Five Stages of Growth

Sooner or later, most new defensive firearms instructors come to a startling realization: some people are really, really stupid. I'm talking monumental stupid. Epic stupid. Stupid beyond stupid. Black holes of stupid that actually suck all the stupid from the surrounding environment and collapse it into one gigantic pulsating ball of superconcentrated stupid. *Stupid!*

Unfortunately, some instructors never get over that phase. They never learn to respect their students for who they are, what they've learned in life, or where they are in their personal journeys. In the most unfortunate cases, they even graduate to thinking everyone is that level of stupid.

Don't be that guy.

Every single student is an adult human being who ended up in your class because they wanted to learn how to do things better and more safely. Even the slowest among them is smarter than you about something. Maybe a lot of things. Even the ones who flounder, who are clearly out of their element, are smarter than the ones who stayed at home and sat on the couch. Even the ones who have to be reminded over and over to keep their fingers off the trigger are better off than the guys posting on the internet about how they don't need to learn anything from anyone.

Every student is on a personal journey that you know nothing about, and has trusted you to help them on that journey. When you think about it, that's downright amazing. That trust deserves your respect and sometimes even your awe.

Growing a healthy self-defense mindset isn't easy. It takes time, energy, and a personal commitment to learning some tough truths. It forces us to face some ugly ideas, and brings us face to face with private doubts of our own. Most of all, it takes *work*.

Good instructors respect the work their students do, and strive to understand the struggle for personal growth that brings a learner into class. One way we show respect for the students' hard work is by making a strong commitment to hard work of our own – the work of understanding the stages of personal growth through which most people pass on their way to defensive readiness.

There are five distinct phases of growth in this sphere. The states are sequential, but nearly everyone passes through the later stages more than once, as if moving along a spiral pathway. Furthermore, because personal defense touches many different facets of life, it's possible to be a Stage One or Two person in some areas but a Stage Four person in others. We often see this in the student who owns, carries, trains, and practices with their firearm but is not willing to study unarmed physical defense skills: "I won't need any of that stuff! I have a gun."

As instructors, we want to help our students move forward into the next stage of growth every time we work with them. Understanding what happens inside each stage helps us do that more efficiently.

The stages are:

1. I won't.
2. I will.
3. I can't.
4. I can.
5. I *will.*

Stage 1: I won't. (The Reluctant Student)

In this stage, Denial is king. People here say *won't* a lot, as in, "I won't have to worry about that…" or, "It won't happen here" or, "I won't be the kind of person who does that." This isn't necessarily a willful denial. In many cases it's simply naiveté, a happily innocent belief that violent crime isn't a real problem that can happen to real people. Or that when crime does happen, it will always happen to other people in distant places, not to people you live near or care about – and certainly not to yourself.

Sometimes, when we think we see a student entirely within this stage, it's actually just unwillingness to use a particular tool or respond in a particular way to threatened violence. Don't discount that. They may be further along the path in their overall mindset than it seems at first glance.

People inside this stage often don't believe violent crime happens often enough to worry about. They don't think they will ever need to protect themselves; or they believe that if they do need to protect themselves, they either won't need a weapon or would be able to find something like a can of bug spray to do the job. In some cases, they may not believe they could do anything effective about a criminal attack. Whatever the root, the bottom line is that they don't intend to take steps toward improving their defensive skills.

> "Whether it is, 'I'm not the sort of person this happens to, this isn't happening,' or the equally devastating, 'I know what I should do, but I'm not the kind of person who would.' The identity, the perception the victim has, prevents action. Even, sometimes, at the cost of life." – Rory Miller

Almost everyone starts in this stage. Most people never leave it.

Although people in Stage One rarely seek out firearms training, we do meet them in class occasionally. Given the denial these folks experience, they usually feel no need to study defensive shooting for themselves, but will sometimes accompany a loved one to class or come for some other reason. Listen for the language: "I'm here because my boyfriend really wants me to learn how to shoot." Here's another: "I'm here to support my wife because she wanted to take this class from you." In both cases, the need or desire of the *other* person brings your Stage One student into your class. They aren't there for themselves –

though if you do a good job explaining the need for personal awareness and defense, they may yet catch your vision.

There's another type of belief that keeps people in Stage One. That's having an external locus of control. People with an external locus believe that the events of their lives, whether those events are good or bad, come to them because of some outside force that makes those things happen. When they do well on a test, it's because they were lucky or the teacher liked them. When they do badly, it's because the room was too hot or too cold, or the questions were poorly worded, or they were distracted because they didn't have their favorite pencil. This type of belief in the power of external forces over our lives makes it very difficult to willingly shoulder the very personal responsibility of self-defense.

> "I love sleeping in a cool room with warm blankets. I hate getting out from under those warm blankets and out into a cool room. Such is life – a series of leaving warm, comfortable places to do what you have to do." – Melody Lauer

The opposite belief, an internal locus of control, embraces personal power and some degree of influence over one's outcomes. When someone with an internal locus fails a test, instead of blaming the weather or poorly-worded questions, they meet with the teacher and figure out how to study more effectively for the next one. They naturally shoulder personal responsibility and strive to meet it well.

When we watch students for locus issues and tackle those issues appropriately, we can more easily help them move through this stage and onto the next.

As with the Stages as a whole, people can be internal locus in some areas of their lives and external locus in others. This isn't a fixed trait. But especially when it comes to avoiding or dealing with violent crime, many people confuse *power* with *blame*, and that makes this type of belief very resistant to change. When someone suspects that embracing their personal power to influence the outcome of a violent event actually means that others will blame them, personally, when things go wrong – well, it's easy to see why the external locus would be so attractive and so hard to let go. People with an external locus enjoy a feeling of blamelessness, and rarely understand that it's also a type of powerlessness.

Because the primary marker of this stage is Denial, we can sometimes influence a move to the next level by providing our students with a healthy mix of solid, realistic information and just a little inspiration. We can also influence change by letting them know that change is within their power and entirely their choice. However, leaving this stage really requires an act of the will so don't be discouraged if it's a tough sell. The move is sometimes precipitated by outside events, but the shift itself is internally driven. They have to make the decision for themselves.

Stage 2: I will. (The Heroic Fantasizer)

Growth starts here, with a strong resolve to Do Something rather than passively accept whatever life throws at you. That determination is the strength of this stage – and its weakness. The strong resolve that forms the heart of this stage is essentially naïve, usually under-informed, and often based less in reality than in idealism. Despite the naiveté at its heart, this stage helps the learner make the essential jump from denial into self-confidence, as the learner no longer puts faith in blind luck or outside happenstance, but instead places it inside a personal commitment to act.

Stage Two learners make up the bulk of most beginning firearms training classes. As instructors, if we do our jobs well, many of our more attentive students will move through this stage in a single weekend, but we still occasionally find Stage Two people even in more advanced classes. It's an essential stage of development and fun to work with once we realize what's going on with it.

> "A very large percentage of people who carry a concealed handgun do not carry it as a weapon. They carry it as a good luck charm. They think of it as a magic talisman that wards off evil, or as a rabbit's foot."
>
> – Tom Givens

People in this stage often express incredibly simplistic understandings of how violence happens and almost storybook ideas of how criminal problems can be solved. They may say things like, "If someone breaks into your house, *all you have to do* is ____." Usually this is something unrealistic and optimistic, such as simply racking the action of a shotgun or kicking the bad guy in the groin or shooting the gun out of someone's hand. People in this stage may place all their faith in a certain brand of gun, or a caliber, or a specific martial arts move, or in some other talisman. They picture a world where freezes and mental glitches don't happen, where stress or fear never hinders the good guys, and where the bad guy's actions cannot possibly cause any harm to good people as long as the good guy is on the job.

On the physical level, although they have not usually reached a high level of skill, Stage Two learners often believe they are skilled *enough*. Most have never measured their own skills against an objective standard. To someone in the middle of this process, a 70-yard hostage rescue shot with a pocket pistol seems equally as easy as getting (unmeasured) "good hits" on a close target on a relaxed Saturday afternoon at the range.

Along with unrealistic ideas about physical and physiological factors, people in this stage also express simplistic beliefs about the legal system. They may plan to drag the body back inside, or put a knife in its hand, or muddy the scene in some other way. They may feel proud that they live in "good" locations where armed citizens never risk unmeritorious prosecutions.

In keeping with the overall themes of resolve and determination, these naïve ideas often serve to protect a growing sense of self-confidence and willingness to act. Watch and nurture that growing self-confidence in

these students, no matter how naïve it sometimes seems. Although their private doubts will eventually trigger the move to the next level, it's the self-confidence that gives them the power to face those doubts. Both are needed.

The flip side of this outwardly strong and sometimes vocal confidence is a sense of inner doubt. That sense of doubt often grows more noticeable toward the end of this stage. In many ways, it is the doubts that bring learners to take the next step, because as learners absorb the lessons of confidence within this stage, they also strengthen their ability to tackle their doubts and fears in earnest. In any case, these people may wonder whether they could *really* bring themselves to shoot another human being. They may worry about the financial and legal repercussions of using a weapon in self-defense, and they often ask thoughtful (but under-informed) questions about "shooting to wound" or the ethics of using deadly force.

> "I ain't goin' out like that. Whether it's some Columbine wannabe who's heard the backward-masked messages on his Marilyn Manson discs, distressed daytrader off his Prozac, homegrown Hadji sympathetic with his oppressed brothers in Baghdad, or a bugnuts whackjob picking up Robert Frost quotes transmitted from Langley on the fillings in his molars, I am going to do my level best to smoke that goblin before my carcass goes on the pile. I am not going to go out curled into a fetal ball and praying for help that won't arrive in time." – Tamara Keel

One counterintuitive way these doubts sometimes surface: some people contrive fantastically creative what-if scenarios, where the obvious *only* way to survive the postulated scenario would be to use deadly force, and then they spring those scenarios on the instructor under the guise of asking, "What would you do if…?" These creative endeavors are less often a way to glean tactical knowledge as much as they are an attempt to express and receive social permission to defend innocent life.

Some people stall out in Stage Two. These are often the people who "have been shooting for years" or who "grew up around guns." If they have a concealed carry permit, they may have taken exactly one class – the one the state requires of them – and have learned nothing since. These are the tough cases.

Like Stage One learners, some Stage Two people will come to class for the benefit of other people. But most of the time, Stage Two people come to class for themselves. That's usually to bolster their own confidence levels as they near the end of this stage. An outside observer would say their most pressing need is competence, but that's not what they're looking for when they first come to us. They're looking for a way to feel more confident.

Although its expressions often seem naïve, the confidence we see among these people must be nurtured, respected, educated, and allowed to develop naturally into the next step; never squashed or belittled. That strong intention to Do Something forms the heart of the survival drive, and it compels people to continue their personal self-defense growth despite later challenges.

Growing through this stage and moving into the next takes an open mind and exposure to an outside source of information. This transition may be tough, because it forces the learner to face and accept a significant blow to the ego. That's because the next stage shines an unavoidable light on the learner's actual ability to do the self-defense job.

Stage 3: I can't. (The Frustrated Student)

There's a sentence I don't like to hear people use in my classes. Actually, I hate it. Hate it so much that I used to stop them from saying it. The sentence begins, "I can't." I can't hit the target from here. I can't shoot as fast as you're asking me to shoot. I can't picture making the choice to defend myself. I can't…

I can't.

"You're not allowed to say that in my class," I'd tell them when they said it. "It's not allowed." I'd say it playfully, jokingly, in a friendly way, working for the laugh. And they *would* laugh. And we'd go on with the lesson. But eventually, I came to realize that I was being profoundly disrespectful when I said that. Disrespecting my student, disrespecting their learning process, disrespecting their decision to be part of my class. Disrespecting my own skill as a teacher – and my own limitations.

> "People want things to be easy. They want something for nothing. I get that. But there are some subjects where it is not possible. Your body is not designed to improve under conditions of comfort. It improves under stress. With stress, muscles grow. Without stress, muscles atrophy. You don't get better at running by sitting… *You can't get good inside your comfort zone*." – Rory Miller

It was profoundly disrespectful because they weren't lying when they said they couldn't do whatever-it-was. They were telling the truth. They just weren't telling all of it.

Weirdly enough, there's a magic little word that will turn the discouraged "I can't" into a promise of victory. When students enter this stage, our work as instructors should focus on helping them find that word for themselves and embrace it.

As people enter the "I can't" stage, they suddenly discover their humanity. Perhaps they attend a professional firearms training class for the first time, and learn that their gun handling skills aren't quite up to par. Perhaps they try shooting a practical pistol match, and discover that the people on the action shooting television shows misled them by making it look so easy. Or perhaps they simply learn something about a criminal encounter that shakes them to their core, or face an event that makes them deeply question their ability to defend themselves during an actual crime. However it happens, people entering this stage have learned that talking about something or watching other people isn't the same as being able to do that thing themselves. Their confidence has taken a severe blow, and they find themselves saying, "I just can't do this."

That loss of confidence defines this stage and gives a surprising strength to those who drive through it.

As instructors, we *know* that a certain number of our students will hit this stage in our classes. If we do it right, all of them will! We want and need them to hit that discouragement and then triumphantly jump the barriers that were holding them back. It is acutely frustrating when we see students turn away from the hurdles rather than boldly jumping over them. Our challenge is to help students find the gumption to jump those hurdles. This requires a mix of compassion and toughness, motivational strategies and just plain stubborn refusal to let the student quit too soon. We must have a finely-tuned sense of how hard to push and when to relax.

> "The only shooting metrics that matter are accuracy and speed. The standard is: You need to shoot faster and/or more accurately than you did yesterday. Tomorrow, you need to shoot faster and/or more accurately than you do today." – John Mosby

On the physical level, people entering this stage begin to understand that some criminal encounters require a high level of skill to solve – a skill level they do not yet possess. If the learner has previously prided herself on her marksmanship, she suddenly realizes that the fight for her life might require her to use much more speed than she's capable of. On the other hand, if the learner has always crushed it on the speed curve but lagged in accuracy, he might find out that some violent encounters can only be settled with highly accurate shooting at small targets, a skill set he hasn't developed. In other words, a shooter in this stage might feel a high degree of confidence in one area, but find that confidence completely erased when seen in the light of another measure of ability.

Again: that's our job as instructors, to help students find the holes in their training that need to be filled. It's an expected and normal part of the growth process.

The loss of confidence that drives this stage isn't limited to the physical sphere. Sometimes it arrives as a slowly-awakening realization that being prepared to cope with violent crime means much more than being able to hit a cardboard target at the range. The very quiet personal doubts that whisper in your ear toward the end of the previous stage of personal development come screaming to the surface in this one: could you *really* kill another person, just to save your own life? How will you reconcile that idea with your childhood faith, or with your adult sense of morality? Are you *really* prepared to act without hesitation, or will you freeze when the time comes?

Because the essential theme of this stage is the loss of confidence, it is a watershed stage. Faced with sudden uncertainty, many people turn back, and regress to one of the earlier stages. Those who regress to Stage One become very stubborn and adamant that *no one* can learn enough to reliably survive a violent crime. This is still denial, but it's a slightly more informed denial than the original flavor. Those who retreat to Stage Two console themselves with false bravado and loud hyperbole.

Only those brave enough to risk humility and failure can fully enter Stage Three, and only those stubborn enough to keep going through these negative emotions will find their way out of it. The way out is to bring one's abilities, capacities, and mindset forward. These things must all move from "can't" to "can."

As instructors, we nurture this process by providing our students with a constant stream of *real* challenges they can overcome only with effort. As they pass the achievable hurdles we set for them on their upward road, they become more skilled and thus more confident. But be cautious: these reachable hurdles have to be real, and must require real effort to overcome. The challenge must be significant enough to provide the student's subconscious with the knowledge of genuine progress.

When we see the pain and frustration that marks this stage, we may be tempted to cheat, and make the tasks easier just to help our struggling students feel better about themselves. But it *is* a cheat. Like a small child 'helping' a butterfly out of its cocoon, a sympathetic but clumsy instructor may cripple their students' growth by setting the achievement bar too low. Learning takes effort, often painful effort. Don't be in such a hurry to erase the sting of incompetence that you remove the students' motivation to overcome the barriers for themselves. That's where learning happens.

"I can't" is an admission of failure. It hurts. And we hate to see our students hurt. That's why I always wanted to flatly deny the place the students found themselves in when they declared, "I can't." It's a horrible place to be. But denying the obvious truth doesn't help students. It's a retreat into a lie. Instead, by adding just one magic little word to that hateful sentence, we can respect our students' reality but still turn their world upside down.

The magic word is *yet*.

"I can't do that" is an admission of failure.

"I can't do that … ***yet***" is a promise of victory.

When you hear struggling and discouraged students telling themselves what they cannot do, help them find the *yet!* That promise of victory is the complete truth our students need to find when they struggle with discouragement inside this stage. They can't *yet* do what they're trying to do, and we should feel compassion for that struggle even as we set fresh, daunting challenges in front of them. But as they keep working to overcome those challenges, their "I can't" reality will change. It may take effort, but that change is within their reach. More than anything else, Stage Three learners need to see that.

Picture the border between Three and Four as a moving sidewalk, going in the wrong direction. Most people find that it takes serious effort to bring themselves, their mindset, and their abilities across the next line.

Stage Four: I can. (The Confident Learner)

In this stage, people work hard to improve their personal skills, and then begin to express stronger and much more realistic levels of confidence. They enjoy new abilities while accepting their ongoing limitations as important data points for future improvement. They develop a more balanced idea of what they can do, and they have a much stronger understanding of what the task will likely entail. They also commit themselves to bringing more new abilities online. If they have not already done so, they make an honest assessment of their own ethical and moral limitations while exploring ways to defend themselves within those limits.

If we do everything right, we will experience the joy of helping many students into this stage – and the joy of seeing many others continue their learning as they return for more advanced classes.

Because Stage Four involves realistic confidence levels, people in this stage become strongly committed to improving their personal competence. As shooters, they push their shooting and gun handling skills to higher limits; perhaps competing in formal events, perhaps not, but definitely measuring themselves against a set standard. They study defensive pistolcraft as a serious discipline. They make it a priority to practice and attend classes. They study criminal encounters and learn how violence develops in different situations. They accept and internalize information about how stress affects the human organism, and they work to eliminate their own glitches and blind spots.

Because the initial entry into Stage Four focuses on struggle followed by achievement, it's a frustrating place for some learners. These people often ask, "How much training is *enough*?" Some look for a definitive stopping place where they can rest on their previous achievements. For these people, few things hurt more than learning the honest truth that there are no guarantees, and no level of skill that can absolutely assure survival. That's a challenge for us to address – with them, and sometimes within ourselves.

People usually stay in this stage a very long time as they struggle to bring *all* of their abilities across the great divide between Stage Three and Stage Four. In some senses, people never fully leave Stage Four, as it is within this stage that growth becomes a lifelong commitment.

Stage Five: I *will.* (The Survivor)

This final stage of self-defense preparedness develops slowly. In Stage Five, people realize that the hyperbolic, naïve "I will" they once clung to has become something else. It has become "I *will*," a fully-formed, fully-informed determination to do whatever it takes to survive.

This stage accepts that not all situations are survivable. It admits personal limitations, glitches, blind spots, and training holes, even while working to reduce these things. It has a robust understanding of how crime develops, including a recognition that many crimes are pure ambushes that would be difficult or

impossible to survive. It knows that legal complications are possible, and that a bad legal tangle can have terrible effects. It is profoundly realistic.

Despite all this, the person in Stage Five fully embraces the same idealism that drove Stage Two, admits the weaknesses discovered in Stage Three, and celebrates the growth spurred by the hard work of Stage Four. With clear eyes and firm resolve, this person says: *I <u>will</u> survive.*

Five Stages Chart

	Motto	**Need**	**Prod**	**Ideal Response**	**Grow**	**No-grow**
Stage 1	"I won't…"	Motivation Inspiration Power/Agency	"You might." "Others have." "It's your choice."	"I will!"	2	1
Stage 2	"I will!"	Reality check	"Let's test that."	"I can't." *or* "I can."	3 5	1 or 2 untested
Stage 3	"I can't…"	Instruction *followed by* Practice	"Here's how."	"I can." *or* "I can't …yet."	4 3 moving	1, 2 untested, or 3 settled
Stage 4	"I can."	Decision	"… and should."	"I will."	5	1, 2 untested, or 3 settled
Stage 5	"I *will*."	New territory	"True here, too?"	"Let's test that."	2, 3, 4 (repeat loop)	2 settled (refusal to test)