

# Panic — the survivor's worst enemy

## Physiological reactions could impair your chances of survival

### A LEADER'S DILEMMA

In any emotionally charged, highly stressful, unplanned or threatening situation, panic, especially if any of our important needs are in jeopardy, might result.

Panic overpowers our rational behaviour and could (will?) ruin any chances of survival. A survivor needs to control, not avoid or deny his fears. Since something can usually be done to improve a potentially harmful situation, his reaction patterns will increase only if panic is kept in check.

How an individual reacts to emergencies depends more on his mental disposition than on the situation itself. Being the most physically strong doesn't mean one can best handle panic. Timid, nervous people may react just as coolly and effectively under stress; as a result, they have a much better chance of surviving a wilderness ordeal. Fear needs to be recognized, manipulated, and, if possible, utilized to meet your needs.

The terrible feeling of helplessness, that depressing sensation of hopelessness, and the gnawing sense of despair, all contribute to increase our sense of fear and panic. There are, however, factors which decrease, or help control our fears. These include:

- Having confidence in the abilities of a good leader;
- Knowing your equipment is suitable for the tasks on hand;
- Concentrating on the job(s) needing completion;
- Trusting the group's ability to overcome obstacles;

come obstacles;

- Having faith in your survival abilities; and
- Trusting in yourself.

### IMPACT OF STRESS AND FEAR

In a highly stressful situation, our bodies undergo a series of dramatic changes. As a direct result of humankind's evolutionary process, we have been programmed with a "fight or flight" attitude when confronted with a major life-threatening crisis. For example, there is an adrenaline rush, coupled with an increased heart rate. We lose a large percentage of fine motor skills (hence, threading a needle or striking a match to start a fire become an impossibility), but gain better control of gross (larger muscles such as arms and legs) motor skills. This makes us prone to running away from a potential threat.

In addition, these changes inhibit metabolism while simultaneously disrupting the circulation process; again, we're being programmed to flee. However, this survival process also impairs good judgment, largely due to the many drastic changes taking place in our brains; in short, the primary focus is on the primitive, or reptilian, part of brain, and not on our forebrain, its human component.

### EFFECTS ON THE BODY

And what physical changes do our bodies undergo? For starters, smaller blood vessels become constricted; hence, the loss of fine motor skills. As well, there is a dilation of our pupils, thus making us very sensitive to light. The victim's breathing rate increases, and hyperventilation sometimes occurs. In addition, the heart rate increases, usually to 145+ beats/minute. We lose the ability to digest any foods, and can no longer control bowel movement.

## Wilderness Survival



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Finally, most blood is directed to larger muscles, making us more capable to run faster and longer.

### PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

As previously mentioned, a victim's heart rate increases; (s)he experiences a shortness of breath; pangs of tightness are felt in the chest area; and his/her mouth becomes very dry. At this point, the survivor may begin to stammer, sweat profusely in both palms, and be extremely sensitive to noise and light, largely due to dilated pupils. Also, a victim normally experiences nausea. We've seen many of these symptoms with novices undergoing survival training for the first time.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

Indeed, many physical changes which occur during a major crisis are great; however, the impact of a dangerous situation on us mentally is staggering. Psychologically, victims usually experience shock, numbness, denial, and feel totally helpless. To compound matters, confusion is the norm, and most individuals lack the ability to concentrate. Survivors become irritable, are simultaneously hostile and passive, quickly change from a talkative to a speechless state; a feeling of unreality takes hold of the entire group.

Many feel sad, cry uncontrollably, and become totally withdrawn from the group; depersonalization becomes the norm. In grave danger, panic takes hold and the need to run is dominant; many become extremely agitated and restless.

To compound matters, auditory problems occur and visual hallucinations are more and more frequent. Finally, in a crisis, few people have any interest in eating or sleeping, further compounding an already dangerous situation. Stress and fear can wreak havoc during a wilderness emergency, further compounding an already volatile situation. A crisis impacts on everyone in the group; each person reacts differently, both physically and psychologically.

How do you, the potential group leader (re)act? How can you control fear in the group? More importantly, as leader, how do you, manage yourself during a crisis?

### CONTROLLING FEAR: SELF

We highlight the importance of being prepared at all times; this includes mentally, as well as physically. In short, we expect anything to happen and are always prepared for the worst.

If something does go sour, we recommend that individuals have a positive attitude and rely on their training; in addition, accept fear as a normal reaction. Good and effective leaders have the ability to know, and look for early warning signs. They've learned from their past experiences and are prepared to confront any emergency. During a crisis, we encourage a leader to stick to processing facts, thereby keeping one's imagination in check.

This can be achieved by staying constructively busy and practising self-discipline. Adapting strategies to suit any emergency is paramount. Look for humour in any dire situation.

Finally, if one has any spiritual leanings, this is the time to allow their manifestation.

### CONTROLLING FEAR IN OTHERS

Not only do you, the effective leader, need to keep a lid on all feelings during a wilderness emergency, you must be a positive role model for all members in the group.

When you're in charge, act like it! Exercise leadership at all times: be authoritative, calm and assured in public.

Keep an eye on the whole situation; delegate authority and tasks as required; be disciplined and do what has to be done; and stay alert.

You, the disciplined leader, are detached, yet part of the group. You strive to develop a teamwork approach towards problem solving and keep all members completely occupied on purposeful tasks during the emergency.

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Readers are invited to participate in our upcoming wilderness survival workshops. Two hour-long seminars have been planned; both will be held at Georgian College, Owen Sound campus, Room 117. One of the two took place Jan. 23. Workshops are open to all interested individuals and are free of charge (except for a \$2 college parking fee). In order to effectively prepare, it's advisable to register if planning to attend. E-mail me at [gferri@wightman.ca](mailto:gferri@wightman.ca)

### DATES \ TIME:

- Tuesday, Jan. 30, 7 p.m. Topic — Project S.T.O.P.: Bushproofing Your Child. This interactive presentation is ideally suited for the entire family ... being the kids.