Staying Alive

If you were caught in a life-threatening event, would you know the best way to survive?

December 23, 2016 By Kate Ferguson

If it seems like there's been an increase in natural disasters during the past few decades, that's because these mostly weather-related events have increased and intensified significantly in the last 30 years. In 2015, China, the United States and India were hit with the greatest number of natural disasters. But floods, earthquakes, heat waves and wildfires aren't the only culprits responsible for snuffing out lives. Some tragedies—such as fires and incidents of mass violence, such as the public shootings in Orlando, Florida, this year when a lone gunman killed 49 people at a nightclub named Pulse—are caused by humans. When faced with any of these potentially lethal occurrences, how can you boost your chances of survival?

Here, Monica Owens Doyle, a senior associate of the Community Preparedness Program at the American Red Cross, talks about the best ways to respond to the unforeseen emergencies that could threaten our lives.

During a disaster, what is the right way to react?

During a disaster, it is critical to stay calm, follow the orders issued by emergency managers in your area and take action according to your level of training and planning. Some disasters, such as a fire, require immediate evacuation. But others, such as a chemical release or an earthquake, call for a shelter-in-place response [seek safety where you are rather than evacuate]. Equip yourself with the knowledge of how to stay safe during the types of disaster most likely to occur in areas where you live, work and visit. If the disaster calls for evacuation, have a predetermined meeting location outside and go to that spot. Knowledge is critical to take quick and decisive action.

How can someone quickly create an escape plan when faced with fire, smoke, an explosion or a panicked crowd?

In general, escape plans should be developed before an individual is faced with a disaster scenario. If you have not created an escape plan yet, turn to auditory and visual cues in your surroundings. Many buildings, especially high-rises buildings, are equipped with various tools, such as well-lit exit signage, strobe lights and auditory directions that will direct you to safety. Some buildings have additional features such as posted escape routes, fire sprinklers and stairwells that

double as areas of refuge. Remember to rely on your senses—look for lighted exit routes, listen for commands and feel for heat using the back of your hand at a door before opening it. Do not run unless you are in an active shooter scenario. If faced with fire, remember the following commands: “Get low and go!” and “Get out, stay out.” You may have as little as two minutes to safely escape in the event of a fire, so acting immediately is of the utmost importance.

During a high-rise disaster, under what circumstances can we take the elevator?

Typically, using the elevator should be avoided during any disaster. But if the building is under a shelter-in-place order due to something like a blizzard or a chemical release in the neighborhood, then taking the elevator would be OK.

When should people absolutely avoid taking an elevator during an emergency event?

In general, using the stairs is a better response. Under no circumstances should you take an elevator during a fire or an earthquake. The power could go out and you could become trapped, with no ability to escape with an active fire in the building.

During a high-rise disaster, what should we consider when determining whether escape via a window makes sense?

In most emergencies of this kind, all other exit routes should be explored first. Even if you can’t get all the way down and out of your building, you’ll be able to increase your chance of survival if you can at least get to the eighth floor or below. Most fire departments’ ladder trucks do not reach above this level. If you cannot evacuate and smoke is present, stuff a wet towel or sheet in openings around doors or vents where smoke might enter. If smoke or fire enters your unit and you can’t get out, call 9-1-1 to report your location. Stay low to the floor to breathe the best air, and put a wet cloth over your mouth and nose. Open a window slightly and wave a bright cloth, like a white sheet, to identify your location to rescuers.

What is the best way to help others who are injured?

Generally, if you call for help and can perform basic first aid and CPR, this is the best way to help people who are injured. If those who are hurt are unable to evacuate the building on their own and the situation calls for evacuation, these individuals may need your assistance to help them escape or get to a safer location in the building. In some buildings, there are preestablished locations called “areas of refuge” that are designed to provide protection from disasters such as fires. These places allow people with disabilities that interfere with their ability to negotiate stairs or who can’t evacuate because of injuries to wait until help arrives.

How does having safety training boost the chances for individuals to survive a disaster, and

specifically what type of safety training would be most effective in these types of situations?

Safety training provides trainees with knowledge about how to prepare for and respond to disasters likely to happen in their communities and what protective actions to take, a framework for emergency planning and the capability to test their disaster-response skills. Knowing what to do will not only assist you to stay calm, but it will also help you make the correct initial response, such as dropping, taking cover and holding on during an earthquake or getting to the lowest, most interior room with the fewest windows in your location during a tornado warning.

Preparedness training could save your life, and it has saved numerous lives already. If your building manager or place of business offers safety training that highlights the features of your building, including fire alarms, locations of building exits and escape routes, areas of refuge, et cetera, it would be extremely beneficial for you to take it.

Any disaster training will help you be better prepared. Because disasters often overwhelm local first responders and emergency medical personnel due to high demand, having adult and pediatric first aid and CPR/AED [cardiopulmonary resuscitation/automated external defibrillator] training is critical. Make sure that at least one person in your family is trained.

The Red Cross also offers free information at redcross.org/prepare. People can download the all-inclusive Red Cross Emergency app, which combines more than 35 emergency alerts to help keep the user safe. And there is a special mobile app called Monster Guard: Prepare for Emergencies. It’s designed for kids and uses an engaging game to teach them to prepare for emergencies at home. Users can find the apps in smartphone app stores or by going to redcross.org/apps. For more information about disaster preparedness, visit redcross.org.

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