

# Survivors of wilderness emergencies often possess special traits

The one who survives may have more than luck on his side. The ability to live may depend more on personality traits than on the various events which precipitated the wilderness emergency. Whether fear will lead to panic or cause someone to react in a positive way, whether stress will consume the victim, or whether physical hardships will break an individual, to a certain degree depends more on the person's ethics and sense of perception than on the situation itself. Based on more than seven years of research on this topic, here is a plausible profile of the survivor:

- 1) Survivors are capable of assessing a situation, admit to making errors, yet can quickly decide on the next course of action.
- 2) Survivors see multiple uses in everything and improvise all available resources.
- 3) Survivors do not need others for mental support. They can keep up their (and their group's) spirits.
- 4) Survivors are adaptive people and readily change to meet any new situation.
- 5) Survivors tend to be calm in the face of danger, keep their wits about them and exude a sense of confidence.
- 6) Survivors are optimistic individuals. They have a positive attitude and high self-esteem.
- 7) Survivors take time to assess their predicaments, act prudently and constantly change a course of action to face any new dangers.
- 8) Survivors can differentiate between hardships and pain. They accept and endure punishment and realize that "survival with style" is a myth.
- 9) Survivors are "people" persons. They can read the group's moods, understand their feelings and cajole others into accomplishing any reasonable, necessary tasks.

## Wilderness Survival



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- 10) Survivors know their weaknesses, fears and shortcomings and try very hard to control their flaws, while simultaneously accentuating their strong characteristics.
- 11) Survivors do not attempt to dominate. They lead by example.
- 12) Survivors control their emotions until the danger has passed.
- 13) Survivors do not keep their deep fears and anxieties bottled up inside. When feasible, they express them openly and freely for anyone to examine.
- 14) When necessary, survivors quickly and readily relinquish their leadership role to a more qualified individual.

### THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WILDERNESS SURVIVAL

Although many technical advances have been made in the development of outdoor gear, clothing, tools and food, in a survival situation, regardless of how good the equipment is, a victim facing a desperate wilderness emergency has to deal with his psyche. Our psychological reaction to a desperate survival situation makes the victim unable to use all available resources. In an upcoming article, I'll devote the entire piece to this very topic, and describe our body's reaction when deal-

ing — and coping — with extreme stress. Based on cutting-edge research, we'll explore the ways a human typically reacts, both mentally and physically, to unpredictable, stressful emergencies.

Based on available data, it is clear that there are a number of psychological factors which influence survival. While much of this information is common sense, keep in mind that common sense is based on a series of experiences. These lead to our making the necessary adjustments to various situations. On the flip side of the coin, not utilizing one's common sense under stress has undoubtedly caused injuries and deaths among rational, sensible people.

In my opinion, an extremely important psychological requirement to survive in a wilderness setting is to admit the reality of the situation and react appropriately. While gathering data for my doctoral thesis on this difficult topic, it became apparent that knowing a series of survival skills contributes to a feeling of confidence in one's ability to survive. Since calmness and self-confidence are essential when handling panic, mastering survival information greatly enhances your ability to live through an ordeal in the bush.

It is for this reason that my book, *The Psychology of Wilderness Survival*, devotes a great deal of space to the necessary skills, as well as the mental preparation, needed to survive.

### SEVEN ENEMIES OF THE WILDERNESS SURVIVOR

Pain, cold, thirst, hunger, fatigue, loneliness and boredom — although everyone has experienced these mental and physical hardships to some extent, few have known them to the de-

gree that they actually endanger one's ability to survive. In such a desperate situation, the feelings of, let us say, pain, cold and loneliness, are no different from those experienced anywhere else. They are, however, more severe and much more dangerous. With these feelings, as with most emotions, the more you know about them and their effects on your psyche, the better you will be able to control them. Don't let them control you.

**Pain** — This is the body's technique of making you realize that something is wrong — both physical and psychological. At times, however, our central nervous system has ways of masking pain if you are preoccupied with other matters, such as plans for survival. On the other hand, if paramount, pain weakens your will to survive. Pain can be overwhelming even if not serious or prolonged. The survivor must concentrate on keeping his hopes up. He will eventually be saved.

**Cold** — To the uninitiated, being cold is almost trivial. To the experienced, cold is indeed a threat to survival. Besides lowering your ability to think properly, it also confounds both mind and body. Under these circumstances, it becomes difficult to keep active. As well, the survivor is constantly tired and simply wants to sleep. For this reason, the survivor might become despondent and lose the will to live.

**Thirst** — This is the hidden enemy of survival. Even when surrounded by water, few individuals force themselves to drink. Lack of water intake fogs their minds. In stressful cases, thirst is usually forgotten. The survivor must remember not to deprive oneself of water, otherwise, dehydration, headaches and nausea will result. In our courses, we constantly emphasize the need to drink

copious quantities of teas, thereby replenishing all lost moisture.

**Hunger** — This is dangerous because of its effects on the mind, primarily in lowering the victim's ability to think rationally. Both thirst and hunger lower the body's ability to ward off the effects of cold, pain and fear. This is especially true after three days of hunger, when the shrinking stomach reduces its desire for food.

**Fatigue** — This state greatly reduces one's mental ability. It makes the survivor careless and fosters a feeling of just not caring. This is one of the biggest dangers to wilderness survival and may be responsible for some deaths in survival situations. Although there is a real danger of over-exertion, fatigue may be caused by a feeling of hopelessness, lack of precise goals, dissatisfaction, frustration, fear or boredom. Fatigue, in reality, is an escape from a situation which is perceived to be too difficult to handle.

**Boredom and Loneliness** — It may surprise the novice to know that boredom and loneliness are two enemies facing the wilderness survivor. Both are normally unexpected and unplanned feelings. If nothing happens, when the unexpected occurs, or if something doesn't go according to plan, when the victim is forced to remain still, quiet and alone, a sense of boredom may creep up on victim. For this reason, in our survival courses, skills such as making bark baskets, fashioning wooden utensils and constructing simple deadfalls are taught. Besides being useful objects to have, making these items keeps the survivor's mind agile. It also forces one to remain close to shelter and not wander aimlessly through the bush.

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