

Surviving a Hostage Situation

By Andrew Taylor

Hostage situations can generally be described in two basic ways. One is the traditional situation, in which the hostage-taker tries to utilize hostages as leverage to negotiate something else. The other situation, which is becoming more prevalent, occurs when the hostage-taker is bent on death and destruction to “make a statement” and has no other goal in mind. As a situation develops, a potential hostage needs to immediately assess the intruder’s intent--negotiation or murder.

Hostage situations generally go through three phases. Recognizing the phases and knowing what to do in each is fundamental to surviving the situation.

Phase I: Capture

This is the most dangerous phase and the one during which the intruder is trying to take control. Victims need to assess the intruder’s intent rapidly, avoid attention, and stay low. If the intruder’s intent appears to be detaining people and/or controlling a facility for negotiation purposes, victims will most likely move through phases two and three. If, however, the intruder is actively shooting or using a weapon to kill, *immediate action* is recommended. As the victim, you have two basic options:

Get Out – Escape any way possible--through doors, windows, or stairs--and run until you are safe.

Take Out – Disarm and disable the intruder as quickly as possible with as much force as needed. Consider that the people on your side probably outnumber the lone gunman. Remember flight 93. Don’t give the intruder an opportunity to fire multiple shots and reload by hiding or playing dead.

Phase II: Internment

Assuming that you are dealing with someone intent on negotiating for what they really want, an internment period will follow. This may last a few hours, a few days, or even weeks. This is the time when negotiations are taking place and the time to do some planning for various contingencies. During this time, hostages should employ the “3 C’s.”

Calm – Stay as calm as you can. When hostages panic, hostage-takers panic, and the situation can escalate beyond the hostage-takers original intentions. You can appear calm by following directions and avoiding sensitive topics in any conversation with the hostage-taker.

Connect – By appearing to empathize (not sympathize) with your captor, you will become a person to them rather than a brokering chip. In some cases, by creating a bond, hostages have reversed the Stockholm syndrome, making captors unwilling to harm their captives. By connecting, you buy yourself time by slowing things down. Encourage the negotiation process and keep the focus on outside contact.

Capitalize – While encouraging a negotiated release or some other peaceful conclusion, remain alert to rescue efforts and escape opportunities.

Phase III: Resolution

Research indicates that 80 percent of all hostages worldwide survive their ordeal one way or another. Resolutions are typically characterized by one of three options:

Negotiated Release – A negotiated release is the safest and sometimes longest outcome, requiring patience and calmness from all involved.

Rescue – Success of a rescue operation depends on the rescuer's ability to distinguish between the hostages and the hostage-taker. Cooperation of the hostages is critical. Avoid being misconstrued as the criminal by avoiding threatening posture. Do not grab and hold on to the weapon, and make sure the rescuers can see your empty hands (sometimes the good guys have to put their hands up. Remember Columbine). If you are not sure what to do, stay low until instructed to proceed.

Escape – Escape is the most risky resolution. If an opportunity presents itself and the risk of not escaping is greater, take it. Recognize that you are betting with your life.

If at any time your hostage-taker develops into a shooter (killer), refer back to the Phase I instructions to get out or take out.

The information above was compiled from three sources—a teleconference hosted by the University Risk and Insurance Managers' Association, the Safe Travel Institute, and the National Hostage Survival Training Center.