



5 Ways to Refine Your Disaster Personality

by Amanda Ripley, author of *The Unthinkable*, June 24, 2008

A number of Time magazine readers emailed Amanda Ripley to ask for the news-you-can-use side column to the TIME adaptation of her book because TIME did not put this piece of the story online. Ripley summarizes it here and elaborates.

1. Attitude: It turns out attitude really does matter.

People who perform well in crises and recover well afterwards tend to have three underlying advantages: they believe they can influence what happens to them; they find meaningful purpose in life's turmoil; they are convinced they can learn from both good and bad experiences.

If you're like me, you're thinking: Yeah, right.

But we should probably consider these incredibly perfect and cheery outlooks as simply inspirational. Like all human behavior, they occur on a spectrum, and no one achieves all of them all of the time. Again and again, survivors have told me that their confidence in their own ability to shape their destiny helped propel them forward. And in any case, it makes sense to encourage this kind of outlook in yourself in your kids--especially because this kind of burning optimism is helpful even if no disaster ever strikes.

2. Knowledge: The brain is amazingly malleable. We constantly underestimate it.

If you understand how you are likely to react to a disaster, you can learn to override your worst instincts. If you learn more about your actual risks--or the risks that scare you most--you will probably be calmer should something go wrong someday. For example, did you know that most serious plane accidents are survivable? Yes, it's true. Of all passengers involved in serious accidents between 1983 and 2000, 56% survived. (Serious, for those of you who still don't believe me, is defined by the National Transportation Safety Board as accidents involving fire, severe injury, AND substantial aircraft damage.) So now that you know that, you know that your behavior can make a difference. And now that you know that, you might have a better attitude (see no. 1) in the extremely unlikely event that your plane goes down.

3. Anxiety Level: People with higher everyday anxiety levels may have a greater tendency to freeze or totally shut down in an emergency.

That is not always a bad thing, as my chapter on paralysis details. But it's a very common reaction, and it's important to recognize this risk and override it if you need to...if, say, your house is burning down or your ferry is sinking.

As in regular life, if you can learn tricks to control your anxiety, you will probably perform better. For example, some police officers are now trained to do rhythmic breathing whenever their guns

are drawn. Take a yoga class and learn breathing and stretching exercises that can lower stress, and anxiety levels.

4. Get in Shape: Once again, what helps us in regular life helps us in disasters.

The harsh truth is that out-of-shape people move more slowly, are more vulnerable to secondary injuries like heart attacks and have a harder time physically recovering from any injuries they do sustain. On 9/11, people with low physical ability were three times as likely to be hurt while evacuating the Towers.

5. Training: By far, the best way to improve performance is to practice.

Make a list of your biggest risks (try to use data to do this, not just emotion). Then think creatively about how to give yourself or your family a dress rehearsal. The brain loves body memory. It is much better, for example, to stop, drop and roll than to talk about stopping, dropping and rolling.

For example, we know that fires generally kill more people than all other disasters combined. (If you are poor or African American, your chances of being in a fire are particularly high.) So give your brain something to work with. Make surprise drills an annual tradition in your office or home. Take the stairs down to the ground--don't just stare at the stairwell door. Create incentives so that people want to do this.

For example, have the boss tell everyone they have to go. Have him or her explain why it matters (because your brain turns to mush in a real fire, and you often lose your eyesight because of smoke). And have him announce that the official meeting spot will be the coffee shop two blocks away, where he will buy everyone coffee and donuts. That way, you boost office morale at the same time, so you get something out of the experience even if nothing goes wrong.

Amanda Ripley, a longtime TIME Magazine contributor, is an investigative journalist who writes about human behavior and public policy. Her book, The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes — and Why, is the first major book to explain how the brain works in disasters — and how we can learn to do better. It has been published in 15 countries.

For more information contact:

James Roddey

ReadySetPrepare.org

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James Roddey & associates

www.ReadySetPrepare.org - 503.970.8829