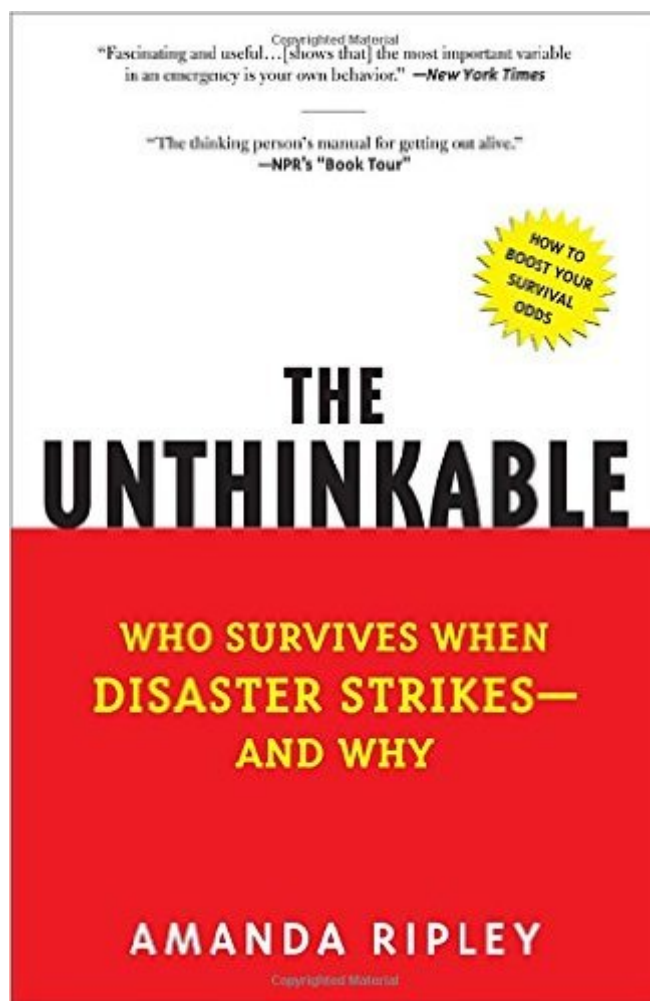


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# The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - And Why



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"A fascinating and useful new book. The New York Times "The thinking person's manual for getting out alive. NPR "Ripley is a voyeur on a mission...Her conviction: We'd all stand a better chance of surviving a disaster if we understood what happens to our little gray cells when things get ugly....Spiced with surprising factoids, this book might save your life one day. Bloomberg News "The Unthinkable is part study of the science of reaction to extreme fear, part indictment of the US government's response to the terrorist threat, part call to arms....The end result is a fascinating book....Despite its title and its subject matter, The Unthinkable is an optimistic. The Times of London "Engrossing and lucid...An absorbing study of the psychology and physiology of panic, heroism, and trauma...Facing the truth about the human capacity for risk and disaster turns out to be a lot less scary than staying in the dark. O, The Oprah Magazine "This is a book with a purpose, meant to change things." Rob Hardy, The Commercial Dispatch "Amanda Ripley takes us on a sometimes stunning, sometimes sobering journey through disaster, using great stories and respected science to show why some prevail and others do not. The Unthinkable isn't merely a book about disaster; it's a book about survival. maybe yours. Gavin de Becker, author of the New York Times bestseller The Gift of Fear "With The Unthinkable, Amanda Ripley succeeds in two different

ways. First, she covers, with great clarity and accuracy, the science of how the body and mind respond to crisis. In the process, she prescribes certain actions that will increase the chances of surviving a disaster. But it's the second aspect, the stories, that makes the book so compelling. These tales leave your viscera enflamed because they compel two questions: "What would it feel like to go through that?" and "Would I do the right thing and survive?" This is an irresistible book.

•Robert M. Sapolsky, John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn Professor of Biological Sciences and Professor of Neurology and Neurological Sciences at Stanford University

"The Unthinkable is the most magnificent account of a survivor's mind that I have ever read. It has helped me know and accept some of my reactions during my 72 day ordeal in the Andes. I can now understand how fear motivated me, and how denial also played a part. This book will help those who've never faced disaster to understand their own behavior and be prepared should their luck run out one day."

•Nando Parrado, New York Times bestselling author of *Miracle in the Andes*

"The Unthinkable reveals why, under the same circumstances, some people caught up in a disaster survive and others do not. Why some are hopelessly immobilized by fear and crippled by panic, and others are filled with strength, endurance, reactions and the other intrinsic stuff of which Homeric heroes are made. How can we ensure which we will be? In her well-crafted prose, Amanda Ripley shows us all how to prepare to meet danger and increase our chances of surviving the unthinkable."

•Bruce Henderson, New York Times bestselling author of *Down to the Sea and True North*

"When a disaster occurs we invariably learn the "what" of the event -- how many died, how many survived. Amanda Ripley's riveting *The Unthinkable* provides genuine insight into the "why" behind the numbers. This remarkable book will not only change your life, it could very well save it."

•Gregg Olsen, New York Times bestselling author of *The Deep Dark: Disaster and Redemption in America's Richest Silver Mine*

"Ever fantasize about what you would do in a disaster? How would you survive? How would you behave? After interviewing survivors of the World Trade Center attack, Amanda Ripley sifted through amazing tales of survivors from other disasters and mined various sociological, psychological, and neurological studies. Her insights are absolutely fascinating, and they could come in handy one day."

•Walter Isaacson, author of the New York Times bestsellers *Einstein: His Life and Universe* and *Benjamin Franklin: A Life*, and Vice-Chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority

"Rich in information about the subconscious ways we face danger. In the event that someday you face a sudden life or death situation, reading this book will increase the odds that the

outcome will be life." — David Ropeik, author of *Risk!: A Practical Guide for Deciding What's Really Safe and What's Really Dangerous in the World Around You*

"Reading *The Unthinkable* will be life-changing. We live in an age of anxiety that has too many of us rocked back on our heels. Once you've feasted on the rich insights and wisdom of this remarkable book, you'll be standing tall again. While our politicians and media have been keen to exploit and fan our worst fears, Amanda Ripley makes clear that individually and collectively we can meet head-on the hazards that periodically befall us. We need not be afraid!" — Stephen Flynn, Senior Fellow for National Security Studies, Council on Foreign Relations, and author of *The Edge of Disaster: Rebuilding a Resilient Nation*

"*The Unthinkable* is a fascinating, in-depth look at human behavior under extreme pressure. Its gut-wrenching stories span the full spectrum of action under duress, from panic to heroism. Not only is this book fast-paced and engrossing, it's illuminating." — Michael Tougias, author of *Fatal Forecast: An Incredible True Tale of Disaster and Survival at Sea*

"Amanda Ripley has written a smart, poignant account about the dramas of the existential moment in this new century. She is a provocative voice of a new generation of writers and thinkers whose grasp of daily events and global disaster is piquant, engrossing, and syncretic. Above all, she makes sense of life today in an entirely entertaining and accessible way-- all with a brimming dollop of optimism. If you ever wondered, 'What would I do if the unthinkable happened to me,' you hold the answer in your hands." — Doug Stanton, author of the New York Times bestseller *In Harm's Way: The Sinking of the USS Indianapolis and the Extraordinary Story of Its Survivors* "A must read. We need books like this to help us understand the world in which we live." — Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author *The Black Swan* and *Fooled By Randomness* From the Hardcover edition.

"*The Unthinkable* is basically a self-improvement manual. But the promised self-improvement isn't better organization, inner peace or higher task efficiency; rather it is increased odds of living through a disaster. And while the book accomplishes the goal of self-help for the attentive reader, even more it shows that who lives and who dies mostly results from characteristics of the individual. Many of these are innate and wholly unchangeable, such as sex, intelligence and ability to absorb stress, each of which is a critical factor in survival. Some are merely extremely difficult to change and in practice immutable for the individual, such as culture and education. Few are easy to change but any bit helps, I suppose. You can boil down the survival advice in this book to three principles. First, by default, ignore anything

those in charge say during a disaster, especially any instructions they give you. Second, and related, *“Above all, it is essential to take the initiative to remember that you and your neighbors must save yourselves.”* Third, maximizing your self-confidence and perceiving yourself as the captain of your fate, if you can, hugely increase your chances of survival. All of these accord with common sense, but the book goes into the whys and wherefores in an interesting and informative manner. The author, Amanda Ripley, examines the responses of individuals (and groups, as collections of individuals) through the prism of numerous modern disasters, both natural and man-made. These range from the Halifax explosion of 1917 through the modern day. She divides all responses into three sequential broad reactions, what she calls *“the survival arc: Denial, Deliberation, and The Decisive Moment,”* and arranges her book accordingly (though noting that the dividing lines between stages are not always crisp). Ripley begins with *“Denial.”* Using numerous examples, including September 11th, she shows how rather than panicking as you see in the movies, the usual immediate response to a disaster is neither panic nor freezing, but cool lethargy. People ignore the problem or delay addressing it in any way with strategies such as laughter, or collecting their wholly unnecessary belongings. Ripley ascribes this to normalcy bias *“the belief that, in essence, since we look for patterns to understand our lives, and a disaster is not part of our usual pattern, this cannot be happening to me—things like this happen to other people.”* This is buttressed by peer pressure *“we risk social embarrassment by overreacting. So we err on the side of underreacting.”* As a result, while we are in denial, we seek information to fit what is happening into a pattern. We ignore alarms and instructions, if any, and turn to each other to talk *“what Ripley calls the ‘milling ritual.’* All of these behaviors, of course, imply that people of an independent cast of mind are more likely to pass through the denial phase quickly (or ideally skip it entirely), which is necessary for survival. As the situation deteriorates, individuals tend to *“dissociate.”* They behave mechanically, and usually in an orderly, but not insightful or thoughtful, fashion. They focus intensely on their immediate surroundings, yet may not notice critical data right around them (even sometimes becoming temporarily blind or deaf), and they may think thoughts that make no sense, trying to explain what *“is happening or what caused the problems they face.* Again, moving past this is necessary for the individual to survive. Next Ripley turns to *“Deliberation.”* Denial is

over (though for some deliberation never happens, and denial morphs into paralysis, a possible outcome of the third, decisive, stage). Here, “we know something is terribly wrong, but we don’t know what to do about it.” And our ability to deliberate is both enhanced and crippled by the situation. Everyone’s first reaction after realizing, or admitting, that there is a Big Problem, is fear. The physical impact varies by person, but there is always some significant physical impact, especially regarding emotion, sensing ability (e.g., tunnel vision, time perception), and fine motor function. In addition, those in the grip of fear tend to focus too much on one thing, sometimes unimportant, to the exclusion of other things, sometimes much more important, as when a plane with a warning light crashes because nobody paid attention to the dropping altitude. But “we can learn from experience”; we can train our subconscious, to an extent. Any preparation, like memorizing where the emergency exits are when you enter a place, can help reduce the negative impacts of the fear response. Hence the emphasis nowadays placed in the military and martial arts on realistic training exercises, as well as on surprisingly effective simple exercises such as controlled breathing. What determines survival and passing successfully through in this second phase is also the individual’s resilience who can overcome the fear and take relevant action. Who will be resilient is not easy to predict (though fat people are generally not resilient, according to Ripley, which makes sense since fat people by definition often lack discipline, which seems related to resilience, though Ripley ascribes it more to physical limitations). Even more un-PC, Ripley notes that the most resilient group, by far, is a subset of white men. Not because of any racial factor (though there is a sex factor – women react radically different than men both in the amount of fear and resilience, worse on both factors), but rather that this subset “liked the world of status, hierarchy and power.” In other words, they saw themselves as in control, and acted like it, rather than being victims of circumstance, they bore up in the face of danger. Ripley tries to soften this conclusion by throwing up chaff about the effects of money differences and physical strength differences, but the conclusion is clear. Ripley generalizes the research on resilience to “People who have it tend to also have three underlying advantages: a belief that they can influence life events; a tendency to find meaningful purpose in life’s turmoil [i.e., religious people]; and a conviction that they can learn from both positive and negative experiences. . . . Dangers seem more manageable to these people, and they perform better as a result.” In other words, those who view themselves as victims, and are atheists, are the least resilient. I suppose that means liberals probably die at higher rates in disasters. That would be an interesting study. In addition, confidence helps reduce

fear. In fact, people who are unrealistically confident tend to fare spectacularly well in disasters. These, in other words, are the arrogant. They live. And when they live, and others also live, the arrogant are much better adjusted than other survivors. Finally, people with higher IQ are more resilient, though why is unclear, maybe because IQ is correlated with success, which is correlated with self-confidence. Yes, you can train yourself to a certain degree. But mostly, these things are innate, or at least fixed, in adults. Special Forces soldiers tend to have higher levels of neuropeptide Y, which apparently helps focus under stress, and they tend to dissociate much less than other people. Not because of training – you can tell in advance which soldiers are more likely to pass the Special Forces tests, using blood and psychological tests for dissociation. And, twin studies show resilience is a biological reality, mostly set from birth – although, again, Ripley tries to soften this necessary and un-PC conclusion with some shiny but empty words about the theoretical impacts of nurture. Finally, deliberation can be strongly negatively affected by the human tendency toward groupthink – prioritizing group harmony. This has some benefits – people are amazingly polite and helpful to others in the vast majority of disasters. But then they do nothing except what they normally do, and they even maintain hierarchies that no longer have any relevance and may be actually pernicious. Ultimately, this tends to create fatal inertia. (Again, men are less inclined to this effect than women – for example, women hesitate much longer than men to jump onto airplane escape slides.) Those who survive are those who are independent and don't care what others think. If you follow others, as most tend to do, you die. The anarchist, the solipsist, the sociopath – they live. And if they choose, they can make others follow, since the herd-like group tends to imitate anyone seen as a confident, resilient leader. If you want others to live, you yell orders at them, preferably well-laced with obscenities. Apparently this is now what flight attendants are trained to do (without the obscenities), rather than gently guiding people. But no matter what you do, some people will not follow – they may still be in denial, or they may be frozen (more on which below). Finally Ripley addresses "The Decisive Moment." Here, we take action (or freeze). "What happens once we have accepted the fact that something terrible is upon us and deliberated our options? In the best case scenario, we take action in a fairly rational, effective fashion. Making a plan is very valuable, so those with plan-based training, typically military people, do better. At the extreme of those who act are heroes, who take highly dangerous action to save



others. Here, again, those with high self-confidence, those who “believe they shape their own destinies, are more likely to take action and more likely to be heroes. As to heroes, the vast majority are men, probably, according to Ripley, because they “believe they are not only capable of heroics but that such behavior is expected of them. Working-class men are much more likely to be heroes than men with high-status jobs. Unsurprisingly, those with a strong sense of duty to help others and a desire not to see themselves as cowards are more likely to be heroes; many of these are religious. If we fail to take action, we panic or freeze. Rarely (surprisingly rarely), people panic. Usually, this only occurs when three conditions are met: people feel trapped; they feel totally helpless; and they feel isolated (even if in a crowd). Then people panic, which is mostly a form of overreaction. For example, numerous examples exist of experienced scuba divers ripping out their air supply deep underwater – an overreaction, a fatal one, to feeling unable to breathe. And, generally, those with higher trait anxiety, a higher general tendency to see things as stressful, are more likely to panic. As with soldiers, you can predict with high accuracy in advance, based on biology, which people will panic. But panic is the exception. A more common counterproductive reaction is paralysis. “The decisive moment arrive, and they do nothing. Generally speaking, the less fear a person experiences, the less likely he is to freeze. Self-control is everything. (Although she doesn’t, Ripley could have quoted and recommended the chant of Paul Atreides in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, trained to repeat to himself: “I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. To bring oneself out of paralysis, or to be brought out, the easiest way is through loud noise (which is, again, why flight attendants are now trained to yell at passengers during evacuations). My only real criticism of *The Unthinkable* is that it contains entirely too much evolutionary psychology. Every few pages, a direct line is drawn between some human behavior and some behavior of the animal kingdom. These may be accurate, but it seems a stretch, for example, to analogize human paralysis to chicken paralysis, suggesting that going limp is a good strategy for all animals because predators lose interest. That’s not true for many predators, and although it’s certainly possible that’s why humans have the response, like all evolutionary psychology, it’s merely a sexy-sounding guess. This pop science reaches its nadir when Ripley approvingly quotes an animal behavior expert about human heroism, and he responds

that since lions never sacrifice themselves for the good of the group, he is skeptical about human heroism, which is "overblown." OK, then. Ripley adds these elements to the book to maintain interest, but she would have been better served by adding less of it. Finally, an important underlying theme of the book is the stupidity of most government responses to disasters—not to the disasters themselves, but rather to emergency plans for future disasters made in response to past disasters. As she notes, specifically with respect to the 2007 London Tube bombings, "emergency plans had been designed to meet the needs of emergency officials, not regular people." More broadly, the plans made by government or others in charge tend to assume that regular people are helpless and panic-prone, and must be guided by their betters and superiors. (In this, of course, government planning for disasters is no different than other modern government planning.) Ripley also attacks those charged with protecting us for lack of trust in those protected, which tends to distort (even more than is usual for everyone) perceptions of risk, since without adequate information people make poor evaluations of risk, and therefore necessarily poorer decisions. The lesson, of course, is to by default ignore anything those in charge say during a disaster. In any case, if you read this book and think about it for a while, you will probably increase your chances of not dying in a disaster. And that's probably an investment worth making.

Has a decent amount of practical advice but the author pegs too much on evolutionary theory, which I think gets in the way of her otherwise helpful message. One of the very useful quotes that should be an encouragement to those who don't have the time or resources for extensive training is found on page 70; "So even civilians can benefit from some preparation. Whether or not their preparation is perfectly tailored to the actual incident, the preparation will have increased their confidence, thereby decreasing their fear and improving their performance." This is good advice for anyone who wants to spend even a little time thinking through how they would react to a variety of threats. I encourage students I train in NRA classes to walk through some mental scenarios and imagine how they would react in a variety of situations. Even this mental preparation is a good bit better than having to react from a standing start with no preparation at all. The book is worth the time to read, and pay special attention to the story of Rick Rescorla, the security official who ran his company's employees through regular but unscheduled evacuation drills at the World Trade Center before the 9/11 attack. His planning and preparation saved many lives.

I have to admit...I'm not even finished. However, this is a thoroughly interesting and

thought-provoking book. In this instant news world we hear of every crisis, catastrophe, and disaster. The actions and reactions of those involved are always the most important part of those reports. You wonder...how would I handle it...what would I do. Sitting on the edge of the Pacific's Ring of Fire... in the home of the continent's strongest recorded earthquake makes understanding survival imperative for me. But survival scenarios are present for all of us. Important book to read.

Really well written. I felt like she was talking to me as a friend. I had read about some of these disasters before, but she brought a different perspective to many of them. It makes you think about what you might do in a similar situation, and helps explain why people do very odd things in moments of crisis. I couldn't put it down.

As a prepper, I found this book helpful because we often assume that violence, looting, and anarchy are inevitable after any disaster. Ms. Ripley takes us to previous tragedies, and enlists experts in a variety of fields to explain the most common human reactions to danger and stress. She also makes clear why mental preparation is vital to survival.

Amanda Ripley's book, *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes - and Why*, focuses on how humans react in disasters or stressful situations and how those reactions can save us or doom us. This intellectual approach to examining human response is both intriguing and enlightening into how you view the normal and the extreme risks that we are all exposed to in our day to day lives. Ripley teaches readers about The Survival Arc which includes the stages of 1) Shock, 2) Deliberation, and 3) The Decisive Moment. If you have ever wondered how you would react in a life or death situation, it is encouraging to know that, "Again and again, studies have shown that people perform better under stress if they think they can handle it." In other words, dress rehearsal can prepare you for the real thing, which is why, at Girls Fight Back, we advocate empowering self-defense. In addition to muscle memory and critical knowledge, learning self-defense (both verbal and physical) helps women gain confidence. That confidence alone, can one day save your life. "The most important point is that everyone, regardless of IQ, can manufacture self-esteem through training and experience. This is what soldiers and police officers will tell you; that confidence comes from doing." WE AGREE at Girls Fight Back! <http://www.girlsfightback.com>

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