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# 5 MISTAKES THAT MAKE YOU A TARGET

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*A Personal Safety Guide from MAJ (Ret.) Will Rodriguez*

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*“The Gun is a Tool — You Are the Weapon.”*

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## Introduction

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I've coached more than 10,000 law-abiding civilians in personal safety. I spent 20 years as a U.S. Army Infantry officer studying how violence happens — and just as importantly, how it's prevented.

But my education started long before West Point.

I grew up in Bushwick, Brooklyn — one of New York City's most dangerous neighborhoods in the 1970s and early '80s. The FDNY was fighting a hundred fires a month there. Most of the kids I saw daily either died or went to jail. I was six years old when someone tried to break into our home through a bathroom window off a fire escape. I've been assaulted. I've had men discuss robbing me in Spanish on a subway platform, not knowing I was Puerto Rican and understood every word. I've had my home burglarized. I've had two men attempt to carjack me.

West Point polished me. The Army educated me further. But the foundation was built on those streets — and that perspective is one most credentialed instructors simply don't have.

Here's what that experience — combined with 15,000+ hours of instruction and deep study of criminal psychology, force science, and defensive law — has taught me about the mistakes that make good people easier targets.

### MISTAKE #01

## Feeling Safe in the Wrong Places

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Most people calibrate their awareness to their comfort level, not to their actual environment. They feel safe at their gym, their church, their favorite restaurant, their kids' school. That feeling is not threat assessment. It is familiarity. And familiarity is not the same as security.

Criminals don't share your emotional relationship with a place. They see environments through an entirely different lens — opportunity, escape routes, target density, police response time. The place that feels safest to you may be exactly the kind of soft, predictable, low-resistance environment a predatory actor scouts deliberately.

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### What to do instead:

Develop the habit of establishing a baseline. When you enter any environment, take a few seconds to read what normal looks like — who's there, how people are moving, where the exits are. This concept, developed at length in *Left of Bang* by Patrick Van Horne and Jason Riley, is the foundation of genuine situational awareness. An anomaly only registers when you know what normal looks like first. You don't need to be paranoid. You need to be present and calibrated — every time, everywhere.

## MISTAKE #02

# Letting People Get Too Close

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Most people have no real appreciation for what violence at contact distance feels like — and that gap leads them to allow proximity they should never permit.

Craig Douglas of ShivWorks is the leading authority on what he calls Managing Unknown Contacts — what I teach as Interacting with Strangers, always with a nod to Craig's foundational work. His ECQC curriculum (Entangled Close Quarters Combat) is built around one brutal reality: most violence happens inside the distance where your firearm is largely irrelevant. At contact distance, the fight is physical before it is anything else.

People allow others to get too close for several reasons. Social conditioning — we don't want to seem rude. Distraction — they didn't track the approach. Overestimation of their own capabilities. Anyone who has ever sparred knows the truth: no matter how good you are, you're going to get hit. The question is whether you saw it coming.

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### What to do instead:

Understand and protect reactionary distance — generally six feet or more from an unknown contact. When someone closes that gap uninvited, that is information. Learn to recognize the interview — the process by which a potential attacker tests your awareness and resistance before committing. The late Dr. William Aprill described it precisely: you are being interviewed for the job of victim. Recognizing that process early is often the difference between a situation that never develops and one that does.

## MISTAKE #03

# Projecting Vulnerability

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Predators read people. Quickly, efficiently, and with a level of accuracy that most civilians find uncomfortable to accept.

The late Dr. William Aprill — clinical psychologist, former law enforcement officer, and one of the most important minds in defensive training — drew on interviews with hundreds of incarcerated violent criminal actors to document how target selection actually works. His findings confirmed what the Grayson & Stein victim selection research established: criminals identify targets through non-verbal signals. Gait. Posture. Gaze. Awareness. These communicate, in seconds, whether you are likely to comply or resist.

Projecting vulnerability is what you communicate when you haven't thought about what you're communicating. Distracted movement, closed posture, downward gaze, hesitation — these signals say clearly: I am not paying attention and I will not be difficult.

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**What to do instead:**

Walk with purpose. Keep your head up. Make brief, calm eye contact. Project awareness without aggression. Dr. Aprill called this deselection — making yourself a no-go decision. His language was direct: your goal is to look unsuitable. Not threatening. Not aggressive. Unsuitable. That alone removes you from consideration for most predators.

## **MISTAKE #04**

# **Overconfidence Without Real Training**

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The Dunning-Kruger effect is well-documented — and absolutely rampant in the personal safety world. A little training, or no training combined with strong opinions, produces confidence that has no relationship to actual competency. In personal safety, that gap is dangerous.

As a young Major with twelve years of service, qualified to the expert level on everything from the 9mm to the 120mm cannon on the M1 Abrams, I considered myself competent with a firearm. Then I spent an afternoon with a former Delta operator who served with the Army Marksmanship Unit. What he did from the holster looked like special effects. It wasn't. It was the product of a genuine standard. That afternoon made me a lifelong student.

The second dimension of this mistake: thinking the gun is the entire plan. If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. A firearm is one tool in a system. Without situational awareness, de-escalation skills, open-hand capability, and legal framework — it's just hardware.

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**What to do instead:**

Seek training from credentialed instructors who will show you what the standard looks like and hold you to it. Train across the full spectrum — awareness, de-escalation, open-hand, non-lethal tools, and firearms. Always carry pepper spray and know how to deploy it. Competency is not a destination. It is a continuous practice.

## MISTAKE #05

# Projecting Capability the Wrong Way

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This one surprises people — and it's the mistake that even trained individuals make.

There is a balance between projecting awareness and projecting capability. Varg Freeborn addresses this directly in *Violence of Mind*: demonstrating that you can handle yourself may, with certain predatory actors, increase rather than decrease your risk. Against someone for whom violence is a familiar tool — not an aberration but a way of life — being perceived as a challenge can escalate rather than deter. They upgrade their approach. They ambush. They bring numbers.

Dr. Aprill's concept of deselection is the key: the goal is to look unsuitable, not dangerous. To communicate that you are aware, prepared, and not worth the trouble — not that you are a worthy adversary.

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### What to do instead:

Present yourself as purposeful, aware, and engaged. Not as someone advertising capability. Not as someone who looks like a rewarding fight. Someone who simply appears to be more trouble than you're worth. Difficult target. Not a challenge.

## Closing

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Personal safety is not about living in fear. It is not about hyper-vigilance, or assuming the worst about everyone you encounter. The enemy gets a vote. No plan survives first contact unchanged. You will not always see it coming.

What you can do is reduce your risk. Recognize situations before they become situations — so they won't become situations. Learn to communicate in ways that de-escalate. Present yourself as someone who creates uncertainty in a potential attacker's mind — not a challenge, not a target. Carry the tools and the training to apply force when force is the only remaining option — open hand, non-lethal, and lethal, in that order, applied lawfully, morally, and effectively.

These five mistakes are fixable. Most cost nothing but attention and intentionality.

### **Start there.**

When you're ready to build the full system — across Mind, Body, Gun, and Lifestyle — that's what GunJitsu is built for.

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## About the Author

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MAJ (Ret.) Will Rodriguez is the founder of GunJitsu and a Personal Safety Consultant with 15,000+ hours of instruction and 10,000+ GJs coached. He is a West Point graduate and combat veteran. What surprises people, given that pedigree, is where his real education began — in Bushwick, Brooklyn, one of New York City's most dangerous neighborhoods in the 1970s and early '80s. West Point polished him. Most of it was thirty years ago.

Primary credentials include Massad Ayoob Group (MAG) Deadly Force Instructor and Tom Givens' Advanced Rangemaster Certified Instructor. Force Science Institute coursework in progress.

Will coaches alongside his wife Denise Rodriguez, a women's personal safety and empowerment specialist with 8+ years of experience and thousands of GJs coached.

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