



A Season of Happiness Focus



F16



In Case of Emergency



Anywhere, anytime - that's the way of emergencies. They arrive in many forms and are rarely predictable. If the source is natural, the weather bureau may give out warnings, even to the extent of hinting at the severity and offering suggestions on how best to prepare. Occasionally, the problem could be the result of human error such as a toxic spill close by, a leaking gas main; or perhaps a deliberate act of terrorism causing any number of dire consequences. The effect of an emergency can be wide-ranging - national, state, localised, or maybe just close to home. Hurricanes, floods, fires, earthquakes, explosions: quite often they just happen, and nobody's immune. Despite knowing there is a distinct possibility of being caught napping, very few are ready to act at a moment's notice; and after the fact, most will regret not doing something that could have made a difference to the way they came out of it.

To get an idea of the risks we all may have to face one day, look back on some of the disasters that have occurred; and please don't be complacent: just because you don't live in Tornado Alley doesn't mean you won't get hit by one; and those massive super-storms which the experts failed to forecast can pop up anywhere out of the blue. If your home is well inland, you will be safe from a Tsunami, but what about flash-flooding after a prolonged deluge of rain? Bushfires are terrifying to face and, given the right conditions, can destroy entire communities in minutes. How many instances do you know of when the family home went up in flames due to an electrical fault, or because a candle was left burning? In all of these examples, there was little warning for the victims; and because it happened so quickly, the majority who managed to escape with their lives had only the clothes they stood up in. They had nothing to sustain them, even for a limited time - no water or food, no shelter, no first-aid; the list could go on. The fact is, they never imagined being in that predicament, so they had made no allowances for dealing with it.

Without doubt, the most important thing to preserve is life itself. This is one of the reasons for high security, to protect the inhabitants of a building from criminal acts by fitting deadlocks on doors and windows, plus bars and steel-mesh security screens as a first line of defence. These are intended to keep intruders out, but they are also extremely effective in trapping the occupants inside. Imagine waking in the middle of the night to find the place filled with smoke. Very few have ever experienced such an event and, as with most surprise encounters, there is a tendency to go blank for a few moments while trying to gather thoughts. Once the problem hits home, a course of action is necessary to deal with it and human instinct has the perfect answer - panic! People living alone only have themselves to look after, so their first thought will probably be to simply get out, not an easy task when choking fumes make breathing difficult and they can't see a hand in front of their face. A flashlight might have been handy, had they thought to keep one on the bedside cabinet. Stumbling and groping, maybe even crawling because they remember from somewhere that there is more oxygen close to the floor, they make their way to the exit, at least to where they thought it was; but in their confusion, this takes more than one attempt and precious seconds are wasted. They eventually find the door, only to discover it is securely locked - they always make sure of that before going to bed. So, where's the key? On a ring with the car key, of course, which is in a dish on the buffet in the family room - somewhere behind the blanket of smoke! What happens next doesn't bear thinking about; how to avoid making similar mistakes does.

In this simplified example, a number of preparations would have made a big difference. Having early-warning smoke alarms fitted should go without saying, but quite a few don't bother, or they forget to check them and change the batteries. A torch next to the bed isn't a bad idea, especially if the area is prone to power cuts anyway. A set of keys on a wall-hook just inside the entrance door solves the problem of being locked in.

Although the mobile phone is often to hand near the bed, wallets and purses containing driver's licence, ID and credit cards aren't always with them. Even if they are, two items are harder to pick up in a rush and can easily be dropped. Consigned to a bum-bag or similar and stowed in a drawer of the bedside cabinet means just one thing to think about.



And don't forget to include some cash – electronic payment systems could be down.

As for the real danger, every home should have at least one extinguisher able to cope with oil and electrical fires - even a small one to hand in the bedroom could be a bonus if flames are blocking the escape route. Unless the outbreak is noticed immediately and can be quickly contained, I wouldn't recommend staying to fight the fire. Please leave it to the professionals, and don't put your life or theirs at risk by trying to be the hero they have to go in and rescue.

Each incident that might necessitate evacuation can't always be predicted and carries its own set of initial dangers that have to be dealt with. No-one is expected to be super-efficient in the circumstances, no matter how well prepared. I would suggest that some thought be given to preparedness before the fact, just in case, but a whole lot more extended to the possible aftermath. Assuming those at risk have managed to vacate safely, continuing welfare now becomes an issue. Although devastating enough, a home fire in suburbia is unlikely to leave the victims helpless. Apart from the emergency services on the scene, there are neighbours, friends and family close by or just a phone call away. They can provide on-the-spot comfort, reassurance and all of those temporary needs that minimise the trauma. Later, once the realisation that prized possessions and memorabilia that can never be replaced have all gone, it becomes apparent there is much more to worry about. Also destroyed in the blaze were: birth and marriage certificates, passports, credit cards, driver's licence, computers which held records of everything, business and personal, even mobile phones; plus the insurance policies - the whole kit and caboodle reduced to ash. Loss of these will cause major headaches both immediately and down the track. Maybe the PC towers and laptop would have been too heavy and inconvenient to take out in the rush, but much of the rest, at least the information required for their speedy replacement, could have been preserved along with important data, had a few safeguards been implemented beforehand.

Organising a "Grab-and-Go" bag is one way to be prepared. Remember it has to be carried, perhaps for quite a while, so it doesn't need to be huge. A waterproofed sports bag with a shoulder strap is handy, even better would be a small backpack. It will contain the basic essentials for immediate survival and safety:

- ✓ A compact first aid kit with band-aids, ointment, sterile pads, cotton and stretch bandages, plus a selection of pain-killers suitable for the entire family. Prescription medication is a must, enough for up to a week - at the onset of a major disaster, medical emergency teams will have their work cut out and it may be some time before drugs of any kind are available. These and everything else in the kit need checking frequently to ensure use-by dates don't expire.
- ✓ Bottled water - especially during floods, water will be contaminated and fresh supplies scarce.
- ✓ A space-blanket or two. They are light and don't take up much room, but they can keep a person warm and dry until suitable shelter can be found.
- ✓ A small flashlight, preferably the LED kind which is more efficient than the old type and the batteries last longer.
- ✓ A spare set of keys for both car and the property. Never let the fuel tank drop below a quarter - gas pumps need power to operate, and there might be none. If there is time, lock up before leaving to deter looters.
- ✓ A small pocket knife - Swiss Army is good.
- ✓ A bottle of combined sun-block and insect repellent lotion or cream.

The next item on the agenda should be warm clothing. This will be bulky and might have to be stowed in a separate bag. I know it sounds like overkill, but having to evacuate in the middle of the night dressed only in pyjamas isn't appealing. Don't forget hats for everyone - wide-rimmed floppies that fold up small; even baseball caps with a decent peak are better than nothing.

Now we come to the important documents. To minimise the bulk and weight, data from the originals can be transferred to a few sheets of paper kept in a plastic bag. Computer discs are fine for later, but they won't be any use without power. Items to consider recording are:

- ✓ Insurance policy numbers and the company's contact number.
- ✓ Bank account details, including credit-cards.
- ✓ Phone numbers and addresses. At the top of the list will be any emergency services that might be needed. Then there's everyone else's details - friends and family. You are unlikely to remember them all, and anyone who has lost an address book knows how inconvenient this can be.

Original documents can go in the same packet:

- ✓ Personal ID such as passports, birth and marriage certificates - they are a hassle to replace anytime, believe me.

To download a convenient one-page printable PDF **Grab 'N' Go Checklist**, just return to the Display page.

What is that special something we simply don't want to lose? There may be certain essentials that you might need and only you know about. Take a little time to consider these so that they can be put in the "grab-and-go" bag. Remember that anything you want to take must be small and easily portable. In an emergency situation, just enough will have to do. Obviously this will differ from person to person, and most of us prize certain things more than others. Some are just too big and heavy to consider, but memorabilia such as photographs can be catered for. Most of us have them on the computer somewhere. It's a bit of a plod, but all of these images can be backed up to discs or a plug-in hard-drive - don't trust USB flash-drives: they aren't designed for long-term storage. Even old letters and postcards can be scanned and saved as image files. I realise these pictures will only be digital copies, but surely that's something.

One final consideration. Accidents can leave a person unconscious or unable to communicate. Some may be wearing bracelets or pendants advising of a medical condition and these can be instantly checked by paramedics prior to any treatment being given. They may, however, need more information than can be engraved on a small area, so carry a piece of paper or card in your wallet or purse outlining the necessary details, and include the phone number of an emergency contact. A further safeguard is to set up your mobile phone or Ipad with an **ICE** contact or two. Simply go to the phone address book and input "ICE" followed by the person's name, number and perhaps their relationship to you. If you need more than one, list them as "ICE1", "ICE2", etc. Anyone wishing to access this information can do so via the phonebook, as long as it isn't password-protected. **For more details, Google: "In Case of Emergency"**.

I can honestly say now is the right time for everyone to plan ahead. In light of the recent extremes of global weather, we are all at risk. In most countries, the authorities are ready to cope with major disasters and minor emergencies, but it may take them a while to reach the seat of the problem. In a few past cases, relief for the victims was actually days away. That's a long, long wait when you are alone, cold, wet, perhaps injured and in shock. Doesn't it make sense to give some thought and an hour or two of one single day to ensure the safety of you and yours for years to come? That's what we wish for you all, but sometimes, even our wishes don't come true.

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