

Planning for Disaster

The best time to prepare for an emergency is, obviously, before one occurs. The best way to prepare is to spend some time thinking about what disasters usually happen in your area. Are you in California? Earthquakes, mudslides, and forest fires are regular occurrences. The coast of North Carolina? Hurricanes. Rhode Island? Snowstorms. Kansas? Tornadoes. These are just stereotypical examples, of course. Tornadoes can occur anywhere in the world, and hurricanes have been known to travel inland for hundreds of miles. The point is not to try and plan for every single thing that *could* happen – as we'll see, that's impossible – but to assemble a set of skills and supplies that you can use in many different situations.

As we said, it's impossible to plan for everything; there are simply too many things that could happen to make planning for each of them practical. You might live on a 100-year flood plain, but that doesn't mean you can't get a major flood three years in a row. There may have never been a recorded tornado sighting in your area, but one could appear on the horizon tomorrow. Given the state of modern travel and the large population of the planet, pandemics travel faster and affect more people than ever before, so you're not necessarily safe just because you live in a rural area. And those are just probable, practical examples. That's not getting into fantastic scenarios like invasions, asteroid collisions, or zombies. (Tip: if you *do* end up having to deal with zombies, surround your house with old tires. It won't kill the zombies, but *will* trip them.)

Fortunately, your goals in the vast majority of disasters will be the same: meet the needs of you and your loved ones, while at the same time keeping as close to your daily routine as possible. This means that your kit will contain basically the same items no matter what emergency you're facing. More on that later.

So what routines are most important in a disaster? It comes down to basic needs: shelter, food, water, sleep. The closer you can stick to your daily routine, the easier it is to weather an emergency, and that should be reflected in your preparation. If your family of four eats three meals a day, you may want thirty-six meals in your kit. If you are building an individual kit, and usually only eat two meals a day, you might only pack six meals. If you have to have absolute quiet in order to sleep, include a pair of earplugs in your kit. You may have to go to a shelter, and they're noisy.

As you start to build your kit, you'll quickly realize that space is at a premium and weight rapidly becomes a factor. The best way to address this is to maximize the usefulness of your supplies by choosing items that have more than one function. The best example of this is some sort of multi-tool, like a Leatherman or Swiss Army knife, which combines screwdrivers, pliers, knife blades, can and bottle openers, etc. into one small package. Similarly, conventional wisdom says that you can use duct tape in hundreds of ways, from repairing ripped tents and torn clothing to stringing a hammock or stretcher.

Another way to make your gear go further is to learn how to use it in unconventional ways.

In 1945, psychologist Karl Duncker defined a condition he called "functional fixedness." This condition is characterized by an inability to see a use for an object beyond its usual function. For example, a person may only see a hammer as a tool used for driving nails. They would not use it as a door stop, or a weight to carry a rope over a tree branch. They are unable to get beyond "hammer = nail."