



# FRIGHT

BY **ARI KANDEL**

# REACTION

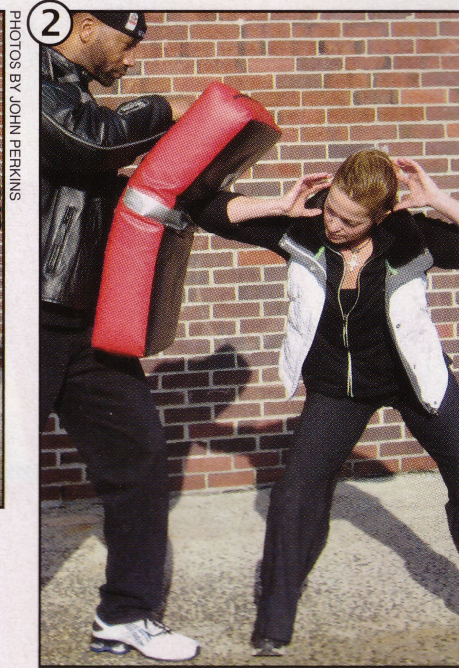
## The Cornerstone of Effective Self-Defense Takes Advantage of a Basic Physiological Response to Fear

### The worst-case scenario

for students of personal protection is the surprise attack, aka the ambush. It happens when you get little, if any, advanced warning prior to an assault—because of a lapse in your awareness, the cunning of the attacker(s) or both.

Note that “surprise attack” refers not to a single move or technique but to the assault in its entirety. Rarely, if ever, will a determined criminal stop at one move. The surprise attack—whether the immediate goal is knockdown robbery, abduction or murder—is usually a hellstorm of chaotic violence that doesn’t stop until the attackers have achieved their goals. And even then, it might not be over.

Reality check: If a criminal with lethal intentions manages to fly under your radar and get the drop on you before you’re even aware of his presence, you’re most likely finished. No amount of martial arts training will protect you from an undetected bludgeon, blade or bullet to the back of the head. That said, assuming that you allow it to operate, your subconscious awareness is amazingly good



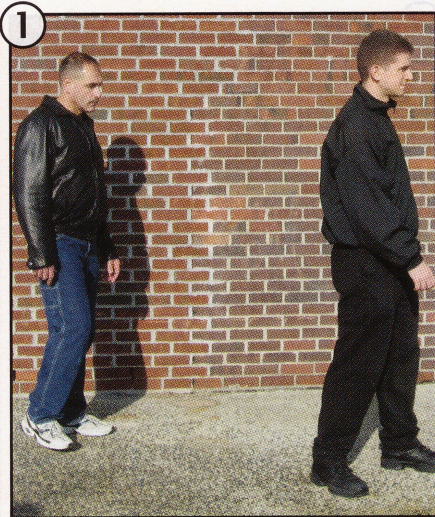
PHOTOS BY JOHN PERKINS

**↑ A BASIC FRIGHT-REACTION DRILL:** *The student stands with her eyes closed (1). Her partner attempts to slam her with a kicking shield and knock her off-balance, causing her to drop into a low stance, regain her balance and prevent a second slam (2). She follows up with a flurry of advancing strikes before running away (3).*

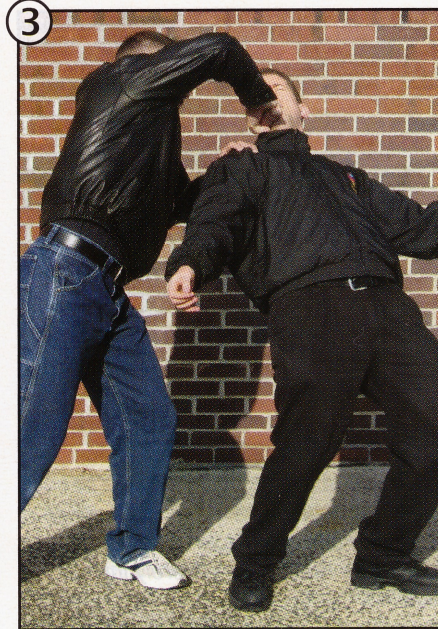
at picking up imminent threats, especially at close quarters. The “sixth sense” that people talk about, especially soldiers and police officers who have the experience

of inexplicably dropping to the ground or otherwise moving decisively a split second before an ambush, is simply the subconscious mind’s utilization of the five senses

to pick up and act on cues of impending danger before the conscious mind can process them. In the surprise-attack situation, the odds are good that your subconscious



**1** **A BAD SITUATION:** A criminal stalks his victim (1). The thug grabs the man's shoulder and yanks him off-balance (2), setting him up for a knockout punch (3).



**1** **A BAD SITUATION MADE BETTER:** This time, as he's yanked backward, the defender uses Fright Reaction training to secure his balance and cover his head while incidentally injuring his attacker with his spearing elbow (1). The defender follows up with a palm strike to the jaw (2), plus any additional strikes that are necessary to secure the time and space he needs to escape.



close-quarters combat, especially once it's been trained for optimum efficiency and the conscious mind has been trained to stay out of the way. Allowing the subconscious mind to take over when appropriate, thus preventing the conscious mind from slowing things down through denial, confusion or over-analysis, requires proper training and mind-set.

Even the subconscious mind, however, faces an initial speed bump in a surprise attack: the startle response. Observe the people around you the next time a truck backfires or some other loud noise occurs, or watch a person's reaction when a large insect lands on his head. You'll most likely see some or all of the following involuntary actions:

- The body drops into a slight crouch.
- The shoulders and hands move toward the head as the head retracts into the torso.

■ The upper body shrinks away from the perceived direction of the stimulus.

These are some of the more apparent physical components of the startle response. The response is hard-wired into the human nervous system, and no amount of training can obliterate it in a psychologically normal human being. It's the natural and useful response to an unexpected, sudden, potentially threatening stimulus. Rather than attempt in vain to overcome it or replace it, you're better off working with and even enhancing it.

Note that it's impossible to "change" the

will pick up *some* cue of impending trouble, be it a glimpse of rapid motion (or its reflection or shadow), a sudden sound or the initial moment of contact with the attackers (assuming that the initial contact wasn't a decisive hit to a vital area).

The problem with the surprise attack is that even with a split-second's warning, you have almost no time to assess the situation, select an appropriate response and prepare for battle. Your conscious mind won't even have a chance to say, "Huh?" before the action begins.

That's one reason Guided Chaos cre-

ator John Perkins formulated a self-defense system to train the body to fight effectively on a purely subconscious level. To expect the conscious mind, in the normal civilian context of not expecting battle behind every corner, to instantly switch gears into a fighting state in the most critical first moments of an ambush, and to efficiently direct the body to counter and escape the ambush, is asking a lot. The subconscious mind, with its parallel-processing capability and hard-wiring to the proprioceptive system of the body, is much better equipped to guide the body through the chaos of lethal



**↑ A REALLY BAD SITUATION:** The victim is jumped by a gang. His balance gone and taking multiple blows to the head, he's likely to be severely injured or killed.

instinctive startle response into something it's not. Anything that deviates significantly from the basic movement patterns described above won't happen in the first instant of a real surprise attack. This means that any thoughts about instantly assuming a conventional "fighting stance" or moving directly into the threat are mere wishful thinking.

That said, it is possible, and indeed advisable, to make the startle response an integral part of your self-defense strategy and tactics.

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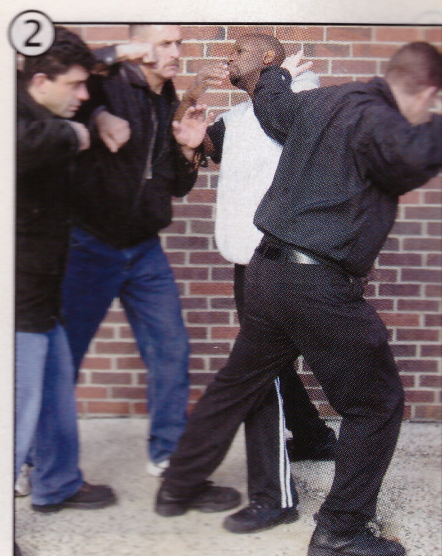
In Guided Chaos, the normal startle response is enhanced as follows to become the Fright Reaction:

- Balance is developed so the body drops explosively into a stable position when the normal crouching reflex occurs.

- The hands and shoulders are trained to come all the way up around the head, with the elbows held high to protect the head and neck while giving any attacker closing from the side something serious to deal with (spearing elbows). This is merely an extension of the natural tendency for the shoulders and hands to move toward the head and for the head to drop.

- The body is trained to immediately move, adapt and go on the offensive as soon as balance is caught. Freezing in confusion or attempting to orient oneself by looking around often follows the startle response. Such tendencies can spell doom in a surprise assault. Guided Chaos trains the body not to freeze up or look around ineffectually after the Fright Reaction starts. Instead, it instantly changes position (known in some circles as "getting off the X") while keeping the head and neck protected and striking out based on feel.

The fight-or-flight response, sometimes called the "adrenaline dump," enhances



**↑ A FIGHTING CHANCE:** This time, the defender responds to the swarm of attackers with a Fright Reaction technique that momentarily secures his balance and protects his head (1). His action gives him a chance to break away and attack the closest man with a chop to the neck (2). He follows up by palm-striking one attacker into the others, thus creating an escape route (3).

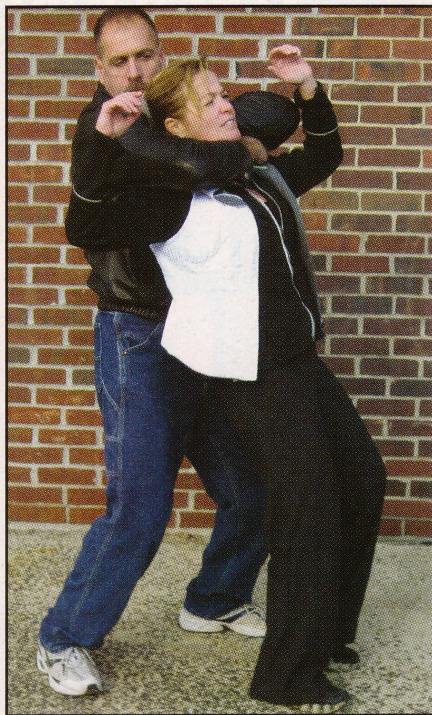
rather than hinders the movement of the Fright Reaction and the follow-up because the movements themselves are but extensions of the body's instinctive reaction.

The instant establishment of balance that the Fright Reaction offers is a critical factor in surviving a surprise assault. If the attacker throws you off-balance in the opening moments of the encounter—whether with a push or a hit or by causing you to duck or flinch awkwardly away from his movement (which is typically part of the startle response of an untrained person)—you probably won't be able to counter the assault because the attacker won't allow you to regain your balance until he's done. It's nearly impossible to move decisively and generate power or access weapons when you're stumbling or falling. The Fright Reaction and its balance training give you the chance to do something to counter the attack.

The raising of the hands and shoulders around the head, which takes place at adrenaline speed (i.e., maximum speed possible for a given human body) minimizes your chance of getting knocked out

or killed in the first seconds of the assault. The raising of the shoulders protects the sides and back of the neck, while the lowering of the chin protects the windpipe. The angle created at the back of the head and neck by the repositioned shoulders and chin, combined with the lowering of the body, makes it likely that any blows from behind directed at your head or neck will glance upward off the skull, rather than connect flush with the more vulnerable brainstem and cervical vertebrae. Your outward-pointed elbows serve to deflect or at least absorb any blows coming from the sides, displacing incoming forces with their strong wedgelike positions. Your chin and throat are protected by your shoulders and lowered head.

Blows directly from the front into the face are of secondary concern in any scenario that elicits a Fright Reaction. If an attacker approaches you from the front, your trained awareness will likely pick up the danger ahead of time, making a Fright Reaction unnecessary. Pre-emptive striking and/or moving off the line of attack while counterstriking are appropriate tactics to



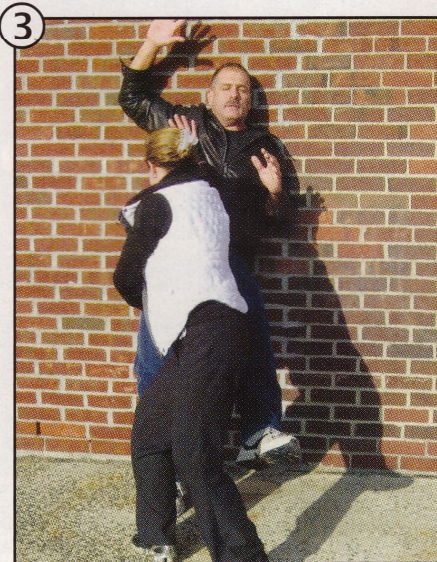
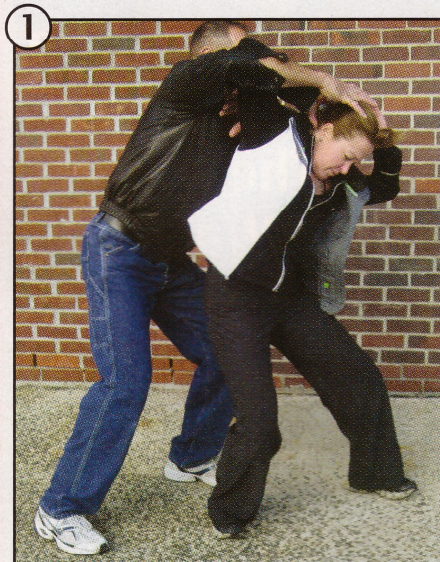
**↑ ABDUCTION:** The victim is jumped from behind by an attacker who uses a choke hold to control her so he can drag her away.

counter such an assault.

Any attempted grappling attack—for example, a bear hug, choke, arm or shoulder grab, or leg tackle from the rear or side—is disrupted by the explosive drop and widening of the base, along with the combined motion of the arms, shoulders and head, which tends to “shed” any upper-body grab attempts. A key advantage of the Fright Reaction is that it can deal not only with surprise grabbing attacks but also with all the factors that usually accompany such attack initiators. In contrast to what’s practiced in the average *dojo*, most attackers don’t simply grab a wrist or shoulder and stand there. They’re more likely to pull you off-balance into a strike or throw. The timing—a grab followed instantly by off-balancing and striking—often causes your defense, whether a joint lock or counter-strike, to fail. The Fright Reaction, on the other hand, enables you to regain your balance as quickly as possible while protecting your head and neck. Once balance

is restored, you’re in a “loaded” position to move and counter.

In many situations, the Fright Reaction is critical beyond the initial contact of a surprise assault. It’s common in a real attack to be initially aware of one or some of the assailants but not all of them—especially if they’re setting you up with a “front man” asking an innocent question while additional ambushers are waiting to strike while you’re distracted. There’s a strong possibility that even as you initiate and carry through your counterattack against the known threat(s), you’ll be hit from other directions by heretofore unknown accomplices or bystanders who misread the situation or simply decide to join in. A subconsciously driven, instant Fright Reaction in response to any of the above conditions will minimize damage to you, check the momentum of any attack, possibly injure attackers coming from oblique angles and set you up to counter and escape. Depending on the severity of the melee, your Fright



**↑ ABDUCTION PREVENTION:** This time, as the woman subconsciously perceives the sudden motion or the sound of the attacker, she uses Fright Reaction training to drop into a stance that momentarily prevents the man from securing the choke and breaking her balance (1). Her reaction also gives her the opportunity to attack the man’s groin (2), then turn and smash him into the wall (3) before escaping.

**“ A key advantage of the Fright Reaction is that it can deal not only with surprise grabbing attacks but also with all the factors that usually accompany such attack initiators. ”**

Reaction may be elicited multiple times in seconds as you battle to maintain balance and counter unseen attackers.

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Back when Perkins was a police officer walking a night beat, he was involved in an incident in which the Fright Reaction almost certainly saved his life during an ambush by a gang of criminals. Perkins had followed a suspect into a dark garage. After he entered the structure, he had to track the man by sound because his eyes needed time to adjust to the darkness. Seconds later, he was kicked in the back of the head by one of four criminals who were waiting in ambush on the back of an unseen flatbed truck.

Even as Perkins' brain teetered on the edge of unconsciousness, his body reverted to the Fright Reaction, which enabled him to catch his balance and took the juice off the ensuing torrent of blows from the five thugs. His training gave him the time he needed to recover enough to lash out by feel at the swarming attackers. His explosive strikes—mostly elbows, edge-of-the-hand blows and hammerfists delivered with “dropping energy”—and changes of position in response to what he felt bought him the space he needed to draw his baton and take the fight to them. More details about the incident and others can be found in his book, *Attack Proof*.

Note that if Perkins had lost his balance and fallen, he most likely would have been stomped to death. Likewise, had his body not subconsciously moved to protect his head and neck while he caught his balance, the near knockout of the initial blow would probably have been completed by the subsequent rain of strikes. While it was his Guided Chaos training in general that allowed him to blindly move and strike his way to safety, it was the Fright Reaction that gave him the chance to access those skills in the first place. ✘

*About the author:*

*Ari Kandel has a second-degree black belt in Guided Chaos. His previous 10 years of martial arts training included taekwondo, jeet kune do concepts, wing tsun, escrima, systema, judo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu and the mixed martial arts. For more information, visit [www.blackbeltmag.com/archives/who/](http://www.blackbeltmag.com/archives/who/).*



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To read Ari Kandel's "Guided Chaos: The Way of Adaptation," which appeared in the December 2007 issue, visit [www.blackbeltmag.com/chaos](http://www.blackbeltmag.com/chaos).