

## SURVIVAL CONCEPTS AND PROCEDURES

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*By Nick Weighton, March 2008*

There are unlimited possibilities as to how you will handle a survival situation. No one has all the answers nor can anyone anticipate all the variables. Knowledge, training, and planning will significantly increase your chances of surviving. How you handle an extreme challenge will be up to you and your fellow hikers.

Preparing for survival begins long before venturing into the wilderness. A crisis is not the time to start thinking about items you need or what you should have done before leaving home. Educate and equip yourself for potential survival in the terrain and climate where you will be hiking. Contemplate likely emergencies and include contingencies in your hiking plan.

**Leadership and organization** are important components of any hike. Identify all leaders (hiking, medical, and survival) well before your hike and disperse the roles between at least two individuals. In a medical emergency, the hiking leader remains in charge while supporting the medical leader's needs. In a survival mode, the survival leader takes charge. Planning a survival strategy, setting priorities, assigning tasks, and anticipating future tasks are a few of the survival leader's responsibilities.

Work as a team – survive as a team! Each individual is responsible for going to the field properly prepared for hiking and survival. In a survival situation, everyone must contribute to the good of the team and its individuals. Teamwork will be paramount. You can offer suggestions, but comply with the leader's decisions and instructions. Do your tasks, then see what else needs to be done. Try to maintain a positive outlook. This will not always be easy and stresses will build. Your inner self will soon surface. If someone is having difficulty handling a crisis, try to deal with him or her logically, but the survival leader may have to use stern measures to resolve problems. Irrational actions by one or more individuals are counterproductive to survival.

An injured person(s) gets first priority of everything. Shock, dehydration, and hypothermia become additional threats to their well-being so the entire team must respond to their needs. Do this as safely as possible so as not to create more casualties. Consider various courses of action but carefully weigh your decisions due to the complex nature of medical emergencies.

The first thing to do in a survival situation is **not** build a fire or a shelter or get water. You literally **stop** and get control of yourself so you can make rational decisions. Even under extreme circumstances, stop briefly and think before reacting or there could be dire consequences. The next fluid steps in survival are: Think, Plan, and then Take Action. Evaluate the situation, consider your options, and decide what to do. Select an adequate survival site within the immediate area or a short distance away. Get into forests or the leeward side of ridges and slightly uphill from streams, lakes or ponds. Forests offer the most resources but you may have to survive above tree line. There are solutions for both environments. Analyze natural and manmade resources and consider what you can do with them. A little thought and imagination can turn simple things into useful survival resources. Develop a plan based on relevant factors such as resources, weather, time of day, and status of the group. Come up with a plan and put it into action. Stay flexible and adjust your plan to suit changing conditions.

Shelter options vary depending on resources and your ability to use them. Knowledge, training, and equipment come into play in selecting a good option. Basic shelters like a pup tent or tarped

hut are adequate for warm weather and are simple and easy to build. Advanced shelters like a tree tent, snow trench, snow block hut, or snow cave are essential for chilly to cold weather. They are more complex, require more resources, and take longer to build but can be very effective. Do not think of shelter options as a numbered priority list, but rather as equal possibilities. Any of several shelters might work. From these options, choose the **best** shelter for **your situation**. This is more relevant than saying, “Always build a snow cave in winter.” In reality, it might be the worst shelter if conditions are not right or you have never dug one before.

Constructing a shelter can take half an hour or several hours. Having the right tools and materials will make the job much easier and quicker. If resources will be limited, you must plan for this and bring extra items. Build a strong shelter that can withstand the elements. Put the entrance downwind if on level ground or down slope on hilly terrain. Close the entrance as much as possible. Insulate the floor, walls, and roof with manmade or natural materials. Improve your shelter each day until rescue arrives. (See *Survival Shelter Construction Methods* on the WTS website for a wide variety of shelters and building techniques.)

Shelter and fire (discussed above) can alternate as first or second priority in survival, depending on circumstances. It is not absolute that you first build a fire in survival; it may be more important to construct a shelter. Shelter is vital to avoid exposure to the elements; fire is a necessity if someone is wet or hypothermic. Let logic and common sense guide you.

Three of anything is the international signal for help, but not everyone knows what certain signals mean. When to use signals in survival will depend on the situation and probability of others hearing or observing your signals. Rescuers generally search during daylight when it is safer and visibility is better, but they might push the limits when children are involved. Carry manmade signal devices and augment them with natural materials when available. Signals literally include smoke and mirrors along with whistles, bright-colored tarps, perhaps high-tech gear such as flares, and a variety of other items. Hang bright-colored thermal blankets or tarps in trees or in the open. You can form letters or symbols on the ground or snow using tarps or natural materials. When making letters or symbols, make sure they contrast with the surrounding ground or snow. Have auxiliary signal items handy – you might only get one chance.

If you include contingency procedures in your hiking plan, you will increase your chances of survival and/or being rescued. Flexibility is a key to surviving. There is no predetermined set of rules or exact procedures to follow. You must constantly consider your choices and make sound decisions throughout a survival ordeal. Always evaluate the full spectrum of possibilities and options available to you. There are workable solutions to most survival situations; use your mind. Face reality, approach problems with a determination to succeed, work as a team, accept and bypass overwhelming obstacles, and keep up a good attitude. Remember, your ultimate goal in survival – is to survive. You must do all you can to make that happen.