2

Individual Responses to Threats

Organising our approach to security is largely about developing a more accurate ability to perceive and analyse threats and choose means of avoiding them. However, we need not develop this perception from scratch: we already have physiological responses to threats which should be understood and acknowledged. Furthermore, our perception and ability to analyse may be challenged by some aspects of our work. If we are at least aware of these, it will help us plan more realistically.

People have natural defence mechanisms which developed through our evolution. Hard-wired into our brains are neural pathways and structures with the primary function of keeping us alive when we are threatened. These functions are most often below the level of conscious awareness; that is, our security processes are operating even if we are not aware of them. This applies both when we ourselves are under threat, or indirectly, when someone close to us is threatened.

One of our survival mechanisms is often called intuition, those powerful but seemingly irrational feelings that we sometimes have about a particular person, place, or activity. When our intuition is signalling untrustworthiness or danger, it is often because we have picked up multiple, subtle **indicators** which alone do not identify a particular threat, but taken together strongly suggest the presence of danger. Many human rights defenders have been saved by paying attention to their intuition or 'trusting their gut', even when they could not explain how they knew they were in danger.

Intuitions of danger produce a feeling of **anxiety**. Although anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling, it is an extremely helpful one. Anxiety provokes us to act to reduce our discomfort. When we feel anxious we actively seek out information that might confirm or challenge the possibility that we are in a potentially harmful or dangerous situation. Depending upon what we learn, our anxiety might develop into fear.

When we feel fear we demonstrate powerful **survival responses**. These responses are driven by the same brain structures and supported by biological changes. When this happens much of our behaviour becomes automatic, in the sense that we have less conscious awareness of choosing to act in a particular way. Common survival responses include the following responses.

1. **The 'freeze response'** is when a person becomes utterly still while remaining highly alert and poised for action. This response relies on escaping notice until the danger has passed. For example, we might cease the work that we are doing, stop communicating through our usual channels, or reduce communication with someone with whom we are in conflict. In each case, we are hoping that the unwelcome attention will pass if we become inactive.

2. **The 'flight response'** is when a person quickly tries to get as far away from the danger as possible. We might move our operations to a safer location, abandon certain activities or modes of communication, or separate ourselves from people who might cause us harm.

3. **The 'comply response'** involves doing what an aggressor instructs in the hope that co-operation will result in the attack ending quickly and with less injury. We might agree to suspend or abandon certain objectives or activities, or give up passwords to secure information.

4. **The 'tend response'** happens when people try to protect other, more vulnerable people who are being similarly victimised. Many human rights defenders are motivated to help others because of our own experiences of oppression and exploitation.

5. **The 'befriend response'** involves trying to build some kind of relationship with the aggressor in the hope that this will limit the harm perpetrated against oneself or others. By telling physical aggressors about our families, we might try to humanise ourselves in their eyes, a strategy that is sometimes useful in reducing violence.

6. **The 'posture response'** is an attempt to drive off the danger by pretending to have greater power than one actually does. As human rights defenders, we often threaten to expose and publicise threats of violence so as to publicly embarrass our adversaries.

7. **The 'fight response'** is when a person attacks with the intent of driving off or destroying the aggressor. Of course there are many different ways to fight and we all make our own choices about this.

It is important to note that when engaged in a survival response, we become quicker, stronger, more focused and more resilient than we would normally be. As a result, these survival strategies are extremely effective in many circumstances. It helps to remember that even though you might only be beginning to develop your own organised approach to security, your natural survival mechanisms are already hard at work.

As powerful as our survival responses are, they are not perfect. While our brains are capable of processing enormous amounts of information and reacting very quickly, they do not do this in a systematic and logical manner. There are some situations in which our brains are particularly untrustworthy, and we should pay special attention to these.

Threats from the digital sphere

One of the ways in which we can be let down by our physiological responses discussed above relates to digital and information security. We are well adapted to respond to physical threats (such as defending ourselves from attack), or interpersonal threats (such as coping with estrangement from family members) and as a result we have strong intuitive and emotional reactions to these kinds of danger.

However, whilst our physical and digital worlds are closely interwoven, we can struggle to identify or respond appropriately to digital attacks; a suspicious stranger standing outside our home might make us very anxious and prompt us to take action to make ourselves safer, yet clear warnings of viruses on a computer are more likely to be experienced as irritants, and ignored or even disabled, despite having very real implications.

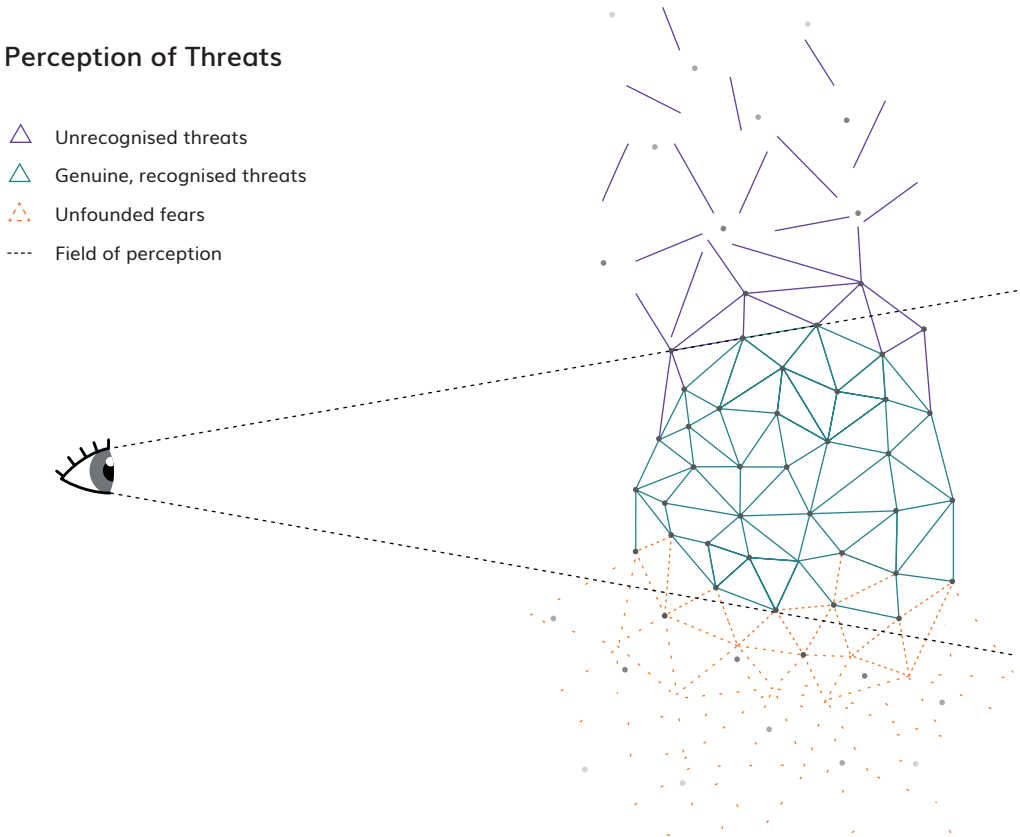
Moreover, the prevalence of proprietary technology and the secrecy surrounding electronic surveillance make it difficult to establish what threats we face. Frequently we fail to recognise these threats, or conversely we perceive threats which may not actually be relevant to us.

Since human rights defenders are subjected to ever more sophisticated means of electronic surveillance and depend more than ever on digital tools, we must learn to make up for this lack of protective instinct. Through taking account of our information as an important asset in our work and opting to protect our data from unwanted access or surveillance where we deem it necessary, we can increase our levels of certainty and reduce the stress and fear which this topic may cause us.

Trauma, stress and fatigue

Very disturbing or **traumatic past experiences** may unhelpfully distort the way we respond to indicators of danger. This is particularly true of those traumatic experiences that stay with us in powerful and uncomfortable ways, even years after the event. These kinds of traumatic experiences lead to two common reactions. For many people, past traumatic experiences contribute to our **unfounded fears**. These people become over-sensitive to things that remind them of past traumatic experiences. When this happens, entirely harmless situations take on a sinister appearance and our intuition begins to tell us that we are in danger when we are not. This can lead us to having reactions which are inappropriate and impact our relationships with the people and organisations around us.

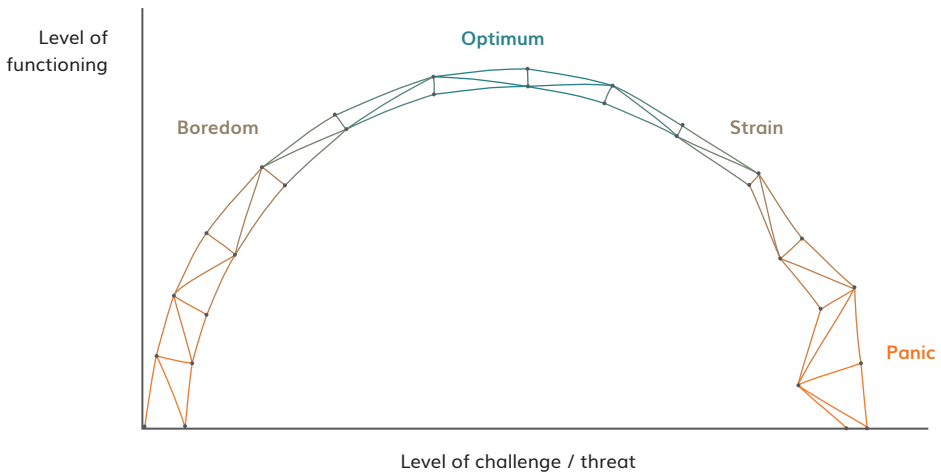
Other people recognise their problem or become exhausted by continually having their brains and bodies reacting to these false alarms. Over time, these people sometimes start to suppress or ignore their healthy internal alarm system. While this helps people live more effectively in the world, it does also reduce their awareness of potential threats in the environment. In this way, past traumatic experiences may contribute to **unrecognised threats**.



Stress and fatigue can also result in us inaccurately identifying and responding to indicators of threats in our environment. When we feel overwhelmed by the challenges in our work and home lives, or when we have been working too hard, for too long and without enough rest, we start to behave differently.

Every person has a level of challenge or threat that stimulates them to a point of maximum productivity and well-being. If there is not enough stimulation and challenge in our lives, we feel bored and become unproductive, even depressed. If there is too much challenge or threat, we start to become overwhelmed. We feel that we cannot cope with everything that life demands of us, and once again we become unproductive, anxious and depressed.

Stress Curve



Many human rights defenders may be accustomed to high levels of challenge in their lives, and some may even enjoy it, but this doesn't mean that we are impervious to stress. Each of us has a limit after which we can no longer cope. When this limit is reached, we become unhappy and our productivity suffers. Furthermore, the level of care and attention that we give to our security drops.

When we are over-worked, security indicators can sometimes be seen as just one more problem we have to deal with. If our coping resources are already completely committed, we might choose to ignore the indicator or react in ways which

are not helpful to ourselves, our colleagues or our work. Another reason for failing to deal adequately with real threats is that we become accustomed to a certain (and sometimes growing) level of threat in our personal or work life. This level of threat starts to feel 'normal' or comfortable. When this happens, we are less likely to take steps to improve our safety.

As a result, developing a culture (both individually and as a group, organisation or movement) of stress management and self-care is fundamental to a holistic approach to security. Not only will this help to prevent threats brought about through long term exposure to stress and fatigue, but it will greatly aid critical thinking about security in general.

In the following exercises, we will reflect upon some of our past experiences and how these may continue to affect our perceptions of danger. Once we are more aware of this, it will be easier to build tactics for keeping our perception 'in check' in our security planning.

1.2a Exercise

Self-awareness exercise: Recognising and reacting to threats

Purpose & Output

The purpose of this exercise is to help you recognise the areas in which your perceptions are most accurate and the areas in which you may be less clear-sighted.

You should gain a clearer understanding of:

- your reactions to threats in the past which went well and not so well
- the gaps in your recognition of threats
- things you may want change
- things which make you confident facing new threats and should be continued.

Input & Materials

Printed copies of the questions

Format & Steps	**Individual reflection** Think back on a past experience where you felt particularly unsafe and then acted to take care of yourself. While the experience might have been primarily physical, emotional or related to information security, it might also have had additional impacts on other aspects of your security. Use the following table to keep track of your insights.
Remarks & Tips	It is helpful to take time for this exercise and write your answers clearly so that you can come back to them as you deepen your self-awareness. If you do this, take care to keep your notes in a private place, sharing your personal thoughts and questions only with people that you trust.

Choose one moment when you felt threatened or in danger and then acted to protect yourself. Consider experiences of physical danger (such as a robbery), emotionally damaging experiences (such as being threatened or betrayed) or threats to your information and communications (such as devices being confiscated or telephones being wire-tapped.

How did you become aware of the threat?

Were there earlier indicators of the threat that you noticed, or maybe failed to notice? Consider indicators in the socio-political environment, in your physical environment, in your devices and in your body and mind.

Were there earlier indicators of the threat that you had noticed, but dismissed as unimportant? Consider indicators in the socio-political environment, in your physical environment, in your devices and in your body and mind.

What were your initial reactions when you became aware of the threat and how effective were these?

What were your subsequent actions and how effective were these?

What would you change if you could go back in time? What would you do instead?

What can you learn from this experience which might help you feel more confident in your ability to cope with future difficulties?

1.2b Exercise

Note: If you, your team members, colleagues or fellow activists have gone through traumatic experiences and you want to know how this might impact your perceptions of threats, you can run this deepening exercise. This exercise may be more emotionally challenging so if you do not presently feel ready, consider completing it at another time.

Self-awareness exercise: How traumatic experiences affect our perception

Purpose & Output

The purpose of this exercise is to help you recognise areas in which your perceptions are most accurate and areas in which you might be less clear-sighted due to traumatic experiences.

Input & Materials

It is helpful to take time over these questions and to write down your answers clearly so that you can come back to them over time and as you deepen your self-awareness. If you do this, take care to keep your notes in a private place, sharing your personal thoughts and questions only with people that you trust.

Format & Steps

Think back on any past traumatic experiences that may not be fully resolved. These will be experiences that you think about often and which still have the power to make you feel frightened, angry, guilty, ashamed, or sad. Don't go into the actual situation, but focus on what you did to help yourself, what you did to help others and what others did or might have done to help you.

Consider the following questions:

- What kinds of dangerous situations are particularly emotionally loaded for you as a result of your past experiences?
- When you find yourself in potentially dangerous environments, are there any situations that make you anxious or scared quite easily?
- Is there someone you trust who could help you identify any unfounded fears you may have?
- What kind of threats do you feel you fail to recognise easily?

- How might you check whether you are failing to recognise some indicators of danger?
- With whom do you feel comfortable discussing your fears and possible blind spots?

Remarks & Tips

As this exercise might prove to be emotionally challenging, communicate this clearly to your colleagues. It is important that nobody feel coerced into participating in this exercise, and if someone starts to become distressed, they should stop immediately. It might also be a good idea to relate it to other activities, which cover areas of psycho-social well-being.

Optional Exercise: Use of Time[6]

As human rights defenders, a very important aspect of our lives which we often lose track of is our use of time. Our workloads are often extremely difficult to manage and our struggle to stay on top of them may come at the cost of our physical and emotional well-being. It may also have a negative effect on our ability to perceive dangers. You can explore this for yourself in the exercise below.

The development of successful security practice demands the commitment of resources, most notably time. As individuals, we need time to reflect on the effect our work is having on us, to ask questions and find answers, to identify successful tactics and tools, to plan and co-ordinate and to integrate new practices into our lives and work.

---

6 Reproduced from Barry, J. (2011) Integrated Security: The Manual, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Stockholm.

Feelings of emotional security are often related to our use and perception of time. What is the ratio between our working or engagement hours and the time we spend with our loved ones or for recreational activities? As activists, we nearly always face the dilemma that our workload never ends but our energies do. So where do we draw the line? The "Use of Time" exercise from the Integrated Security Manual helps us to make conscious steps towards a healthier and more emotionally secure use of time, which you can find in **Appendix E.**