

Keeping Your Head in Times of Crisis

Somehow, we all seem to think we'll be able to keep our cool when everything goes to hell in a handbasket. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

Medical science has proven that one of the effects of the adrenalin dump that happens as part of the fight or flight reaction, is to reduce our ability to think clearly.

One reason that it's called the "fight or flight instinct" is that leaving cognitive thought out of the equation brings us to the point of reacting by doing one of the two. Which one depends in part on the circumstances and in part on our own personal ability. Two people, faced by the same conditions, can react quite differently, with one running and the other one fighting.

But in the kinds of scenarios, we expect to encounter, as preppers and survivalists, it's quite probable that neither fight nor flight are the correct response. The fight or flight instinct is closely associated with ancient man, who didn't have the resources available to them that we do today. Reactions which would have been ideal for them are not often the best ones for us today; because of the tools we have available to us. Nevertheless, left unchecked, the fight or flight instinct could cause us to ignore those tools and take a decidedly more primitive action.

What do I mean by that? Choosing to run away from danger, when one has a motorcycle right beside them is a prime example of a more primitive action. Likewise, choosing to fight against an assailant, when one has a gun strapped to their side is a more primitive action. Somehow, we must overcome these base reactions that more rightly belonged to our ancient ancestors

and replace them with reactions which are more appropriate to the times in which we live and the resources we have available to us today.

Training Helps

One of the reasons training is so important is that by training we are also building “muscle memory.” While I don’t believe that muscles have an independent memory, I do understand that repeated action helps the brain to learn how to take that action without thinking. We see this in countless actions we do every day, from tying our shoes to walking and a host of other things we do daily, without thinking about them.

Military training is based upon the foundation of this principle. Regardless of whether we’re talking about basic training or advanced flight training, military personnel are required to perform the same tasks over and over again, with the idea of making them totally proficient at them. In times of combat, they can’t stop and walk through how to do some tasks; they must be able to do it as easily as walking.

One of the big differences between elite troops and others is that they have a wider range of tasks that they can accomplish on autopilot, without having to think about them. That both increases their chances of survival and their ability to accomplish the mission.

The other important thing that this sort of repetitive training does is give the trained troops more confidence. That, in turn, helps keep them from panicking and going into the fight or flight mode, with the associated adrenalin dump into their bloodstream. So, people who are properly trained not only know what to do, without having to think about it; but they also are more likely to be able to think during that crisis. Their ability to think makes it easier for them to find a solution or take action that’s needed to help their team survive.

This applies directly to us in our own survival needs. Sadly, there are many in our community who haven't even taken their gear out of the box, let alone used it to the point where they can do so, without having to consciously think about it. Unless you've pretty much worn out one set of gear, using it, you probably haven't done the task enough to be proficient. Granted, some gear, like a knife or hatchet, isn't going to wear out; but other gear will and will need to be replaced.

Another thing that using that gear in training does for us is helps us find out if the gear we have is sufficient to the task. I've changed out gear in my main survival kit repeatedly, through the years, sometimes finding that the gear I had wasn't good enough. So, I have found other equipment that works better. Once I find that gear, I end up having to start the process all over again, learning how to use that new piece of gear efficiently, while giving it a thorough test.

Being familiar with the gear and methods that I will need in a survival situation helps to eliminate that potential to panic and go into fight or flight mode. At a minimum, I will be faced with using equipment and methods which are familiar to me, rather than being faced with a situation I don't understand.

Run Practice Scenarios

One of the best things you can do for yourself, and your family, is to run practice scenarios. These can be full-blown survival tests, where you go off in the woods with nothing more than your bug out bag, or they can be partial tests, where you are testing only a certain set of skills. I've used both.

One of my regular pastimes used to be going to the local shooting range's weekly tactical shoot. Unfortunately, my local shooting range doesn't have that. So, I only get to participate when I go somewhere where the range has one.

Tactical shoots are competitive events where the shooters are shooting against the clock. Scenarios are created by the people running the event, simulating a real-world active shooter situation. Shooters then must use a combination of movement and shooting to take out the targets, without hitting any innocent bystanders (indicated by a different colored target). Doing this against the clock provides the adrenalin dump that's necessary to make it more realistic.

In addition to the adrenalin dump affecting the shooter's thinking, it also affects their fine motor skills, making someone who might be a good shooter when target shooting look like a fool who has never shot a gun in their life. But because of that, it becomes a great method of testing your skills and seeing if you could really do it, if you were faced with that survival scenario.

On a larger scale, there are several things we can do to simulate a survival situation, putting ourselves and our families through the paces to see how well we handle it. Try shutting off the power the next time there's a big storm or blizzard and see what everyone does. Fake a breakdown in a storm, out in the middle of nowhere. Go out in the woods for a week, with nothing more than a survival kit.

The more of these you do, the greater range of scenarios there will be which are familiar to you. That's a major part of keeping you head about you. We are much more likely to have a fight or flight reaction to a situation when we haven't been there before. But if we have, even in training, we'll most likely fall back on what we've done before.

Planning

Any emergency response organization of any size has a planning officer. This person might have other responsibilities as well; but their main job is to develop written plans that give detailed step-by-step directions for what to do in any of a

number of emergencies.

There are two interlocking ideas in play here. First, it's considerably easier to work out what actions need to be taken, while sitting at a desk, with all the time and resources needed to build that plan. Secondly, when the time comes, having a writing plan helps to ensure that everything that needs to be done is done, at a time when the people who must make the decisions and get things done may not be thinking all that clearly.

Granted, no plan is going to be perfect. It's highly likely that when the time comes, something in the plan will have to change. But that doesn't negate the value of having that plan. At a minimum, the plan provides a starting place, so that anyone who is involved knows what to do. Changes can happen as they are in the process of doing it.

As preppers, we need to have written plans for every sort of disaster we are likely to face. One overall survival plan isn't enough, because different sorts of disasters can cause different sorts of problems. Some might require that we bug out, while we would be better off bugging in during others.

As part of that planning, we need to specifically define the circumstances under which we would bug out. While we might end up changing our minds when the time comes, having those criteria established does at least give us a starting point. Again, it will be a starting point that will have been worked out when we had the time to think about it, rather than when we are in the middle of the situation, with things coming at us from every direction.

As much as possible, those plans should be walked through in a test run. Things like how much you can carry in your bug out vehicle can't really be determined without actually loading the vehicle. How well you can heat your home with wood can't be determined if you don't turn off the furnace and try it;

and that trial must happen when it's cold enough to really challenge your wood-burning stove or whatever other emergency heating system you have.

Even if you don't have your written plan in hand when faced with a survival situation, you will have gone through the work of preparing it. You may not remember every little detail; but you will have some memory of it. That will help provide you with a logical starting point and some logical steps to take, rather than just reacting.

Mentally Playing through Scenarios

A written plan is great, but there are always things you can't do a written plan for or times when you wouldn't have that plan with you anyway. Take a gunman entering a restaurant where you're eating for example; what would you do? Even if you have a written plan for that scenario, every restaurant is different and every such situation is different, so there would still be a lot of details to iron out.

I have long played the mental game of turning situations I find myself in, into survival scenarios. Whether those are self-defense scenarios or more traditional disaster survival, I start with where I am and what I have available to me. Working from that, I try to develop a full plan of action.

A very important part of this is answering the two interrelated questions of what I can do with whatever I have available to me and what I will do when I don't have something crucial that I need. I've come up with more than one new idea like this; ideas that could help me in some future scenario.

Part of the idea here is that when I finally do find myself in a survival situation, it won't be unfamiliar to me. While I might never have lived through that situation before, there's a good chance that I will have thought through it at some time or another. Not only will that help me know what to do, but it

will help eliminate that potential for panic that will keep me from thinking clearly.

There have been literally thousands of these that I have gone through in my mind, especially those which are associated with an active shooter. That puts me a big step ahead, mentally speaking, should any of those situations arise. While I may not have thought through that exact situation, in that exact location, there's a good chance that I will have thought through something similar enough, that my mind will be able to use it. I won't panic, because of being on familiar ground.

All these steps are important, even if they may seem like variations of the same thing. Each plays its own part in making the mind familiar with a crisis, so that the mind isn't faced by something totally unknown. Maybe it can be considered to be playing tricks on oneself; but they are tricks that will help you to keep your head, when and if those situations do arise.