

# How to Get the Survivor Mindset:

## Tips, Tricks, & Techniques to help you survive – mentally & physically – any situation.

Think about the last time you went on a trip and stayed in a hotel. Can you remember the hotel room? Now imagine you are asleep in this room and you're awakened by a piercing sound. What would you do?

Would you, like so many people, peek out your door to see if anyone else is taking this alarm seriously? Would you try to call the front desk? Or would you throw on some clothes and promptly walk to the nearest set of stairs and go to the lobby to see what was going on?

Taking the last action could save your life. It could also make you appear foolish – to yourself and worse, to someone else. Appearing foolish is one of the reasons people don't react in emergency situations.

When an emergency happens, we often look to others for signs as to how to act. We don't want to take responsibility. We don't want to make a wrong choice. We don't want to appear foolish. We also have a tendency to believe that everything is okay. This is because it usually is. We often underestimate the possibility of a disaster occurring, as well as its possible effects and so we don't react, or we act very slowly. Reacting slowly, or not at all, to a disaster has a name. It's called normalcy bias.

### Normalcy Bias

Normalcy bias is a mental state that occurs during a disaster. It happens because your brain uses what has happened to you in the past, tries to make sense of the present, and attempts to predict the future. Your brain looks for patterns that tell it how to act now. Normalcy bias predisposes your brain to see patterns where they might not be.

Back to the example of the alarm sounding in a hotel; if you peek out your door and don't see smoke in the hall, or other people moving quickly towards the stairs, you will probably conclude there isn't a fire. After all everything appears to be normal. You'll feel justified and safe going back to sleep. Your mind will tell you, 'if something's really wrong, someone will tell me.' When you were young, you practiced reacting to fire alarms in school. They were just drills. There wasn't any danger, so a real fire is outside the realm of your mind's experience. Your

brain is wired to be optimistic when it comes to disasters. It will seize any ambiguity in the present situation to infer a normal outcome.

Normalcy bias is one of the reasons mass evacuations are slow to happen when storms occur. When people are advised to leave their homes, in anticipation of a large storm, most check with four or more sources before actually deciding what to do. They check the weather station. They check in with a family member. They call their boss. They call the neighbor next door. They don't want the storm to be real. 'Disasters happen to other people, not to me,' is a pervading thought in most people's minds.

The media portrays disasters as panicked situations. Television, movies, and books are replete with characters in danger who panic. If you haven't had any real experience with a disaster, you will infer that if you were really in danger, everyone would be panicking, including you. In reality, the truth is a far different story. In most disaster situations people become very docile. They don't panic. They comply.

Take 9/11 for example. Very few of the over 15,000 people who escaped from the towers panicked. People walking down the stairs of the towers were overall very polite. More polite in fact than on a normal work day. One of the survivors remembers, "Nobody pushed anybody. Nobody tried to get into the stairway before anyone else. Everybody just went right back as a group and continued to funnel into the stairway in an orderly fashion."<sup>1</sup>

Quite a few of the survivors didn't do anything at all until someone told them to leave the building. Their normalcy bias had kicked in. Their brains wanted everything to be normal. In fact, some survivors took over 45 minutes to begin leaving after the first plane hit the North Tower. Many people felt the plane hit. Many called family or friends to see if they knew what was happening. Many went into the halls to talk to co-workers to see if they knew what had happened. In fact when surveyed, over 70% of survivors said they checked with family, friends or co-workers before leaving.

This 'checking in' behavior delayed reaction. The average time to react was about 6 minutes. Considering that the first and second planes hit about 16 minutes apart, those minutes were precious indeed. Considering that planes plowing into the twin towers was out of the nation's realm of reality, it's amazing so many people survived.

What would you have done? Think about this for a moment. You're in a tall building and suddenly you feel it shaking. The shaking stops. What would you do?

A plane deliberately crashing into the twin towers was unprecedented. It's not something that anyone was prepared for. Bombs, fires, and other disasters had been foreseen; however, drills to

exit the 110 floors of the buildings – an area so big it had its own zip code - were not even practiced.

Many of those who survived did so because a boss or other co-worker told them to evacuate. This is the power of Group Think.

### **Group Think**

Human beings are social creatures. You know how uncomfortable it is to go against the consensus of a group. The same feelings occur in a disaster. Most disasters occur to groups of people, not just to a single individual. Even if you don't know anyone around you, once an emergency occurs you quickly become a group. And group members work hard to conform. Most people look to an authority figure to tell them what to do when something unprecedented happens. In a disaster, if a boss, a fireman, or someone else you perceive as an authority figure, tells you to do something, you'll most likely comply. Workers in the twin towers usually left if their boss left. If the boss, or floor's fire marshal, stayed people were more likely to stay - unless another person came by and confidently told them to leave.

The 9/11 disaster isn't an exception. We all react differently in a group. When a crisis happens, statistics show people usually fall into one of three categories. The majority - about 70% - will do nothing. They will look to others for direction. About 15% will be calm and authoritative. They will act efficiently and quickly take control of the situation. The remaining 15% will become hysterical. This hysteria will usually be isolated and short-lived. Most of the group will be calm, so the hysteria will come under control.

How *you* react has more to do with your previous experience and “disaster day dreaming” than it has to do with your natural personality. A crisis is not a normal situation so the rules of how people normally interact don't apply. If you have experienced a crisis before, you will automatically act. Others will follow this natural lead. If you have no experience in a disaster, you will probably be a follower and look to others to lead.

Just by thinking about what could happen, however, you will be in a much better position to act. People who have previously experienced an emergency act quicker than those who have never encountered a catastrophe. You are reading this report. This gets you thinking about what you would do in a crisis. You will be able to act more quickly than a person who has never considered the possibility that a disaster will affect him personally.

### **Disaster Day Dreaming**

Remember the fire drills in grade school? Everyone lined up in an orderly fashion and filed out to stand on the playground until they were told to go back inside. The kids were grateful to stop learning fractions and the teachers thought it was a waste of time. But drills aren't a waste of time. Drills are a form of “Disaster Day Dreaming,” or advance planning. Just taking a few