

The Fix:

Flinching

Photos by Peter Fountain

By George Harris

THE PROBLEM

Somehow you've developed this bad habit. Your accuracy has dropped and, despite your best efforts, you can't seem to beat it.

THE SOLUTION

You can eliminate flinching, but first let's define what it is, why you do it and what to do to overcome it. You are not alone and, in fact, it is a common problem all shooters encounter at one time or another. Some get over it easier than others, but it is a curable problem.

Flinching is a condition that materializes out of our subconscious. It is a physical response to an event that is perceived as unpleasant and possibly dangerous to our physical well-being. When dealing with firearms, it is stimulated by loud noise and the uncontrollable movement of a metal object in the area of our head and eyes.

The physical response is usually exemplified by the shooter closing his or her eyes while simultaneously pulling the trigger and pushing the gun away from the head. This action more often than not moves the muzzle of the gun off target, decreasing the likelihood of success to almost zero. The reason for this phenomenon is rooted in the crisis-control center of the brain called the amygdala.

Take a moment and think of how you would react if an unexpected loud noise were to occur the moment you were reading this.

Your train of thought would be broken, you would close your eyes momentarily, you would involuntarily tense your muscles, and most likely leave your seat in an effort to escape the source of the perceived threat. This is largely what happens when flinching takes place.

Conventional training suggests if you shoot enough, perhaps thousands of rounds, you will eventually overcome the phenomenon of flinching. This could be true, but there is an alternative method of overcoming this innate self-preservation response—one that requires less time and ammunition.

It is important to understand why the sound of a gun and the movement (recoil) in our visual field would be objectionable, especially if you had been shooting for a while.

In the arena of adult learning, it is generally accepted the average human can simultaneously process five to seven bits of information in the conscious mind in ideal circumstances. As the stress level increases, the number of information bits that can be processed decreases. This varies between individuals, but typical results

suggest only two to three bits of information are being processed while working with firearms.

In conventional firearms training, a student is taught stance, left- and right-hand grip, breathing, sight alignment, sight picture and trigger control, among other things. There is no room in the conscious mind to process all of this information, much less worry about what the gun sounds like or how far it moves in recoil.

Since the subconscious mind "downloads" information of this type by way of the conscious mind, there is little chance the subconscious has processed the message that a firearm's noise and the movement of a gun are of no consequence to the physical well-being of the rest of the body. Understanding how the brain learns and responds to threatening situations is essential to successfully eliminating fear of the gun and controlling the flinch while working with firearms.

Flinch can be overcome with lots of rounds and time, or with a magazine or two of ammunition and the Flinch Inoculation Drill, which was developed by a seasoned firearm instructor who made it his life's work to simplify shooting by eliminating roadblocks such as flinching. The key is to explain the causes of flinch response, and then provide a positive learning experience through practical application.

The Flinch Inoculation Drill ▶

enables the shooter to focus on gun noise and gun movement. Step one of the drill is to have the shooter point the gun into a suitable backstop with no target and fire the gun with his or her eyes closed. This, of course, should be supervised for safety. The initial point of attention is the sound of the gun only. The shooter is allowed to listen to each individual shot until he is comfortable with the report of the gun.

Step two is to feel the gun in

your hands as the muzzle rises and settles with each discharge. The eyes remain closed, and the shooter is allowed to shoot until he or she is comfortable with the gun's feel during discharge. In each of the first two steps, five to six rounds is the average number shooters need to accomplish the task—although no limit to the number of shots should be set.

Step three is for the shooter to ▶

watch the gun's movement from each side and from the rear, while only focusing on how the gun actually moves, again allowing the number of shots needed to satisfy the shooter.

These three steps allow the shooter to reassure their subconscious mind—through the cognitive download of practical experience—that the sound and movement of the gun are of no consequence to his or her safety.

At this point, there is no fear of the gun and little reason to flinch when firing it in the future. In fact, you may start to see things you have never seen before, such as brass exiting the ejection port or smoke and flash at the muzzle on either side of the front sight when it is in focus at the moment of discharge.

On rare occasions, some shooters may have to perform the Flinch Inoculation Drill periodically



because of long-term, deeply ingrained habits that sometimes surface at the most inopportune times. Hopefully, that won't apply to you as you advance to the next level of hitting what you want, when you want. S

During his 40 years of military service, Harris earned both the U.S. Army Distinguished Rifleman Badge and Distinguished Pistol Shot Badge. He cofounded and directed the SIG Sauer Academy in Epping, NH, before going on to serve as president and CEO of International Firearms Consultants, where he continues to teach firearms-related subjects on a variety of levels.

