

THE SURVIVOR PERSONALITY

Why Some People Have a Better Chance of Surviving When Survival is Necessary*

by Al Siebert, PhD

Survival in a deadly crisis is challenging because of the shock and unexpectedness of the threat. During the chaotic turmoil of a deadly emergency some people feel overwhelmed and freeze up. Others panic and may act in senseless ways that reduce their survival chances. Many become highly emotional and believe they are going to die. In contrast, a few people quickly comprehend the reality of the new situation, accept that they could die but don't panic, and take action to increase their chances of surviving.

In real life deadly situations it is wrong to think that a person will fight to survive at the expense of others. It is not "either me or you", it is "both me and you." Stories of survivors usually reveal that in the survival turmoil they extend their coping skills and their commitment to live to those around them. They reflexively act in ways to keep both themselves and others alive.

Being a survivor in life and death emergencies is an outcome from interacting with everyday life in ways that increase the probability of survival when survival is necessary. Your habitual way of reacting to everyday challenges influences your chances of being a survivor in a crisis or an emergency. The interaction includes three core elements:

- ◆ Quickly absorb accurate information about what is happening.
- ◆ Feel confident that something can be done to influence events in a way that leads to a good outcome.
- ◆ Be willing to consider using any possible action.
- ◆ Do whatever it takes.

First, Survive the Toss of the Cosmic Coin

Before a deadly disaster, no one can predict who will live or die. Chance and luck play a role when a group of people is trapped in a deadly shooting, a sinking boat, or plane crash. It is as though a cosmic coin toss determines who will be killed and who will not. But the survivor personality research reveals that if you are still alive after others have died, there may be moments when what you do can make a difference in whether or not you live or die. Here is what survivors do....

In a Crisis, Survivors Rapidly Read the New Reality

Life's best survivors are habitually curious. This habit predisposes a survivor to quickly read the new reality in an emergency. This quick comprehension of the total circumstance is "pattern empathy." While reading their new reality they simultaneously scan internally for the best action or reaction from their reservoir of paradoxical response possibilities. This automatic and sometimes unconscious reflex can cause the individual to later be astonished by what they've done, and to wonder just how he or she accomplished it.

In a crisis, the survivor reflex is to rapidly "ask" unverbally clusters of questions, such as:

- ◆ What is happening? Not happening?
- ◆ Should I jump, duck, grab, yell, freeze, or what?
- ◆ How much time do I have? How little?
- ◆ Must I do anything? Nothing?
- ◆ What are others doing? Not doing? Why?
- ◆ Where do I fit in the scene?
- ◆ Have I been noticed? How do I appear in their eyes?
- ◆ What is the dangerous person afraid of? How anxious is he?
- ◆ How are others reacting? What are their feelings?

- ◆ How serious is this?
- ◆ How much danger exists now? Is it over?
- ◆ Does anyone need help? Who doesn't?

The more quickly a person grasps the total picture of what is happening, the better his or her chance for survival. The reading of the reality includes a quick empathy assessment of others in the situation. This includes scanning the emotional states of others in the survival situation to judge how helpful or unhelpful they may be and reading the emotional state of any attackers that may have caused the danger.

Alertness, pattern recognition, empathy, and awareness can be viewed as a sort of “open-brainedness.” This open-brainedness is a mental orientation that does not impose pre-existing patterns on new information, but rather allows new information to reshape the person’s mental maps. The person who has the best chance of handling a situation well is usually the one with the best mental maps, the best mental pictures or images, of what is occurring around them.

In contrast, those people who are not able to survive well tend to have incorrect or distorted constructions of what is happening in the world outside their bodies.

To Survive an Emergency: Stay Calm

Telling yourself to “stay calm” and “relax” is a useful. Several deep breaths will help. Rage, screaming, panic, or fainting are not good solutions to a crisis (unless done out of choice as a way to affect others.) Anger, fear and panic narrow what a person sees and reduces response choices. The evidence is clear on this point. Being calm improves awareness and effective actions.

Laughing and Playfulness Improve Efficiency

Playful humor enhances survival for many reasons. Mental efficiency is directly related to a person’s level of emotional arousal. At high levels of arousal a person makes mistakes. He or she reacts too fast, panics, and may act in dysfunctional ways. (The exception is for an action requiring simple, powerful, muscular effort. High arousal can create super-human strength.) When a person is highly emotional, he or she is less able to solve problems and make precise, coordinated movements. Laughing reduces tension to more moderate levels and efficiency improves.

Playing with a situation makes a person more powerful than sheer will power. The person who toys with the situation creates an inner feeling of, “This is my plaything; I am bigger than it. I can toy with it as I wish. I won’t let it scare me. I’m going to have fun with this.”

Another advantage of playful humor is that it redefines the situation emotionally. The person who makes humorous observations is relaxed, alert, and focused outward toward the situation to be dealt with. And a benefit of playful humor is that it leads to the discovery of creative solutions.

Be Open to Do Anything

Survival chances are increased by quickly considering a wide-range of response choices. This can lead to acting in a way that is opposite from what most people might do or opposite from what you typically do. The benefit from having a discovered personality is that you are always open to do something new or different, while people with trained personalities are limited to what they’ve been taught to do. Survivors are uniquely complex. They have many paradoxical traits and attributes. This gives them choices for doing one thing or doing the opposite—depending on their reading of the situation. Inner complexity is why survivors are more flexible and adapt more quickly than people with rigid, inflexible ways of doing things.

Life-Competence Helps in Emergencies

Survivors who are alive because of actions they took in a life and death emergency, acted out of reflexive self-confidence. Their daily habit in life is to keep learning ways to be better at having things work well for themselves and others. When they make mistakes or don’t handle something well, they convert what happened into a valuable learning experience. Through this process of self-managed learning they keep getting better at whatever they apply themselves to and become more and more self-confident in their ability to handle new, unfamiliar, and difficult challenges.

Healthy self-appreciation and a positive self-concept make life-competent people invulnerable to personal threats, victim games, and con artists. Their empathy skills let them see that a raging or threatening dangerous person is not powerful, but is someone in great pain, may be trying to overcome feeling helpless, or is misdirecting angry rage felt toward others. Perceptive individuals see that anyone whose rage is so out of control that they want to kill people they don't know, is an ineffective, emotionally weak person.

Totally Commit to Doing Your Best

The survivor reaction to a crisis, is like side-stepping a charging bull. One reads reality rapidly by asking clusters of questions nonverbally, relaxing strong emotions, and noticing something amusing to laugh at. At the same time, total attention is on surviving and turning the situation around. The person makes an emotional commitment to handle what is happening and focuses on finding a way to succeed. The solution, the action, is usually creative and it works.

When problems or new difficulties occur, survivors recover quickly from feeling discouraged. The best survivors spend almost no time, especially in emergencies, getting upset about what has been lost or feeling distressed about things going badly. Survivors avoid feeling like victims and focus on helping everyone survive.

The survivor way of orientating to a crisis is to feel fully and totally responsible for making things work out well. The better your self-confidence, the more you can face up to a crisis believing that you can handle it without knowing exactly what you will do. When you remain highly conscious, play with what is happening, and allow yourself to do something unpredictable that has a chance of working, you usually discover or invent a way to deal effectively with it.

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Website resources:

www.THRIVENet.com

www.SurvivorGuidelines.org