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Personal, Personal Security

When Senator Judd Gregg's wife, Kathleen, walked into her Northern Virginia home recently, she found two individuals ravaging her home in search of valuables. Mrs. Gregg was suddenly face to face with the most frightening time of her life. Abducted at knifepoint she drove to the bank and withdrew money for the assailants who dashed away in a stolen car. What would you have done differently?

According to Dr. Thomas Connell, Vice President of West Palm Beach Interlink Consulting Services, the entire event probably could have been prevented. Connell and his training teams provide Cross Cultural Communications, Personal Security and Threat Awareness training for international travelers as well as private families who are at increased risk due to their financial background, executive position, job, etc. "By the time Mrs. Gregg was at the point of no return she had probably passed up several opportunities to avoid the situation," Connell said, "beginning with turning on the home alarm system."

"These bad guys probably knew the home was vacant and the alarm off. It is doubtful a home invasion of this type was an impulse, spur-of-the-moment crime -- they had to be watching. Usually, after the criminal act takes place, the victim or neighbors recall signs of surveillance or other suspicious activity in the area."

This type of criminal activity is shocking to most North Americans while in Latin America it borders on commonplace. The event Mrs. Gregg experienced is called "Express Kidnapping" in Latin America -- where you are snatched out of your home, car, or from the street and held until kidnappers receive their money. Usually, family members get a phone call describing demands, etc., or often the victim themselves is taken to a nearby ATM machine where they are forced to make a withdrawal and pay their own ransom. This crime does pay. Mexico is currently averaging 4,000 kidnappings a year with ransoms up to \$30 million. "In some areas of Mexico, children speak with their parents every 30 minutes to tell them they're safe," Connell says. "And, Mexico is number two for kidnappings behind Colombia."

Connell comments that "these acts are becoming more common here. It's a sad reality that with the high quality of home alarms, automobile alarm and tracking systems, the bad guys turn to "softer" targets for fast and often unreported cash. It is no surprise that Ford and GM now offer armored vehicles this year."

Residents of Mexico City, Caracas, Bogotá, Buenos Aires etc., have long lived with this type activity. Much of the criminal activity thought to be limited to Latin America and other high-threat areas are increasingly, now showing up in the US.

“Fifteen years ago who had heard of a carjacking?” Connell asked. “Now, carjacking is nearly common in US cities, and you rarely hear about it unless it is particularly awful such as additional violence directed at the driver, a child still in the car, or a dramatic police chase.”

Developing a personal security strategy and learning techniques to make yourself a difficult target are critical in helping you and your family stay safe. Connell adds that ultimately, the individual is responsible for his or her safety. “You must have your own personal protection strategy today -- and not only for the adults. Don’t be paranoid, be prepared.” Easier said than done? No. Here are Connell’s five personal security recommendations for everyday local activity:

1. Don’t say it doesn’t/can’t happen here or to you and your family.

Accepting this helps move you to a more security conscious state. Start to look around and clean up your risk profile. “The criminals are looking for easy targets,” Connell explained. “By making you, your family and home a difficult target they will usually look elsewhere.” If you have a home alarm system, use it. Test it regularly and make sure everyone in your family understands that the last one out arms the system. Arm the system when you are in for the night. Have a family plan for a middle-of-the-night activation. Talk to your children about kidnapping. Emphasize that an adult *never* needs help from a child and, for instance, if an adult asks your child for help in locating their puppy, get away fast. Forget the “Don’t Talk to Strangers” nonsense. If a child is escaping from a kidnapper, a passing by stranger may be the difference between life and death.

2. Be aware of what is going on around you. DEA and other law enforcement instructors teach a simple color code awareness system which breaks down levels of awareness and readiness into four colors; white, yellow, orange, and red. White is the “auto-pilot” mode – lost in thought. You simply cannot allow yourself to be in this mental state while out in public. The bad guys can easily pick out the inattentive – it’s nothing personal. You are just a target of opportunity. At the least you should be in Yellow Condition where you are paying attention, looking around and generally being conscious of movement around you – particularly when departing and entering your automobile or when pulling out your wallet, credit cards, etc. Condition Orange is usually in response to a perceived threatening event or situation, i.e., a group of suspicious individuals moving towards you. Condition Red takes place when the criminal act is executed and you are in the fight or flight mode.

The next time you are at a shopping mall, take notice of how people walk to their cars. What is their Awareness Condition? Most are in Condition White. Few will be looking around for suspicious activity. Getting in or out of your car is a particularly vulnerable point. Always watch around you; where would a threat come from? What would you do? When you get into your car, immediately lock the doors before starting the engine -- make this an everyday habit. Using a drive up ATM? You should be well into Condition Yellow -- look all around as you pull up to the machine. Use your mirrors constantly and *never, never* put the car in park or neutral. Leave it in gear and keep your foot on the brake while operating the ATM. If approached by a pedestrian or if you are threatened, you can immediately get away. Don’t count your money or arrange the bills in your wallet while you sit with the window down. Get your card, cash and leave. Always be aware and control your valuables when paying

for merchandise; don't ever place your wallet on a register counter. This is a classic opportunity for distraction such as a person asking you if you live in Palm Beach Gardens because you look familiar, etc. Poof! Your wallet is gone.

3. Driving in Condition Yellow – Choke Points and Cars in Front/Back:

Analyze your routes to regular destinations; work, back home, to the malls, favorite restaurants, etc. Where are the “Choke Points?” Knowing where your Choke Points are is central to avoiding a carjacking, assault, etc. This is any point known by the bad guys through which you must pass to get somewhere such as a tunnel entrance, parking garage exit, or especially, an unmanned gated community entrance. Usually you must pull up and wait for a gate to open which allows opportunity and access to you and/or your car. This type of entrance is particularly concerning if the entrance offers concealment and escape opportunity. When you are waiting for gate to open look around you, check your mirrors often, etc. Avoiding surprise is critical here. Secondly, begin to notice cars behind and in front of you. If you suspect someone is following you use these techniques to calm your mind or verify you are being followed: Most effective is to make a U-turn when the road presents the opportunity and see if the suspicious car follows. If it does, make one more U-Turn. If the car follows *this* time, you are now in Condition Orange. Stay calm, grab your cell phone and call 911. Explain the situation and do not stop unless the police advise so. Another related and classic scenario for kidnappings or assassination is for a car in front to stop at stop sign and you stop behind it. As you wait another car stops behind you. This is expected so nothing appears suspicious. Then, the car behind you creeps up and at the same time the car in front begins to back slowly into your vehicle. While you are focused on the car in front, honking your horn, several individuals exit the car behind you and “suddenly” the windows are smashed in. Your options are severely limited now.

4. Listen to your “Gift of Fear”: This is mostly aimed at men. Women generally do this very well while the *male of the species* overrides this concern by thinking they can handle it, etc. If you see something odd or your inner voice is screaming, *move*. Change direction, cross the street if walking down the street, duck into a store or other entrance until the threat is gone. Tell someone. Don't be afraid to say you were afraid. Be wary of people asking for directions and in higher threat areas carry a “throw down” wallet with a few dollars, expired credit cards, etc. and stash your cash and credit cards somewhere else -- preferably in your front pocket with rubber bands around them. This makes it more difficult to be picked from your pocket.

5. Don't give away sensitive information. Sound like a no-brainer? “It is,” Connell says. “I once saw a woman at a mall shouting to her friend she was leaving tomorrow morning and wouldn't return until next Thursday night. Following her home is all it would have taken to get the last bit of information for a home invasion. Don't discuss pin numbers, alarm codes, and don't ever, ever publicly give out your social security number. If pushed for one, make it up. And, increasingly, I hear businesses such as video rentals, tire stores, and others asking for your phone number so they can access your store account. The next time this happens to you, write it for them. Why? **NEWS FLASH:** Go to Google Search Engine and type in your telephone number -- surprise! There is your full name and home address. And, if that is not enough help for a bad guy, he can click on the “Maps” link and now he has your

name, phone number, *map and directions to your home!* Considering wireless PDA technology the bad guy can be standing behind you and (1) record you giving out your phone number (2) pull up Google and get your information immediately then (3) strike up a conversation with “Say, aren’t you the Carol Jones over on Cypress Creek?”

What about carrying a weapon? “This is only part and an optional component of the overall personal security strategy,” Connell explained. The Right to Carry/Concealed Carry opportunity brings with it significant additional considerations and responsibility. If the decision is made to carry a weapon, Connell’s personal security trainers make sure the client understands the legal and personal issues involved with carrying a weapon. “They won’t be alone,” Connell explained, “over 800,000 Floridians have Conceal Carry permits. We orient the client to different types of weapons, help decide which is best for them, provide several live-fire weapon-training sessions and overall make them safe and comfortable with the firearm.”

Local area travel is one thing but Connell says “international business travel is the most dangerous travel in the world. You should still utilize the same items discussed here but understand that you may not have the regional/cultural mental tools to even recognize a problem.” Connell explains, “That’s where we come in. We provide training on the Cross Cultural environment, area threat and how to manage those risks.

And that sounds like another article for later. Connell’s company provides *personalized* Personal Security training -- specialized new mental tools for business travelers, single women and men as well as families that are intended to keep you safe in and out of your home.

Connell’s teams include former US Secret Service agents, counter terrorism specialists and others who analyze a client’s risk profile. “From exposure and threat to favorite restaurants and shops to international destinations, their home security systems, potential choke points, and other areas of vulnerability,” Connell said. “We don’t publicly discuss family security procedures. I can tell you we often make recommendations on improving their security profile such as upgrading alarm systems, installing camera surveillance systems, and other physical security issues. If the client wants to adopt our recommendations we make it happen; organizing contractors and overseeing the entire operation.”

“Make yourself a difficult target and the bad guys will usually look somewhere else. Don’t be paranoid,” he repeated, “be prepared.”

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