

# Cooper's colors: A simple system for situational awareness

The late Jeff Cooper's "Color Code" has been embraced and taught by competent instructors for many years. Most of you are quite familiar with the concepts, but a review of these essential survival levels is worthwhile. Cooper broke down alertness levels into four colors of escalating degrees of preparation for the use of deadly force. This color code system is a mental process, not a physical one, and should be utilized whether or not you are armed — though being armed is always preferred. Being alert may help you to avoid a deadly threat in the first place, which is always the preferred outcome.

## White

In condition White, you are relaxed and unaware of what is going on around you. Ideally, a police officer is only in white when asleep, but realistically we often drop our guard when we are at home or in some other environment we assume to be safe, like the squad room. Since even police stations have been attacked, it is better to be more alert even when you are in your "lair." As the Lakewood coffee shop ambush proves, you simply cannot be on white when you are in uniform, whether on duty or off.

If you are attacked in condition white, you may very well die — unless you are lucky. I prefer to not depend on luck.

## Yellow

In condition yellow, you remain relaxed, but are aware of who and what is around you. This merely means that you are paying attention to the sights and sounds that surround you whether you are at home or moving in society. Condition yellow DOES NOT equate with paranoia or any other irrational fear of persons or places. Instead, you simply have moved your alertness to a level of attention that will prevent you from being totally surprised by the actions of another person.

While walking through an area you will loosely keep track of anyone behind you. When choosing a seat in a restaurant, you will position yourself to see the entrance or to minimize the number of people who might be behind you.

You don't need to insist on securing the "gunfighter seat" which will put your back to a dead corner and your face to the entrance, because you are not anticipating a threat, you are merely conducting an inventory of your surroundings and the other people around you. You will also be running a cursory "what if" mental visualization of where a threat could appear and what your reaction(s) should be.

If you are attacked in condition yellow, it should not come as a total surprise. Your response to a threat should have been pre-planned to some extent, allowing you to simply run an existing plan rather than having to make one up quickly while under fire. A competent police officer MUST be in condition yellow whenever they are on duty — or when armed while off duty.

## Orange

In condition orange, you have identified something of interest that may or may not prove to be a threat. Until you determine the true nature of whatever has piqued your interest, your "radar" is narrowed to concentrate on the possible threat and will remain so focused until you are satisfied no threat exists.

Contacts you make throughout your shift — either dispatched or self-initiated — are obvious examples of a condition orange focus. These people are not currently a threat, or you would move swiftly and smoothly to the next higher color. Instead, these individuals simply could be a threat, so you shift from condition yellow (relaxed but alert) to condition orange (specific alert).

You may make this harmless shift many times a day as you go about your normal routine. If someone or something looks out of place, you change from a 360 degree general awareness to a more focused

concentration in a specific direction. At the same time, you can't drop your general awareness, because a bad guy in front of you may be a distraction for another behind.

If you are attacked in condition orange, you should be expecting the attack. Further, you will hopefully be facing your attacker since you have already shifted your focus in his direction. If you are well trained, your subconscious mind will have been searching your hard drive for similar events or training sessions you have already experienced, or any pre-visualized "what if" situations you've cataloged as possible solutions should an attack take place.

## **Red**

If the focus of your attention in condition orange does something you find threatening, you will shift to condition red.

Notice here that condition Red IS NOT the firing stroke, as some instructors have misconstrued from Cooper's teachings. Instead, condition red simply changes the focus of your attention from a potential threat to a potential target. You will draw your weapon, or move still further to sight acquisition, only if the potential target's actions dictate such a response. Once you've shifted to condition red, you cannot be surprised by your primary adversary and you are fully prepared to repel boarders should he push the incident that far. But, your intense concentration on a forward threat will lessen your ability to maintain some degree of 360-degree awareness for unknown threats that may come from other directions. Effective training under high-stress conditions will help you avoid the tunnel vision that some describe as "akin to looking through a toilet paper tube."

If possible, in both conditions orange and red, move to a position that will give you a tactical advantage. Ideally, you want a wall or previously cleared area behind you and some sort of solid cover you can move behind should shooting break out. Having one or more backup officers at this point can greatly enhance situational awareness, if — and only if — one of those officers remains alert in all directions — a rear guard. All too often, every officer on-scene concentrates on the threat with no regard for 360 degree security.

If you are attacked in red, you should be fully prepared to defend yourself. Whether or not you have a gun in hand or on target will depend on the circumstances, but mentally, you are already ahead of the game.

## **K.I.S.S.**

Some trainers try to improve on Cooper's color code by adding more stages, like "black" for dealing with the aftermath of a shooting. One trainer uses "black" to describe someone totally immobilized with panic — a condition the color code is designed to prevent. I say, keep the system simple. Four colors seems to me to be about right, allowing enough variety for all problems without being too complicated.

Some insist you cannot go through life using this system without becoming a hair-trigger paranoid person who is dangerous to ones self and others. I believe well-adjusted police officers can run through the color code dozens of times every day and be no worse for wear. Most experienced police officers who learn the color code realize they have been taking these steps on their own all along.

Like most great training ideas, this four-step process merely codifies what good cops over the years have learned to do on their own. By teaching new recruits this life-saving system for situational awareness, we can start them out with the knowledge others have gained through a lifetime of survival on the streets.

## **About the author**

Dick Fairburn has more than 30 years of law enforcement experience in both Illinois and Wyoming, working patrol, investigations and administrative assignments. Dick has also served as a Criminal Intelligence Analyst and as the Section Chief of a major academy's Firearms Training Unit and Critical Incident training program. He has a B.S. in

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