Installing Mental Toughness of Navy SEALs
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HOW TO INSTILL THE MENTAL TOUGHNESS OF A SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIER INTO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

Whether lost in the woods, attacked by terrorists, or trying to find your way after total economic collapse, survival requires knowledge. Understanding various survival techniques puts you and your family way ahead when even the basics of life are no longer guaranteed. Believe it or not, despite the power of all the survival knowledge you have accumulated, the single most powerful asset you have is the mindset of you and your family.

Humans are capable of amazing things. A large brain that is adept at manipulating its surroundings can be credited with the many technological marvels in the world today. This powerful tool can and should be at your disposal when catastrophe threatens the livelihood of your family. Especially during survival situations, harnessing the power of your brain equates to limitless possibilities. The ability to use this power starts by having a proper survival mindset; the same mindset taught to Special Forces soldiers around the world.

A survival mindset transcends emotion. Not that Special Forces soldiers are void of all emotion; they simply know how to control those emotions and even use to them their advantage when the situation demands. Learning to have this kind of composure in sometimes horrific situations is not easy. It is a difficult skill to master but it is the one skill that can save your life above all others when confronted with the stress of a traumatic or dangerous situation.

WHY HAVING A PROPER MINDSET IS SO IMPORTANT

Often the news reports stories of people stranded in the outdoors with no gear and minimal (in any) survival training. Yet somehow, many of these people trump all odds and survive. How is this possible? These people possess a strong will to survive and that mindset has been proven time and again to be more useful than any other single trait when survival is
questioned. The military realizes this and tries to instill this very mindset into the soldiers it trains.

According to studies, 95 percent of people that perish from psychological trauma die within the first three days. It truly is a mind over matter situation. Losing the ability to think clearly will be more detrimental to your chances of survival than any number of other factors. One survivor was reported to have eaten his own belt when no other food sources were available. Others have lost as much as 25 percent of their body mass due to dehydration and still did not perish. Almost as common are stories of well-prepared individuals that give up when the situation becomes difficult and succumb to death as a result. Some even take their own lives rather than fight for their own survival. It’s no wonder that all military survival guides start with chapters about the survival mindset before detailing actual survival techniques. The message is clear – mindset is the key to your family’s safety.

During a survival situation, the human brain will go through a series of processes and emotions. Understanding these basic stages of thought in advance is the first step to achieving the appropriate mindset. The exact series of emotions will vary from situation to situation and form person to person but the basic stages will always be the same. Crisis Stage

When initially confronted with a survival situation most people will experience shock. This form of shock, known as psychogenic shock, occurs as a result of extreme emotional stress. If not controlled, the crisis stage can immediately lead to irrational thought and panic both of which are critical to survival. The crisis stage is when most people suffer from temporary symptoms that mimic psychosis and can quickly lead to death from psychological trauma for the unprepared.

In a group situation, such as your family, a leader needs to take control right away to direct the group. During this stage, everyone is controlled and directly affected by the environment and the situation. As the leader, you need to change this by forming a plan. You have to be in control of the situation instead of letting it dictate your next course of action. The plan does not need to be very complex. In fact, the simpler the plan is the easier it will be for everyone to follow. Try to focus on the keys to survival during this time and create an action plan with these basics in mind.
Coping Stage

A coping period ensues after the initial situation onset. Survivors are now faced with the gravity of their situation and must begin to take action. The importance of creating a plan during the crisis stage should now be apparent. Not only did creating the plan help thwart feelings of desperation; it also makes the transition to action much easier and less stressful.

Staying calm and adhering to the plan ensures that logical, rational decisions are made consistently. Decisions to take action based on emotion are usually not conducive to survival and can even be dangerous.

LEARNING FROM THE NAVY SEALS TRAINING PROGRAM

It goes without saying that the Navy SEAL teams are some of the most elite Special Forces soldiers on the planet. Many prospective recruits attempt to become part of this elite squad but as many as 75 percent of them fail to complete the intensive training regimen. The Navy wanted to find out why so many physically capable candidates were failing and commissioned a team of psychologists to figure out why.

Physical ability was not the issue. Intelligence was also not the issue as most SEAL candidates tend to score above average on IQ tests. The psychologists determined that the sole reason for failure was that the candidates were not mentally prepared for the emotional and psychological stress they faced during training.

The Navy has since added psychological training to the SEAL curriculum and failure rates have been reduced drastically. These same survival mindset tactics can be used by anyone and can truly mean the difference between life and death.

Goal Setting

Most of us know the importance of setting goals in life. They help you achieve the things you desire most. Goal setting is even more important during a crisis. Short term, medium, and long term goals are all important aspects of a proper survival mindset. The logic is simple. Instead of thinking about the long term consequences of survival, short term goals are much easier to attain and will build the confidence your family will need. A short term goal might be as simple as surviving the next five minutes.
A medium, or mid-term, goal could be locating and securing shelter for the evening or procuring some food. A long term goal may be as simple as surviving until the next day. The timeline for what is considered a short, medium, or long amount of time are transformed during a survival situation. Living in this limited focus manner will keep your brain healthy even when faced with unimaginable circumstances. A dangerous thought pattern that has been responsible for many deaths is thinking too far ahead during stressful situations.

SEAL candidates are taught a similar way of thinking. The intensive Navy SEAL training program is six months long. Feelings of hopelessness creep up on the recruits quickly if they think in terms of months or even days. By training to look only a few minutes ahead, the tasks presented seem much more manageable and the chances of success more certain.

**Visualization**

Mentally rehearsing an action prepares your mind for completing the task successfully even if unexpected circumstances arise. Taking a step by step inventory of everything required for a favorable outcome means less time will need to be spent thinking about these things when performing the action.

The SEAL recruits learn this through a series of tests. For example, during underwater training, a SEAL instructor will swim underwater and sabotage the recruit’s breathing apparatus. Immediately, a primal fear of drowning prevails and the candidate is often left disoriented and unable to perform the assigned tasks. To combat this, recruits are trained to visualize the successful completion of the exercise before starting. Since these recruits already knew each step that was required they were more capable of finishing the task despite their sudden inability to breathe.

This same technique can be applied to any task that needs completion whether it is self-defense, finding shelter, or retreating to safety. Whenever possible, understand exactly what needs to be done before beginning to increase the chances of success.

**Self-Talk**

You probably aren’t aware that people can talk to themselves as fast as 7,000 words per minute. That is 116 words per second! Imagine if most of those words are negative. Self-doubt
and hopelessness will surely take hold if they are. You and your family must learn to maintain a positive mental attitude through the use of positive thinking in order to survive.

To manage self-talk efficiently begins by realizing how often it occurs. Take some time to consider all the thoughts you have in a day. You may be surprised by just how many times you think about everything from the car in front of you on the way to work to the kid’s baseball game after dinner. Realize how many of these thoughts are negative or induce stress. Now imagine these same negative thoughts creeping up during a stressful, imminent danger situation. The effects can be devastating, or even deadly.

Force yourself to replace negative thoughts with positive ones whenever possible. This is not meant to sound like a lesson on positive living, but if you begin training your brain now to manage negative thoughts as they occur it will come more easily when you are depending on it.

The Navy even encourages recruits to use mantras to maintain positive thinking under pressure. Even simple, one word mantras such as “survival” can help to lift your spirits and maintain a proper survival mindset.

**Breathing and Arousal Control**

When the body is put under sudden distress, natural reactions in the body occur. These reactions can be helpful if managed properly but can lead to poor choices if not controlled. The bloodstream is flooded with chemicals such as Adrenaline that increase physical ability. These same chemicals make the body very reactive and years of physical and mental training can be lost instantly.

SEAL recruits are taught to focus on breathing to temporarily divert their attention away from whatever situation is responsible for the added stress. Doing this will allow the brain to stabilize and logical thinking becomes possible once again while still benefiting from the performance gains afforded by the increase in hormones.

Controlled breathing is not difficult. Focus on breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to exhale more deeply than you inhale. This helps to remove as much carbon dioxide as possible from the lungs that can then be refilled with fresh oxygen. Think about nothing other than breathing. If your mind begins to wander, gently redirect your focus back to breathing. Following these steps will slow down your breathing and heart rate making it easier to regain composure under duress.
After a couple minutes of this, you can re-evaluate the situation and be confident that you are not making rash decisions based on fear or anxiety. A similar breathing technique is used in meditation practices because it has the same calming effect on the body.

**Planning**

Planning transcends the line between a mindset skill used by Special Forces and a physical survival skill because it encompasses both aspects. To think like a soldier, creating a solid action plan is the first step because it provides multiple benefits. A good plan reduces the likelihood of emotional disturbance. It also provides hope and can relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression; emotions often encountered in stressful situations.

As mentioned before, a plan should be created as soon as possible. Assess the situation, the environment, and establish priorities based on this information. Completing this task quickly is also important because fatigue, hunger, or injury could affect your decision making abilities later. The ability to leave emotion to the side and make an accurate assessment of any situation is taught more than any other thing in Special Forces training. Even with the best intelligence information, no soldier ever knows exactly what they will encounter in the field. Neither do you. Plan for as many contingencies as possible and use visualization techniques to break down tasks into manageable pieces.

A basic plan can be created without much effort. Start by assessing the highest priority survival requirements based on the situation. Determine how to best attain these goals and then break each task into smaller subtasks. Put the plan into action and take frequent inventory of your progress. Looking at what you have already accomplished builds self-confidence and aids in maintaining a positive outlook.

**Use Small, Easily Managed Tasks**

Since the brain has a tendency to shut down or think irrationally in times of stress, SEAL recruits are trained to think sequentially. Many civilians who have successfully beat the odds share this trait and have often attributed it to their survival. By thinking small and focusing on simple, direct actions, you can force your brain to regain composure and think logically.

A popular story about World War II demonstrates this principle very well. During the war, the USS Indianapolis was hit by a torpedo and began to sink. A Marine on board the ship
was thrown in to the water. As the ship sank, the oil tanks started leaking effectively covering swimming survivors in oil. Barely able to locate a life raft and covered in vomit, oil, and blood, the Marine finally located and climbed onto a life raft full of injured sailors.

After assessing the situation, the Marine could tell that the sailors were in shock. Injured himself, he decided to clean his pistol. He did not need the pistol at that time but cleaning it was a simple task that he could do while his brain processed the situation. After a few minutes, he began asking some of the sailors to help him clean the pistol. In just a short amount of time, the Marine had forced his brain to think logically and he realized that the sailors would also benefit from performing the simple task of helping him clean the pistol.

Breaking down any task into small pieces helps the brain cope when it cannot function normally. If you want to maintain a mindset like a Special Forces soldier, learn how to focus on one small activity at a time.

The Dangers of Sleep Deprivation

Although soldiers often train with little or no sleep to simulate real world situations, these soldiers are fully aware of the adverse effects that lack of sleep has on a person’s ability to think clearly and perform physically. Lack of sleep can produce feelings similar to intoxication in as little as 24 hours. Hallucinations and even psychosis can occur as well. Cognitive abilities including visual-spatial, memory, and attention are also affected.

The military has done extensive studies on the effects of sleep deprivation. After 24 hours of continuously being awake, soldiers will often fall into small bursts of micro sleep. Micro sleep is involuntary and may only last for one to two seconds but the soldier can be left feeling disoriented thus affecting performance. After 72 hours without sleep, SEAL candidates showed significant deviations in performance. Shooting accuracy is decreased by almost 40 percent after this long without sleep. This marked decrease in shooting accuracy means that a Navy SEAL would be no more effective with a gun than a civilian without proper military training.

There may be times when sleep is not possible but it is important to realize the limitations that are presented as a result. Alternating sleep cycles with other members of your family is a good way to ensure that someone is always rested sufficiently to make key decisions for the
group. Power naps of 20 to 30 minutes are an effective way of temporarily reducing the effects of sleep deprivation.

**Understanding Feelings**

The military spends a great deal of time educating soldiers on the various feelings and emotions that may arise in a stressful situation. The best weapon for combatting these feelings and preventing them from becoming problematic is knowledge. Properly understanding negative emotions and having an arsenal of tools to control them is another component of the soldier’s mindset.

Fear is a common emotion that everyone experiences. Special Forces soldiers experience fear as well. Mastering fear requires understanding it, admitting that it exists, and accepting it as a reality. Fear is diminished by self-confidence and self-confidence is built by following a plan of simple, achievable goals.

Anxiety is closely related to fear but the feeling is not as intense. It is often associated with a feeling that something bad is about to happen. Thinking about other things can help to alleviate fear and anxiety. Some reports document prisoners of war teaching their captors English in an attempt to keep their minds from being engulfed by the anxiety that they were feeling.

Anger often stems from stressful situations and can severely impair sound judgment. Frustration is often a precursor to anger. When this emotion arises, it is best to do something else to take your mind off the task at hand. Unchecked anger has led to many poor decisions in battle when lives are at stake.

Loneliness is commonly experienced even when in a group. Sometimes a situation seems so dire that an entire group of people can feel lonely and alienated. Setting simple goals that boost self-confidence will also lead to a feeling of self-sufficiency which is often enough to end feelings of loneliness.

Soldiers are also trained to deal with boredom as it can lead to emotional distress over extended periods of time. Often soldiers are faced with repetitive tasks. Taking frequent breaks and reminding yourself of the importance of the task, no matter how boring, can alleviate the emotion. If necessary, you can create new tasks to do simply to break up the monotony. One soldier that was imprisoned in a small hut for a long time began killing insects and feeding them...
to spiders in the hut. Although frivolous, it enabled the soldier to remain active and cope with weeks of imprisonment.

Hopelessness is a dangerous emotion that has taken the lives of many otherwise well prepared individuals. Feelings of hopelessness are difficult to shake once they have set in. It is important to remember that hope is never fully lost unless you let go of it. The will to survive is often all that is required in even the bleakest of circumstances. When something seems impossible to accomplish, be willing to accept alternative outcomes for achieving goals if necessary.

DEVELOP COPING STRATEGIES

Coping is defined as changing behavioral efforts to manage both external and internal demands. Learning how to cope with stressful situations properly is the single greatest asset that a Special Forces soldier has over a civilian. Fortunately, effective coping skills are not difficult to learn. Understanding and applying proper coping techniques will allow you and your family to deal with just about any type of situation that confronts you. Some coping methods are learned through trial and error while others can be incorporated into daily life and become a valuable part of your skills inventory.

Training

Both mental and physical training are important strategies that better prepare you for any situation. As important as having a proper mindset is, having physical skills will make you better prepared to deal with the emotional and physical demands thrown at you. Special Forces soldiers are confident in their skill set and this automatically elevates their mindset to further set them apart from the crowd as an elite force.

Motivation

Motivation is similar to the will to survive. Many people have survived insurmountable circumstances simply by convincing themselves that they were not meant to die in those conditions. Others focus on loved ones at home who depend on them. Whatever you use for motivation, make sure it is powerful enough to overcome the feelings of despair that often accompany extreme stress.
Attachment

Similar to motivation, attachment refers to having a solid emotional base that helps keep you emotionally grounded. The love shared between members of a family is a good example of attachment. Carrying these feelings with you will aid in the development of a mindset that does not take failure as an answer.

Hope

Maintaining a positive outlook at all times forces feelings of hopelessness to take a back seat. Much of a proper mindset is based upon looking for positive change (no matter how small) in a given situation. Without hope, failure is closer than at any other time. Similar to the self-talk strategies mentioned earlier, learning to develop a consistent positive mental outlook will be an enormous asset when your life or that of your family depends on it.

Acceptance

Not to be confused with “giving in,” acceptance of any situation for what it is without any emotional interference leads to rational decision making and controlled emotional reactions. Those who fail to accept the situation they are in are more likely to fail. This is true in life and even more relevant in stressful situations encountered by Special Forces soldiers.

Helping Others

Believe it or not, helping others can often aid your own coping mechanisms when under severe stress. Helping a family member doesn’t have to be complicated. An encouraging word is sometimes enough to boost the spirits of those who have not adjusted as readily to present conditions. If someone is having difficulty completing a task, help them. It will have a general calming effect on the entire group and leave you with a stronger handle on your emotions and the situation as a whole.

Personal Inventory

Making an honest personal inventory of your strengths and weaknesses is also important. Everyone in the family should do this so that areas of deficiency can be developed.
together can make the activity more beneficial because loved ones may be able to point weaknesses in each other that may not be readily apparent to the individual.

**Fear**

Fear has already been discussed but it is an essential coping skill that truly sets a soldier apart. Once you realize that fear is inevitable, it becomes easier to manage when it occurs. In fact, fear can be a useful tool when it is understood and controlled effectively. It is impossible to eliminate fear. The key to managing fear properly is to build confidence in your abilities further enabling you to function despite your fear.

**Relaxation**

An often overlooked coping skill is relaxation. Relaxing your mind helps to manage stress more effectively and can leave you feeling refreshed. In even the most troubling of circumstances, taking a couple of minutes to recharge yourself is a necessity. People have many different methods of relaxing. Some pray or meditate while others may recall a favorite vacation spot. Coping successfully depends on your ability to calm down regardless of the situation.

Possessing the mindset of a Special Forces soldier is a skill that takes a long time to master. The human brain is truly amazing and it is capable of adapting to almost any set of circumstances imaginable. What soldiers are taught is that the mind can be either your biggest asset or your biggest liability depending on how you use it. By understanding this principle and taking steps to ensure your mind’s allegiance when you need it you will be well on your way to having the same calm, collected persona that is often associated with the best trained soldiers in the world. The proper mindset is the difference between an effective soldier and an unfortunate casualty.