

TARGET PANIC

PART DEUX

STORY BY RANDY ULMER

TREATMENT PROTOCOL

Step One: Learn to shoot a hinge style release aid (See Sidebar). The hinge release has a 'functionality' that will most likely be unfamiliar to you and will help 'reprogram' your brain in regards to the release process. To eliminate the distraction of the bow (and the shot), we will use a length of release rope (or similar-diameter string) to learn the basics of this release aid. Tie a length of string so that it ends up as a loop about as long as your draw length. Hook one end of the loop over your bow hand and hold it as if it were the bow's handle. Hook your release aid to the other end of the loop so that you are shooting a 'pretend' bow. Adjust the loop's length until it simulates your draw length. (Too short is better than too long.) As you begin to practice, be smooth and consistent. Concentrate on relaxation and follow through. The release should be

a surprise every time you execute and there should be absolutely no anxiety surrounding the release process. Don't begin shooting your bow with this release aid until its function becomes second nature to you.

Step Two: Shoot your bow with your eyes closed. Someone a lot smarter than me once said "the best way to screw up a perfectly good shot is to aim." People tend to try to exert too much control over the aiming process. They want to hold the pin perfectly still and they can't. Remember this: It is impossible for anyone to hold the pin perfectly still- especially you!! Accept and embrace the motion!

To eliminate the process of aiming, you must shoot with your eyes closed. This also makes it easier to fully feel a perfect shot. The key to a perfectly executed shot is relaxation. So the perfect shot is a paradox - relaxation is absolutely necessary, yet it takes tension to hold the bow back. You have to learn to fully relax all parts of the body not necessary to hold the bow up and hold it back. The best way to learn to establish this balance is to shoot with your eyes closed and your 'sense of feel' wide open.

Before you begin this exercise, lower the poundage of your bow, so it is very easy to pull and to hold. As with step one, this phase is about reconditioning your mind. Stand about three feet in front of an archery backstop (I use a hanging bag). While learning to execute the perfect shot, use a single arrow and slow the process way down. Take time to reflect and analyze each aspect of every shot. You should develop a

process that you can repeat exactly the same way for each shot. (As a side note, myself and many other top competitive archers begin each practice session by shooting with our eyes closed. I call it 'finding my shot'.) At some point you will begin to feel completely relaxed and immersed in the shot process. You will experience no fear or discomfort. The release will come as a complete surprise, with no reaction from you either mentally or physically. It can lead to a 'Zen' like state of mind. Once you can summon this perfect shot repeatedly and on command, you are ready for the next step.

Step Three: Shooting with your eyes open without a sight attached to your bow. This step merely introduces one more external stimulus-vision. However, there is no aiming apparatus to distract you from the feel of the shot. Remain close to the backstop and continue to shoot just one arrow. Concentrate on complete relaxation and the feel of the perfect shot. You may want to close your eyes occasionally when you lose 'the feel'. Again, once you can summon the perfect shot at will, with your eyes open, you are ready to move to step four.

Step Four: Shooting with a sight and a target. This step introduces two additional stimuli-a sight and a target. Logic would tell us that we should add just one additional stimulus during each step. However, if you do not add a target face during this step you will end up aiming at small holes or defects in the backstop-and I don't want you aiming that finely yet. You must use a brand new target face, one

without a tiny x or any other defects inside the 10 ring. The target should be large enough so that no matter how badly you shake your pin will never leave the inside of the 10 ring. Stay close to the backstop (3 feet) and adjust your sight to make sure your arrow hits nowhere close to the center of the target. I want you to have no visual indication as to where your arrow is hitting. Allow your pin to float in the yellow while you execute the same relaxed shot you learned in the previous steps. As before, you may need to close your eyes occasionally when you lose 'the feel.' When you can summon 'the feeling' at will, while aiming, you are ready to move to step five.

Step Five: Move back to 5 yards and aim only. Use a very large target face. Pull the bow back and aim. Aim for 15 seconds but do not shoot. Let down. Rest 30 seconds and repeat. Focus on reducing the movement in your pin by relaxing. Experiment to determine what makes the bow's movement slow down. (You will want to try to copy this particular form when you begin to shoot again.) Always have an arrow on the string for this phase-just in case the bow goes off. I want you to become very comfortable with your pin in the middle of the target. I want to teach your subconscious that it is OK to have the pin in the center of the target and also to break any automatic reflex you may have to fire the shot when the pin is in the middle. Once you can do this repeatedly, with no anxiety, you may move to step six.

Step Six: Shoot at 5 yards. Keep your sight adjusted so that your

arrows will hit far from the target's center. (Move your sight way up or way down). I do not want you to see where your arrows are hitting as you shoot. (We do not want to introduce the pressure of grouping yet.) Continue to shoot just one arrow and then retrieve it. This may seem like a waste of time-walking back and forth to get that single arrow. It is not. This process will help you slow down and analyze each shot. Focus on every aspect of the shot process and relax, relax, relax. Again, when you can summon the perfect 'feel'

repeatedly and on command, you are ready to move further back. When you are ready, move back to 10 yards and repeat step six. When you are comfortable there, move back to 15 yards and then to 20. Continue using the same large target face. If you are still comfortable, move to step 7.

Step Seven: Shoot for score. Move back up to five yards and adjust your sight so that your arrow hits the center of the target. Continue to shoot just one arrow. Use the same large target face as in step six. You may begin to keep score now. Your

pin should never leave the large ten ring, so theoretically you should shoot a perfect score. The point of this exercise is to introduce one more key, anxiety-producing, stressor: Visible and quantifiable results of the shooting process. Once you are comfortable at 5 yards you may move back to 10 yards, then 15 and then 20. When you are comfortable at 20 yards you may introduce ever smaller targets. As in all the previous steps you are trying to hold on to the same form, rhythm, relaxation and feel you developed in step one. As you

HINGE-STYLE

If I were given a mandate to prevent any bowhunter from ever getting target panic, but I was only allowed to make one change to their form or their equipment, I would take away their trigger release aids and replace them with 'hinge' style release aids. Back-tension, hinge, pull-through or trigger-less release aids (these names can be used interchangeably) will not prevent or 'cure' target panic all on their own. However, they will help when used in restructuring the shot process and retraining the subconscious and conscious mind. These release aids expedite the 'healing' process for those who have target panic. They also work as a preventative tool for those who have never had target panic but want to avoid it.

The primary reason to shoot a hinge-style release aid is to make the shot a complete surprise. They're intended to make it nearly impossible to precisely time the

shot. Basically, these release aids are designed to be shot without the use of a trigger. They go off as you rotate the handle around a pivot point. Most shooting problems originate from anxiety associated with the timing of the shot. Because hinge-style release aids don't have a trigger, it's nearly impossible to anticipate exactly when the shot will go. You are forced to maintain focus and stick with the shot. Eventually this technique eliminates a great deal of the anxiety that surrounds the shot process.

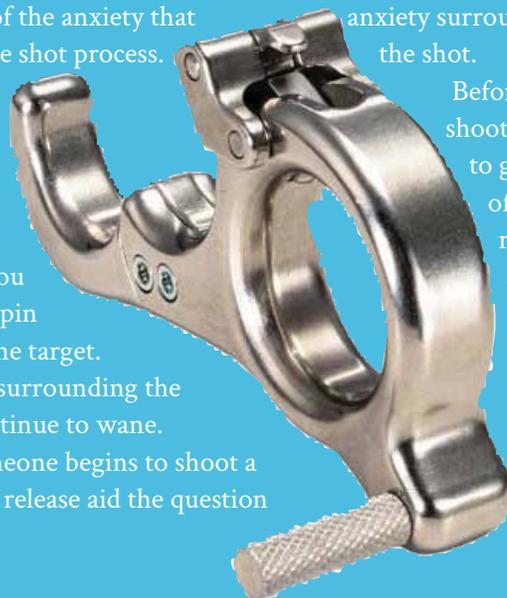
As you use one of these release aids, you'll eventually notice that you can hold the pin steadier on the target.

The anxiety surrounding the shot will continue to wane.

Once someone begins to shoot a back tension release aid the question

that always comes up is: what is the best way to shoot this thing? The answer to this question is simple: use the method that works best for you! There are many ways to execute the shot using one of these releases. Your job is to try the different methods and see which method gives you the most consistency with the least anxiety. The latter is important because the primary reason for you to shoot a hinge release is to minimize the anxiety surrounding the execution of the shot.

Before we go over how to shoot these releases, I want to give you a few words of wisdom: Most hinge releases can be set up so that they 'click' right before they fire. The idea is to allow you to rotate the release until you hear the click. Then it takes only a slight rotation of



move back and shoot at smaller and smaller targets, it will become more and more difficult to maintain 'the feel.' The aiming process will become more difficult, more important and more integral to the outcome of the shot. Try to focus on the shot process and the feel. Let the results (where the arrow hits) be of secondary importance. (This is much more difficult than it sounds).

Step Eight: Transition to your old release aid and draw weight. Start with your eyes closed and close to the target until you can get the

same feeling with your old release aid as you do with the back tension release aid. (Keep the draw weight low for now.) Shoot this release aid as similarly as you can to the way you shoot the hinge release. Do not shoot it by pulling the trigger with your index finger. Instead lay your finger on the trigger deeply and tighten your back muscles until it fires as a surprise. Once comfortable with this release you may gradually increase your draw weight. I would encourage you to continue to do most of your practicing and shooting with the

hinge release. Use your trigger release only for hunting. This is what I do every season.

During each of these steps, you must be the judge of your progress. You must decide when you are ready to go to the next phase. Do not hurry the process. If you do, your anxiety will return. It is your job to recognize anxiety creeping back in. (It will, repeatedly!) If you feel it, you must move backward through the steps to the point where you can consistently shoot a perfectly relaxed shot. Then move forward through the steps

RELEASE AIDS

the handle to execute the shot. In my opinion, this click defeats the purpose of using the hinge release entirely. The purpose of the hinge release is to make the release a surprise. Shooting with the click transforms the release from an absolute surprise-style release aid into a trigger release. After you've reached the click, you know that it only takes a very small movement of the handle to fire the release. At that point the handle becomes a trigger that you can punch! The release aid is no longer serving the purpose for which it was intended. Please-if you are using the hinge release to break bad habits- don't use the click! You can remove the click from most of these releases by removing the half-moon then rotating it 180 degrees and replacing it (See the instructions that came with the release).

As I mentioned earlier, start the learning process by using a length of string as a 'pretend' bow. Pull the bow back by placing your thumb

over your index finger to prevent the handle from rotating and firing the release. Maintain a little extra tension on your index finger as you pull the bow back. Your other fingers can be engaged on the handle, but do most of the pulling with the index finger and thumb. Once the bow is at full draw, find a comfortable anchor and begin aiming. Remove your thumb from over your index finger. Begin to relax your index finger while at the same time contracting the muscles in the middle of your back, between your shoulder blades. At the same time, engage the ring and pinky finger more snugly on the handle of the release. These motions in combination act to rotate the release handle gradually and nearly imperceptibly until it fires. Keep your release hand as relaxed as possible.

Most bowhunters don't like the thought of using a hinge-style release aid for hunting because they want to be able to time the shot precisely. A

hinge-style release precludes them from doing this. I understand this sentiment completely-I only hunt with a hinge when I think I'll have plenty of time for the shot, as I usually do when hunting mule deer using the spot and stalk method. For elk or whitetail hunting, I always use a trigger release - because the shots often need to be executed quickly.

I would encourage any bowhunter who is serious about their long term archery abilities to continue to do most of their practicing and shooting with the hinge release. They can always use their trigger release aid for hunting. If you are shooting both release aids the right way their impact points should be very close to the same. You should be able to re-sight in for the trigger release aid with a very minor 'gang' adjustment of your pins. I go through this procedure at the beginning of every hunting season.