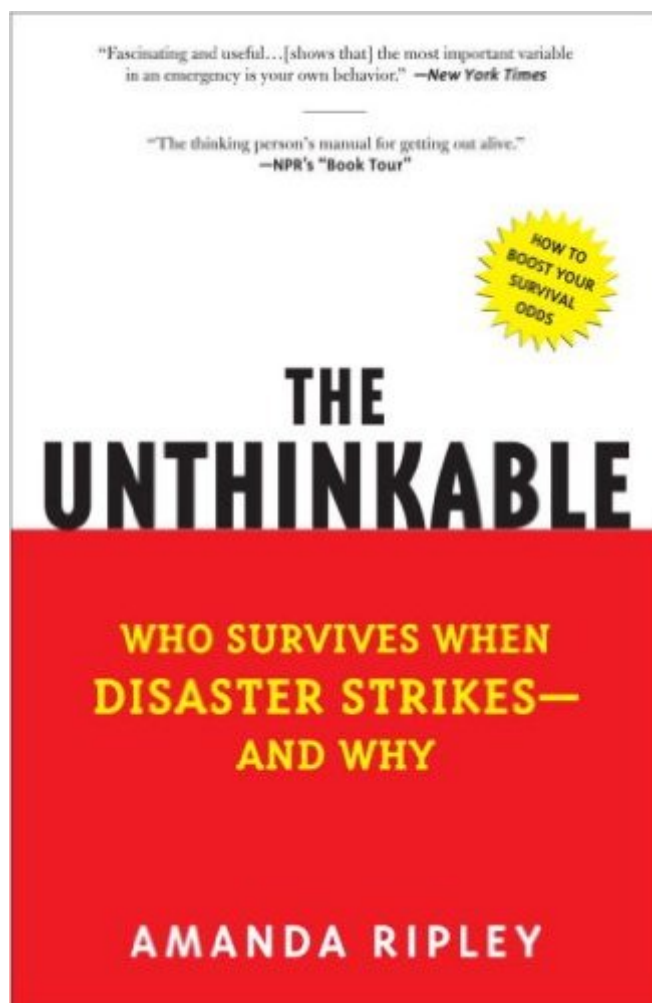


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The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - And Why



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

"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.

*****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.

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.

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