7 Essentials If You're Trapped In A Fire

Even if it may seem far-fetched for the average Joe taxpayer, getting caught in a burning building is a relatively common occurrence in modern-day America, hence acquiring the skills and/or the intel on how to survive such an unpleasant scenario should rank high on any respectable prepper's bucket-list.

To begin with, let me throw a bunch of statistics at you, to make you understand that today's topic is as serious as it gets.

For example, fires cause more than 7 billion dollars in damage each year in the United States, as fire departments respond to more than 300,000 home fires. Again, each and every year. To put things into a grimmer perspective, **2600+ Americans die each year from fires**, and more than 13,000 are injured. Now, if you don't want to become part of that statistic at some point in the future (God forbids!), keep reading.

There's an old saying around old-school firemen: if you want to escape a fire, you must think like the fire. I think I've heard this line in a movie about firemen starring Kurt Russel, but let that go. The idea is, one of the crucial things to determine if caught in a burning building, whether it's your home, a hotel or an office building, is how fire spreads. You must understand what it is required from a fire to grow and spread through a building, so you can concoct a realistic escape plan.

The basics of fire starting, which are very familiar to survivalists, also apply in our case: for a fire to start, grow and spread inside a building, it requires 3 elements:

- A source to provide the initial "spark", which is basically a heat source

- Oxygen (the more, the better)
- A fuel source, i.e. any type of material that burns.

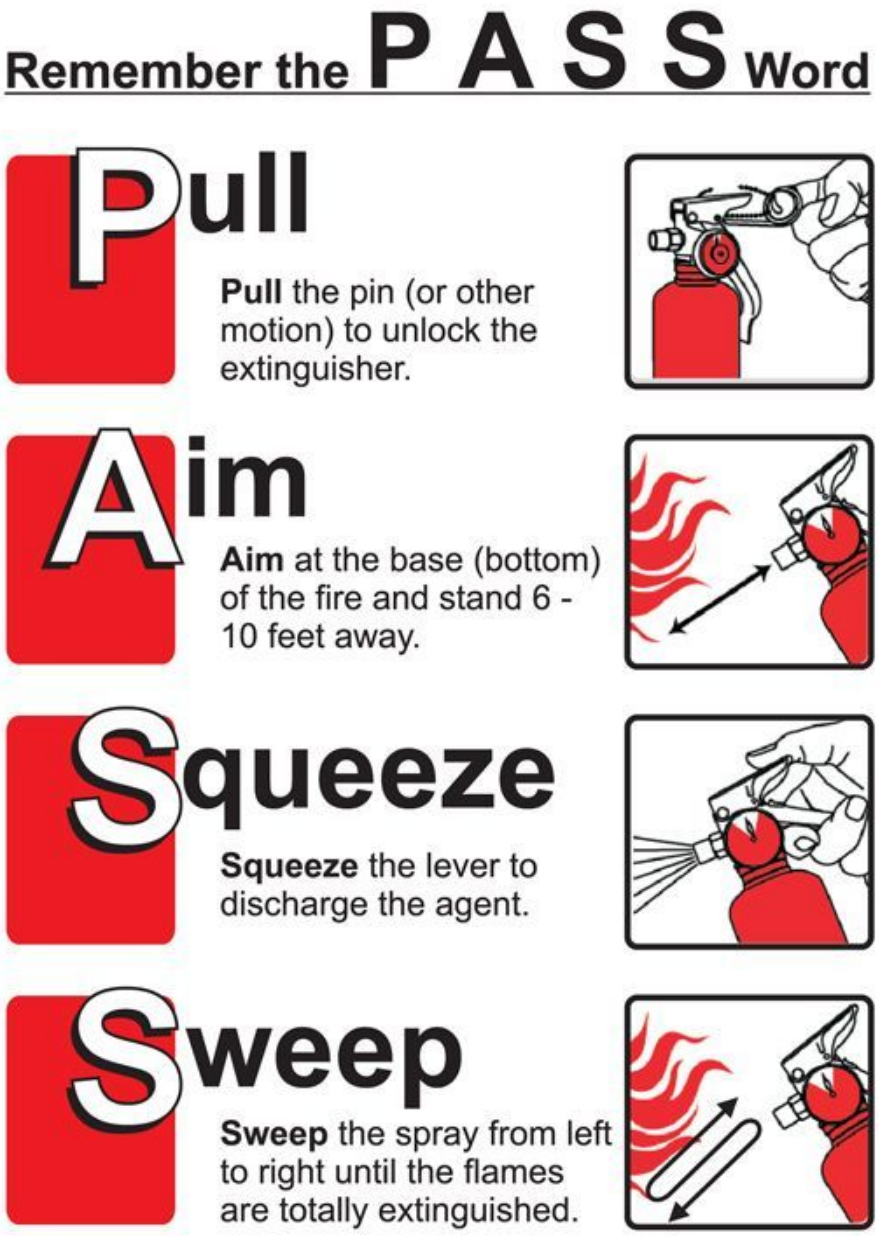
The primary source of home fires is, to no one's surprise, **cooking**. This may be the reason people prefer to eat out, right? However, the primary culprit for fire related deaths is represented by dropped cigarettes. As an interesting factoid, most accidental fires that cause huge property damage and casualties are started by men, and we're talking 64% of the fires.

Once the first spark which causes ignition takes place, the fire will try to spread for as much and as long as possible, as long as there's enough fuel and oxygen. Keep in mind that fire tends to spread into cooler areas, and the heat spreads very rapidly.

For example, a house fire will literally cook your goose in under 4 minutes, as it's capable of raising the interior temperature to 1100+ degrees Fahrenheit. Shortly after that, the air inside a room will get so hot, that basically any flammable material will spontaneously combust. This phenomenon is called flashover and it occurs even in the absence of actual (as in open) flames. Why am I boring you with such sadistic details? Well, you must understand perfectly that if caught in a burning building, you'll have a tiny window of opportunity to escape, and we're talking about 3 minutes, give or take.

With all these in mind, always remember the old boy-scouts' motto: **always be prepared!** The question is, how? Well, that's why you are here.

The first lesson to be taken home is this: people and fires are competing for the same crucial resource: oxygen. A lack of oxygen will make you sleepy and dumb, hence fire has an obvious advantage over humans in this competition.



Here's from FEMA's fire safety manual about the effects of an oxygen depleted environment:

- 21% Oxygen Level– Normal atmospheric level.
- 19.5% Oxygen Level – Minimum healthful level.
- 15-19% Oxygen Level – Decreased stamina and coordination.
- 12-14% Oxygen Level – Breathing rate increases with exertion, increase in heart rate, impaired coordination, perception, and judgment.
- 10-12% Oxygen Level – Breathing further increases in rate and depth, lips turn blue. Poor judgment.
- 8-10% Oxygen Level – Mental failure, fainting, unconsciousness, nausea, and vomiting.
- 6-8% Oxygen Level – Fatal after 6 to 8 minutes.

- 4-6% Oxygen Level – Coma in 40 seconds, convulsions, respiration ceases, and death occurs.

In order to survive getting caught in a burning building, you must understand **how dangerous the lack of oxygen is for the human mind and body**. And on top of that, a lack of oxygen is not the only problem. As the fire expands, plumes of toxic smoke will wreak havoc on your eyes and lungs, not to mention gases like carbon monoxide which causes mental impairment even in small amounts. As a matter of fact, smoke inhalation kills more people than actual flames do.

What You Can Do to Stay Alive

The first thing to consider in any SHTF scenario is situational awareness. In our case, you must be aware of your exact location in relation to fire escapes, whether you're at home or in an office building, in a hotel or wherever. Public buildings are required by law to post evacuation maps, so check them out every time you go out. If they don't seem to make much sense, try to do a little recon yourself by exploring (walking the floors) the layout of the building, looking for a possible escape route in case SHTF. The name of the game when caught in a burning building is to get out of there as soon as possible. You should also be capable of pinpointing your exact location in a given building to rescuers or 911 dispatchers, the likes of floor/room number, but you must be very specific in case you get trapped.

Another thing to consider is that even with small office fires, many may die due to toxic gases and smoke produced during combustion, especially in poorly ventilated spaces, which tend to trap the smoke inside. Hence, you should always know where the hose lines/fire extinguishers are in relation to your location, so you can put out small fires very quick, or if you'll have to fight your way to the nearest exit through flames.

Heat, flames and smoke will always tend to rise first, and even if it’s only a matter of time until toxic gases and smoke will envelop the whole room, try to stay as low as possible as you’re trying to escape the hot areas. Additionally, you can use a damp piece of cloth (your t-shirt for example) to cover your mouth and nose, thus reducing the amount of smoke and toxic gases produced by the fire. This simple trick will also reduce the temperature of the air you inhale, thus helping with preventing irritation, inflammation and even burning of airways, hence minimizing the damage caused by smoke inhalation.

During your escape, **always do a quick check of the doors before opening**. In this way, you’ll make sure you’re not opening a door that contains a fire on the other side. Basically, you must check out if the door or its handles are hot when touched. If you open the wrong door, you’ll cause the fire to spread out quickly and to expand out of control due to an infusion of oxygen between rooms. If any points on a given door feel warm, proceed to an alternate exit, your secondary option so to speak. If there aren’t any, look for a window, and yes, you may have to break it to escape, and even jump a floor (or worse).

Always remember: the name of the game is **to get out as soon as possible**; don’t stop to grab any precious belongings, not even to call the fire department. You can do it after you get out of there! As soon as you see flames or smell smoke, you must enter in “flight mode” and get the hell out of there.

During a fire it is not advised to use elevators, as they may malfunction and trap you inside. All buildings are required by law to have separate exits, besides elevators that is, which means stairs. If you are trapped in your room and you can’t get out, try to keep out the smoke by placing wet clothing, blankets or towels, under the door/ventilation shafts to keep the smoke out. If your clothes catch fire, remember the old drill: stop, drop and roll to smother the flames, while covering your face and mouth with your hands to protect them. Always learn your building evac-plans, especially if you live/work in a high rise building, I cannot emphasize this too much; if you can get out, do it as quick as possible, as the stakes are high.

Speaking of fire extinguishers, many people die in fires because they don’t know how to use them, or they try to fight the fire themselves.

Here’s FEMA again on whether you should use a fire extinguisher:

- You are trained in how to use the extinguisher.
- You can put out the fire in five seconds or less.
- The fire is small and contained – like in a wastebasket.
- There is no flammable debris or hazardous material nearby.