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How prepared are you for an emergency? One sign is your behavior during the office fire drill. Do you stop working and make the walk down the stairs to the exit? Or do you stay at your desk, ignoring the alarm and pleadings of the security staff?

I confess to being one of those employees who has routinely blown off the fire drill. But it was at my own peril. During the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, my offices in the World Financial Center were evacuated, but I didn't have a clue how to get out because I had never used the stairs during a drill. Fortunately, a co-worker led the way.

Whether it's taking part in a fire drill, getting to know your neighbors or listening to the flight attendant's safety talk, there are several simple steps we can all take to improve our odds in an emergency. While most discussions of disaster preparedness focus on community resources, the most important variable in an emergency is your own behavior.

Much of what we know about surviving disasters comes from people who have been through them. Their stories are collected in a fascinating and useful new book, "The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes — and Why" (Crown), by Amanda Ripley, a journalist who has covered floods, fires and plane crashes for Time magazine.

"There are people walking around who have been through disasters and emergencies and have learned really interesting things," Ms. Ripley said. "I'm always amazed by their stories, but that's not part of our national conversation about emergency preparedness and homeland security."

In addition to talking to survivors, Ms. Ripley also delves into the science of disaster preparedness and survival. One of the main lessons is that panic, denial and fear may be inevitable during a disaster, but your brain will perform best in a stressful situation if you have already put it through a few rehearsals.

That's why the fire drill is so important. You need to make the walk down the stairs to the exit so that your brain can store the physical memory of the experience.

"Your brain works by pattern recognition, and when it's in an extremely frightening situation it sorts through a database for a script," Ms. Ripley said. "It's important to get into the stairs and actually go down them. Your brain relies on that memory and responds to it much more quickly and fully than words."

A surprisingly common disaster behavior is the tendency to stick around and gather things. Whether it's a building fire or a plane emergency, people often move surprisingly slowly and find reasons to delay evacuation. Ms. Ripley tells the story of a woman who during the 9/11 attacks pattered around her desk and retrieved a book she was reading before leaving. Even on burning planes, where passengers have only minutes to act before smoke becomes toxic, passengers routinely open overhead bins to retrieve their bags.

But being aware of this "gathering instinct" can help you overcome it. "You need to move quickly, but it won't be your first impulse," Ms. Ripley said.

Crowd behavior in a disaster is also surprisingly predictable. Although there are cases of panic and stampedes, the more common response is "group think," says Ms. Ripley. People stick together, follow one another and are civilized and painfully slow during evacuations.

People also tend to stick to their roles. Passengers listen to flight attendants; diners listen to waiters and other employees. In the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire in Southgate, Ky., in 1977, guests typically waited for instructions from staff members. In interviews after the tragedy, in which 165 people died, 60 percent of workers said they tried to help with evacuation and rescue but only 17 percent of guests said they did.

A person who takes a leadership role in a disaster will invariably be followed. In that fire, hundreds of lives were saved by a busboy who barked orders at the wealthy patrons telling them where and how to evacuate. A bride took charge of evacuating the guests at her wedding reception.

Small steps in a disaster can improve your odds. For airline passengers, count the number of rows between you and the emergency exits. In an evacuation, smoke and darkness may make it difficult to find the exit. Listen to the flight attendant and read the safety card every time so your brain is programmed to respond.

Two decades ago, Dr. Fred Helpenstell, a retired surgeon from Nampa, Idaho, survived a plane crash in Denver that killed 28 people. As he felt the plane tipping, Dr. Helpenstell assumed the crash position, protecting his head as his section of the plane was crushed. “The one thing on the card is the crash position — getting your hands up over your head, tucking your head down and getting ready to roll,” Dr. Helpenstell said. “I don’t know if it was technically necessary, but it’s a good reflex.”

There are ways to prepare for more common threats like fires, floods and other emergencies. Take part in evacuation drills at work and at home. Make a habit of changing batteries in your smoke detector on a schedule, like the first of the month or every time you change the nearest light bulb. And get to know your neighbors, who can be a valuable resource in emergencies.

“You have to feel like you are an agent in your own survival,” Ms. Ripley says. “You and your co-workers and neighbors are going to be there, not homeland security paratroopers. The more confidence you have before the event happens, the less debilitating the fear will be and the better your performance will be.”

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