

Wilderness Survival

S.T.O.P.

In almost any emergency, but especially in a survival situation, it is critical that you first S.T.O.P.

"**S**" is for **Stop**. Take a deep breath, sit down if possible, calm yourself and recognize that whatever has happened to get you here is past and cannot be undone. You are now in a survival situation and that means . . .

"**T**" is for **Think**. Your most important asset is your brain. Use it! Don't Panic! Move with deliberate care. Think

first, so you have no regrets later. Take no action, even a foot step, until you have thought it through. Unrecoverable mistakes and injuries, potentially serious in a survival situation, occur when we act before we engage our brain. Then . . .

"**O**" is for **Observe**. Take a look around you. Assess your situation and options. Consider the terrain, weather and resources. Take stock of your supplies, equipment, surroundings, your personal capabilities and, if there are any, the abilities of your fellow survivors.

"**P**" is for **Plan**. Prioritize your immediate needs and develop a plan to systematically deal with the emergency and contingencies while conserving your energy. Then, follow your plan. Adjust your plan only as necessary to deal with changing circumstances.

YOU WILL SURVIVE!

Stay Put!

It's absolutely critical that you STAY PUT! If lost, the odds that you will find your way out are slim. If injured, you'll only make it worse by trying to travel. If it's just gotten late, you stand a good chance of getting lost in the darkness. However, if you stay put you will be found, likely in only a few hours. BSA Troop 780 Home Page Don't make it harder for searchers by moving around.

If you are with another person or a group, always stay together. Do not separate, do not split up, and never move out of sight or hearing of each other.

When you are noticed missing, others will start to search for you immediately. Before long a lot of volunteers and professional search and rescue people will join in the search. All you have to do is stay safe and stay put and they will find you.

There are only a few fundamentals to wilderness survival. You must maintain your body temperature at or near 98.6 degrees (fahrenheit). Too cold (hypothermia) or too hot (hypothermia) and you can die. You need to conserve energy. Don't waste it by "doing" before "thinking." Water is vital for your body and mind to function properly. You need both working as good as possible. Finally, remember that your only responsibilities are to stay alive, and if at all possible, make yourself easier to find by actively working at attracting attention to yourself.

Shelter

Shelter is a basic necessity. Find or make temporary shelter. Heat and cold can sap the lifeblood from you very quickly. Wind, rain, snow or other inclement weather hastens the process. Pick the best convenient location for your shelter, as dry as possible in wet or cold weather, and away from natural hazards. Don't go far to find something better or perfect, make do with the best you can find right where you are.

Your shelter can be as simple as sitting under the overhanging branches of a large tree or rock outcrop. Beneath the bottom branches of a large evergreen there is often a clear dry area, even in heavy snow. Avoid sitting on the bare ground or snow. Sit or lay on gathered small branches or shrubbery or on a downed tree for insulation.

A large garbage bag (a bright color is best, but any will do) is a very effective, inexpensive and compact personal emergency shelter or poncho that will fit in your pocket. Always carry one or two when you go off into the wilderness. Use the garbage bag to cover yourself and to keep heat in and the weather out.

To use, hold the bag upside down and go to one of the corners (a bottom corner, but now on top as you hold it), drop down about eight inches along the crease, and cut or tear a slit or hole only big enough for your face. Pull the bag over your body so that the corner rests on top of your head and your face sticks through the hole. Be sure to keep your head out where you can breathe, you can suffocate inside the plastic if it covers your mouth and nose. If you have another bag and you're tall enough so one bag won't cover you completely, pull the other bag up from your feet. If you can, stuff the bags and your clothing with dry leaves for added insulation, but be careful not to introduce any unwelcome pests into your improvised shelter.

You can also use the bag as a small shade tarp, if the sun is a problem. A cap or hat is always useful to keep your head dryer, and warm or shaded, as appropriate. Use a tree, downed tree or piled up snow to break any wind. Curl into a tight ball to conserve heat. If there is more than one person, huddle together for warmth. In hot sunny weather, seek shade. If the ground is soft and you can do so without overexerting yourself and wasting precious water, scoop out a hollow in the shade, it can be 30 degrees cooler 12 inches below the surface. Once you have shelter, stay there. If you've taken shelter where it might be hard for anyone to see you, try to leave some sign or marker, sticks or some rocks, out in the open pointing to your shelter.



Attract Attention

The more you can do to attract attention to yourself, the quicker someone will find you. The way to do this is by making lots of noise and by making yourself easy to see. You can be hard to see when wearing dark clothing, so it's always a good idea to wear bright colors when you go out. If you hear a helicopter, lie down in a clear dry space to make the biggest possible target for them to see.

If you are rested, feel up to it and there is a clearing, make a big "X" or "SOS" in the dirt or snow using your feet or a stick to scrape the dirt or stomp the snow down, broken branches and shrubs or rocks.

Contrast and size are the keys to effective ground signals. If there is enough room, the letters should be 12 feet tall with lines at least two feet wide.

If you have something to use as a flag (an excellent reason to carry a brightly colored bandanna with you, it also has many other uses), that will be far more effective than your arms and hands alone. If you must use your hands alone, always wave wildly with both hands in an emergency situation. You don't want to be mistaken for somebody just giving a friendly wave.

Most survivors are found by ground search teams and a whistle is the most effective signaling device. A whistle is far superior to shouting because your voice just doesn't carry very far, especially in the woods. The whistle will be heard for 1/2 to 2 miles or even more in the wilderness where your voice may only carry for a few hundred feet, at best. You will also be able to signal for much longer periods of time, whereas your vocal cords will give out very quickly. You should never leave home without a whistle hung around your neck.

The shrill and unmistakable blast of a whistle repeated three times is a universal signal for help and will definitely attract the attention of anyone within earshot. Blow three clear blasts, pausing for a few seconds between each, then wait for five minutes and repeat until you are rescued. If you hear a whistle, respond immediately with three blasts every time. If you don't have a whistle, you can make a loud signal by

banging two rocks together or beating on a dead tree with a stick or rock (but, be careful you don't hurt yourself or that the tree or branches don't fall on you if it is still standing).

At night, your greatest fear is likely the result of an overactive imagination fed by the TV and movies you have seen. While the sounds of the wilderness at night may be unfamiliar, there's nothing out there that has any interest in harming you. If you think you hear an animal nearby, yell, make lots of noise or blow your whistle. If it's an animal, it will run off. If the noise is searchers, you have been found.

Water

For the limited length of time you might be out, water is a lot more important for you than food. It's always a good idea to have at least a quart of water with you at all times, more is better, especially in the desert. The best place to store water is in your stomach, so don't be afraid to drink what you have. Don't drink to excess, but if you have water, drink it when you feel the need. If you don't have any water, keep from sweating and breathe through your nose to retain as much as you can.

While it is best to purify water found in the wilderness before drinking, don't let a lack of purification stop you drinking from a stream or spring, as long as the water looks reasonably clear. Keeping your body fluids at a safe level (hydrated) is more important than the slim chance you might catch some bug from the water. There's nothing you can get from the water that a doctor can't easily take care of. Do not eat snow to obtain water, it will just make you colder.

Improvisation

Improvisation, the ability to use things for other than what they were originally designed for, is an important survival skill. It's not what things were that's important, it's what they can become, what they can be used for. Using a garbage bag as a personal emergency shelter is an example of improvisation. Think of your personal belongings and the natural environment as your own private wilderness equipment store. With a little thought and effort, you can improvise everything you need to survive.

The five rules of improvisation are:

Determine what you really need.

Inventory your available materials, man made and natural.

Consider all alternatives before proceeding.

Select the best one that takes the least amount of time, energy and materials.

Do it, making sure it is safe and durable.

Don't Panic

Always let someone responsible, preferably an adult, know where you are going and when you expect to return. If no one is around, at least leave a detailed note. That way, if you don't come back when expected, they can start a search and the searchers will know where to look for you. That makes their job much easier and shortens the time until you are found.

The only time the wilderness will bite back is if you panic and forget these basic survival lessons. An unexpected stay in the wilderness is not a big deal, if you keep your wits about you. Make yourself as comfortable as possible and wait for someone to find you or for morning when you can see well enough to continue your travels. As with most things in life, dealing with this sort of emergency is a lot easier if you already anticipated the possibility that you might someday find yourself in this situation and have equipped yourself to deal with it, both with knowledge and equipment. If you prepare yourself with a few bits of basic survival gear recommended here, then you will really be set to enjoy, not just survive, your unexpected wilderness adventure.

No matter how bad your situation, you can be sure others have survived far worse with much less. You must never give up. All you have to do is hold out until help arrives. You can do that. Don't panic. Use your brain. Hang in there. **YOU WILL SURVIVE!**

Equipment

A few inexpensive pieces of equipment that will fit in your pockets are all you need to make survival and rescue a sure bet and your unforeseen stay in the wilderness a lot more comfortable.

Identification and/or Medical Alert Tag or Bracelet (Vital if unconscious when found.)

A Loud Whistle (On a lanyard around your neck so it can't be lost -- useful all the time, not just in the wilds. The lanyard should not be so strong that it cannot be broken in an emergency to prevent strangling.)

1 or 2 Large Garbage Bags (Fit in your pocket.)

1 or 2 Canteens of Water

A Pocket Flashlight (Handy if you find yourself out over night and another item that's very useful many other times as well.)

A Brightly Colored Bandanna (International, Neon, or Blaze Orange is preferred - has multiple uses.)

Two other items can make a big difference and are considered among the most fundamental survival tools by experienced outdoors persons, if you know how to use them properly and safely.

Pocket Knife (a sturdy locking folding knife is best and the safest -- non-locking pocket knives are accidents waiting to happen)

Fire starter (matches, lighter or flint and steel) These are not toys and can be dangerous and destructive if misused. They should never be carried or employed unless you have received instruction from an adult in their safe use. Once you know how to use these tools safely, you should never venture into the wilds without them.

Survival Kits

The environment is the key to the types of items you will need in your survival kit. How much equipment you put in your kit depends on how you will carry the kit. A kit carried on your body will have to be smaller than one carried in a vehicle. Always layer your survival kit, keeping the most important items on your body. For example, your map and compass should always be on your body. Carry less important items on your load-bearing equipment. Place bulky items in the rucksack. In preparing your survival kit, select items you can use for more than one purpose. If you have two items that will serve the same function, pick the one you can use for another function. Do not duplicate items, as this increases your kit's size and weight. Always refer to The Ten Essentials !

Your survival kit need not be elaborate. You need only functional items that will meet your needs and a case to hold the items. For the case, you might want to use a Band-Aid box, a first aid case, an ammunition pouch, or another suitable case. This case should be--

Water repellent or waterproof.

Easy to carry or attach to your body.

Suitable to accept different sized components.

Durable.

In your survival kit, you should have--

First aid items.

Water purification tablets or drops.

Fire starting equipment.

Signaling items.

Food procurement items.

Shelter items.

Some examples of these items are--

Lighter, metal match, waterproof matches.

Snare wire.

Signaling mirror.

Wrist compass.

Fish and snare line.

Fishhooks.

Candle.

Small hand lens.

Oxy tetracycline tablets (diarrhea or infection).

Water purification tablets.

Solar blanket.
Surgical blades.
Butterfly sutures.
Ziplock bags for water storage.
Chap Stick.
Needle and thread.
Knife.
Paracord.
Whistle.

A great site that goes in-depth on survival subjects is www.SurvivalIQ.com. I highly recommend visiting this site for resources prior to training for Wilderness Survival.