

Survival Priorities: How to Get Started Without Feeling Overwhelmed

Emergency preparedness can be overwhelming, especially to those who are just getting started. I am often asked, "Where should I start?"

It is normal to feel a little overwhelmed when confronted by the sea of information on preparedness. Everyone seems to have opinions and advice about the most important aspects of emergency preparedness and what you should be preparing for. Unfortunately, some of that advice is influenced by how folks who prepare are portrayed by the unprepared. It is sad to see responsible people with an earnest desire to prepare get influenced by and tropes and negative stereotypes perpetuated by the ignorant.

According to the TV Series Domsday Preppers, every prepper prepares for some singular threat that they are obsessed with to the exclusion of all others ... the more unlikely, the better. In reality, the only people I have seen do that are newbies that were attracted to the preparedness movement by survival TV shows. The reality is that we aren't very good at predicting the future and usually are unaware what the next disaster we confront will be beyond known threats. Nassim Taleb used the name Black Swan to describe a threat that we fail predict that harms us.

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Paraphrased, the term Black Swan was used by Greek and then European scholars to describe an animal like a unicorn, that did not exist, only to later discover that black swans existed all along, in Australia, and that scholars were simply unaware of the fact, whereupon the term took on a new meaning.

The good news is that we need mostly the same stuff regardless of what type of disaster befalls us. So, if we plan for basic survival needs first, then we will achieve a state of general preparedness where we are prepared to face most volatility. Once we have done that, then we can prepare for specific known threats and further prepare, in a more general sense, to face unknown threats.

The Basic Universal Survival Needs

I have already written extensively about the basic survival needs we all have in common, in an article about what I call the [Modified Rule of 3's](#), and the editors called the “Newly Updated Rule of 3's”, so I won't do it again here, but it is a simple mnemonic for basic survival needs relative to how quickly they can threaten us. The Rule of 3's says that you can live three seconds without thinking (Security), three minutes without air (First Aid/Medical), three hours without shelter (Exposure, Cordage, Fire, Knife), three days without water (Water Procurement, Treatment & Hydration), three weeks without food (Food, Food Procurement, Food Preparation), three months without hope (Self-Recovery, Rescue, Psychology, Adapt

& Overcome). These are the basic survival needs relative to risk.

When preparations keep survival needs in mind, they stick to the basics necessary to survive and there is no bloating of the survival kit by asking questions like, "What nifty gadgets could I cram in?" my given container.

I feel obligated to note that some of the more liberal survival instructors, whose view of nature is heavily filtered through the lens of their cherished political beliefs, are in denial that security is a need at all. Either they have been fortunate to live lives insulated from violence by economic privilege or they deny it, just as they chose to deny the cruelty they surely have observed in nature. The fact that aspects of survival are culturally taboo should not cause rational people to ignore it.

Prepare to Stay or Go

One question many new to survival ask is should I prepare to bug out or shelter in place? The answer is that to the degree which you are able, you prepare to do both. In some disasters, staying put can lower chances of survival to near zero and in others, and in others bugging out can have the same result. The truth is that many times one cannot know ahead of time, which path will be necessary, so reason dictates that we be ready to bug out or shelter in place as the situation demands.

If you are just getting started here are some [small survival goals](#). Start by looking at your needs. What do you need to survive just one week at home? For security, some folks might start out with:

- Pepper Spray
- Baseball Bat
- Lantern

- Flashlight
- Batteries

For first aid/medical they might have a

- Small First Aid Kit
- save up a week's worth of their Prescription Medications.

For shelter, they have to look at how they will heat their home if the power goes out, and the natural gas lines depressurize. For various reasons, they might decide on

- Wood,
- Propane or Kerosene
- and layered Clothing for the coldest nighttime temperature.

They might store some

- 550 Cord
- Tarps

in case their roof is damaged. They might gather an

- Axe,
- a Fixed Blade Knife and
- a way to make fire.

For water, they might identify the nearest surface water source and get a cart and some

- Buckets and Lids
- Water Cans to transport and settle it

- a bag of Coffee Filters to prefilter it
- a Large Stock Pot to boil water and
- Iodine or Unscented Chlorine Bleach (not splash-less) as a backup treatment method.

They gather a

- Week worth of non-perishable food that does not need to be cooked to eat.

Then gather

- Paper Maps,
- a Phone Directory,
- a paper Contacts/Address Book
- a Battery Powered Weather Radio,
- a Solar USB Battery Pack and
- a Universal Charge Cable to charge cellphones and
- rechargeable USB devices such as a rechargeable headlamp
- and start saving cash on hand.

This is a solid starting point to shelter in place.

To be ready to bugout, they need to decide where they would go. In studying actual disasters, most people stay with family or friends. Those who can afford to stay at cabins or recreational properties. Those who do not have anywhere to go become displaced persons is Fed-speak ... refugees. They stay in shelters, FEMA trailers or become homeless. So, it is worth putting some thought and effort into a bugout plan. Another option is to enter into a mutual aid agreement with another survivalist family with the same problem, although I haven't been able to find much evidence of instances where people have successfully done this. I also have not seen any evidence of people successfully seeking refuge with survival groups. But there are abundant cases where evacuees have found temporary

and sometimes even permanent refuge through governments, churches, employers, and organizations of all sorts.

I have not been a refugee myself, but I did have the opportunity to stay in a Red Cross shelter during a training exercise called a Red Cross Shelter Bootcamp where I volunteered to be a “displaced person” for an exercise through the CERT program.

What I learned from the experience is that there is a lot of downtime. Even in a preplanned exercise that the Red Cross knew about ahead of time, they were not able to deliver meals on time. If you go to a shelter, bring some good books, a deck of cards, snacks and some luggage locks to keep unattended children out of your pack and a cable lock to make sure no one walks away with it without making a scene. Have someone you trust guard your stuff while you are away or take it with you to the bathroom. We weren’t searched during the intake process, but weapons and certain other items were prohibited.

I don’t think being a refugee or homeless is anyone’s Plan A. I certainly don’t plan on it, but as only 45% of Americans have enough savings on hand to cover a \$1,000 emergency, relatively minor volatility such as an accident, illness or job loss could put them on the street without going into debt or help from family, friends or charitable organizations. (Renter, 2023)

As for bugging out, plan to do it either in your vehicle or on foot, as the situation dictates. Use a bugout drill as an excuse to go camping. Time how long it takes you to fuel and load your vehicle and get on the road and then time how long it takes you the second and third times. Once you do it a few times, you should be able to be on the road in less than half an hour. Hopefully your destination is less than a tank of gas away. Either way, one way to ensure you have fuel is to upgrade to an extended range fuel tanks or add auxiliary fuel tanks. This will enable you to store fuel in your vehicle

without the hassle of rotating gas cans or fuel trollies. A full-size truck or suburban with a 40-gallon main tank and two 20-gallon saddle tanks can carry 80 gallons of fuel ... enough to drive from Phoenix to Idaho without refueling.

Stockpile for a Longer Duration Emergency

Once you have the basics to make it a week, it is a simple matter to add

- [beans](#),
- bullets,
- [Band-Aids](#),
- fuel,
- [water](#),
- [rechargeable batteries](#) and
- [cash](#)

to increase your sustainment time. If past emergencies are any indication, food becomes the primary currency. If you own your home, planting fruit and nut trees will give you the most calories for the least effort. Plant a garden and raise a few chickens. Doing it on as small a scale as you need to, and storing what you need to expand food production as needed is a much viable plan. Planning to till under your lawn and plant seeds out of can you bought online is not likely to succeed.

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IN A CIVIL WAR**

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Prepare for Known Threats

Get a copy of your county risk assessment and take a look at government flood insurance [maps](#) and you will have a pretty good picture of the threats your local government is aware of. Combine those with threats you are aware of, and you have a starting point of knowns to prepare for.

Prepare for Unknown Threats

How on Earth can you prepare for the unknown? It's not as difficult as it sounds because you need about the same stuff to prepare for most emergencies, but the key to dealing with the unknown is for you and your preparations to be adaptable. Adaptability and versatility are the strengths of a modular, layered survival stockpile.

References

Renter, E. (2023, May 9). *Most Americans Save, but Many Can't Cover a \$1,000 Eergency*. Retrieved from [nerdwallet.com: https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/banking/data-2023-savings-report](https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/banking/data-2023-savings-report)