

PSYCHOLOGY OF SURVIVAL



It takes much more than the knowledge and skills to build shelters, get food, make fires, and travel without the aid of standard navigational devices to live successfully through a survival situation. Some people with little or no survival training have managed to survive life-threatening circumstances. Some people with survival training have not used their skills and died. A key ingredient in any survival situation is the mental attitude of the individual(s) involved. Having survival skills is important; having the will to survive is essential. Without a desire to survive, acquired skills serve little purpose and invaluable knowledge goes to waste.

*There is a psychology to survival. The soldier in a survival environment faces many stresses that ultimately impact on his mind. These stresses can produce thoughts and emotions that, if poorly understood, can transform a confident, well-trained soldier into an indecisive, ineffective individual with questionable ability to survive. Thus, every soldier must be aware of and be able to recognize those stresses commonly associated with survival. Additionally, it is imperative that soldiers be aware of their reactions to the wide variety of stresses associated with survival. This chapter will identify and explain the nature of stress, the stresses of survival, and those internal reactions soldiers will naturally experience when faced with the stresses of a real-world survival situation. The knowledge you, the soldier, gain from this chapter and other chapters in this manual, will prepare you to come through the toughest times **alive**.*

A LOOK AT STRESS

Before we can understand our psychological reactions in a survival setting, it is helpful to first know a little bit about stress.

Stress is not a disease that you cure and eliminate. Instead, it is a condition we all experience. Stress can be described as our reaction to pressure. It is the name given to the experience we have as we physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually respond to life's tensions.

Need for Stress

We need stress because it has many positive benefits. Stress provides us with challenges; it gives us chances to learn about our values and strengths. Stress can show our ability to

handle pressure without breaking; it tests our adaptability and flexibility; it can stimulate us to do our best. Because we usually do not consider unimportant events stressful, stress can also be an excellent indicator of the significance we attach to an event--in other words, it highlights what is important to us.

We need to have some stress in our lives, but too much of anything can be bad. The goal is to have stress, but not an excess of it. Too much stress can take its toll on people and organizations. Too much stress leads to distress. Distress causes an uncomfortable tension that we try to escape and, preferably, avoid. Listed below are a few of the common signs of distress you may find in your fellow soldiers or yourself when faced with too much stress:

- Difficulty making decisions.
- Angry outbursts.
- Forgetfulness.
- Low energy level.
- Constant worrying.
- Propensity for mistakes.
- Thoughts about death or suicide.
- Trouble getting along with others.
- Withdrawing from others.
- Hiding from responsibilities.
- Carelessness.

As you can see, stress can be constructive or destructive. It can encourage or discourage, move us along or stop us dead in our tracks, and make life meaningful or seemingly meaningless. Stress can inspire you to operate successfully and perform at your maximum efficiency in a survival situation. It can also cause you to panic and forget all your training. Key to your survival is your ability to manage the inevitable stresses you will encounter. The survivor is the soldier who works with his stresses instead of letting his stresses work on him.

Survival Stressors

Any event can lead to stress and, as everyone has experienced, events don't always come one at a time. Often, stressful events occur simultaneously. These events are not stress, but they produce it and are called "stressors." Stressors are the obvious cause while stress is the response. Once the body recognizes the presence of a stressor, it then begins to act to protect itself.

In response to a stressor, the body prepares either to "fight or flee." This preparation involves an internal SOS sent throughout the body. As the body responds to this SOS, several actions take place. The body releases stored fuels (sugar and fats) to provide quick energy; breathing rate increases to supply more oxygen to the blood; muscle tension increases to prepare for action; blood clotting mechanisms are activated to reduce bleeding from cuts; senses become more acute (hearing becomes more sensitive, eyes become big, smell becomes sharper) so that you are more aware of your surrounding and heart rate and blood pressure rise to provide more blood to the muscles. This protective posture lets a person cope with potential dangers; however, a person cannot maintain such a level of alertness indefinitely.

Stressors are not courteous; one stressor does not leave because another one arrives. Stressors add up. The cumulative effect of minor stressors can be a major distress if they all happen too close together. As the body's resistance to stress wears down and the sources of stress continue (or increase), eventually a state of exhaustion arrives. At this point, the ability to resist stress or use it in a positive way gives out and signs of distress appear. Anticipating stressors and developing strategies to cope with them are two ingredients in the effective management of stress. It is therefore essential that the soldier in a survival setting be aware of the types of stressors he will encounter. Let's take a look at a few of these.

Injury, Illness, or Death

Injury, illness, and death are real possibilities a survivor has to face. Perhaps nothing is more stressful than being alone in an unfamiliar environment where you could die from hostile action, an accident, or from eating something lethal. Illness and injury can also add to stress by limiting your ability to maneuver, get food and drink, find shelter, and defend yourself. Even if illness and injury don't lead to death, they add to stress through the pain and discomfort they generate. It is only by controlling the stress associated with the vulnerability to injury, illness, and death that a soldier can have the courage to take the risks associated with survival tasks.

Uncertainty and Lack of Control

Some people have trouble operating in settings where everything is not clear-cut. The only guarantee in a survival situation is that nothing is guaranteed. It can be extremely stressful operating on limited information in a setting where you have limited control of your surroundings. This uncertainty and lack of control also add to the stress of being ill, injured, or killed.

Environment

Even under the most ideal circumstances, nature is quite formidable. In survival, a soldier will have to contend with the stressors of weather, terrain, and the variety of creatures inhabiting an area. Heat, cold, rain, winds, mountains, swamps, deserts, insects, dangerous reptiles, and other animals are just a few of the challenges awaiting the soldier working to survive. Depending on how a soldier handles the stress of his environment, his surroundings can be either a source of food and protection or can be a cause of extreme discomfort leading to injury, illness, or death.

Hunger and Thirst

Without food and water a person will weaken and eventually die. Thus, getting and preserving food and water takes on increasing importance as the length of time in a survival setting increases. For a soldier used to having his provisions issued, foraging can be a big source of stress.

Fatigue

Forcing yourself to continue surviving is not easy as you grow more tired. It is possible to become so fatigued that the act of just staying awake is stressful in itself.

Isolation

There are some advantages to facing adversity with others. As soldiers we learn individual skills, but we train to function as part of a team. Although we, as soldiers, complain about higher headquarters, we become used to the information and guidance it provides, especially during times of confusion. Being in contact with others also provides a greater sense of security and a feeling someone is available to help if problems occur. A significant stressor in survival situations is that often a person or team has to rely solely on its own resources.

The survival stressors mentioned in this section are by no means the only ones you may face. Remember, what is stressful to one person may not be stressful to another. Your experiences, training, personal outlook on life, physical and mental conditioning, and level of self-confidence contribute to what you will find stressful in a survival environment. The object is not to avoid stress, but rather to manage the stressors of survival and make them work for you.

We now have a general knowledge of stress and the stressors common to survival; the next step is to examine our reactions to the stressors we may face.

NATURAL REACTIONS

Man has been able to survive many shifts in his environment throughout the centuries. His ability to adapt physically and mentally to a changing world kept him alive while other species around him gradually died off. The same survival mechanisms that kept our forefathers alive can help keep us alive as well! However, these survival mechanisms that can help us can also work against us if we don't understand and anticipate their presence. It is not surprising that the average person will have some psychological reactions in a survival situation. We will now examine some of the major internal reactions you and anyone with you might experience with the survival stressors addressed in the earlier paragraphs. Let's begin.

Fear

Fear is our emotional response to dangerous circumstances that we believe have the potential to cause death, injury, or illness. This harm is not just limited to physical damage; the threat to one's emotional and mental well-being can generate fear as well. For the soldier trying to survive, fear can have a positive function if it encourages him to be cautious in situations where recklessness could result in injury. Unfortunately, fear can also immobilize a person. It can cause him to become so frightened that he fails to perform activities essential for survival. Most soldiers will have some degree of fear when placed in unfamiliar surroundings under adverse conditions. There is no shame in this! Each soldier must train himself not to be overcome by his fears. Ideally, through realistic

training, we can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to increase our confidence and thereby manage our fears.

Anxiety

Associated with fear is anxiety. Because it is natural for us to be afraid, it is also natural for us to experience anxiety. Anxiety can be an uneasy, apprehensive feeling we get when faced with dangerous situations (physical, mental, and emotional). When used in a healthy way, anxiety urges us to act to end, or at least master, the dangers that threaten our existence. If we were never anxious, there would be little motivation to make changes in our lives. The soldier in a survival setting reduces his anxiety by performing those tasks that will ensure his coming through the ordeal alive. As he reduces his anxiety, the soldier is also bringing under control the source of that anxiety--his fears. In this form, anxiety is good; however, anxiety can also have a devastating impact. Anxiety can overwhelm a soldier to the point where he becomes easily confused and has difficulty thinking. Once this happens, it becomes more and more difficult for him to make good judgments and sound decisions. To survive, the soldier must learn techniques to calm his anxieties and keep them in the range where they help, not hurt.

Anger and Frustration

Frustration arises when a person is continually thwarted in his attempts to reach a goal. The goal of survival is to stay alive until you can reach help or until help can reach you. To achieve this goal, the soldier must complete some tasks with minimal resources. It is inevitable, in trying to do these tasks, that something will go wrong; that something will happen beyond the soldier's control; and that with one's life at stake, every mistake is magnified in terms of its importance. Thus, sooner or later, soldiers will have to cope with frustration when a few of their plans run into trouble. One outgrowth of this frustration is anger. There are many events in a survival situation that can frustrate or anger a soldier. Getting lost, damaged or forgotten equipment, the weather, inhospitable terrain, enemy patrols, and physical limitations are just a few sources of frustration and anger. Frustration and anger encourage impulsive reactions, irrational behavior, poorly thought-out decisions, and, in some instances, an "I quit" attitude (people sometimes avoid doing something they can't master). If the soldier can harness and properly channel the emotional intensity associated with anger and frustration, he can productively act as he answers the challenges of survival. If the soldier does not properly focus his angry feelings, he can waste much energy in activities that do little to further either his chances of survival or the chances of those around him.

Depression

It would be a rare person indeed who would not get sad, at least momentarily, when faced with the privations of survival. As this sadness deepens, we label the feeling "depression." Depression is closely linked with frustration and anger. The frustrated person becomes more and more angry as he fails to reach his goals. If the anger does not help the person to succeed, then the frustration level goes even higher. A destructive cycle between anger and frustration continues until the person becomes worn down-physically, emotionally, and

mentally. When a person reaches this point, he starts to give up, and his focus shifts from "What can I do" to "There is nothing I can do." Depression is an expression of this hopeless, helpless feeling. There is nothing wrong with being sad as you temporarily think about your loved ones and remember what life is like back in "civilization" or "the world." Such thoughts, in fact, can give you the desire to try harder and live one more day. On the other hand, if you allow yourself to sink into a depressed state, then it can sap all your energy and, more important, your will to survive. It is imperative that each soldier resist succumbing to depression.

Loneliness and Boredom

Man is a social animal. This means we, as human beings, enjoy the company of others. Very few people want to be alone *all the time!* As you are aware, there is a distinct chance of isolation in a survival setting. This is not bad. Loneliness and boredom can bring to the surface qualities you thought only others had. The extent of your imagination and creativity may surprise you. When required to do so, you may discover some hidden talents and abilities. Most of all, you may tap into a reservoir of inner strength and fortitude you never knew you had. Conversely, loneliness and boredom can be another source of depression. As a soldier surviving alone, or with others, you must find ways to keep your mind productively occupied. Additionally, you must develop a degree of self-sufficiency. You must have faith in your capability to "go it alone."

Guilt

The circumstances leading to your being in a survival setting are sometimes dramatic and tragic. It may be the result of an accident or military mission where there was a loss of life. Perhaps you were the only, or one of a few, survivors. While naturally relieved to be alive, you simultaneously may be mourning the deaths of others who were less fortunate. It is not uncommon for survivors to feel guilty about being spared from death while others were not. This feeling, when used in a positive way, has encouraged people to try harder to survive with the belief they were allowed to live for some greater purpose in life. Sometimes, survivors tried to stay alive so that they could carry on the work of those killed. Whatever reason you give yourself, do not let guilt feelings prevent you from living. The living who abandon their chance to survive accomplish nothing. Such an act would be the greatest tragedy.

PREPARING YOURSELF

Your mission as a soldier in a survival situation is to stay alive. As you can see, you are going to experience an assortment of thoughts and emotions. These can work for you, or they can work to your downfall. Fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, guilt, depression, and loneliness are all possible reactions to the many stresses common to survival. These reactions, when controlled in a healthy way, help to increase a soldier's likelihood of surviving. They prompt the soldier to pay more attention in training, to fight back when scared, to take actions that ensure sustenance and security, to keep faith with his fellow soldiers, and to strive against large odds. When the survivor cannot control these reactions

in a healthy way, they can bring him to a standstill. Instead of rallying his internal resources, the soldier listens to his internal fears. This soldier experiences psychological defeat long before he physically succumbs. Remember, survival is natural to everyone; being unexpectedly thrust into the life and death struggle of survival is not. Don't be afraid of your "natural reactions to this unnatural situation." Prepare yourself to rule over these reactions so they serve your ultimate interest--staying alive with the honor and dignity associated with being an American soldier.

It involves preparation to ensure that your reactions in a survival setting are productive, not destructive. The challenge of survival has produced countless examples of heroism, courage, and self-sacrifice. These are the qualities it can bring out in you if you have prepared yourself. Below are a few [tips](#) to help prepare yourself psychologically for survival. Through studying this manual and attending survival training you can develop the *survival attitude*.

Know Yourself

Through training, family, and friends take the time to discover who you are on the inside. Strengthen your stronger qualities and develop the areas that you know are necessary to survive.

Anticipate Fears

Don't pretend that you will have no fears. Begin thinking about what would frighten you the most if forced to survive alone. Train in those areas of concern to you. The goal is not to eliminate the fear, but to build confidence in your ability to function despite your fears.

Be Realistic

Don't be afraid to make an honest appraisal of situations. See circumstances as they are, not as you want them to be. Keep your hopes and expectations within the estimate of the situation. When you go into a survival setting with unrealistic expectations, you may be laying the groundwork for bitter disappointment. Follow the adage, "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst." It is much easier to adjust to pleasant surprises about one's unexpected good fortunes than to be upset by one's unexpected harsh circumstances.

Adopt a Positive Attitude

Learn to see the potential good in everything. Looking for the good not only boosts morale, it also is excellent for exercising your imagination and creativity.

Remind Yourself What Is at Stake

Remember, failure to prepare yourself psychologically to cope with survival leads to reactions such as depression, carelessness, inattention, loss of confidence, poor decision-making, and giving up before the body gives in.

At stake is your life and the lives of others who are depending on you to do your share.

Train

Through military training and life experiences, begin today to prepare yourself to cope with the rigors of survival. Demonstrating your skills in training will give you the confidence to call upon them should the need arise. Remember, the more realistic the training, the less overwhelming an actual survival setting will be.

Learn Stress Management Techniques

People under stress have a potential to panic if they are not well-trained and not prepared psychologically to face whatever the circumstances may be. While we often cannot control the survival circumstances in which we find ourselves, it is within our ability to control our response to those circumstances. Learning stress management techniques can enhance significantly your capability to remain calm and focused as you work to keep yourself and others alive. A few good techniques to develop include relaxation skills, time management skills, assertiveness skills, and cognitive restructuring skills (the ability to control how you view a situation).

Remember, "the will to survive" can also be considered to be "the refusal to give up."