

Mind Over Matter: How Your Mindset Affects Performance Under Stress

[Dr. Martin Greenberg](#)

Police officers are no strangers to the impact of stress on their work. Whether entering a potentially volatile scene or facing scrutiny in a courtroom, officers are constantly balancing the pressures of their role. Amid these demands, understanding how mindset affects physiological responses is becoming increasingly relevant. This article explores how a “threat-versus-challenge” mindset can influence one’s body and performance during high-stakes situations. By viewing stressors as challenges rather than threats, officers can influence their body’s response to stress and manage arousal levels, improving their chances of making clear-headed, effective decisions under pressure. Traditional law enforcement training already incorporates many foundational concepts that can influence physiological responses. Concepts like Colonel John Boyd’s [OODA Loop](#) and Jeff Cooper’s [Color Codes](#) are undoubtedly familiar to generations of readers. Here, we detail the immense potential that arises when proper mindset complements physical skills and tactical competence, allowing officers to better manage their physiological responses and potentially improve decision-making outcomes in critical moments.

The Impact of Mindset on Physiology

The idea that mindset can affect physiological states is supported by modern stress and decision-making models, such as the [BioPsychoSocial Model of Challenge and Threat \(BPM-CT\)](#). This model proposes that viewing a situation as a challenge, as opposed to a threat, can lead to a more favorable physiological response. When someone perceives a situation as a challenge, the body’s response is geared toward maximizing performance: heart rate increases, cardiac output is enhanced, and blood flow improves to key organs. This “challenge state” primes the officer for optimal engagement with the task at hand. In contrast, a “threat state” is more defensive. It constrains blood flow, heightens vascular resistance, and diverts energy to a “fight-or-flight” response, which can detract from the ability to think clearly and act effectively.

Every officer has likely experienced a moment when they felt they were “in the zone”—where their actions felt natural and fluid, and their responses were on point. This often occurs when a person’s perception shifts toward viewing a stressor as a manageable challenge rather than an overwhelming threat. By fostering this mindset, officers can reduce some of the body’s natural but potentially restrictive reactions to stress.

The OODA Loop in Practice

Developed by Colonel John Boyd, the OODA Loop—**Observe, Orient, Decide, Act**— offers a framework for quick and effective decision-making in high-stress environments. Boyd’s work is well-respected among police and military professionals for its emphasis on rapid adaptation to changing circumstances. Rather than a rigid, linear process, the OODA Loop is a constantly adapting feedback system. An officer’s mindset plays a crucial role in this loop. For instance, an officer viewing a situation as a challenge may be more attuned to relevant cues during the “Observe” phase, orienting themselves faster and allowing more flexibility in the “Decide” and “Act” phases.

Cooper’s Color Codes, another well-known system, work seamlessly with the OODA Loop. The Color Codes help officers maintain situational awareness by assigning different levels of alertness—from relaxed awareness in “Condition Yellow” to a ready-for-action state in “Condition Red.” The value of this system is widely acknowledged among law enforcement, as it reinforces a proactive, rather than reactive, approach. By shifting perception toward a challenge state within the OODA Loop and Color Code systems, officers may better process their environment and engage in decision-making that results in a tactical advantage.

Challenge vs. Threat: A Balance Within Training

Training focused on situational realism can help officers naturally adopt a challenge mindset. Realistic scenarios are structured to mirror on-duty encounters, fostering resilience and familiarizing officers with high-pressure decision-making. High-fidelity, interleaved decision-making training has been shown to be more effective than traditional “block and silo” approaches, which, though they may provide initial skill acquisition, are less effective at preparing officers for real-world encounters. By engaging officers in dynamic environments where they’re encouraged and ultimately prepared to view scenarios as challenges, trainers reinforce a mindset that promotes more adaptive physiological responses.

Importantly, however, a challenge-oriented mindset doesn’t imply that an officer will experience less arousal—rather, it enhances focus and supports optimal arousal, allowing the officer to use physiological arousal constructively. By reinforcing this understanding, training programs equip officers with the tools to actively control how they perceive and experience stress, preparing them to perform at their best in time-critical scenarios.

The Role of “Naturalistic Decision Making” and Automaticity

In the high-stakes world of law enforcement, decisions are often made in mere seconds, and effective training builds the foundation for these split-second decisions. Dr. Gary Klein’s concept of “[Naturalistic Decision Making](#),” or “[Recognition-Primed Decision Model](#),” argues that expert decision-making results from patterns and schemas developed through exposure to repeated, realistic experiences. These experiences provide a blueprint that officers can draw upon automatically when similar circumstances arise.

This principle is particularly relevant when an officer’s initial interpretation of a situation could either lean towards a threat or a challenge state. Through repeated exposure to challenging situations, officers can develop schemas that help them recognize which situations demand caution and which allow for a more direct, assertive approach. Automaticity here refers to the level of skill where actions can be executed without conscious thought, allowing officers to allocate mental resources toward situational awareness and tactical judgment rather than focusing solely on mechanics.

Encouraging a Balanced Mindset in Law Enforcement Culture

Effective law enforcement relies on a balance between skill and mindset. Viewing stress through the lens of “good stress” (eustress) versus “bad stress” (distress) helps officers make the most of the body’s natural response systems. Trainers can enhance officers’ abilities by helping them learn how to use stress to heighten awareness and concentration.

This also requires reinforcing the law enforcement culture. Officers should be encouraged to view themselves as both skilled professionals and resilient individuals capable of managing stress positively. A “challenge” mindset promotes proactive behavior, while a “threat” mindset can lead to more reactive, defensive actions. Officers can foster a challenge mindset through training that combines physical skill-building with techniques that boost mental resilience, such as mindfulness or controlled breathing exercises.

Conclusion and Future Outlook

Law enforcement is not merely a trade; it is an evolving and maturing profession that demands resilience, skill, and adaptability. While practical skills remain essential, the way officers perceive and respond to stress can significantly influence their performance. The challenge-versus-threat perspective is a powerful component of an officer’s toolkit. By adopting a balanced, resilient approach to stress, officers can harness their physiological responses, leading to clearer decision-making and improved outcomes in critical situations.

In a forthcoming white paper, I will examine the detailed components that support this model. The paper will explore the role of the quiet eye technique and map the neural pathways that affect performance under stress. Additionally, it will cover adaptable mental schemas, the BioPsychoSocial Model of Challenge and Threat, and Attentional Control Theory to offer a deeper understanding of how mindset and training affect physiological arousal.

This white paper will also address advanced de-escalation techniques, such as [Dr. John Azar-Dicken](#)'s TEB (Thoughts, Emotions, Behavior) Model and the Behavioral Influence Stairway Model, and explain how they can be integrated with adaptable mental schemas to facilitate effective communication and rapport-building in complex encounters. Furthermore, I will discuss automaticity, game theory, and the parallels between athletic and law enforcement training. These insights are intended to provide officers with a comprehensive understanding of the physiological and psychological factors that contribute to resilience, equipping them to pursue excellence as this profession continues to mature and adapt to the demands of modern policing.

About Guest Author

[Dr. Martin Greenberg](#) is a retired hand and trauma orthopedic surgeon with over 40 years in medicine and 24 years in law enforcement. A former police officer, SWAT operator, tactical medic, and police Medical Director, he pioneered Tactical Emergency Medical Support (TEMS) in Illinois, where over half of SWAT teams now have embedded TEMS units. As an [IMERT](#) Executive Council member, Dr. Greenberg has taught extensively on emergency response and authored [The Law Enforcement Medical Encyclopedia](#).