



Neutralize The Twinge of Uncertainty

Are you glancing at the rib just before the shot, flinching, or hesitating to pull the trigger? You do so because you have a twinge of uncertainty.

BY JOHN D. SHIMA

All humans are born with a psychological and physiological need to be in control of themselves and the outcomes of their actions. In their article “Born to Choose: The Origins and Value of the Need for Control,” psychologists Leotti, Iyengar and Ochsner reported this need for control is linked to protective habits that form automatically to ensure our survival.

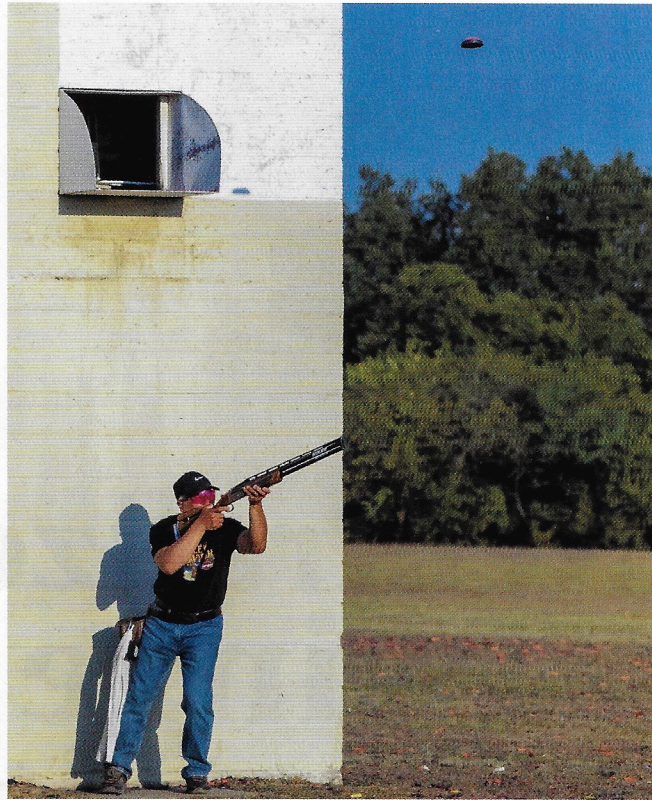
Every experienced shooter understands that watching the clay target is necessary to effectively point the muzzle of the shotgun toward where the target is going. Yet, the most common self-reproach I hear when a shooter misses a target is, "Damn, I looked at my gun again!" The problem of looking at the rib usually occurs in response to a brief moment of uncertainty just as the target approaches the break zone. The shooter's physical reaction to this twinge of uncertainty varies from a slight hesitation in firing the gun to a visible flinch. This article explores the underlying psychological and physiological reasons that cause the twinge of uncertainty during the clay target shooter's quest for certainty.

THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

Humans are inquisitive by nature. In the quest to maintain a degree of certainty in life, our rational mind is continuously analyzing real or perceived problems and making confident decisions that will achieve a desired outcome. Whenever a situation threatens our self-confidence and sense of emotional security, it creates an instant of doubt about our ability to control the desired outcome.

In her article "Living in the Moment: The Beauty of Uncertainty," Sheena Amin emphasized the need to

► Make it a conscious habit to do the right things the right way.



◀ Looking at the gun to make sure everything is aligned is a mistake of uncertainty.

quiet your mind to stop the process of analyzing and embrace the stillness that exists in the moment. Stillness can only be embraced when shooters allow themselves to accept an uncertain outcome. They need to care less about breaking the target, and care more about watching the target until it breaks.

It is impossible for shooters to completely suppress the need for control. However, it is possible for them to control what they are thinking and how they are looking. The key is to make a conscious habit of doing the right things, the right way.

THE CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS MINDS

The concept of duality ascribes to the premise that the human mind consists of two distinct components: the conscious and the unconscious. Tim Gallwey explained the concept of duality in his class book for athletes, *The Inner Game of Tennis*. In my book *The Moment of Truth*, I proposed that self-talk is the Ego Self talking to the Conscious Self with the intention to actively control all elements of the shot sequence. Meanwhile, the True Self, which represents the adaptive unconscious, merely waits quietly for the Ego Self to stop talking and get out of the way so it can automatically react and respond to the flight of the clay target.



I suggest there is a right way for clay target shooters to use their “three minds.” The role of the Conscious Self is to manage the pre-station and pre-shot routines; the role of the Ego Self is to manage the watching reflex; and the role of the True Self is to manage the shooting reflex.

I have described three distinct zones in the shot sequence that relate specifically to the shooter’s visual perception. The acquisition zone is around the shooter’s eye hold, which is where the peripheral vision detects the emerging target and determines its direction, speed and distance. The tracking zone is where the shooting eye centers primary visual focus on the target and adjusts

depth of focus to enhance visual discrimination of the target. The break zone is where the muzzle of the gun engages the target with the proper forward allowance based upon its direction, speed and distance. The right way means the shooter must apply undistracted concentration to gradually intensify visual focus on the target as it travels along its path toward the break zone.

CONCENTRATION AND FOCUS

I believe the two most important skills possessed by elite clay target shooters are concentration on the process and continuous focus on the target. Concentration is the ability of the shooter

to discipline the Ego Self to pay attention to just one thing — watching the next target continuously until it breaks. Focus is the ability of the shooter to visually transition from expanded soft focus in the acquisition zone, to centering focus on the target during the tracking zone, to hard focusing on a specific point on the target in the break zone. Extra hard focusing is also called hyper focusing.

Commit to the break point: Consistency in shooting is achieved through programming a precise pre-planned move for each target presentation through rigorous practice. The ideal execution of each shot requires the shooter to select the appropriate break point

▲ You’ll never reach your full potential until you can concentrate on the process and continuously focus on the target.

for each target and commit to firing the gun at that point on the target path, regardless of the perceived lead picture. In fact, the gun should fire at the ideal break point automatically.

Unfortunately, there is a pesky little trick the Ego Self utilizes to distract the shooter’s concentration on the target just prior to pulling the trigger. I call this trick the twinge of uncertainty. The Ego Self cannot concentrate on focusing really hard on a target for very long. The easiest way to manage this process is to begin with curiosity to acquire the target

correctly, and then gradually intensify primary focus on the target to see it clearly, and finally hard focus on a specific point on the target just prior to firing the gun.

Hyper focusing: The act of hyper focusing is the most critical instant of the shot sequence. Every element of the shot sequence can be executed perfectly and still result in a missed target if the shooting eye fails to hyper focus on the target. Hyper focus on a specific segment of the target requires conscious effort. I refer to hyper focusing metaphorically as doing visual crunches. Hyper

▼ You can beat the twinge of uncertainty by becoming emotionally detached from the outcome of the shot.

focusing maintains the shooting eye's point of focus and depth of focus on the target. Importantly, hyper focusing keeps the target in the eye's primary focus zone while maintaining an awareness of the muzzle in the eye's secondary focus zone.

Defocusing: The twinge of uncertainty suddenly disrupts the gradual intensity of focusing, which instantly alters the shooting eye's point of focus and the depth of focus as the target enters the ideal break zone. Rather than hyper focusing on a specific segment of the target, the shooting eye shifts the point of focus to the space between the target and the muzzle, which causes the depth of focus to recede to an area somewhere between

the end of the muzzle and the path of the target. This abrupt defocusing alters synchronization of the muzzle with the target.

The loss of hyper focus due to the twinge of uncertainty results in one of two unfavorable outcomes. If the shooter fires the gun at the ideal break point, the decreasing gun speed causes the shot to miss behind the target. More often, the shooter's Ego Self will sense the change in gun speed and analyze the problem, which results in riding the target past the ideal break point while attempting to move the muzzle into the "correct" position to salvage the shot. Following both scenarios, the shooter will say, "Damn! I looked at the end of my gun again!"

CAREFULLY MINDFUL

The Ego Self relies on its confidence in shooting mechanics and precise pictures to perform the elements of the shot sequence analytically. This method seems to work well for Careful shooters who are able to devote thousands of hours to practicing to achieve and maintain their skills over a long period of time. The Conscious Self relies on unconditional trust in the True Self to manage the adaptive unconscious (subconscious mind) to perform the elements of the shot sequence automatically. This method works well for Mindful shooters who are able to develop and maintain the mental and visual discipline



needed to watch the target until it breaks.

My friend Murrell Smith suggested that his inability to consistently hyper focus at the break zone feels to him like an unbalanced state between carefulness and mindfulness. We agreed that "carefully mindful" is a state through which Careful shooters must pass when they aspire to become Mindful shooters. It is also the state into which Mindful shooters slip when they are distracted by uncertainty.

NEUTRALIZE THE TWINGE OF UNCERTAINTY

It would be a neat trick if I could just place an eye patch on the shooter's eyeglass lens and raise the comb on the stock with moleskin to eliminate the twinge of uncertainty. Unfortunately, these



come emotionally detached from the outcome of the shot sequence. The shooter's desire to break the target must be replaced by an intention to watch the target until it breaks.

the gun at the break point that disrupts the thought that triggers the twinge of uncertainty.

• Emotional Discipline:

The third and most important step in the process requires the transition from shooting with confidence in a precise "picture" to shooting with absolute trust in a pre-planned move. Confidence in a precise picture is the product of conscious thought. Unconditional trust in a pre-planned move is a committed belief in the power of the adaptive unconscious. It requires discipline for the shooter to become emotionally detached from the outcome of the shot. Embracing stillness in the moment provides the foundation for emotional discipline.

The basic in-comer drill is an ideal training regimen for neutralizing the twinge of uncertainty. The slower incoming targets allow enough

▲ Complete trust in your pre-planned move will give you confidence to thwart the twinge of uncertainty.

"Neutralizing the twinge of uncertainty requires changes within the shooter."

shooting aids merely help the shooting eye look above and beyond the muzzle so it can predictably detect, acquire and track the clay targets. Neutralizing the twinge of uncertainty requires changes within the shooter. These internal changes involve three disciplines:

• Mental discipline:

The first step in the process involves mental discipline. Shooters must develop emotional freedom. By this I mean the shooter must be-

• **Visual discipline:** The second step in the process requires visual discipline. Shooters must consciously hyper focus on a specific segment of each target as it enters the break zone and consistently intensify their hyper focus on that segment while the shot is released and the target breaks. It is the emotional detachment from outcome, the intensification of hyper focus in the break zone, and the simultaneous automatic firing of

time to track the target while gradually increasing the intensity of focus and then hyper focusing on a point on the target just as it enters the ideal break zone.

Due to the small lead for incoming targets at stations 1 and 7, it might be necessary to modify the drill to use stations 2 through 6. The increased forward allowance required for incoming targets at these stations makes it easier to maintain the rib in secondary visual focus. The visual sequence is: look softly, see it, watch it, focus (hard) and fire! **CTN**

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