

Are You Prepared for SURVIVAL ?

By Richard Smith (Adapted from US Army Field Manual 21-76 –SURVIVAL)

We have heard that the best selling book in New Orleans, after Katrina, was the Survival Manual of the US Army. While particularly useful in dire times, the teachings of the manual are broadly applicable to survival in many circumstances, including natural disasters and, maybe especially, in dealing with the challenges of aging and disability.

In the Army manual, each letter in the word SURVIVAL stands for actions that need to be taken. While the manual emphasizes the combat relevance of the tactics, we have adapted them for broader application:

Size up the situation. Size up your surroundings. Size up your physical condition. Size up your resources.

Use all your senses—Be observant. Undo haste makes waste—formulate a plan.

Remember where you are and what you need to accomplish—Remember your plan.

Vanquish fear and panic—they may cause you to react with emotions and destroy your ability to make an intelligent decision.

Improvise—use your strengths and make changes to overcome your weaknesses.

Value Living—Refuse to give in to problems, obstacles, inconveniences and discomforts—maintain your will to live.

Adapt to changes when they are necessary—study those who have overcome similar challenges and learn from their successes.

Learn the new skills you may need, practice them—Live by your wits.

Doing what is necessary to survive physical, financial, or social changes in our circumstances results in stressful feelings. In fact, stress can be thought of as “our reaction to pressure”. We tend to think of stress as a bad thing, but it does also have benefits:

- It gives us chances to learn more about ourselves, our character, values and our personal strengths
- It tests our adaptability and flexibility
- And it can give us the needed energy and motivation to do our very best.



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Too much stress, on the other hand, can cause the problems we all know about:

- Difficulty making decisions
- Angry outbursts
- Forgetfulness
- Low energy level
- Constant worrying
- Propensity for mistakes
- Thoughts about death or suicide
- Trouble getting along with others
- Withdrawing from others
- Hiding from responsibilities
- Carelessness.

All of these interfere with survival.

Some people have trouble operating in settings where everything is not clear-cut. *The only guarantee in a survival situation is that nothing is guaranteed.* It can be extremely stressful operating on limited information in a setting where you have limited control of your surroundings.

There are some advantages to facing adversity with others. Being in contact with others provides a greater sense of security and a feeling someone is available to help if problems occur.

Fear is our emotional response to dangerous circumstances that we believe have the potential to cause death, injury, or illness. This harm is not just limited to physical damage; the threat to one's emotional and mental well-being can generate fear as well. Fear can have a positive function if it encourages caution in situations where recklessness could result in injury. Unfortunately, fear can also immobilize a person. It can cause him to become so frightened that he fails to perform activities essential for survival.

Associated with fear is anxiety. Because it is natural for us to be afraid, it is also natural for us to experience anxiety. Anxiety can be an uneasy, apprehensive feeling we get when faced with dangerous situations (physical, mental, and emotional). When used in a healthy way, anxiety urges us to act to end, or at least master, the dangers that threaten our existence. If we were never anxious, there would be little motivation to make changes in our lives. Reduce anxiety by performing those tasks that will ensure coming through the ordeal. To survive, we must learn techniques to calm anxieties and keep them in the range where they help, not hurt.

Frustration arises when a person is continually thwarted in his attempts to



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reach a goal. The goal of survival is to stay alive until you can reach help or until help can reach you. One outgrowth of this frustration is anger. Frustration and anger encourage impulsive reactions, irrational behavior, poorly thought-out decisions, and, in some instances, an "I quit" attitude (people sometimes avoid doing something they think they can't master). Try to harness and properly channel the emotional intensity associated with anger and frustration in order to act productively to meet the challenges of survival.

It would be a rare person indeed who did not get sad, at least momentarily, when faced with the privations of survival. As this sadness deepens, we label the feeling "depression." Depression is closely linked with frustration and anger. The frustrated person becomes more and more angry as he fails to reach his goals. If the anger does not help the person to succeed, then the frustration level goes even higher. A destructive cycle between anger and frustration continues until the person becomes worn down-physically, emotionally, and mentally. When a person reaches this point, he starts to give up, and his focus shifts from "What can I do" to "There is nothing I can do." Depression is an expression of this hopeless, helpless feeling. If you allow yourself to sink into a depressed state, then it can sap all your energy and, more important, your will to survive. It is imperative to resist succumbing to depression.

We, as human beings, enjoy the company of others. Very few people want to be alone *all the time!* As you are aware, there is a distinct chance of isolation in a survival setting. This is not bad. Loneliness and boredom can bring to the surface qualities you thought only others had. The extent of your imagination and creativity may surprise you. When required to do so, you may discover some hidden talents and abilities. Most of all, you may tap into a reservoir of inner strength and fortitude you never knew you had. Conversely, loneliness and boredom can be another source of depression. Surviving alone, or with others, you must find ways to keep your mind productively occupied. Additionally, you must develop a degree of self-sufficiency. You must have faith in your capability to "go it alone."

As you can see, you are going to experience an assortment of thoughts and emotions. These can work for you, or they can work to your downfall. Survival is natural to everyone; being unexpectedly thrust into the life and death struggle of survival is not. Don't be afraid of your "natural reactions to this unnatural situation." Prepare yourself to rule over these reactions so they serve your ultimate interest--staying alive with the honor and dignity. Below are a few tips to help prepare psychologically for survival:

- **Know Yourself.** Take the time to discover who you are on the inside. Strengthen your stronger qualities and develop the areas that you know are necessary to survive.
- **Anticipate Fears.** Don't pretend that you will have no fears. Begin thinking about what would frighten you the most if forced to survive alone. Train in those areas of concern to you. The goal is not to eliminate the fear, but to build confidence in your ability to function despite your fears.



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- **Be Realistic.** Don't be afraid to make an honest appraisal of situations. See circumstances as they are, not as you want them to be. Follow the adage, "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst."
- **Adopt a Positive Attitude.** Learn to see the potential good in everything. Looking for the good not only boosts morale, it also is excellent for exercising your imagination and creativity.
- **Remind Yourself What is At Stake.** Failure to prepare yourself psychologically to cope with survival leads to reactions such as depression, carelessness, inattention, loss of confidence, poor decision-making, and giving up before the body gives in.
- **Train.** Begin today to prepare yourself to cope with the rigors of survival.
- **Learn Stress Management Techniques.** A few good techniques to develop include relaxation skills, time management skills, assertiveness skills, and cognitive restructuring skills (the ability to control how you view a situation).

Remember, "the will to survive" can also be considered to be "the refusal to give up."

NOTE: This article is an adaptation of a small portion of the manual. You may want to purchase a complete copy. The **U.S. Army Field Manual 21-76 - SURVIVAL** is available, in paperback, from general booksellers for about \$15. In this article, we have mainly covered topics presented in the "Psychology of Survival" section. The full manual covers many other subjects, including the development of specific survival skills.

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