

Who Survives?

By Jim Jones, EMT/CHCM

Good news! If you are reading this, you are already more likely to survive a serious disaster than those who prefer not to think about unpleasant situations and face unpleasant possibilities. .

When facing an immediate hazard or just a potential threat, we go through three distinct stages of mental adjustment. These stages are often referred to as the “survival arch” of: denial, deliberation and decision. In the case of an immediate hazard, such as a fire, plane crash, or assault, we may have only seconds to go through these stages and act. In anticipation of a slower developing emergency such as a storm, flood or epidemic we may have hours or days to move from denial through deliberation and on to a decision. Even very slow developing threats such as, developing shortages, rising crime levels, or growing economic problems are first denied, then deliberated and finally a decision must be made to take some form of action.

The fact is that no one likes to think about bad things. We may be fascinated with disasters that happen to other people at other places, and we may even enjoy those spectacular disaster movies, but contemplating the possibility of personally being, burned, shot, injured, trapped, or just destitute or lost is not the kind of thing we like to contemplate. The idea of our home burning, criminal assaulting our families, or being desperate for food and water are quickly put out of mind. You assure yourself that the plain you are in will not crash, the terrorists will not strike in my area, and things will never get that bad here. Of course it is unhealthy to go through life in constant fear of disaster. The fact is that life is a series of risks and living a full life inevitably involves risks. Your ancestors may have had to face wild animals and hostile climates, but you drive to work among giant trucks loaded with flammable and toxic chemical and trap yourself in high-rises and subway cars. Your ancestors had to hunt and forage to survive, but you are dependent on a fragile and vulnerable system for every need of life. So, everyone is at risk, but not everyone chooses to acknowledge the facts or consider their impact.

Unthinkable Thinking

Most people today have a fairly low bass sense of dread. That is to say that they go through life assuming that bad things will not happen to them and that everything will be okay no matter what they may be told or what the situation. These folks have generally been raised in a protective family environment, attended safe schools in safe communities and experienced fairly peaceful and secure lives. The idea that things can get hard or that they could be on their own is literally “unthinkable”. Making any sort of emergency plans or survival preparations would be a major psychological trauma to them. They do not want to think about it and they do not want to frighten the kids. When they do think about an emergency, they consider who should help them or what will happen to them. In other words, “things happen to them” If caught in a fast developing hazard such as a fire, plane crash or assault, they have great difficulty accepting the reality and their responsibility to act. They generally spend too much time in denial. In these cases a few seconds may mean the difference between life and death. They wait to see what others will do or wait for instructions or just freeze in place. Responders tell of finding people burned to death still sitting at a table in a banquet hall where everyone else had safely evacuated. Passengers just remain seated in a burning plane while others got out. The average time for people to start towards the stairwells of the World Trade Centers after the plan hit on 9/11 was 6-minutes! Some turned off computers, some made phone calls, some put away files. They just wanted things to be okay. It takes too long for these “victims” to get from their low sense of dread to the point of action. They so want to be someplace else that their mind goes there. Even if they move from denial to deliberation and decision, they are unlikely to have gathered any knowledge to help make the right decision or carry any item to help. For them ignorance is bliss, often deadly bliss. Only luck and the kindness of strangers can save them. In most cases they shall be called “victims”.

Thinkable Thinking

You, dear readers have a relatively high sense of dread. The very fact that you are reading this article in this publication indicates that you are normally more aware of both immediate and future hazards. I would bet that when *you* find yourself next to that tank truck with the hazardous placard on it going 70-miles per hour, you are thinking about what to do if he swerves and how to get away from it as soon as possible. You check the emergency exits at your hotel room and you read that instruction card and note the escape routes

on a plane. Your basic attitude is that it can happen and it can happen now to me. When thinking about any pending or immediate disaster you think, “what would I do” and “how could I help”. In other words you happen to things. In fact in several plane crashes it was found that all of the survivors had read the instructions and noted the exit locations before takeoff. People with higher basic levels of dread usually have been exposed to danger and disaster earlier in life. Kids who grew up in high poverty and crime environments, combat veterans, survivors of fires, earthquakes and tornados generally are ready to expect the worst. Those who go through realistic disaster/combat training can also react better and faster under stress. It is doubtful that the survivors of the Great Depression of the 1930s would have not foreseen and prepared for the recent and future recessions. Most survivors of the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 did much better on 9/11 although some had slipped back into denial. Those who survive quickly adjust to the situation as it is. They are here now no matter how bad here and now is. They either have a plan or make one quickly. The chances are good that they have at least some basic knowledge to assist them in implementing their decision and may even carry a few survival items such as a small flashlight, whistle, or pocketknife. The more dedicated may have survival kits or even carry a firearm in dangerous areas. For you awareness and preparedness is a sense of security, true and effective security. Nothing can assure survival, but if there is a chance to survive they will take it and know how to use it. They are more likely to be called “survivor” and in some cases “savers of lives”. Note that a “high level of dread” does not equal a high level of stress. Dread leads to awareness and conscious acceptance. This in turn generates mental and practical preparedness that reduces stress.

Fear and its Effects

Every normal person has fear, real gut turning, mind numbing fear. Navy fighter pilots have said that they lose half their IQ in the way to the flight deck. Over and over again you hear police, fire fighter, soldiers’ and medics say “don’t know what happened, the training just took over”. Once you are out of the denial phase, its not enough just to do something, it has to be the right something. In rare cases the something can even be to do nothing, but you need training or at least knowledge to guide you. While slow developing situations may allow time to gather information, immediate threats require immediate and correct responses. Unfortunately the same brain chemical frees’ that can cause a longer delay can also blank out good judgment and needed skills. Basically, “if you have to think about it your dead”. You cannot depend on your mind to be logical, analytical and knowledgeable under extreme stress. You cannot depend on so called “survival instincts” long dulled by our relatively safe environment. Those instincts that we do have were established to cope with primitive threats rather than more recently created hazards such as flying bullets, toxic fumes or falling buildings. The mind is slow to go where it has not been. A situation never thought of *will* cause delay and denial, an action never practiced will *not* happen under stress. So even the person with a high sense of dread, who anticipates dangers and moves from denial to deliberation and decision more quickly needs knowledge and training to make the *right* decisions and do the *right* things. In most cases, this type of person tends to seek out just such education. They often are lead to compatible lines of employment such as: safety professionals, EMTs’, Police, fire or other emergency services.

Havers and Doers

Within the low and high dread groups are two subcategories. There are people who define themselves by what they have (stuff) and those who define themselves by what they do.

High dread (survivors) people who are also “stuff oriented” tend to depend on stuff to cope with every possible situation. They will spend a fortune on dehydrated food, guns, ammunition and other equipment, but tend to spend little on training. They often have overly heavy survival packs and may be tied down to their stuff when they should become mobile.

High dread (survivors) people who are “do orient” tend to have less equipment, but more books. They are much more likely to pay for survival, first aid, and self-defense training. Do oriented survivors are also more likely to be involved in survival and emergency response related organizations.

Of course the low dread folks can be defined as stuff oriented and do oriented as well, but for them: stuff is a fancy car or a big screen TV and do is playing golf or partying. None of which will be of much help to themselves, their neighbors or their community in times of emergency and challenge

Both having stuff and doing things are important, but one must strike a good balance.

Remember our slogan “survival is 50% what you can do and 50% what you can do without”.

Training and Leadership

If you are already predisposed to anticipate disasters (large and small) and prepare for them, you have a responsibility to be the best at survival and self-reliance that you can be. You also have the responsibility to teach and lead in your community. It has been found that even the most paralyzed potential victims of a disaster responded to strong and decisive instruction. Loud orders to “move” or “get down” often jarred them into action that saved their lives. Often that leader was not an authority figure. It was often a waiter, clerk or truck driver that got everyone to safety. Most survival folks carry a whistle to use to summon help, but it also would designate them as someone to follow. Most of your neighbors are probably in denial about the need to prepare for a variety of potential (some inevitable) threats to their lives, property and liberties. Their state of dependency and complacency will cause them great suffering at some time and their problems may seriously effect your survival as well. Again, leadership can overcome complacency and vastly improve everyone’s chances in future emergencies.

Admittedly, it’s easier to buy stuff than find and attend training classes, but at least you should read the directions and practice using any survival related items you buy. Run the generator, cook on the stove, try some of the food, shoot the gun, and sleep in the tent. Buy books, buy DVDs and search the Internet for how-to information, then try to do the techniques shown. If firearms are part of your preparation, find a local range that offers basic shooting classes. Taking up hobbies that enhance survival skills is another self-training option. Camping. Martial arts, gardening, food preservation, hunting, fishing, hiking and other life enhancing activities may be of great value in challenging situations. Everyone should take first aid and CPR courses available in most communities. Participation in or organizing an active survival preparedness group is the best way to build your survival capacity. You can share books and skills. Often you can all share the cost of sending one or two members for training so they can return and train the group. Groups can also buy supplies in quantity and make plans for mutual support in emergencies.

In addition to general skill training there should be personal scenario based training. There are many normal reactions that are dead wrong in an emergency. You smell smoke and you sit up in bed. You hear shots and you look out the window. You hear an explosion and you go to see what it was. An adult tells a child to come with them and she does. These are normal actions and all of them can be fatal. Telling you that here will probably not override your instinctive actions when it happens. Only practicing a different action. Such as rolling out of bed and crawling, blindfolded to the door, or getting on the floor and turning out the lights. Running and screaming will ingrain the correct responses. You should practice these responses regularly until *they* become normal. Skills like first aid, self-defense and combat shooting also require realistic, scenario-based drills were stress and unexpected changes are created. Real smoke, noise, darkness, flashes and shouting will firmly establish that the right action will be taken under pressure. In fast developing disasters, you do not want to have to think. The training has to “take over”. The old military eight-Ps” concept hold true. “Proper. Prior, planning and preparation prevents piss poor performance”.

Conclusion

People who have higher levels of basic dread tend to react faster to emergency situations and also tend to anticipate potential emergencies and disaster possibilities that may occur in the future. Such individuals often enhance their readiness through the acquisition of critical survival and self-reliance equipment and skills. Such individuals move from denial, through deliberation and on to effective decisions and actions faster than most others. They usually have a mental plan of action before the emergency and think “what should I do” rather than waiting for others to act. When these kinds of people enhance their attitudes with survival knowledge, skills and training, they can make a significant difference in the outcome of immediate emergencies and future widespread disasters. Individually they save lives. Collectively they may save the future.

**Some scientists believe that the reason the human brain is shrinking over time is because we no longer have to think about survival. We no longer have to be smart just to survive and find food. Dumb, complacent and passive people survive and reproduce just as well as smart, aware and proactive people in a society of plenty and protection.*

Recommended Reading

For further reading on the subject of survival psychology, who survives and why, I highly recommend the following two books from which several of the concepts in this article were derived. These books tell you how to think rather than what to think.

Thinking the Unthinkable by Amanda Ripley, 247 pgs., hardcover, Crown Publishing.

Deep Survival, by Laurence Gonzales, 301 pgs., hardcover, w. w. North Co. publishers._