

You're in the O-Zone, or Oblivious Zone, when you have your head in the clouds and aren't paying attention to what's going on around you. Escaping the O-Zone teaches how to watch your surroundings and recognize intuitive danger signals.

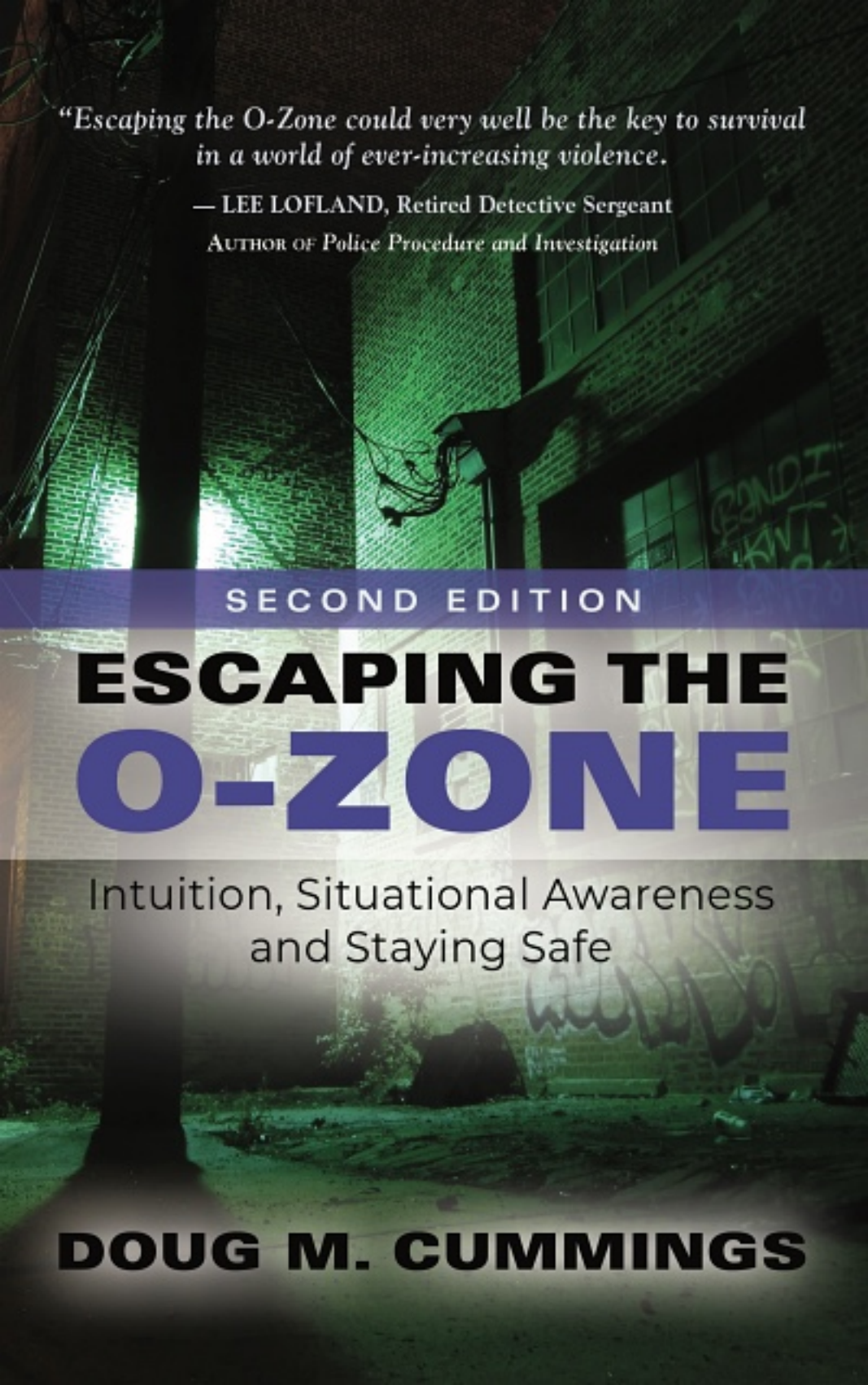
**Escaping the O-Zone:
Intuition, Situational Awareness, and Staying Safe**

By Doug M. Cummings

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*“Escaping the O-Zone could very well be the key to survival
in a world of ever-increasing violence.*

— LEE LOFLAND, Retired Detective Sergeant
AUTHOR OF *Police Procedure and Investigation*

SECOND EDITION

ESCAPING THE O-ZONE

Intuition, Situational Awareness
and Staying Safe

DOUG M. CUMMINGS

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958878-03-3

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-368-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2023

Second Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Cummings, Doug M.

Escaping the O-Zone: Intuition, Situational Awareness, and
Staying Safe by Doug M. Cummings

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022920518

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This book provides content related to personal safety topics. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

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Introduction

A confession: I've been a crime victim twice in my life. On both occasions, I was floating in what I've come to call the Oblivious Zone or the O-Zone. That's the place where we're stuck in our heads and really aren't paying attention to much except what's immediately in front of us and probably not looking very hard at that.

Although it sounds like the opening to a bad movie, the first time it happened I was a high school freshman, walking through a cemetery alone at midnight on the way home from a date. Two guys jumped me, took my wallet and my limited teenage self-confidence. The second time I was an adult, cocky in my knowledge of bad people and the things they do. I knew better, for example, than to leave my car in my driveway unlocked overnight. I really did. But I was tired. I unloaded a high-end audio recorder, radio equipment, and other electronics and went to bed. Next morning, all the parking lot and toll-road change I kept under the dash, an extra cell phone, an expensive pair of dark glasses and a pair of headphones was gone.

Sounds corny, but I vowed that would not happen to me again. And I got to thinking how I might help others to avoid being victimized. In 2014, I wrote the first edition of this book.

After the sniper attack in my home town on July 4th, 2022, I decided some updating of the original book was necessary. More ways to react to an active shooting for one. Some suggestions for houses of worship about security and safety for another.

This remains, however, a handbook about the basics. It's not a textbook or an instruction manual. There are no orders or "you gotta's." Similarly, I offer no guarantees. If you finish reading this, or any part of it, and think you know all you need to take on the bullies, thieves, thugs, and/or active shooters of the world, you are mistaken. My hope is that it will teach you ways to *avoid* those individuals, remain safe in harmful circumstances, and prompt you to advance your personal safety knowledge with other books, lectures, and workshops.

You may disagree with me at times or decide you have your own techniques. That's terrific. Personal security is just that: personal. How you decide to stay safe is up to you.

My ultimate goal is to invite you to participate in your own survival or, if you will, provide a path for you out of the O-Zone.

Now You See Them

The baseball great, Yogi Berra, said it best: “You can observe a lot just by watching.”

“Watching” everywhere you go is a great drill and has the advantage of keeping your head up and moving, showing you’re alert, and aiding the appearance of Command Presence. Paranoid? Not really. You watch other cars while you’re driving. Practice watching people wherever you are and it will soon become just as much of a habit. I’m sitting in a coffee shop as I write this. Every few moments, I look up and take the temperature of the room. Normal stuff happening? I go back to work.

Any time you’re in a public place, ramp up your awareness by scanning the crowd as though looking for a friend you expect to join you. In a restaurant, bar or club, if possible, choose a table near an exit but always sit where you can watch the door. Look for people who don’t seem to belong. Observe faces, of course, but body language too. The moment someone catches your eye, estimate their height and weight (you can check height against nearby doors and other fixed objects) and note what they’re wearing. Determine what made that individual stand out to you. Are they wearing a jacket or even a long coat on a very warm day? Sweating profusely on a cold day? Eyes constantly moving and refusing to meet yours or locked in on someone else...

perhaps a child? Or are they staring at you? Repeat their description to yourself or scribble it down.

Cops are taught to watch hands. That's a good tactic for us to practice, too. If they're going to do something to you, chances are it will be with their hands. Does the person have one hand out of sight? Are both hands in a hoodie front pocket clutching something that bulges and weighs the pocket down? Or is one hand hovering near their waist, ready to drag a jacket or shirt out of the way to free a weapon? Guns are cumbersome. Most amateurs who carry firearms aren't expert at concealing them. Stuck in a belt without a holster, pistols tend to shift position and their owners are constantly trying to keep them secure. They'll pat the area where the weapon is kept, lift sagging pants and, in some cases, even walk with an odd gait. Watch their entire beltline: over the groin in front, right and left side, and particularly in the small of their back. What's attached to their pockets? Knives are often carried with a clip that shows on the outside of the pocket. It could be a small pocket knife or a switchblade. Either way, if they confront you, it'll be handy to know they have a weapon, especially if you don't.

Be aware of, and use, your environment to keep you alert. Was that broken streetlight working fine last night? Did it wear out, or are there glass fragments on the ground around it signaling that it's been recently broken to keep the area dark? How about the light over the ATM kiosk outside your bank? Are there a dozen

vehicles parked in the public garage or just a panel van in the spot next to yours? Are there people you don't know hanging around your church or business parking lot or even in the street outside your home? Several folks saw individuals loading a pickup that was backed into my neighbor's driveway a few years ago but didn't think anything of it... until my neighbor's granddaughter called police. She read it as a burglary in progress. She was right.

It's an old spy movie trick but still useful and valid: when you walk down a street, use reflections in window glass to watch other people around you and to see if you're being followed. Be alert to individuals who seem to give you more than a passing glance. It may be a compliment to your looks or it could be they have something sinister in mind. If they appear nervous, looking from you and back over their shoulder like a guilty child about to do something bad, take that especially into account. Always check for occupants in the vehicles you approach and again as you walk past.

A former British special forces (SAS) operative once pointed out to me that humans learn emotion before rational thought. He added that those who live with the threat of sudden violence learn to reverse the sequence, suppressing fear in favor of action and rapid planning. I haven't trained my brain to do that but, as a novelist, I regularly visualize attack scenarios. I ask the fiction writer's favorite question: "What if?" Occasional dives into your imagination are a great way to stay focused.

What if someone with a gun rushed into the room or the place caught on fire or the lights went out? Think about ways the people nearby might react. Think about the ordinary items around you that are available as weapons (a fire extinguisher, an overturned table or chair, a cup of hot coffee, or even an empty water glass). Where would you hide? As noted earlier, consider how to move and what route you would take to an exit. Don't let your visualization become an escape into fantasy or fear, however. Assess and move on. And always have a plan.

Listening is another way to orient yourself to what's happening around you. Drop the headphones, shut off your videos, and eavesdrop a little. You may think it's rude but the idea is not to focus on (or become distracted by) one specific chat, no matter how fascinating. Rather, keep your ear tuned to the ambient level of conversation in the room, topics discussed nearby, and the intensity of those speaking. A debate can turn physical with little warning. The only heads-up you get may be threats, loud expletives, or the scraping of chairs as the combatants rise to do battle. Make a point of noticing what's happening around you and eventually it will become second nature to do so.

You can do a variety of looking and listening awareness drills at home.

Choose a room. Take a good look around. You know this room well, right? Now close your eyes or, better yet, walk out. Get someone else to remove an object or

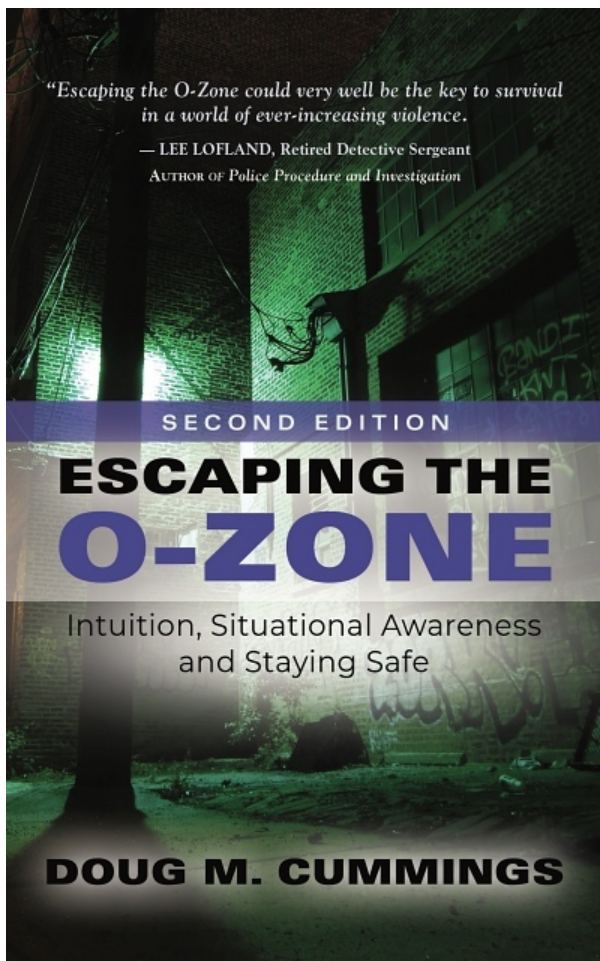
two. Take another look and see if you notice what's missing. Have other family members choose a room for themselves and practice the same drill.

On a nice day or evening, sit in your yard or on a porch or balcony with your eyes closed. Listen. Try to get an idea of what's going on around you just using your hearing. A conversation at the neighbors? Your kids arguing? What are the smells in the air? Now try this drill in public, in a park, or at a mall. See what you can identify with your eyes closed. It's a good idea to have a friend with you when you try this anywhere but at home.

And, obviously, choose a safe place to practice!

#SAFETYTip: If attacked, sniff. Your sense of smell can provide clues to police. Identify fragrances such as cologne, after-shave, or body odor.

#SAFETYTip: Do you have a typical routine each day? Consider changing it up. Don't be predictable.



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