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Survival Instincts

Why We Do What We Do In an Emergency

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It's 2 o'clock in the afternoon and you receive a phone call from "Reverse 911" informing you a fire is headed your way and you should evacuate immediately.

You scoop up the cat and place her in a carrier, snap the dog's leash on his collar and put both in the car. You then methodically collect the folder containing important papers, the photo album, computer disks, prescription meds, and other items on the "don't forget to take" list kept on the fridge.

You can feel the tension and anxiety, but you and your family have rehearsed this before, so you feel confident things will be OK. You have cleared flammables away from your home. You know your children's school and spouse's work disaster plans. You have your "get away" pack in the car. You know where you will meet with your family. You know several ways out of your neighborhood.

Just as you start to leave, the phone rings. It's your neighbor. She asks you what you are going to do. She wonders if you think the threat is real and if you have talked to anyone else. She wants to know if you think she should leave.

Why the different reactions to the same phone call? You have "trained" your brain to instinctively know what to do by your preparations.

In emergencies, our instincts can be dangerous. We want to stay put, we want things to remain normal. In fact, research has shown that people will first check with several sources before deciding what to do. This "freezing" behavior is instinctive. When people are caught up in a disaster, 10-15% will act quickly and properly; 15% will "freak out," and the rest will do very little, stunned and bewildered.¹

In an emergency, the brain slows down. When you are calm, your brain takes 6 to 10 seconds to process each new piece of information, but the more the stress, the slower the process and when the brain is bombarded with new information, it shifts into low gear.²

In this state, people will first experience a period of disbelief and move very slowly, often forming groups. They can walk in circles, as if in a trance.

¹ "How to Get Out Alive," by Amanda Ripley, *Time Magazine*, May 2, 2005, pg 60.

² *Ibid.*

“...All of the seriously [auto accident] injured were transported to Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital, while others wandered around the glass-splattered scene disoriented and shocked...” Melissa Evans, Santa Barbara News-Press, Feb. 20, 2006

If no familiar behavior or action comes to mind, the brain will latch on to the first familiar “fix” in its library of habits and knowledge. You may run out the door you came in, even though you pass by exits you could have taken sooner. It’s like a Google® search: put in a word or two, like “FIRE EXIT,” and your brain searches past actions, training, readings, etc., to find something to do. It will probably come back with many “hits.” But if you’ve been observant of all the exits (especially those new to you), you can say, “FIRE! FIND EXIT I SAW COMING IN.”

According to news stories, in a disaster drill following the Amish shootings, students ran past exits and into rooms with no outside doors; those that reached outside gathered in groups a short distance from the building, in harm’s way if the shooter exited.

We live in earthquake country, but face a number of potential hazards, from auto accidents to wildfires. Start now and put together your disaster and evacuation plans, start your get-away kits, make a list of what you’d take if you had to evacuate in a hurry, and think about how you would react in different circumstances to give your Google® search engine (brain) lots of information to be considered in an emergency.

Fortunately, we live in an area where disasters are few and far between. However, this greatly affects our attention to preparedness and our ability to respond to them when they occur. Residents in hurricane zones often have to practice their emergency and evacuation plans several times a year.

Unless you have been through and personally affected by a natural disaster, it might be difficult to imagine what it will be like and how you will respond. People will often decide (consciously or subconsciously) to not deal with the subject at all. This can be a dangerous mistake!

It is important to start planning for emergencies without delay. This will give you a great sense of being in control of your own situation. Think of it as preparing a will or trust – you put it off because it is an unpleasant reminder of your own mortality and it takes time to gather all the information – but when it’s done, you have a good feeling of accomplishment and readiness. Consider disaster preparation a form of insurance. You hope you never have to use it, but if you do, it’s ready to use.

Remember, although you can’t predict or control a natural disaster, you can protect yourself and your family from its consequences. You will feel more in control and less anxious. Giving yourself a minute to think about your choices will allow you to make a better decision. Start your emergency kit and family disaster plan now and engage your whole family!

The only thing tougher than planning for a disaster is explaining why you didn’t.