"Can Do" Attitude: How to Dismantle the Stress of Danger

There are a thousand little details that go into surviving any given situation; some under our control and others not. Skills, knowledge, equipment, and supplies help, but those alone won't keep any of us alive. More than anything, we need to have the right attitude.

Attitude is king in the survival realm. If you watch any of those survival reality TV shows, it's the people who have a positive attitude who end up doing the best. That may be TV, but it's at least supposed to be mimicking real life. So the "actors" have plenty of leeways to be themselves. Part of that is letting their personality and attitude come through.

If we need proof that attitude is essential, we have to look at military training manuals on survival. All the branches of service have them. Interestingly enough, they all start with a chapter on attitude. Maybe that's because the military has found that attitude helps keep downed airmen and soldiers trapped behind the line alive.

Even medical doctors have noticed this. Cancer patients with a positive mental attitude are much more likely to survive their fight with cancer than those who are mourning how they're going to die. Likewise, emergency room doctors have seen police officers who have received non-lethal gunshot wounds die on the operating table because they were convinced that if they were shot, they would die. At the same time, some received severe gunshot wounds whose will to live got them through.

Okay, so how do we apply that to survival?

Develop a "Can Do" Attitude

The difference between an "I'm going to survive" attitude and an "I'm going to die" one is often nothing more than "I can." People who believe they can act as if they can, whether that is winning a race or surviving a catastrophe. People with that positive attitude are going to do whatever it takes to make sure they survive.

That's an essential key because survival often requires us to do things that we are uncomfortable doing, may never have done before, and find extremely difficult to do. The amount of physical exertion that would be necessary for most survival scenarios is far beyond what most of us are used to.

Survival is also going to require us to push harder and longer than we're used to. The physical strain of survival is likely to tax us to the limits and beyond. But giving up on those tasks could also mean giving up on life, not a good choice. The "Can do" attitude helps us push through, like an athlete who finds a second wind to keep on running when they're already exhausted.

Without something to motivate us, it will be challenging to do

what's necessary to survive. Can you imagine someone having to chop wood when they're used to sitting at a computer all day? I guarantee you, their muscles will be screaming to call it quits after only the first five minutes of chopping. Or how about someone who has a queasy stomach, but is faced with having to skin and gut an animal, so that they can cook it for dinner?

It's unlikely that we'll find much in the way of external motivation in those situations. Whatever reason we are going to have is going to have to come from inside ourselves. That's why the "can do" attitude is so important. Without it, we could easily find ourselves overwhelmed by the situation and giving up.

The one thing that separates Navy SEALs from any other fighting force in the world is that they don't know how to quit. Even their motto, "The only easy day was yesterday," conveys this idea. Their creed starts with the words, "I will never quit. I persevere and thrive on adversity."

When SEALs go through training at their base in Coronado, California, there's a bell hanging in front of the orderly room. All through the day, that bell mocks them, saying, "All you have to do to get out of all this is ring me, you'll be out of here so quick, your backside won't catch up with you for a week. While many do ring that bell, the ones who wear the trident never do. They're survivors.

Training Helps

There's a saying that the way you make elite troops in any military is to tell them they are elite and then wait for them to live up to their image of themselves. While I'm sure there's a large grain of truth to that, I also know that those elite troops go through some of the most brutal training in the world, preparing to become those elite troops.

Training helps anyone develop that "can do" attitude, as they come to know they really can do the tasks they need to, to survive. The more jobs we have confidence we know how to accomplish, even under the worst conditions, the greater our overall faith becomes.

Of course, that training has to be done with purpose. The skills being learned have to be the ones that will need to be used in a survival situation. They also need to be practiced under somewhat realistic conditions, close enough to the actual ones, to create some familiarity and comfort when necessary to use those skills.

I often see preppers practicing in a way that is too far removed from an actual survival situation. Perhaps the best example of this is starting a fire in ideal weather conditions. But when push comes to shove, chances are pretty good that we'll have to create a fire in the rain or snow, not when it's a lovely calm summer evening. Their confidence isn't going to get that fire going if they don't indeed have the skills to go with it.

Taking that a step further, have you ever tried finding tinder or even firewood during a storm? If you're like most people, you probably never have. After all, you're smart enough to stay in your tent when it's raining. You'll need to know where to look when the disaster strikes, which means having done it before.

In the military, learning a skill means having the skill down to the point where one can do it without thinking about it. There's a good reason for that; in a crisis, when the adrenalin is flowing through one's system, it's hard to think. You can't rely on your ability to look at a situation logically and figure out what to do. Instead, you've got to be able to react at a moment's notice, counting on muscle memory to help you do the right thing.

That sort of ability comes from three things:

- Breaking the task down into small parts and learning each of them thoroughly
- Practicing the task over and over again
- Applying the task in as many different scenarios as possible

We need that same sort of training with every critical survival skill. Calling ourselves fully trained before we get there is nothing more than fooling ourselves.

Learn to Dismantle the Stress of Danger

If you spend any time with a community of people engaged in dangerous work, you'll find that they all have something in common. That's the dark humor they have in discussing their jobs. It's not something you're likely to hear unless you're part of such a community. It's the talk they have amongst themselves when they are alone with each other. Such discussion may even sound offensive to those outside that particular community of professionals, but it's part of survival to them.

Soldiers talk about "buying the farm" and pilots about "not making as many landings as they have takeoffs." Both are talking about death in that dark humorous way. But it's not making fun of death as some might think; it's finding a way to deal with the risk of death in the things they do every day.

That humor helps them face the danger, emotionally dismantling it and diffusing the intensity of the risk they face. If they don't do that, fear can overcome them, paralyzing them at the wrong moment.

Fighter pilots, especially those who fly off of aircraft

carriers, are some of the cockiest people in the world. Part of that ability to be cocky is that they've learned how to dismantle the stress of the danger they face. While no American aircraft carrier has ever returned to port after deployment with their full complement of pilots, every pilot on that ship is convinced that they'll come home. They recognize the danger of what they're doing but have decided that their luck will hold out.

If those pilots couldn't do that, they would become paralyzed, unable to do their job, and fly their planes. So all that dark humor has a real place in their lives.

They've even developed rituals around that humor. Sit in on the ready room briefing before a unit takes off on a mission and you'll hear the briefer using the same sort of language as part of the briefing. Those jokes are not-so-subtle reminders of what they need to do to survive. They're reminders of some of the most important lessons their community has learned, without the seriousness that would cause them to start worrying and freeze up.

So how do we use that in our brand of survival? Maybe that dark humor doesn't work for you. But you still need to find ways of dismantling that fear. That could be through confidence, faith, or even focusing on other things. That's

really what the humor does, helps them to focus on other things.

Have Faith in Something

Faith is an integral part of survival. Regardless of what your religious convictions are, it would help if you had something to believe in. We can all expect to face survival situations that are bigger than we are. When that time comes, we need confidence in something more than just ourselves.

I don't know what your faith is, and I don't need to know. Nonetheless, you must have faith in something. It's that faith that will sustain you when you feel like you can't do anymore. Regardless of how it happens, believing in some god will give you something you can count on, bigger than you.

There have been many times in my own life where I feel that my family and I were saved by divine intervention. Whether that was keeping us out of danger or helping us through it, there was something that kept us alive. I'm not talking about places where my survival skills kept us busy, but rather where my survival skills didn't make a difference, yet we managed to survive.

You need to come to grips with this on your own. I'm not here to convince you to go one way or another. But I will say this; a faith that isn't tangible, that isn't something that sustains you every day of your life, probably isn't going to do you the tiniest bit of good in a crisis.

For faith to be faith, it must be in use all the time. Anyone who ignores their faith, but expects to be able to call upon their god in a time of crisis, is fooling themselves. It's not that god will fail them, but rather that they won't be looking to help when they should be. They won't even think about it because they aren't used to thinking about it.

But there's another part of this, which fits in with our subject of the day. Having faith in something bigger than you helps to give you that positive mental attitude that you need to have to survive. You may not be able to say "I Can," but find yourself saying, "I know my God can." That will have the same impact on your confidence and overall mental attitude. Whether or not your god comes to help, you won't be giving up; and that might see you thought, with or without the help of your god.