesson that even people in the military need to learn.



Courtesy of Greg Amundson

George Ryan (right) believes schools can use scenario-based training to prepare staff for gun-related incidents just as they prepare for fires or earthquakes.

"Just because someone is wearing a uniform, it doesn't mean they are ready for this type of attack," Blauer said.

The element of surprise is a huge factor, he said. The shooter in Fort Hood opened fire in a soldier-readiness processing center. Not one person expected that, and the surprise took them all off guard.

"Why was Mike Tyson able to bite Evander Holyfield's ear two times?" Blauer asked. "Because of the element of surprise. Holyfield was expecting a punch, not a bite."

He added: "The first assault is on the emotional system."

In his seminars, Blauer teaches people to use the body's natural startle-and-flinch response and adrenaline rush to create action.

Survival Mindset

If we are able to train teachers and school administrators to keep cool heads and turn fear in to action, what should their response be if a gunman enters a school?

Ryan says that school employees must be willing to call 911 even if something just doesn't look right. Then, if shooting is taking place, he says the teachers and children should run in the opposite direction of the deadly activity if it's possible.

"After making a quick assessment, the teacher should give the children concise, easily followed instructions such as, 'Run past the office and then to the crosswalk.' It is best if teachers have pre-planned options and instructions for such a response," Ryan said.

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and follow that plan.**

However, if the deadly activity is close to the classroom, teachers need to lock and barricade the door. The children must then be instructed to move away from the entry point, stay low to the ground and keep quiet. If there is time, they should draw the blinds and call 911.

Blauer agrees. He says that teachers and children should be taught to run away from the threat if they can.



Courtesy of Tony Blauer

The key is a plan of action, whether that means running away, hiding or playing dead.

"You, me and Rich Froning, we can all sprint out the door equally as fast," Blauer said.

The key is to act quickly.

"The cavalry will rush in," Blauer said. "The question is when? You have to make sure the fear loop doesn't get you."

Freezing and being unsure of what to do or where to go can cost valuable seconds. If schools have a plan, then teachers and children can spring into action and follow that plan.

"You need to act," Blauer said, but action does not necessarily mean playing the hero.

"Maybe the solution is to play dead," Blauer said. "You have to combine instincts and intuition. It's not about charging the threat. However, if he does come in the door, you have to be ready. The survival mindset must precede the survival skill set."

Ryan and Blauer agree that if a worst-case scenario occurs and a gunman does gain entry into a classroom occupied by children, the plan needs to be to take action.



E.M. Burton

Blauer advises that teachers and administrators spend time at a shooting range to give them an idea of the sound and speed of gunshots.

"The form of action will be completely dependent upon the circumstances, the physical space and the ages of the children," Ryan said.

For instance, he said teachers and children can throw anything and everything within their reach at the gunman, including staplers, chairs and coffee mugs.

"The intent is to overwhelm and startle that person," Ryan said. "The key is to do something—anything—other than being a target. This tactic may seem a little farfetched for some, but doing nothing is an unacceptable alternative."

Both Blauer and Ryan think teachers and parents can take steps to mentally prepare themselves for an attack. Ryan says that teachers, staff and administrators can educate themselves about taking action in the face of fear. Instead of being overwhelmed and paralyzed by the adrenaline, teachers can learn how to use the body's natural kickstart for positive action. The huge surge of adrenaline during a crisis is overwhelming for people who've never been in a violent situation, but your response can be tempered with adrenaline-managing techniques. These techniques can be used for any situation that provokes fear—including a CrossFit workout.

Ryan has a four-step process he teaches to help people remain calm in panic-inducing situations:

1. Welcome the adrenaline into your body—Think of the adrenaline as a power surge and tell yourself your body is preparing for success.
2. Replace negative thoughts with positive ones—If you hear your inner voice suggesting the situation is too daunting, replace those thoughts with positive ones immediately. Tell yourself to take positive action and repeat it.
3. Positive repetitive mantra (PRM)—Choose a simple, positive mantra that you silently repeat in your mind during a crisis situation to keep you focused. Examples include, "Let's go" or "I can do this."
4. Deep Breathing—Use deep breathing to help reduce sympathetic-nervous-system activity. Deep breathing will not totally eliminate the symptoms, but it will make them more manageable for improved performance during a crisis event. Breathe deeply in through your nose for a four-second count. Be sure to begin filling your lower lungs first, then the middle and finally the top portion of your lungs. Hold for four seconds. Then exhale through your mouth for a count of four seconds while letting the air out from the top, middle and finally the bottom of your lungs. Then repeat. The four-second count can be changed to a different time period if necessary.

The four steps are simple but require constant effort to fight against the body's natural inclinations.

Essential Life Skills

In addition to mental strategies, both Blauer and Ryan have more concrete suggestions to prevent and manage attacks.

"Ideally, school employees should be able to electronically lock all of the outside doors, and no one should be able to enter the school grounds without checking in and showing ID," Ryan said. "All classroom doors need to remain locked from the inside when children are in the rooms. Doors that automatically lock when closed but then automatically unlock via a push bar on the inside are one such defensive option. Master keys should be made available to teachers, administrators and law enforcement."

After talking to one school principal, Blauer thinks administrators and teachers would be well served by going to a range and practicing shooting a gun. This is not because he thinks teachers should be armed but because “they need to know the operating system,” Blauer said. If the school’s plan is that the principal should access an app on her phone in the event of a shooter, Blauer thinks the principal needs to know exactly how quickly everything happens when a gun is involved, as well as what actual gunshots sound like.

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“We are so weighed down with policy and procedure. When you’re three feet away from the bad guy, you need to fucking move,” Blauer said.

If the school does not have a plan in place, should parents talk to their kids about what to do in the event of a gunman at school?

“One of the many tragedies to arise from these horrific incidents is the fact that it now seems inescapable that we must educate and prepare our children about school shootings,” Ryan said. “Parents should talk to their children about past incidents without overwhelming them with detailed information. These talks should, of course, be tailored to the age and individual temperament of the child.”

Ryan says that the emphasis should be on helping kids visualize proper responses to a crisis. Then, he said, children can think about how they would distance themselves from a gunman on the school grounds or barricade a classroom by summoning help from their friends. In addition, parents should instruct their children to be leaders when a crisis happens.

The discussion can take on a broader context, because the reality is that school shootings are thankfully still quite rare. Moving beyond weapons in schools, parents can use this opportunity to talk to their kids about taking charge of their own safety in general.

“Dealing with fear, coping with panic and taking action in a crisis are essential life skills—not just school-shooting skills,” Ryan said. “These skills can be taught, reiterated and practiced during life’s littler crises so that children can have some sense of empowerment in a larger crisis.

“If nothing else, parents can teach their children two essential mantras: ‘3-2-1 ... breathe,’ because taking a breath helps to control fear and panic, and then ‘3-2-1 ... go!’ This mantra will remind them to always take action,” Ryan said.

Blauer believes that everyone—teachers, office workers, CrossFit athletes—should have the basic tools to be his or her own bodyguard. He calls it indignation or the “how dare you?” state of mind. Rather than freezing when threatened, learning a few basic techniques can help you spring into action.

“You have to take on the fear and deal with it,” Blauer said.



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