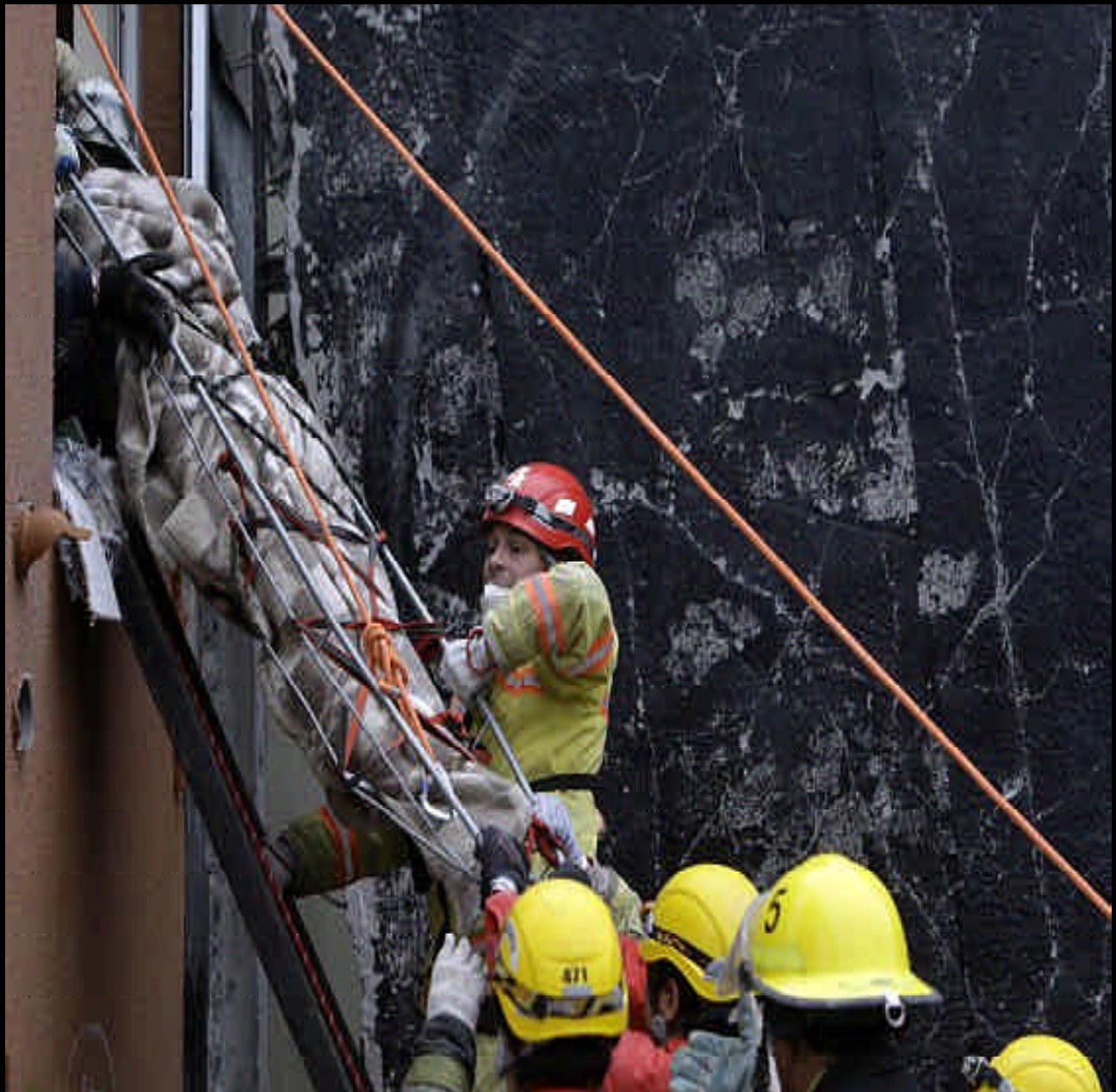


Advice from the experts:

Surviving a Disaster



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CONTROLLING OUR FEARS



Amanda Ripley, author for the book: The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes and Why.

As we go about our day-to-day lives, disasters are far from the minds of most people. But 90 percent of Americans live and work in places where there are significant risks for earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, terrorism or other natural and human-made disasters. When a life-or-death situation occurs, some people do better than others. In the midst of a disaster, many people panic, while others assume

leadership roles. Some people emerge as heroes while others simply freeze.

In the midst of a disaster Why some do better than others?

We literally use different parts of our brains instantly in a disaster. Everything changes. As one Sept. 11 survivor said to me, "You don't ever want to have to think in a disaster." He knew that because he had experienced the complete change that occurs when you are in a life or death situation. So literally you lose peripheral vision, your heart rate increases, your blood pressure goes up, you get an injection of stress hormones which help you perform physically, but actually make it much harder to perform cognitively, so you have a lot of trouble making decisions — even simple decisions — or processing new information. So the reason some of us often do better than others in a disaster usually has to do with what was in our brains before everything went wrong, because you won't be able to really progress much from where you were once things go bad. So it really depends on what you had in your head as far as what to do, how to do it, when to do it, before everything went wrong.

The American Public Health Association APHA's Get Ready Campaign helps Americans prepare themselves, their families and their communities for all disasters and hazards, including pandemic flu, infectious disease, natural disasters and other emergencies.

Surviving a disaster: Controlling our fears is an interview made from the American Public Health Association to Amanda Ripley, who is an award-winning Time magazine, who has criss-crossed the globe to cover some of the most devastating disasters of our time. This interview was conducted, edited and condensed by Teddi Dineley Johnson, The Nations's Health, APHA. It has been revised and translated to Spanish for publication in Salud+HealthInfo magazine.



How can we overcome weaknesses and boost our odds of surviving in a disaster?

The more familiarity you have beforehand with any of your major risks and how to get out of them, the better you will do. For example, if you know that you live in place that is at high risk for flooding, which is true of many millions of Americans, then the more thinking you have done about what you would take with you, how you would evacuate, when you would evacuate, how you would deal with your elderly mother — all of those things are not going to go very well if you wait until you are under stress — you are not going to make great decisions. So the more you plan strategies, step by step plans and practicing, these plans become automatic and it eliminates confusion.

In general, we have certain weaknesses when it comes to assessing risk and performing well under stress. We also

have a lot of strength, but if we can understand what the weaknesses are in advance, will improve our ability to succeed. One of the biggest weaknesses is that we tend to move very slowly under extreme duress, and the more we have done in advance the more quickly we will push through that phase and perform appropriately.

Why do so many of us shut down or freeze?

This is so common, so pervasive across every kind of high-stress events. I have talked to firefighters, who have many related tales of people freezing up, all the way to stockbrokers who have seen it on the trading floor during a stock market crash. This tendency to shut down or freeze is, in my mind, an evolved defense mechanism. It is so powerful and so common that I don't think we would have evolved to this state unless it served a purpose. We need to understand this better because it's the kind of thing you can overcome, and it's very, very dangerous in events like fires or plane crashes. We've seen this many times, we know that this is a bigger risk, so we should start planning for it in advance.

Among the many survivors I have talked to, the people who have military training or even Boy Scouts training tend to perform a little better in a lot of situations. But more important is not the training but the culture, the whole outlook on life. Research shows that if you have what's called an "internal focus of control," so you believe that you influence your destiny, then you tend to do better and recover more fully in many situations. If on the other hand you feel like you are kind of at the mercy of fate and are in a more passive victim role in your day to day life, then that could be problematic because you'll be less likely to take action and can have trouble recovering.

We all have to spend time in preparedness, so it is important to really prioritize. What are my biggest risks?

It obviously depends on where you live and how you live but certainly we know that disasters are getting more frequent and more expensive in this country, largely because of wind and water events. We live in these dense, vertical cities near water, so we really have to try to focus our minds on things like floods, and also fire, which generally kills more people every year than all other disasters combined.

Are there any simple ways that we can train our fears and thoughts to help us survive in a disaster?

There are simple things you can do that are taught to first responders and elite military units, and they basically are not that different from yoga. We know that the most effective way to influence your subconscious brain is through breathing. With controlled breathing, for example, you breathe in for four counts, hold for four counts, release for four counts, hold for four counts and you repeat, over and over and over again whenever you are under stress. It could be mild stress, but it's something I practice all the time, in traffic and so forth.

In your book you mention who the real first responders in a disaster are. Who are they?

Talk to anyone who has actually survived a disaster and they will instantly tell you that they were the first responders. Since Sept. 11 we have become very reliant upon first responders. In big disasters, regular people do the majority of life saving, so the people you work and live with are the first responders and I really think that this is probably the most important lesson I have learned in covering disasters over the last decade.

The tendency to think that regular people will not perform well is often misguided. Regular people perform much better on average than we expect. So we really need to enroll regular people, engage them creatively, listen to them in advance and have them literally at the table when we are making decisions about emergency evacuation drills, about how to prepare for biological threats. They literally need to be at the table or else a natural bias will warp our planning and we will end up with emergency plans that are written for emergency responders.

The reality is that in disasters, we don't turn into the kinds of hysterical mobs that we see in movies. We tend to actually show each other great courtesy when things are going very bad and that should be enormously reassuring to people. So generally, people form groups and that is helpful because you need information more than almost anything else in most disasters. Ten brains and 20 hands are better than one brain and two hands.

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