

## Module 2: Situational awareness and personal safety

[00:00:12] **Alison Baskerville** Hi, welcome back to module two, How to Report Safely: Strategies for Women Journalists and Their Allies. My name is Ali Baskerville, I'm your lead instructor. In module one, we looked at the risk assessment process. We looked at an effective communication plan, we looked at kitting equipment to think about when we're travelling on an assignment, and we also looked at personal protective equipment.

[00:00:41] In this module, we're going to focus on some travel and location safety, we are going to look at our situational awareness and we're also going to have a conversation with a working media professional who will also give you some invaluable advice about planning and travelling safely whilst working as a journalist.

[00:01:06] So let's take a look at one of the first elements of working as a journalist, and also some of this advice will be useful in your day-to-day activities. The first thing that we're going to look at is situational awareness. And this is something that's helpful, again, for all of us in most settings, but particularly when we're working in a high risk or challenging environment. Now, we are all capable of knowing when there's a threat. We have a built in survival instinct and it comes from a very primal part of our brain.

[00:01:47] It's often referred to as the limbic system, and it also is that part of us that initiates us to react when we feel we're in danger. The three main elements to this -- the fight, flight or freeze. And in some areas, we talk about appease. So I'm going to talk about these in a little bit more detail and see how they affect our ability whilst on the ground on how to manage some of those risks. Because when we're in this fight/flight/freeze part of ourselves, it can be quite difficult to make decisions. And circling back to the risk assessment process, if we have a plan in mind when we do face a threat, it actually makes that decision making a lot easier because we've actually already thought it through and it's still in our brain somewhere so we can access that.

[00:02:44] So we have what's called our built-in survival instinct, our gut instinct, that intuition that tells us something isn't right. "The presence of the abnormal and the absence of the normal" has always been a mantra that I've used when working in risky situations. This could often be a change in the environment that you're in, perhaps a place that you're walking has poor lighting, perhaps there's normally people there and on this particular day, there's nobody there. We may not know specifically what the risk is or the threat, but indeed we can get a sense that something isn't quite right, and it's normally a moment when we get some hairs standing from the back of our neck or on our arms.

[00:03:33] So we do know that something isn't quite right, but what can we do beyond that so that we can make a good decision about what to do safely? Well, the first thing to do is to understand what your personal space is to you, and often we would imagine that an arm's distance away from us is kind of our circle of protection. When people get beyond that, then we feel something inside of us which makes us feel quite anxious because people are getting into our personal space.

[00:04:06] I often use Stanley Cooper's colour code here, which is basically a really good way of measuring by using a colour code system when somebody is getting into our personal space. Now, if you look at the graph here, you can see that on the white grey area, this is often when we're very unaware of what's going on around us, and we've all done this where we're absorbed in a book or we're listening to music on the train or in

public transport or completely engrossed in something other than what's going on around us. So this leaves us in a quite unaware situation.

[00:04:48] Now, when we're going to a new place or when we're going about our work, we kind of want to be out of that zone. We want to be more sort of the yellow, which is aware but not alert. And as you can see on the scale, it tends to go up depending on what the threat is and how approximate that is to us. And the reason why this is helpful to think about is because we don't want to be in this red zone all the time, because this is when we're highly adrenalized and this is when we are in the danger zone, when somebody is a threat or something is a threat to us. -.

[00:05:23] Now, from a psychological point-of-view, being adrenalized all the time is also really exhausting. And those of you that have experienced this will know that there are physical symptoms of being under stress -- raised heart rate, quick breathing, sweaty palms. You know, all those things will eventually take away your energy so we don't want to be here for too long. So we have to think of ways to kind of get ourselves out of that red zone and start to get our nervous system more calm.

[00:05:55] In the final module of this course, we're going to talk a little bit more about this, because it also has an effect on our mental well-being as well. Situational awareness is important because once we've done the risk assessment and we have planned for contingencies that we're aware of after doing research, then we have to also rely on our survival instincts and our own awareness when we're actually out and doing the work. It's very different when you're on the ground and reporting as it is to when you start planning for your reporting trip.

[00:06:35] So we have to rely on those survival instincts that we've already talked about to kind of give us a sense of any potential unknown risks that might happen in front of us or around us whilst we're working. Now, some of this can be managed and sometimes it happens spontaneously. Now this gut instinct I talked about is something that you become more aware of with experience, and a lot of you will already have gone through this yourselves and will have known when you get that feeling in your chest or the stomach when something isn't quite right.

[00:07:15] And I would always encourage you to listen to that, not to ignore it. You may find your colleagues who are probably might be more risk averse or the opposite way, are more willing to take different risks and certainly may have even habituated the risk and normalised it because they've been exposed a lot to it may try and encourage you to ignore that. But again, it takes courage to kind of listen to that and act upon it. It also helps us to make what I call a dynamic risk assessment, and this has been able to think quickly on your feet and look at ways out of a situation.

[00:07:54] The first and the best way to de-escalate any thing that's happening in front of you that poses a risk is avoidance. After all, we don't want to get pulled into a situation. We want to avoid it. Now, this might be challenging if you were a videographer or a photographer when you're in a protest situation and you need to get the images. But remember about exposure time, you don't need to expose yourself for risk any longer than you need to to get those pictures that you need to get. And often there would be a repetition of the same type of image because we have been drawn in to the event itself and have put ourselves in risk for longer than we need to.

[00:08:34] Now, situational awareness can be limited because of the types of work that you do. If you are holding a camera, as soon as you put this up to your face, then you're already blocking your vision. And this is why we always encourage you to work in pairs or work with a colleague, and certainly if you're doing video work, to have somebody behind you and giving you guidance in movement if you're working in a very crowded situation.

[00:09:02] Another important thing with your awareness and your situational awareness is to make sure that you use your voice. Often when something appears in front of us, particularly somebody walking at us or walking towards us, our appearance can make a big difference in this, the way we carry ourselves, keeping our chest up, head up and appearing in confidence even though we might be scared inside. We give that perception of confidence, and sometimes challenging somebody and using a stern tone of voice can deter a potential attack. What we don't want to do is to get into an argument with somebody and start shouting at them, but sometimes we can use a firm tone to let somebody know that we are not vulnerable and to take away this idea of us being a victim to them.

[00:09:56] One of the other threats that we often face is crime. Now, everybody has different motivations to take something from you, attack you, hurt you. And I think in a way, what we need to access here is to also not only be aware of our personal space, aware of our exits, where we can get away from any kind of threat, but also potentially using the power of being a journalist and being a good communicator to perhaps negotiate our way out of a situation. There's often been cases where you will empathise with the person trying to take something from you to find out a little bit more about what they want.

[00:10:40] Now, you don't need to interview them, but at the same time, your tone of voice can really make a difference to how the situation plays out. Don't forget, that person who's trying to attack you or harm you is in their fight, flight or freeze mode and will probably be in the red zone. So they're not necessarily going to be thinking rationally and again, you will also potentially be afraid if somebody is trying to harm you. So sometimes a quick few questions about what they actually want from you can be quite helpful.

[00:11:14] I'd also think about avoidance again here, and it's very helpful to have a throwaway purse or wallet, or have you want to call it to throw at somebody, if that's what they're after is after money. It gives you time and space, then, to either make an exit or run away from it. Now, this awareness is vital to have when we're reporting. I would also encourage you to keep that level of awareness until you get to a safe haven, because often when we're on assignments and when we're on the ground, we tend to move away from a space which is being quite risky and quite dangerous, and as we travel back to a location, we tend to drop our guard.

[00:11:58] Try and keep that level of awareness at a good level until you actually get back to your hotel room or wherever you're staying and are able to kind of decompress. This brings me nicely to talk about hotel and location safety. You should view your hotel room as a safe haven. It is the place for you to go back and rest, maybe file your work and to decompress. Remember, when you've been through difficult situations, you will have potentially been adrenalized. Therefore, your fight, flight freeze has been activated and of course, your nervous system will have been put into a higher state.

[00:12:44] Therefore, we have to think about how we decompress. So your hotel is a really big part of that. Now, most of the time we stay in hotels, sometimes we might stay in a

embassy location, we might stay with an NGO or we might stay in a self-catering accommodation such as Airbnb. So I'm going to go through a few pointers here about how to maintain safety within these different locations.

[00:13:13] Now, going back to the planning phase we talked about in module one, we really also need to think about booking. And again, this comes down to research, and when you're looking at where to stay, it's helpful to know how far away the hotel is from the airport or where about to go travelling from. Not everyone's going to fly into places; people will travel by car, some people are travelling across state to a different location that they haven't worked in before and staying in an Airbnb. But make sure you have an understanding of the time and the distance it is to take there.

[00:13:47] And also in relation to where you're working, where is the nearest town village? Maybe there's a few different locations that are going to be helpful for you if you're interviewing different people. It may be that there's a space in the hotel that you're staying that you might want to meet people. But again, this really comes down right back to the start, again, our risk assessment about the nature of what we're doing. If you're going to be interviewing people who are quite at risk, especially sources, you need to have a separate location to interview them that's safe for them to get to and also safe for you to get to.

[00:14:25] We'll talk about this a little bit more in a moment. But for your personal safety, we need to pick a location that offers us some physical security or social security for personal belongings and also for our well-being. So ahead of your trip, it's useful to book using a personal credit card if you're working for a staff organisation. The reason for this is that if you use an organisational name, it may alert somebody to the fact that you were arriving and gives them an opportunity to access any information about you, but also in a worst case, plant any devices inside your hotel rooms, which has happened in the past.

[00:15:05] So don't give people too much of a clue about your arrival and be careful about who you share your itinerary with before you go anywhere, especially if it's high risk. If it's high risk, we shouldn't be advertising our travel plans on social media before we get there. So when booking a hotel, we can easily use just the first initial of a name and a surname to avoid making any reference to our gender, which can be very helpful. Also, we can choose where we want to stay. Again, it's a bit difficult because finding a hotel and saying I want to stay between the second and the fifth room of the hotel might not always be possible.

[00:15:47] But when we do arrive, we can actually change our room and use different reasons for why we're changing it, whether it's the view, whether it's the facilities in the room, you don't have to be so specific in saying, "I'm doing this for my own safety" because a lot of hotels won't really understand that. And also, we don't want to highlight that we're concerned about our safety just because. We're not always aware of who's around us when we're in these locations, because we don't know every guest in the hotel.

[00:16:17] Also, when we book these places to stay, again, get some referrals from other journalists, and of course, when you're researching, you will come across different places that become the kind of go-to spot for media workers and NGOs. And also, if you're not moving to a different country or place and you don't need to stay particularly in one hotel, of course, do the same kind of research for any Airbnb location that you're going to stay in. For some of you, you may just be staying with family members and you may, of course, be working and living in the location that you report in.

[00:17:03] So there's different elements that apply here. And again, if you're moving, working in a location where you live, then still consider having separate locations to meet people, sources, that is, that you have thought through and have a plan in place for that. I just want to talk about peepholes here and indoors. You can actually buy a device called a peephole reverser, which you could easily buy on Amazon, which can actually look into the room and give you a very clear view. So therefore, I would advise you to actually cover up that little hole on your hotel room door if you do have one.

[00:17:49] It's interesting because in the past we would have seen this as a useful tool, but with devices like this now available, then obviously it's not so helpful. So, again, cover it up. The same as you would do for your laptop webcam camera as well whilst you've got your laptop open in your hotel room. So when you're in your room itself, again, we need to make it a safe space, so using the locks are available to you on the doors. Remember, if you're booking a room and you don't feel those locks are good enough or they're broken, then asked to be moved to a different room.

[00:18:26] As well as this, we can create a feeling of safety by actually making sure we've got an alarm doorstop. Now, a normal doorstop we would put inside the door, but actually they don't really work that well because what they whilst they might prevent someone from pushing the door in, they don't really let you know that somebody is coming in unless you start to hear the noise. So therefore, you need something that's got a really loud, audible sound, because often if someone's going to break into your room, it's going to be late at night or in the small hours of the morning, so you'd potentially be asleep.

[00:19:00] So you need something a bit more urgent that's going to wake you up. So we recommend taking either an alarm doorstop or you can get a portable door alarm to put inside the door itself. If you're travelling with colleagues, make sure that you know each other's room numbers, very simple. But of course, if you need to get help, then at least you know what room to phone and also if they need help or know how to get to you, etc..

[00:19:27] It is good to know, also, where the emergency exits are in the hotel. It's not always easy to memorise this sort of information, but I would recommend you take a photo of the schematic of a hotel which you can often find inside each lift or where there's an emergency exit. I'm just going to touch a little bit here on one of the more high threat situations of staying in hotels, and that's from terrorist attacks or active shooter incidents. Now, you have limited options in this situation because of where you are, how many exits are available to you, and, of course, the confusion and chaos that will ensue in an incident like this.

[00:20:10] I would say you've got three main options really here. If you're in the hotel and you can run and get away, do it. And again, this is going to be very much based on that fight, flight or freeze reaction. If you're in your room, stay in your room because the time it might take for you to find an exit might put you in exponential risk. And if you're inside your room, lock your door and form a barricade, turn your phone on to silent, make sure that it can't be heard. Turn your lights off and use as many items as possible to put against the door -- mattress, chairs, table, the thicker object the better.

[00:20:46] So a mattress is always a good option and hide and stay there until someone arrives. Again, don't be tempted to run at this point. Make a commitment. If you're going to stay in your room, stay in your room. If you're going to run, run because you won't have much time in this particular incident. Another aspect to looking after our location and making sure it's safe is meeting locations as well as the hotels safety. Now, remember our

hotel room, our Airbnb, our lodgings, our guest house is our safe haven. And we sometimes there's a neutral space to meet potentially a source or someone who is at risk.

[00:21:28] Again, we have a duty to look after the people that we potentially are going to work with us and try and put some very basic safety measures in when where possible. Now, a meeting location is something that you should pre-research. It's helpful once you get to where you're going to go and look for it yourself. It's good to be in the venue, have a look around, to see where all the exits are where the entrances are and make sure you know how to get there. Now, make sure you know a couple of routes in and out, OK, rather than just having the most easiest route there and the most easiest out.

[00:22:08] This is mainly for surveillance. If you think someone is following you to that location, you could easily change direction to see if they're still following you. It's called just doing a dogleg. It's a very obvious, illogical route and if someone stays with you, it means that they're potentially following you. Therefore, you can cancel that meeting if you want to and rearrange it for another day. But again, it's thinking about who are you going to bring to you to this location with you.

[00:22:39] So let's think a little bit more than about the safety of the place itself. And we want somewhere private, we want somewhere that's not overheard. We want somewhere that someone can perhaps keep an eye on it for us. Maybe it's another journalist, maybe we have a fixer or a translator with us. Again, our person helping us to translate it is going to be in the meeting with us, but can someone be outside and close to the exits or can we predetermine a point where we want to be picked up from?

[00:23:10] Now, in some instances, you might want to meet in a busy place, because actually that gives you a little bit of cover in the sense that you may not be talking about anything too sensitive at this point. It may be your first meeting. But again, think about your profile in the situation. Of course, if you're meeting somebody and you're a white journalist in a all Middle Eastern space, then therefore you are going to attract attention. So do you have a good cover story for why you're there? Is it OK for you to be completely open about what you're doing there?

[00:23:43] So think a little bit about the type of place you're going to meet people and the attention it will bring to you, but more importantly, the attention it will bring to the person that you're interviewing. And again, these are questions to be asked of the person that you are going to meet. Again, they will have their own safety concerns so it's really important to make sure they have space to air those with you.

[00:24:06] So, we've covered quite a bit here about hotel safety or places to stay and thinking about the some basic security measures we can put in place to make them feel safe, but actually to be more safe. And we've also looked a little bit more about locations of where we might meet sources and also places that we could go to if we want to interview somebody. So to summarise, we've now covered how to make your hotel lodging safer for you to stay in to create a safe haven, what to do if the worst case happens in that location, and we've also talked about location, safety for meeting sources or people that you're going to interview.

[00:24:55] Don't forget to check out the extra readings and also take part in the discussion forum and the quiz. And I'll see you for module three, where we're going to talk about harassment, gender based violence, and have some insightful conversations with people to give us more information and also to give us more lived experience about this wide

spreading situation that affects many women and LGBTQ journalists working in the world today.