The Psychology of Survival

You can have every philosophy in this book nailed down on paper and still fail if your head is not right. Survival is brutally mental.

The mindset that carries people through bad nights is a strange combination of realism and hope. Paramedics, my brother among them, kneel beside people in wrecked cars who understand clearly that their situation is ugly and still choose to cooperate, breathe, pray, and joke, and beside people in far better shape who have given up inside and become almost impossible to help.

The trick is to keep your expectations low and your hope high. That sounds like a contradiction. It is closer to a load rating.

Optimism and Low Expectations

Survival life is probably going to be rough. Accept that up front and make the best of it; low expectations plus stubborn optimism is the closest thing to a secret of happiness I've found, in disasters and in the garden both. Expect long stretches of boredom interrupted by short bursts of hard work. Expect things to break, people to disappoint you, and plans to fail at the worst times. When that happens, you are not shocked. You are annoyed, then you solve the next problem in front of you.

Positivity does not mean ignoring what is in front of you. It means deciding that your actions still matter, that small improvements add up, that your kids are worth the trouble, and that God still sees you at two in the morning when nobody else does. Dark circumstances do not get the last word in your head.

That balance keeps you moving. A pessimist quits because nothing will work, and a pure optimist falls apart the first time something does not. Assume the day will be hard and get to work anyway.

Decision Making Under Pressure

Bad decisions under pressure come from one of three places: panic, pride, or paralysis. Ask an infantry instructor what loses a fight and

ask an emergency nurse what loses a patient, and you will hear the same three things.

Panic makes people sprint in the wrong direction. Pride makes them refuse to change course when new information appears. Paralysis locks them in place while the situation moves on without them. At a roadside wreck, all three waste minutes when minutes are what matters.

The record has a night that shows all three at once, and shows that the panic was built into the building. On March 3, 1943, sirens sent East Londoners toward the Bethnal Green tube shelter, and at 8:27 a new anti-aircraft rocket battery a third of a mile away fired a salvo nobody had heard before. On the nineteen steps down, a woman carrying a bundle and a baby tripped near the bottom, and within seconds the crowd behind her had piled three and four deep. No bomb fell that night. One hundred seventy-three people died: 27 men, 84 women, and 62 children under sixteen.

The inquiry found the cause was "a number of people losing their self control at a particularly unfortunate place and time," and then it listed what made the place unfortunate: a stairway "nearly dark," no handrail, and a request from the borough to improve that entrance, turned down. The crowd did not decide to panic; the dark stairway decided for them. What you control is what you build ahead of time: the light, the rail, the route everyone has walked before. The habits below are that kind of preparation.

You need a simple way to make choices when the clock is ticking and your heart is pounding. Later chapters will walk through checklists and flow charts. For now, here are a few core habits that matter in every scenario:

- **Separate what feels urgent from what is important.** Shouting people, loud noises, and flashing lights create a sense of urgency. That does not always match what actually threatens lives. Train yourself to ask: what can kill us first in this situation.
- **Move from big problems to small ones.** Every first aid course worth taking drills airway, breathing, and circulation before anybody worries about a broken finger. Survival decisions work the same way. Secure air, shelter, water, and basic security before you fine tune comfort.
- **Decide, then refine.** Aim for decisions that are good enough to move you off the X, as the tactical crowd puts it. You do not

need a perfect shelter design to get out of the wind. You do not need a perfect route to get away from an immediate threat. Move, then adjust as you learn more.

- **Use simple rubrics.** I keep a handful of mental checklists for different types of events. Is anyone bleeding badly. Is there smoke or gas. Is this place safe to stay in for the next hour. The questions fit on an index card in my head, and they keep me from chasing minor issues while a major one grows.

You can train this. Run drills in your home. Talk through what-if scenarios with your family over dinner. The more your brain has rehearsed, the less it freezes when reality throws a similar pattern at it.

Two more habits round these out. The first is the Marines' line, worn smooth by a million t-shirts and still true: improvise, adapt, overcome. No plan survives contact, and the families who do well in a mess are not the ones whose plan was perfect but the ones who move to the backup without sulking about it. The second is practice with your hands. Mindset without skills does not get much done, and Chapter 1 is where we start putting tools in your hands.

The Rules of Three

When everything goes sideways, it becomes very easy to focus on the wrong problem. People will argue about politics while a storm is ripping roofs off. They will fight over food while they are minutes away from hypothermia.

To keep your priorities straight, memorize the simple Rules of Three:

- Roughly three minutes without air.
- Roughly three hours without adequate shelter in harsh conditions.
- Roughly three days without water.
- Roughly three weeks without food.

Those are averages, not guarantees, although they are close enough to guide decisions. The details of a scenario dictate the final order. Fire, for example, jumps the queue in cold country, because fire is how you make shelter warm and water safe. But the list keeps you from polishing doorknobs while somebody freezes (Figure I.2).

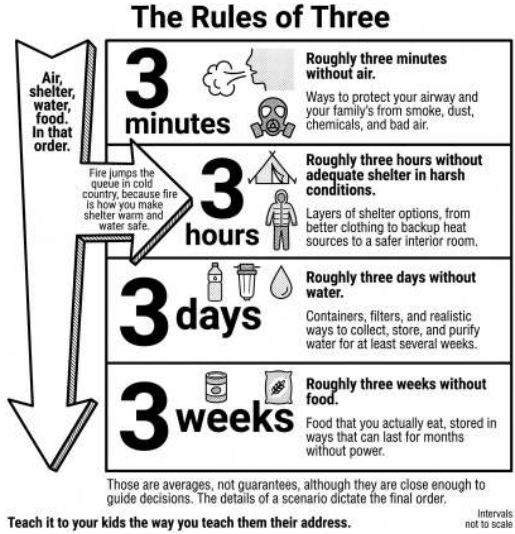


Figure I.2. Three minutes, three hours, three days, three weeks: averages rather than guarantees, and close enough to tell you which problem to solve first.

If the man in the ditch cannot breathe, his blood sugar does not matter at that moment. If my family is starting to shiver in wet clothes with the wind rising, I don't care about dinner yet. I care about getting them dry and out of the elements.

Apply the same order to your planning:

- Do you have ways to protect your airway and your family's from smoke, dust, chemicals, and bad air.
- Do you have layers of shelter options, from better clothing to backup heat sources to a safer interior room.
- Do you have containers, filters, and realistic ways to collect, store, and purify water for at least several weeks.
- Do you have food that you actually eat, stored in ways that can last for months without power.

In the chapters ahead we plug the specific scenarios into these same priorities: pandemic, grid failure, civil unrest, nuclear fallout. The details change and the human body does not. Memorize the order. Air, shelter, water, food. Teach it to your kids the way you teach them their address.

Doctrine: Things I Believe Before Breakfast

Every trade keeps a set of sayings that carry its hard-won lessons in small packages. Farmers have them. Medics have them. The Army practically runs on them. Over the years I've collected mine. Some came from field manuals I have no business enjoying as much as I do. The largest share, most of the headings below, I learned from James Wesley Rawles, whose precepts have been in print and on SurvivalBlog since before preparedness was a cable television genre. I've kept his wording where I couldn't improve it, and the commentary under each heading is mine. The sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs are Dave Grossman's. "Two is one" belongs to everybody who ever packed a spare.

I call them doctrine because that's what the Army calls the things you believe firmly enough that you don't re-argue them every morning. Doctrine is not dogma. It is a set of defaults that frees your head for the decisions that actually need it that day. These are mine. You are welcome to push back on any of them. A few took me years to accept, and one or two still cost me arguments at my own dinner table.

Civilization is a thin veneer. In the absence of law and order, the slide from tranquility to barbarism can happen overnight, as the looting after every major disaster of the past few decades demonstrates. "It has been said that civilization is twenty-four hours and two meals away from barbarism," Neil Gaiman wrote in *Good Omens*, and it was only half a joke. The typical American pantry holds a few days of the meals a family actually eats, and perhaps two or three weeks if you count every can and condiment; nobody has surveyed it carefully, so this book plans on four days and treats anything more as a bonus. When that runs out, desperate parents will do very bad things to feed starving children.

Most people are sheep, a few are wolves, and a very few are sheepdogs. Not a flattering picture, but it holds. The sheep are not fools; they are busy, trusting, and out of practice, which describes all of us in some part of our lives. The wolves prey on them. The sheepdogs think for themselves and put their bodies between the two. This book assumes you would like to be a sheepdog and are willing to do the work.

Herds follow natural lines of drift. People under stress take the path of least resistance, which is why nearly every urbanite fleeing a city will pour onto the same freeways at the same time and turn

them into parking lots. If you must move, move before the herd does, and know the lightly traveled back roads by heart. Plan, study, and practice the routes now.

Show restraint, but keep recourse to force. My father told me more than once, "It is better to have a gun and not need it than to need a gun and not have it." Use less than lethal means whenever it is safe and practicable. But understand that there are rare moments when nothing substitutes for an accurate rifle in a steady hand.

There are moral absolutes. Not everything is a matter of taste. The Ten Commandments summarize the floor about as well as it has ever been summarized: do not murder, do not steal, do not lie about your neighbor. A group that stops believing there is a floor ends up doing whatever the strongest person in the room wants that afternoon. It takes both faith and friends to come through perilous times with your soul intact.

Skills beat gadgets, and practicality beats style. Any armchair survivalist can buy a closet of camouflage and a rifle hung with gadgets. Real capability comes only from study, training, and practice, and style points should never be mistaken for skills.

Tangibles trump conceptuals. A dollar is a promise that strangers will take it tomorrow; land, tools, and stored food are not. The Confederacy ran the experiment in four years: its price index went from 100 in January 1861 to over 9,000 by April 1865, and a Richmond war clerk wrote flour at $500 a barrel on January 6, 1865, $1,000 on the 14th, and $1,250 on the 18th. By the end the paper was worthless and the flour was not. Chapters 5 and 25 cover money properly. The doctrine is short: keep the majority of your wealth in productive land and useful tools, and only after the key logistics are squared away should extra money go into silver and gold.

Two is one, and one is none. One of anything is a single point of failure. That is the same reasoning that puts a spare tire in your trunk. Store the essential beans, bullets, and Band-Aids in real quantity, because if commerce stops, your own logistics are all you have, and anything beyond your needs becomes barter and charity. Make the redundancy count by making it different, since two identical items tend to fail the same way on the same day, and spread your stores across more than one location while you are at it, so a single fire or flood cannot zero you out.

Charity is a moral imperative. We are obligated to assist those less fortunate. The responsibility begins with your immediate family and expands in rings: neighborhood, church, community, and beyond as resources allow. If your preparedness ends at your own fence line, it is hoarding.

There is no substitute for mass. Mass stops bullets, mass stops gamma. Mass slows down bad guys trying to come through your wall to take what your family needs. Sandbags are cheap, so buy plenty of them, and when you plan a retreat house, think medieval castle.

Always have a Plan B and a Plan C. Whatever your pet scenario and grand strategy, situations change without asking you first. Keep a packed get-out-of-dodge kit handy even if you live at your retreat year-round and never intend to leave it.

Be frugal. Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without. Frugality is what pays for every other item on this list.

There is a line of scripture I come back to whenever the news gets loud: "If ye are prepared ye shall not fear." Fear fills the space where preparation should have been, and the cure is work, not more news.

Bottom line: the doctrine above is a set of defaults, so a tired group does not have to re-argue the basics. Pick the five sayings you disagree with least, put them where you will see them, and get to work.