

Defensive Strategies



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“Can you help find a gun my wife can shoot?” the sincerely interested husband asked. “I’ve tried to get her to use my semi, but she can’t rack the slide.”

They were coming to an AWARE introductory firearms class. While we usually have people use AWARE’s guns in that class, I asked this man to bring his personal firearm along, so I could see for myself the trouble his wife was having.

On the day of the class, we had quite a selection of revolvers and semi-autos for students to try for fit and manipulation before taking them to the range. I took this woman, her husband and her husband’s gun aside. “I can’t rack that slide,” she said, firmly. “Let me show you a different way to do it,” I offered.

Step by step, the empty gun in her hands, we went through the process I have found most reliable with my own hand/gun combinations and that of many

Racking the Slide

other women. On the first try, she racked the slide successfully! I smiled! Her husband looked so pleased! She said, “I can’t rack that slide,” handed the gun back to me, and turned to the revolvers.

The look her husband and I exchanged was priceless.

Her self-image of “I can’t rack the slide on that gun” was so strong that it overrode even the evidence that she could, and actually did, rack that slide.

What’s going on here?

It doesn’t take much in the way of a negative experience to get the “I can’t...” demon firmly planted in the brain. Negative thinking is a powerful force, and can override even an instance of success.

A non-gun example: A very senior friend of mine said she was “afraid to get down on the floor to play with my grandkids, because I might not be able to get up.” A physical therapist overheard, offered to help, and, safe step by safe step had my friend get down onto the floor, and then back up again. My friend thanked the PT, and on the way out with me said, “I can’t play on the floor with my grandkids, because I can’t get up.”

Leaving aside all the psychol-

ogy of those situations, what was the technique that I showed the shooter that actually worked?

This is great for people with small hands. It works for people with only moderate grip strength. It also works for people with not much arm strength.

Note that although this is for right handers, it is easy to reverse for lefties. It is a variation on what is commonly called the Slingshot Method of racking a slide.

Figure 1. The Slingshot Method of Racking the Slide



Step 1. Keep a firing grip with your right hand, trigger finger straight, in register along the frame throughout.

Step 2. Keep the muzzle pointed downrange at all times.

Step 3. Bend both elbows, bringing the gun close to your body. You will have more leverage in this position than holding the gun farther away.

Step 4. With your support hand, grab the serrations on the back of

the slide. Do this by pinching, your thumb on one side and fingers on the other, no part of your hand or fingers over the ejection port.

Step 5. Other methods tell you to pull the slide back with your support hand, like a slingshot, and let go, but that takes too much strength in that arm. Other methods tell you hold the slide steady with your support hand and push your right hand forward to move the body of the gun forward to rack the slide. Better, but still might take too much strength in that arm. This variation is to lock both elbows and both wrists, and to push forward with your right shoulder. Yes, your shoulder. There is more strength and range of motion than most people realize. Moving that shoulder will cause many slides that seemed to be glued closed to suddenly fly open.

Another method, usually called the Overhand, is extremely popular with many women. It is especially popular with those who can't pinch with their thumb.

Figure 2. The Overhand Method of Racking the Slide



Again, for righties:

Step 1. Keep a firing grip with your right hand, trigger finger along the frame throughout.

Step 2. Keep the muzzle pointed downrange at all times.

Step 3. Bend both elbows, bringing the gun close to your body.

Step 4. Grasp the serrations at the back of the slide over the top, with your four fingers on the side where your trigger finger is and the heel of your hand and your thumb on the other side. To do this safely, you should rotate your body clockwise, so that instead of facing downrange, you are facing the right wall. This allows your gun to keep facing downrange.

Step 5. Be sure that no part of your hand or fingers cover any part of the ejection port. It is much easier for this potential hazard to occur in this method than the slingshot one.

Step 6 Squeeze the gun between your fingers and palm heel. You aren't using your thumb. Push your right hand forward. The slide will open.

Step 7. Keeping the gun pointed downrange, move your body back to its original position.

Warning: If you don't turn your body to the right, the tendency will be for the muzzle to drift to the

left, justifiably concerning anyone else on the range, and possibly endangering them. Keeping your gun pointed in a safe direction is paramount.

The second method will point the ejection port up for

left handers, making it a bit more difficult to clear a stoppage or a malfunction that way.

Which method is better? That

depends on so many things. If only one method works for you, clearly that is the one you would exclusively use. If both work, you might want to consider which is faster. You might prefer one because it is easier for you to remember, or to do during a long range session. Choose the one you prefer and practice until the process becomes fluid and in-grained. Yes, it will take time, but it is worth it.

Racking the slide, or just opening the slide to its locked position, is necessary for many operations involving a semi-auto handgun. After inserting a magazine into a gun with the slide closed, racking the slide is necessary to chamber the first round. You must pull back the slide a little to check to see whether there is a round in the chamber. When your gun is empty and the slide is locked back, you reload by dropping the empty mag, inserting a fresh one, and ... racking the slide. When your gun has had a malfunction with a fired round, resulting in a stoppage such as a stovepipe, you clear it by pulling that slide back and shaking the bad round free. You want to hand your gun to another person; the right way to do that is to lock the slide back to show the gun is unloaded. You are going to clean your gun; you need to lock the slide back to start that process.

One of these methods of racking/locking the slide WILL work for you, though it might take some persistent practice for it to become easy.

Being able to rack the slide on virtually any semi-auto will open up a world of guns for you to choose from, for defense or for fun.