I Shall Not Be Prey: Instilling Perceived Self-Efficacy Through Personal Security Training

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Abstract

The world can be a dangerous place as evidenced by the 2015 riots in Baltimore, Maryland and the record high numbers of murder that occurred during those riots. People’s fear of being the prey of a violent criminal is very real and it often results in people retreating from society and avoiding situations that are perceived as dangerous. An examination of literature on perceived self-efficacy, a confident belief in one’s own ability to cope with a fearful situation, shows that through personal security and self-defense training that is designed for the particular student, perceived self-efficacy can be achieved. Students having achieved that sense are less prone to suffer from invasive negative thoughts, victimization, and avoidance behaviors that pull them out of living normal lives.

*Keywords*: perceived self-efficacy, self-defense, avoidance reduction, personal security

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The 24-hour news cycle is awash with reports of violent crime on the streets that would drive any rational person into hiding. In Baltimore, Maryland, a person was murdered every 17.7 hours in May 2015 and every 16.5 hours in July of that year (Marton, 2016). The year prior, while living Baltimore City, this author stopped an attempted murder. If that murder attempt had been successful, the number of murders for Baltimore would have been 218 for that year (Zadrozny, 2015). Baltimore is a beautiful city with museums, historic landmarks, restaurants, the National Aquarium, two major league athletic teams with well-appointed stadiums, and so much more. The fear of being preyed upon cost the city significant amounts of revenue (DelSignore & Glick, 2015) and brought the residents significant amounts of discomfort. People need to feel that they can leave their homes and walk the streets. This article proposes that one method to making that possible is by building people’s perception of their ability to effectively avoid and even thwart potential incidents. Through an exploration of the literature pertaining to building perceived self-efficacy, this article shows a path forward for people that fear danger where they live, work, and go to school.

Understanding Perceived Self-Efficacy

In 1977, Bandura wrote an article titled, “Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change.” In that article, he proposed a theoretical framework that would reach into psychology, business, management, education, and even the topic for this article, personal security. Bandura wrote,

This theory states that psychological procedures, whatever their form, alter the

level and strength of self-efficacy. It is hypothesized that expectations of personal

efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much

effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles

and aversive experiences. Persistence in activities that are subjectively

threatening but in fact relatively safe produces, through experiences of mastery,

further enhancement of self-efficacy and corresponding reductions in defensive

behavior (Bandura, 1977, p. 191).

Perceived self-efficacy is not the positive self-talk that so many of today’s motivational speakers preach about. To them, positive self-talk is the beginning of the endeavor. To Bandura, a leader in social-cognitive theory, perceived self-efficacy is the achievement of the endeavor. Positive self-talk is hollow and powerless. Perceived self-efficacy is backed, as Bandura wrote, by “experiences of mastery” (Bandura, 1977, p. 191). Investments of time, energy, and resources are essential to this achievement. Sound education and dedicated practice are two ingredients in the recipe of perceived self-efficacy. Demonstrated mastery by the instructor leads to mastery modeling by the student. Educators and trainers must model the behaviors expected of their students and then show them how to achieve those behaviors. As Jesus said, “The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher” (Luke 6:40 New International Version). As a self-defense and firearms instructor, I practice to the point where I can make shots at 25 yards that my students are challenged to make at 10 yards. This is not done to intimidate them, but instead, to establish my position of authority, model the expected behavior, and prove just what can be done with a firearm.

Ozer and Bandura (1990) took the place of mastery in achieving perceived self-efficacy into the self-defense realm when they published “Mechanisms Governing Empowerment Effects: A Self-Efficacy Analysis.” The researchers found that about 80 percent of rapes that were reported were perpetrated by unarmed perpetrators. They also found a high rate of success in repelling would-be rapists by responding with force. With that knowledge in hand, they constructed a program that taught students how to disable an attacker in a variety of situations and environments. The students practiced defensive tactics at full force against heavily protected mock attackers, a highly effective way of conveying confidence and developing mastery. Students go from believing something works because they have seen it work to believing it works because they can do it. The students were taught to identify dangerous situations in advance of them occurring in addition to developing a view of themselves as being capable taking charge of a violent encounter.

Mastery modeling enhanced perceived coping and cognitive control efficacy, decreased perceived vulnerability to assault, and reduced the incidence of intrusive negative thinking and anxiety arousal. These changes were accompanied by increased freedom of action and decreased avoidant behavior (Ozer & Bandura, 1990, p. 472).

The students achieved what every personal security instructor desires to see. They believed in their ability to deal with attacks, they were able to lead lives unencumbered by constant fear, and they were able to confidently go out into a world that was previously seen as too dangerous to enter. Having the ability to defend yourself is like a parachute or a car air bag; you hope to never need those but you draw comfort from knowing they are there.

Andragogy and Perceived Self-Efficacy

Human beings have proven themselves to be a very resilient lot. We build resilience through knowledge and the ability to act. For a personal security trainer to help someone develop perceived self-efficacy, it is essential that the trainer understand the dynamics of teaching adults, also known as andragogy. As Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) wrote,

Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it. Tough (1979) found that when adults undertake to learn something on their own, they will invest considerable energy in probing into the benefits they will gain from learning it and the negative consequences of not learning it (p. 64).

It is this understanding of why personal security students need to learn about it that drives many instructors to lead into training with well-substantiated statistics in the same fashion as this article opened. As any good salesperson will convey, the key to making a sale is taking a perceived need and turning it into a felt need. People that live in the relative safety of suburban and rural areas need to understand that nobody is immune from victimization and that they must be prepared.

**The Holistic Approach**

The National Rifle Association’s (NRA) Refuse To Be A Victim® (RTBAV) program takes a very holistic approach to personal security and developing perceived self-efficacy as an agent of one’s own security. To the NRA, personal security is not simply about guns. In fact, RTBAV includes only a brief and optional section on firearms. The course is designed to address the spectrum of areas where security self-efficacy is essential. The Student Handbook (National Rifle Association of America, 2015) breaks the curriculum down as follows:

* The psychology of criminal predators
* Mental preparedness
* Physical security
* Home security
* Automobile security
* Out-of-town travel security
* Technological security
* Personal protection devices
* Special modules covering:
  + Workplace security
  + Security of children from pre-school through high school
  + Campus security
  + Security for senior citizens and people with disabilities
  + Domestic violence and stalking

The training includes videos, hands-on experience, demonstrations, and a lot of student interaction and questioning (certified NRA instructors are taught to use the Socratic method without actually being told the term). A favorite activity of students is to use an inert pepper spray device because it allows them to see exactly how far and how fast it shoots. The philosophy behind this approach is that the world is a hazardous place, and for people to perceive that they can exercise control of their own security, they must be prepared to deal with a broad spectrum of risky situations. Since its beginning in 1993, RTBAV has been taught to over 100,000 students (National Rifle Association of America, 2016, para. 1). The approach is popular, it is supported by local and state law enforcement, and based on student feedback, it works to improve people’s sense of perceived self-efficacy.

The Singular Focus Approach

While the variety of threats that the NRA addresses in RTBAV is very real, many people focus on self-defense training alone to give them a better sense of personal security. There is good reason for this, particularly for certain groups of people such as female students on college campuses. “Between 20% and 25% of women will experience a completed and/or attempted rape during their college career” (Gray, 2012, para. 1). That figure is astonishing. The fear that this can build in this students has a variety of effects, not the least of which is the development of avoidance behaviors.

If women are fearful of crime on their college campuses, which could certainly impact large-scale choices such as where to go to school or where to live on campus, to smaller decisions such as whether to go to a library to join a study group on a particular evening, whether to socialize with other students whom she does not know, and more (Jordan, 2014, p. 144).

Interestingly enough, Jordan (2014, p. 144) points out that men are actually more likely to be victims of crime while on campus. The factor that may drive this disproportionate fear is that women fear rape and that fear cascades into fear of other crimes. “Rape may operate like a ‘master offense’ among women, especially younger women who have the highest rates of rape, heightening fear reactions for other forms of crime” (Ferraro, 1996, p. 669). To combat this fear, it is natural for women to seek a singular solution, that is, self-defense training, to develop perceived self-efficacy. While the battle they may have to wage some day is against a perpetrator, the war they wage is a war in their minds. They must be able to convince themselves that they can do something to prevent them from becoming the next victim. A woman with the right training and a mastery-based perception of her own abilities can physically defeat a man that is bigger and stronger.

Gidycz and Dardis (2014) identified that when women resist with a weapon, they can reduce completed rapes by 91 percent and when they resist with another physical method, they can reduce that rate by 85 percent (p. 325). While taking such action may strike against societal norms and stereotypes for women, developing perceived self-efficacy in those areas can convince women of their ability to take such action, thus breaking those stereotypes and norms. “[T]here is evidence that some women do perceive themselves to be strong enough to physically resist and that these strategies often prove to be effective” (Gidycz & Dardis, 2014, p. 325). To be effective, research suggests that the training of women to resist must be geared toward women. This is in contrast to typical self-defense training that is delivered to mixed classes of men and women.

Hollander (2004) conducted a 10-year study of women participating in a for-credit, university-sponsored personal security and self-defense course. The course was designed for the female physique and it also targeted the emotional and relational issues that need to be included in effective self-defense training for women. The study suggests that feminist self-defense training is more effective for assault prevention and daily living in confidence than general co-educational self-defense training. That assessment is in agreement with research conducted by Snyder (2014) on the impact of various active shooter training programs on college campuses. He found that a course designed specifically for active shooter events on college campuses had a much greater effect on student resiliency (a measure of perceived self-efficacy) during such an event than a highly respected course developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that takes place in an office environment. It is vital to students that are being driven toward perceived self-efficacy to know that others just like them are capable of accomplishing what they are being taught to do.

Perceived Self-Efficacy and Post-Trauma Recovery

Sadly, many personal security and self-defense instructors find students that have come to them after an attack has occurred. These students are in various states of withdrawal from society. Avoidance behaviors are common coping mechanisms in people that have been the victim of personal trauma. In “Social Cognitive Theory of Posttraumatic Recovery: The Role of Perceived Self-efficacy,” Benight and Bandura (2004) explored ways for people that have suffered great trauma to return to normalcy. Through meta-analysis of many related research studies, the authors found, “consistent support for perceived coping self-efficacy as a focal mediator of posttraumatic recovery” (Benight & Bandura, 2004, p. 1144). The road away from trauma must have signs declaring, “I shall not be prey” and it must end at a place where victims realize that they are former victims, never to be subject to the whims of those who would rob them of their peace and security.

Perceived Self-Efficacy in the Battle Against PTSD

Being in the military is very challenging. One of the greatest threats to a veteran is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For many female veterans, PTSD comes not from the battlefield, but from being the victim of sexual assault. David, Cotton, Simpson, and Weitlauf (2004) studied a group of 67 female veterans being treated for varied trauma issues, including sexual assault. In their study, “Making a Case for Personal Safety: Perceptions of Vulnerability and Desire for Self-Defense Training Among Female Veterans,” they showed how the subjects believed personal security/self-defense (PS/SD) training would help them to recover from PTSD. The goal of the study was to serve as a pilot for a clinical project that would use PS/SD training alongside of traditional PTSD training to allow these women to experience more normal lives. Objectives included feeling safer, having a belief they could combat assailants, being more assertive, and not avoiding being integrated with society. They met that objective and two years later, three of the four researchers went onto lead project “Taking Charge” in concert with the University of Washington, Seattle and Veterans Affairs Puget Sound Health Care System.

Taking Charge, the program that David, Simpson, and Cotton developed, was, “a 36-hour comprehensive behavioral intervention involving psychoeducation, personal safety, and self-defense training” (David, Simpson, & Cotton, 2006, p. 555). Taking a small group of female veterans that had suffered sexual abuse while in the service, the researchers ran them through that course. In a follow-up conducted six months after the training, a significant number of the participants showed continued improvement in their PTSD symptoms demonstrating there is a clinical value in providing personal security and self-defense training.

Poker Tells and Perpetrator Aversion

Poker is a game of chance, or is it? A number of players sit at a table with a well-shuffled deck of 52 cards dealt at random. From a purely mathematical perspective, no one player would have an advantage over another. If sufficient hands were played and all players understood the value of the various hands, chance would dictate that each player would eventually win some hands and given that they made similar bets, would walk away with a similar amount of money. However, as anyone that has followed events like the World Poker Tour and the World Series of Poker can attest to, there are certain players that win large sums of money on a regular basis. One reason these players are able to do this is they are experts at reading other players “tells.” Tells are, “non-verbal movements or cues emitted by other poker players” (Heiser, 2005, p. 4). An unskilled poker player will often inadvertently give off such tells when holding a strong hand. Other players will try to intentionally give off feigned tells of strength or weakness when their hands are either strong or weak. Skilled poker players can discern those tells and bet accordingly. If the skilled poker player sees the tell as sincere, that player will fold the hand and let the unskilled player win the hand with very few chips to show for it. The giving and reading of tells can also play a role in the realm of personal security.

Charles Spafford, president of Arimus Tactical, a military policeman, and self-defense instructor has an axiom in regard to non-verbal communication as a means of potentially preventing victimization; “if you look like food, you will get eaten” (C. Spafford, personal communication, September 2014). What this means is if a person’s body language, or in poker vernacular, tells, gives off that the person is vulnerable, a perpetrator is more likely to victimize that person. Conversely, a person having perceived self-efficacy when it comes to self-defense will give off non-verbal cues of strength and the ability to resist that may drive a perpetrator to find a different victim.

In the age of mobile devices, one of the biggest cues that people can give to a perpetrator is to have their heads buried in a mobile device or to have the bright white earbuds that come with many devices firmly planted in both ears. The cue that those people are giving is that they are not paying attention to their surroundings, that they lack situational awareness. They are also letting perpetrators know exactly where their mobile devices are located. For this reason, personal security programs like RTBAV program teach students to avoid these behaviors (National Rifle Association of America, 2015, p. 54). Conversely, having a level of awareness, “the degree to which you observe what is going on around you” (National Rifle Association of America, 2015, p. 7) and following guidance like “Maintain a confident, alert mindset. Don’t look like an easy target; walk tall and look others straight in their eyes” (National Rifle Association of America, 2015, p. 8) gives a clear visual cue to perpetrators that they would be well advised to take their deeds elsewhere. This confident posture, to be believed, should be backed by perceived self-efficacy in the area of self-defense. Otherwise, just as a skilled poker player sees through a false tell of confidence and takes the opponent for a large sum of money (Heiser, 2005, p. 4), a savvy perpetrator will see through feigned strength and take far more in a much less pleasant manner.

Conclusion

It is indeed possible to avoid being the prey of a would-be perpetrator through developing a perception of one’s own self-efficacy to repel that person. Furthermore, it is possible for a person to diminish fear and avoidance behaviors through the development of perceived self-efficacy as a defender against crime. Achieving that sense of self-efficacy comes as the result of mastery modeling, focused and varied training, and opportunities to actually experience the ability to be effective. For those who have been victimized and those who are paralyzed over fear of being victimized, this is of vital importance, because nobody should have to live in fear. Nobody should have to be prey.

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