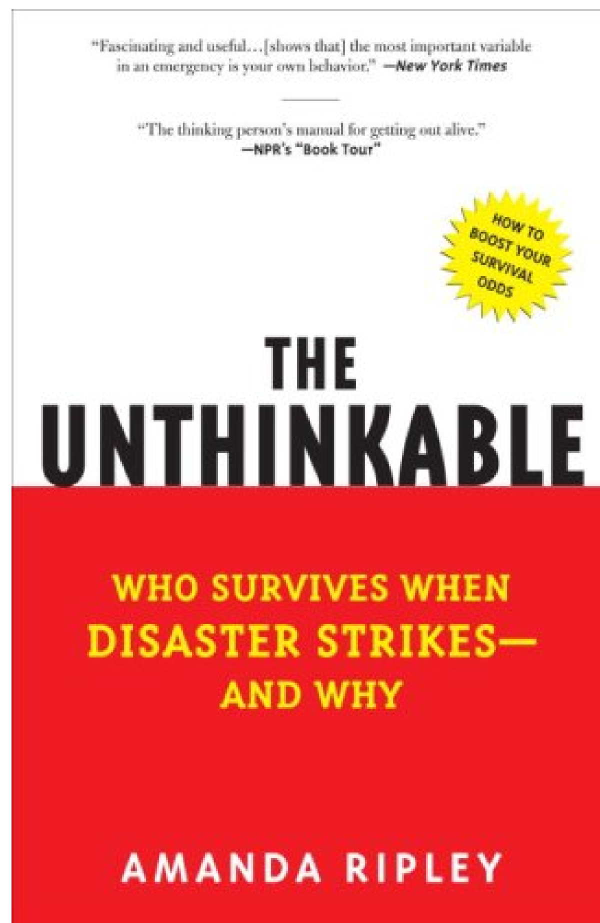
THE UNTHINKABLE: WHO SURVIVES WHEN DISASTER STRIKES - AND WHY BY AMANDA RIPLEY



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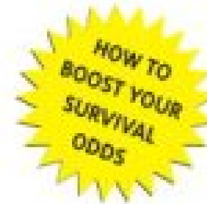

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If you encounter a fire, explosion, plane crash, or terrorist attack, your chances of survival might depend on how your brain reacts or what preparations you make. Using major disasters such as 9/11, Haj stampedes, and a club fire in Kentucky as examples, Ripley examines the psychology of individuals and groups confronted with life-or-death situations. Kirsten Potter's narration is straightforward and clear. She emphasizes important words with short pauses and injects a bit of irony here and there. Above all, she catches Ripley's obvious enthusiasm for her subject. The author put herself into simulated disaster situations; Potter does likewise for listeners. J.B.G. © AudioFile 2008, Portland, Maine

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Chapter 1
Delay: Procrastinating in Tower 1

On February 26, 1993, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center for the first time, Elia Zedeno was in an express elevator carrying a slice of Sbarro's pizza. She had taken a new temporary worker to the food court to show him around, and they were on their way back to their desks. When the bomb exploded, they heard a loud pop and the elevator stopped and began to descend. Then it stopped for good, trapping her and five other people. Smoke began to slowly coil in from below. Two men grappled with the door. A woman dropped to her knees and started praying, making Zedeno nervous. Then one of the men calmly directed everyone to get low and cover their faces. They all did as they were told.

Zedeno concentrated on keeping her breathing shallow and slow. But the more she tried to calm down, the harder her heart seemed to pound. Then they heard a man screaming in the elevator next to them. "I'm burning up!" he yelled as he banged on the metal box around him. But soon he was quiet. "I remember thinking, 'We're going to be next,'" Zedeno says. She visualized rescue workers finding them dead inside the elevator later. Just then, she thought she would lunge for the doors and start banging herself. But before she could, the temp had started doing it for her. He was screaming and banging. So Zedeno took charge of quieting him down. "Robert, calm down. You're going to inhale too much smoke," she told him. He started to cough and returned to the floor.

It was around then that Zedeno was filled with a wave of peace, inexplicably. "Regardless of the outcome, I knew everything was going to be OK," she remembers. "My breath became effortless. My mind no longer wandered. Suddenly, I wasn't there anymore. I was just watching. I could see the people lying in the elevator. The sounds were far away, and I was just hovering. I had no emotions."

When they'd been in the elevator for about an hour, a firefighter managed to rip open the door and pull them out. It turned out the car had returned to the lobby level, and that's where they'd been all along. Zedeno could not see the face of the firefighter who pulled her out; the smoke was too thick. She did as he instructed, grabbing onto a rope and following it out through the lobby and out the doors. She was stunned by the darkness in the lobby and the emptiness outside. She thought that once she had made it out of her own private catastrophe, everything would be normal, bustling and bright. She never imagined that a place could look so different.

In the basement below, a Ryder truck full of eleven hundred pounds of explosives had left a crater five stories deep. Six people had died. It was the largest full-building evacuation in U.S. history, and nothing had gone the way it was supposed to go. Smoke purled up the stairways. The power failed, rendering the emergency communications system useless and the stairways dark. People moved extraordinarily slowly. Ten hours after the explosion, firefighters were still finding people who had not yet evacuated in their offices.

After the bombing, glow-in-the-dark tape and backup power generators were installed in the Trade Center. Both helped save lives eight years later. But still no one fully answered the fundamental question: why did people move so slowly? And what did it mean about all of our assumptions about skyscrapers--and the Trade Center in particular? The 1993 bombing became a story about terrorism, as would the attacks on the same buildings eight years later, and rightly so. But they were also stories of procrastination and denial, the first phase of the human disaster experience.

A few days later, Zedeno was right back at work in a neighboring building. One month later, her office reopened on the seventy-third floor of Tower 1. She started riding the same elevator to work. But it was months before she could get the taste of soot out of her mouth. She thought about leaving the towers, but not with any conviction. "I remember saying, 'This could happen again.' And someone said, 'Lightning never strikes twice.'"

"Don't Worry. It's in Your Head!"

Zedeno has a small stature, round glasses, and Dizzy Gillespie cheeks when she smiles, which happens often. She came to America with her family from Cuba when she was eleven. Her parents had spent her entire childhood plotting to get away from Fidel Castro. When they finally got permission to leave in the early 1970s, they moved to West New York, New Jersey, where their daughter could see the brand-new Trade Center Towers sunning themselves almost everywhere she went.

When she was nineteen, Zedeno visited the Trade Center for the first time. She came to apply for a secretarial job with the Port Authority of New York/New Jersey. She had no idea what the Port Authority did--or even that it owned the Trade Center--but a girlfriend convinced her to fill out the application. When she returned for her second interview, her mother came with her. The boss hired her on the spot, and, on her lunch break, Zedeno ran to the plaza to tell her mother. "What will you do?" she asked her mother, who had no idea how to get home to New Jersey. "I will sit right here and wait for you," her mother announced. They took the train home together that evening.

Eventually, Zedeno got promoted to the finance section. Her office had regular fire drills, which consisted of gathering in the hallway to gossip. During a blackout in 1990, she and her office mates walked down the tower's stairs. That's how they learned that homeless people had been using the lower stairwells as bathrooms. "We were laughing and talking," she remembers. When Zedeno talks, her voice goes up at the end of her sentences, like a child telling you something outrageous. "The whole thing was a joke!"

Zedeno is a witness wherever she goes. She remembers life in surround-sound detail. When I ask her what it was like to leave Cuba as a little girl, she tells me about the day she left in April of 1971. Her mother was doing her hair when they heard the sound of a motorcycle. "Only one man in town had a motorcycle, and it didn't sound like that," she says. Suddenly, the sound stopped in front of their house. A soldier walked in the front door without knocking and told them to leave. Zedeno knew this was good news: they had finally won permission to go to America. Fifteen minutes later, they left their house forever. They were terrified the whole journey out, but they made it. When they arrived in Miami, Zedeno ran down the aisles of a supermarket yelling out descriptions of everything she saw.

By September 2001, Zedeno had worked in the towers for over twenty-one years. She was forty-one years old, and she managed five employees on the seventy-third floor of Tower 1. Her group oversaw the Port Authority's engineering consultants. On 9/11, Zedeno got to work a little after 8:00 A.M. She settled into her cubicle and listened to her voice-mail messages. In an hour, she would head up to the cafeteria to get some breakfast, as usual.

The Trade Center did not feel like a cluster of seven buildings; it felt like a city. Every day, fifty thousand people came to work there, and another two hundred thousand passed through. The plaza underneath held the largest shopping mall in Lower Manhattan. "You didn't need to leave for anything," Zedeno says. The complex had 103 elevators--and its own zip code (10048). Bomb threats and small fires were not uncommon. The engine company across the street sometimes got called to the Trade Center eight times a day. Zedeno got used to seeing firefighters in the elevators. Days later, she would hear that there had been smoke somewhere in the building. It might have been two football fields away from her.

At 8:46 A.M., an American Airlines Boeing 767 traveling 490 mph struck the building eleven floors above her. When the plane hit Zedeno's building, the effect was not subtle. It obliterated four floors immediately. From her desk, Zedeno heard a booming explosion and felt the building lurch to the south, as if it might topple. It had never done that before, not even in 1993. This time, she grabbed her desk and held on, lifting her feet off the floor. "I actually expected the ceiling to fall and the building to cave in," she remembers. At the time, she screamed, "What's happening?"

Talking about it now, in a deli across from the void where the towers once stood, Zedeno wonders why she didn't immediately run for the stairs. She'd been through this before, after all. But what she really wanted, quite desperately, was for someone to answer back: "Everything is OK! Don't worry. It's in your head!" At the moment of impact, Zedeno had entered a rarefied zone. The rules of normal life were suspended. Her entire body and mind changed. She would wind her way through a series of phases along the survival arc. First would be a thicket of disbelief, followed by frantic deliberation, and, finally, action. We will witness all three here, but more than anything else, Zedeno's story is one of denial.

Zedeno has revisited the moments of her escape from the Trade Center until they are worn and familiar. She now gives tours of Ground Zero to tourists from around the world. But still there are riddles she cannot decipher, behavioral glitches that don't make obvious sense. More than anything else, she is mystified by how slow she was to accept what was happening all day long.

After the plane hit the building, Zedeno told me, she wanted nothing so much as to stay. Like her, I was perplexed by this reaction. Shouldn't a primal, survival instinct have kicked in, propelling her to the door? I wondered if Zedeno was unusual. So I went to the National Fire Academy to find out. The instructors at the school, located on the rolling grounds of a former Catholic college in rural Maryland, are veteran firefighters who have witnessed just about every conceivable form of human behavior in fire. I met Jack Rowley, who spent thirty-three years as a firefighter in Columbus, Ohio. When I told him about Zedeno, he told me that he saw this kind of curious indifference all the time. In fact, he came to consider one particular kind of fire a regular Saturday night ritual. His station house would get dispatched to a bar; he would walk into the establishment and see smoke. But he would also see customers sitting at the bar nursing their beers. "We would say, 'Looks like there's a fire here,'" he says. He'd ask the customers if they felt like evacuating. "They would say, 'No, we'll be just fine.'"

One of the few people who has extensively analyzed behavior at the Trade Center in both 1993 and 2001 is Guylene Proulx at Canada's National Research Council. And what she saw fit with Zedeno's memory exactly. "Actual human behavior in fires is somewhat different from the 'panic' scenario. What is regularly observed is a lethargic response," she wrote in a 2002 article in the journal Fire Protection Engineering. "People are often cool during fires, ignoring or delaying their response."

In a May 19, 2006, column in the Wall Street Journal, Matthew Kaminski wrote about a recent flight he'd taken from Paris to New York. Three hours out of Paris, halfway into the movie Jarhead, Kaminski heard a loud thud and felt the plane shudder and swerve. "The captain made no announcement. No one asked the flight attendants a thing," he wrote. And yet, wrote Kaminski, a veteran traveler, "My stomach told me to worry."

About an hour later, the pilot announced the plane would be making an emergency landing in St. John's, Newfoundland. It seems one of the plane's four engines had blown out. As the plane approached the landing strip, the passengers could see fire trucks and ambulances on the tarmac below. The French flight attendant's English was deteriorating fast. In a high-pitched voice, she ordered the passengers to "Brace, brace!" And what did about half the passengers do in this moment of exquisite tension? Did they panic or weep or pray to God? No. They laughed.

The plane, as it turned out, landed safely. And Kaminski was left to marvel at his fellow passengers' well-developed sense of irony.

Laughter--or silence--is a classic manifestation of denial, as is delay. Zedeno was not alone. On average, Trade Center survivors waited six minutes before heading downstairs, according to a 2005 National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) study drawn from interviews with nearly nine hundred survivors. (The average would likely be higher if those who died had been able to respond to the survey.) Some waited as long as forty-five minutes. People occupied themselves in all kinds of interesting ways. Some helped coworkers who were disabled or obese. In Tower 2, many people followed fatal instructions to stay put. Staying inside was, after all, the standard protocol for skyscraper fires. But ultimately, the threat should have demanded immediate attention. Eventually, almost everyone saw smoke, smelled jet fuel, or heard someone giving the order to leave. Even then, many called relatives and friends. About one thousand individuals took the time to shut down their computers, according to NIST. "The building started to sway and everything started shaking," one person on a floor in the sixties of Tower 1 told NIST. "I knew there was something wrong." Notice what comes next: "I ran to my desk and made a couple of phone calls. I dialed about five times trying to reach my [spouse]. I also called my sisters to find out more information."

Why do we procrastinate leaving? The denial phase is a humbling one. It takes a while to come to terms with

our miserable luck. Rowley puts it this way: "Fires only happen to other people." We have a tendency to believe that everything is OK because, well, it almost always has been before. Psychologists call this tendency "normalcy bias." The human brain works by identifying patterns. It uses information from the past to understand what is happening in the present and to anticipate the future. This strategy works elegantly in most situations. But we inevitably see patterns where they don't exist. In other words, we are slow to recognize exceptions. There is also the peer-pressure factor. All of us have been in situations that looked ominous, and they almost always turn out to be innocuous. If we behave otherwise, we risk social embarrassment by overreacting. So we err on the side of underreacting.

But it would be a mistake to assume that we just waste time during this delay.

From the Hardcover edition.

From Publishers Weekly
Ripley, an award-winning writer on homeland security for Time, offers a compelling look at instinct and disaster response as she explores the psychology of fear and how it can save or destroy us. Surprisingly, she reports, mass panic is rare, and an understanding of the dynamics of crowds can help prevent a stampede, while a well-trained crew can get passengers quickly but calmly off a crashed plane. Using interviews with survivors of hotel fires, hostage situations, plane crashes and, 9/11, Ripley takes readers through the three stages of reaction to calamity: disbelief, deliberation and action. The average person slows down, spending valuable minutes to gather belongings and check in with others. The human tendency to stay in groups can make evacuation take much longer than experts estimate. Official policy based on inaccurate assumptions can also put people in danger; even after 9/11, Ripley says, the requirement for evacuation drills on office buildings is inadequate. Ripley's in-depth look at the psychology of disaster response, alongside survivors' accounts, makes for gripping reading, sure to raise debate as well as our awareness of a life-and-death issue. 8 pages of color photos. (June)
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Discover how human beings react to danger–and what makes the difference between life and death

Today, nine out of ten Americans live in places at significant risk of earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, terrorism, or other disasters. Tomorrow, some of us will have to make split-second choices to save ourselves and our families. How will we react? What will it feel like? Will we be heroes or victims?

In her quest to answer these questions, award-winning journalist Amanda Ripley traces human responses to some of recent history's epic disasters, from the explosion of the Mont Blanc munitions ship in 1917–one of the biggest explosions before the invention of the atomic bomb–to the journeys of the 15,000 people who found their way out of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. To understand the science behind the stories, Ripley turns to leading brain scientists, trauma psychologists, and other disaster experts. She even has her own brain examined by military researchers and experiences, through realistic simulations, what it might be like to survive a plane crash into the ocean or to escape a raging fire.

Ripley comes back with precious wisdom about the surprising humanity of crowds, the elegance of the brain's fear circuits, and the stunning inadequacy of many of our evolutionary responses. Most unexpectedly, she discovers the brain's ability to do much, much better–with just a little help.

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- Great product!

From AudioFile
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Chapter 1
Delay: Procrastinating in Tower 1

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Zedeno concentrated on keeping her breathing shallow and slow. But the more she tried to calm down, the harder her heart seemed to pound. Then they heard a man screaming in the elevator next to them. "I'm burning up!" he yelled as he banged on the metal box around him. But soon he was quiet. "I remember thinking, 'We're going to be next,'" Zedeno says. She visualized rescue workers finding them dead inside the elevator later. Just then, she thought she would lunge for the doors and start banging herself. But before she could, the temp had started doing it for her. He was screaming and banging. So Zedeno took charge of quieting him down. "Robert, calm down. You're going to inhale too much smoke," she told him. He started to cough and returned to the floor.

It was around then that Zedeno was filled with a wave of peace, inexplicably. "Regardless of the outcome, I knew everything was going to be OK," she remembers. "My breath became effortless. My mind no longer wandered. Suddenly, I wasn't there anymore. I was just watching. I could see the people lying in the elevator. The sounds were far away, and I was just hovering. I had no emotions."

When they'd been in the elevator for about an hour, a firefighter managed to rip open the door and pull them out. It turned out the car had returned to the lobby level, and that's where they'd been all along. Zedeno could not see the face of the firefighter who pulled her out; the smoke was too thick. She did as he instructed, grabbing onto a rope and following it out through the lobby and out the doors. She was stunned by the darkness in the lobby and the emptiness outside. She thought that once she had made it out of her own private catastrophe, everything would be normal, bustling and bright. She never imagined that a place could look so different.

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Talking about it now, in a deli across from the void where the towers once stood, Zedeno wonders why she didn't immediately run for the stairs. She'd been through this before, after all. But what she really wanted, quite desperately, was for someone to answer back: "Everything is OK! Don't worry. It's in your head!" At the moment of impact, Zedeno had entered a rarefied zone. The rules of normal life were suspended. Her entire body and mind changed. She would wind her way through a series of phases along the survival arc. First would be a thicket of disbelief, followed by frantic deliberation, and, finally, action. We will witness all three here, but more than anything else, Zedeno's story is one of denial.

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About an hour later, the pilot announced the plane would be making an emergency landing in St. John's, Newfoundland. It seems one of the plane's four engines had blown out. As the plane approached the landing strip, the passengers could see fire trucks and ambulances on the tarmac below. The French flight attendant's English was deteriorating fast. In a high-pitched voice, she ordered the passengers to "Brace, brace!" And what did about half the passengers do in this moment of exquisite tension? Did they panic or weep or pray to

God? No. They laughed.

The plane, as it turned out, landed safely. And Kaminski was left to marvel at his fellow passengers' well-developed sense of irony.

Laughter--or silence--is a classic manifestation of denial, as is delay. Zedeno was not alone. On average, Trade Center survivors waited six minutes before heading downstairs, according to a 2005 National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) study drawn from interviews with nearly nine hundred survivors. (The average would likely be higher if those who died had been able to respond to the survey.) Some waited as long as forty-five minutes. People occupied themselves in all kinds of interesting ways. Some helped coworkers who were disabled or obese. In Tower 2, many people followed fatal instructions to stay put. Staying inside was, after all, the standard protocol for skyscraper fires. But ultimately, the threat should have demanded immediate attention. Eventually, almost everyone saw smoke, smelled jet fuel, or heard someone giving the order to leave. Even then, many called relatives and friends. About one thousand individuals took the time to shut down their computers, according to NIST. "The building started to sway and everything started shaking," one person on a floor in the sixties of Tower 1 told NIST. "I knew there was something wrong." Notice what comes next: "I ran to my desk and made a couple of phone calls. I dialed about five times trying to reach my [spouse]. I also called my sisters to find out more information."

Why do we procrastinate leaving? The denial phase is a humbling one. It takes a while to come to terms with our miserable luck. Rowley puts it this way: "Fires only happen to other people." We have a tendency to believe that everything is OK because, well, it almost always has been before. Psychologists call this tendency "normalcy bias." The human brain works by identifying patterns. It uses information from the past to understand what is happening in the present and to anticipate the future. This strategy works elegantly in most situations. But we inevitably see patterns where they don't exist. In other words, we are slow to recognize exceptions. There is also the peer-pressure factor. All of us have been in situations that looked ominous, and they almost always turn out to be innocuous. If we behave otherwise, we risk social embarrassment by overreacting. So we err on the side of underreacting.

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Most helpful customer reviews

155 of 163 people found the following review helpful.
Exciting Stories, Practical Lessons
By Rob Hardy
"In a disaster, would I panic?" If you are like most Americans, you have never had to go through a terrorist attack, plane crash, flood, or tornado, but also when viewing such video-rich scenes on television news, you can't help wondering what you would do if you were the one in the disaster. The good news is that no, you probably won't panic, because almost no one does. The bad news is that you are far more likely to sit and do nothing. Human response to disasters can be studied, and Amanda Ripley, a senior staffer for _Time_ magazine, has interviewed people who have been in disasters, has talked with academics who study human behavior in such extremities, and has even been through mock disasters herself. She has now written _The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - and Why_ (Crown). There are lessons here about disasters of many kinds and people who failed to respond in a way to save themselves, but this is far from a pessimistic book. If you think of a disaster as being a scene of destruction followed by panic and every-man-for-himself selfishness relieved only when the professional rescuers show up to help, Ripley has some revelatory studies and examples to give you. "Reality is a lot more interesting," she writes, "and hopeful."

She has often translated the hopefulness in her studies into practical lessons. This is a book with a purpose, meant to change things. Panic might have been present in a small number of cases at the World Trade Center, but Ripley quotes a researcher who found that workers in the towers did the same thing that others in disasters do: "What is regularly observed is a lethargic response. People are often cool during fires, ignoring or delaying their response." On an average, those who survived the WTC attack waited six minutes before heading downstairs. Delay is part of a denial phase. "We have a tendency to believe that everything is OK because, well, it almost always has been before." The false reliance on normalcy is not completely bad. In a real disaster, Ripley writes, "Civilization holds. People move in groups whenever they can. They are usually far more polite than they are normally. They look out for one another, and they maintain hierarchies." This was all true at the fire that killed 167 of the 3,000 people packed into the Beverly Hills Supper Club in 1977. Researchers looked for selfish behavior, and didn't see it. They saw order. One said, "People used what they had learned in grade-school fire drills. `Stay in line. Don't push. We'll all get out.' People were queuing up! It was just absolutely incredible." It is part the lesson to be drawn from one of the heroes profiled here, Rick Rescorla, who put grumbling millionaire bankers through surprise fire drills at the World Trade Center for his firm Morgan Stanley. When their tower collapsed, 2,687 Morgan Stanley employees were safe, and only thirteen died. That number includes Rescorla himself, who was last seen heading back up to help more people out.

The big lesson: take emergency drills seriously. This is true for plane crashes, too; 56% of passengers in serious plane accidents survive, and you improve your odds if you pay attention to the stewardess as she shows you where the emergency exits are. Remember that bureaucracies now love technical fixes, experts, and gadgetry, but the vast majority of rescues in disasters are done by regular people caught up in them, using no special tools. Know those you live and work with and practice with them. There are lots of other good lessons here besides practice, practice, practice. Expect there to be smoke, so know how to get to a door or exit blindfolded. Use text messenging; it often will work when voice calls won't. Get in shape; speed is needed for most successful evacuations and extra weight slows people down. Ripley has produced a very readable book that dips into psychological and neurochemical explanations for human behavior now and then, but mostly deals in reports about the behavior itself, behavior that is usually explicable and often admirable. More disasters are coming. Read _The Unthinkable_, pay attention, and improve your odds.

125 of 135 people found the following review helpful.
Stunning Nonfiction Thriller That Will Save Lives
By O. Merce Brown

******
I wish that I could give this book six stars; it is not just an outstanding book, but its usefulness in today's times is unparalleled. It is a book about what our brains do during disasters and how we react as unpredictable individuals, which is something that science and technology do not always take into consideration.

It is not dry or dull like some books about "emergency preparedness" or "crisis management" that are more like texts or reference books. No, this is a nonfiction thriller told through fascinating stories of actual disasters in which exactly how our brains react is illustrated. It's a book about behavior, especially the behavior of regular, ordinary people, who are actually the most important people when a disaster strikes (and you'll find out why).

For example, the book doesn't just detail what to do when a tsunami strikes, or when a hurricane warning is issued, but how you will be thinking differently, how you may be confused, what brain-related problems you might have---like paralysis, temporary blindness, an apparent slowing down of time, tunnel vision, etc.

What makes some people resilient and why do they do so much better than others? The author explores this. How do groups react in a crisis? How do we process risk? Have you ever wondered why people don't evacuate when there is a disaster warning? Again, you'll find many of these answers explored here.

The author interviewed survivors of many different types of disasters (e.g., bombings, 9/11, crowd crushes, airplane fires, nightclub fires, and so many more) and THIS is what THEY wanted us to know; there were so many commonalities across the different crisis scenarios, but the survivors had no way of sharing these commonalities and principles with the general public. It's what the survivors wished they had known beforehand so that they could have been more prepared. The author has gathered this information and coordinated it with current brain research in this remarkable, unique book.

There is information about how to deal with each phase of the "survival arc"---from denial, to deliberation, to the decisive moment.

The reason you should buy and read this book, the reason you should buy copies for your friends, is so that you and they will be truly mentally prepared...for the unthinkable. I don't know about you, but I want to be not afraid and filled with doom and gloom, but relaxed, alert, and as ready as I can be. Reading this book does not increase my anxiety about the future as you might think, but decreases it, as I feel more competent---like I've learned valuable, valuable mental skills and principles to get me through what might come.

This book will save lives. Get it.

I have reviewed hundreds of books, and of all of them, I'd give this one my highest recommended...and six stars.
******

53 of 57 people found the following review helpful.
How would you react in a disaster?
By Cathy Stucker
I have often wondered how I would react in a disaster. Would I freeze and be unable to move? Would I get myself to safety, however possible? Would I help others to safety?

Although we can not know with certainty until faced with disaster, this book gives clues about how and why

we humans react to the "unthinkable": disasters such as plane crashes, fires, tsunamis, and terrorist attacks, as well as smaller-scale crises, such as automobile accidents.

Some disasters are not survivable. This book, though, explores why some people survive while others perish in the same circumstances, and describes the behaviors and choices that cause many to die needlessly.

"The Unthinkable" describes disasters that cumulatively resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives; however, it is not a morbid tale of death, but an inspiring story of humans responding and adapting to situations and saving their own lives or the lives of those around them.

The key lesson to take from this book is the need to be prepared. Those who anticipate possible disaster and know what to do and how to do it are more confident if and when the disaster occurs. We can not prepare for every possible type of danger, but simple things such as learning where the exits are when in an unfamiliar place can mean the difference between surviving or not.

After reading "The Unthinkable," my thinking about what it means to be prepared for disaster has changed. For example, I probably pay more attention to things such as airline safety videos than the average passenger, but on future flights I will spend more time really learning my surroundings, such as counting the rows to the nearest exits. And I believe that by understanding our natural responses to danger, I can teach myself to be more mentally prepared to act, and not sit passively waiting for someone else to do something.

Just as Gavin deBecker's book, The Gift of Fear, helped me to learn the importance of listening to and trusting my instincts, "The Unthinkable" has shown me how we, as "regular people," can prepare and train ourselves to survive a disaster. I highly recommend both of these books. Reading them could save your life.

Cathy Stucker

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THE UNTHINKABLE: WHO SURVIVES WHEN DISASTER STRIKES - AND WHY BY AMANDA RIPLEY PDF

Why need to be this on the internet e-book **The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - And Why By Amanda Ripley** You could not require to go someplace to review the e-books. You can read this book The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - And Why By Amanda Ripley whenever and every where you really want. Even it remains in our downtime or sensation burnt out of the works in the workplace, this corrects for you. Obtain this The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - And Why By Amanda Ripley right now and also be the quickest individual who completes reading this publication The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - And Why By Amanda Ripley

From AudioFile
If you encounter a fire, explosion, plane crash, or terrorist attack, your chances of survival might depend on how your brain reacts or what preparations you make. Using major disasters such as 9/11, Haj stampedes, and a club fire in Kentucky as examples, Ripley examines the psychology of individuals and groups confronted with life-or-death situations. Kirsten Potter's narration is straightforward and clear. She emphasizes important words with short pauses and injects a bit of irony here and there. Above all, she catches Ripley's obvious enthusiasm for her subject. The author put herself into simulated disaster situations; Potter does likewise for listeners. J.B.G. © AudioFile 2008, Portland, Maine

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Chapter 1
Delay: Procrastinating in Tower 1

On February 26, 1993, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center for the first time, Elia Zedeno was in an express elevator carrying a slice of Sbarro's pizza. She had taken a new temporary worker to the food court to show him around, and they were on their way back to their desks. When the bomb exploded, they heard a loud pop and the elevator stopped and began to descend. Then it stopped for good, trapping her and five other people. Smoke began to slowly coil in from below. Two men grappled with the door. A woman dropped to her knees and started praying, making Zedeno nervous. Then one of the men calmly directed everyone to get low and cover their faces. They all did as they were told.

Zedeno concentrated on keeping her breathing shallow and slow. But the more she tried to calm down, the harder her heart seemed to pound. Then they heard a man screaming in the elevator next to them. "I'm burning up!" he yelled as he banged on the metal box around him. But soon he was quiet. "I remember thinking, 'We're going to be next,'" Zedeno says. She visualized rescue workers finding them dead inside the elevator later. Just then, she thought she would lunge for the doors and start banging herself. But before she could, the temp had started doing it for her. He was screaming and banging. So Zedeno took charge of quieting him down. "Robert, calm down. You're going to inhale too much smoke," she told him. He started to cough and returned to the floor.

It was around then that Zedeno was filled with a wave of peace, inexplicably. "Regardless of the outcome, I knew everything was going to be OK," she remembers. "My breath became effortless. My mind no longer wandered. Suddenly, I wasn't there anymore. I was just watching. I could see the people lying in the elevator. The sounds were far away, and I was just hovering. I had no emotions."

When they'd been in the elevator for about an hour, a firefighter managed to rip open the door and pull them out. It turned out the car had returned to the lobby level, and that's where they'd been all along. Zedeno could not see the face of the firefighter who pulled her out; the smoke was too thick. She did as he instructed, grabbing onto a rope and following it out through the lobby and out the doors. She was stunned by the darkness in the lobby and the emptiness outside. She thought that once she had made it out of her own private catastrophe, everything would be normal, bustling and bright. She never imagined that a place could look so different.

In the basement below, a Ryder truck full of eleven hundred pounds of explosives had left a crater five stories deep. Six people had died. It was the largest full-building evacuation in U.S. history, and nothing had gone the way it was supposed to go. Smoke purled up the stairways. The power failed, rendering the emergency communications system useless and the stairways dark. People moved extraordinarily slowly. Ten hours after the explosion, firefighters were still finding people who had not yet evacuated in their offices.

After the bombing, glow-in-the-dark tape and backup power generators were installed in the Trade Center. Both helped save lives eight years later. But still no one fully answered the fundamental question: why did people move so slowly? And what did it mean about all of our assumptions about skyscrapers--and the Trade Center in particular? The 1993 bombing became a story about terrorism, as would the attacks on the same buildings eight years later, and rightly so. But they were also stories of procrastination and denial, the first phase of the human disaster experience.

A few days later, Zedeno was right back at work in a neighboring building. One month later, her office reopened on the seventy-third floor of Tower 1. She started riding the same elevator to work. But it was months before she could get the taste of soot out of her mouth. She thought about leaving the towers, but not with any conviction. "I remember saying, 'This could happen again.' And someone said, 'Lightning never strikes twice.'"

"Don't Worry. It's in Your Head!"

Zedeno has a small stature, round glasses, and Dizzy Gillespie cheeks when she smiles, which happens often. She came to America with her family from Cuba when she was eleven. Her parents had spent her entire childhood plotting to get away from Fidel Castro. When they finally got permission to leave in the early 1970s, they moved to West New York, New Jersey, where their daughter could see the brand-new Trade Center Towers sunning themselves almost everywhere she went.

When she was nineteen, Zedeno visited the Trade Center for the first time. She came to apply for a secretarial job with the Port Authority of New York/New Jersey. She had no idea what the Port Authority did--or even that it owned the Trade Center--but a girlfriend convinced her to fill out the application. When she returned for her second interview, her mother came with her. The boss hired her on the spot, and, on her lunch break, Zedeno ran to the plaza to tell her mother. "What will you do?" she asked her mother, who had no idea how to get home to New Jersey. "I will sit right here and wait for you," her mother announced. They took the train home together that evening.

Eventually, Zedeno got promoted to the finance section. Her office had regular fire drills, which consisted of gathering in the hallway to gossip. During a blackout in 1990, she and her office mates walked down the tower's stairs. That's how they learned that homeless people had been using the lower stairwells as bathrooms. "We were laughing and talking," she remembers. When Zedeno talks, her voice goes up at the end of her sentences, like a child telling you something outrageous. "The whole thing was a joke!"

Zedeno is a witness wherever she goes. She remembers life in surround-sound detail. When I ask her what it was like to leave Cuba as a little girl, she tells me about the day she left in April of 1971. Her mother was doing her hair when they heard the sound of a motorcycle. "Only one man in town had a motorcycle, and it didn't sound like that," she says. Suddenly, the sound stopped in front of their house. A soldier walked in the front door without knocking and told them to leave. Zedeno knew this was good news: they had finally won permission to go to America. Fifteen minutes later, they left their house forever. They were terrified the whole journey out, but they made it. When they arrived in Miami, Zedeno ran down the aisles of a supermarket yelling out descriptions of everything she saw.

By September 2001, Zedeno had worked in the towers for over twenty-one years. She was forty-one years old, and she managed five employees on the seventy-third floor of Tower 1. Her group oversaw the Port Authority's engineering consultants. On 9/11, Zedeno got to work a little after 8:00 A.M. She settled into her cubicle and listened to her voice-mail messages. In an hour, she would head up to the cafeteria to get some breakfast, as usual.

The Trade Center did not feel like a cluster of seven buildings; it felt like a city. Every day, fifty thousand people came to work there, and another two hundred thousand passed through. The plaza underneath held the largest shopping mall in Lower Manhattan. "You didn't need to leave for anything," Zedeno says. The complex had 103 elevators--and its own zip code (10048). Bomb threats and small fires were not uncommon. The engine company across the street sometimes got called to the Trade Center eight times a day. Zedeno got used to seeing firefighters in the elevators. Days later, she would hear that there had been smoke somewhere in the building. It might have been two football fields away from her.

At 8:46 A.M., an American Airlines Boeing 767 traveling 490 mph struck the building eleven floors above her. When the plane hit Zedeno's building, the effect was not subtle. It obliterated four floors immediately. From her desk, Zedeno heard a booming explosion and felt the building lurch to the south, as if it might topple. It had never done that before, not even in 1993. This time, she grabbed her desk and held on, lifting her feet off the floor. "I actually expected the ceiling to fall and the building to cave in," she remembers. At the time, she screamed, "What's happening?"

Talking about it now, in a deli across from the void where the towers once stood, Zedeno wonders why she didn't immediately run for the stairs. She'd been through this before, after all. But what she really wanted, quite desperately, was for someone to answer back: "Everything is OK! Don't worry. It's in your head!" At the moment of impact, Zedeno had entered a rarefied zone. The rules of normal life were suspended. Her entire body and mind changed. She would wind her way through a series of phases along the survival arc. First would be a thicket of disbelief, followed by frantic deliberation, and, finally, action. We will witness all three here, but more than anything else, Zedeno's story is one of denial.

Zedeno has revisited the moments of her escape from the Trade Center until they are worn and familiar. She now gives tours of Ground Zero to tourists from around the world. But still there are riddles she cannot decipher, behavioral glitches that don't make obvious sense. More than anything else, she is mystified by how slow she was to accept what was happening all day long.

After the plane hit the building, Zedeno told me, she wanted nothing so much as to stay. Like her, I was perplexed by this reaction. Shouldn't a primal, survival instinct have kicked in, propelling her to the door? I wondered if Zedeno was unusual. So I went to the National Fire Academy to find out. The instructors at the school, located on the rolling grounds of a former Catholic college in rural Maryland, are veteran firefighters who have witnessed just about every conceivable form of human behavior in fire. I met Jack Rowley, who spent thirty-three years as a firefighter in Columbus, Ohio. When I told him about Zedeno, he told me that he

saw this kind of curious indifference all the time. In fact, he came to consider one particular kind of fire a regular Saturday night ritual. His station house would get dispatched to a bar; he would walk into the establishment and see smoke. But he would also see customers sitting at the bar nursing their beers. "We would say, 'Looks like there's a fire here,'" he says. He'd ask the customers if they felt like evacuating. "They would say, 'No, we'll be just fine.'"

One of the few people who has extensively analyzed behavior at the Trade Center in both 1993 and 2001 is Guylene Proulx at Canada's National Research Council. And what she saw fit with Zedeno's memory exactly. "Actual human behavior in fires is somewhat different from the 'panic' scenario. What is regularly observed is a lethargic response," she wrote in a 2002 article in the journal Fire Protection Engineering. "People are often cool during fires, ignoring or delaying their response."

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