

# Making A Go-Bag: An Updated Guide On How To Prepare For The Unexpected

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Last week I spent a few hours in the freezing rain with a few hundred of my new best friends. Someone had tripped the fire alarm in my condo at 2 a.m. In my sleepy haze of panic I was able to throw on a layer of clothes, grab my coat, and make it down way too many flights of stairs from my penthouse unit while my adrenaline played havoc with my tummy and brain functions.

The temperature was not at all what I had been used to while living in Hawaii. The day of the Japanese tsunami, I was in nervous-well-prepared-high-alert-emergency-mode while the sirens blasted their eerie tones every few minutes. I had my tropically appropriate go-bag and extra gear. I felt I had done everything I could to prepare, and I even felt I had time to go get a fancy coffee drink while waiting for the possible "big wave" to hit Oahu.

Last week I was jerked out of my bed and ran like a normal human being and left my go-bag in the hall closet. I also left the keys to my apartment on the table. Apparently my brain was somewhere else.

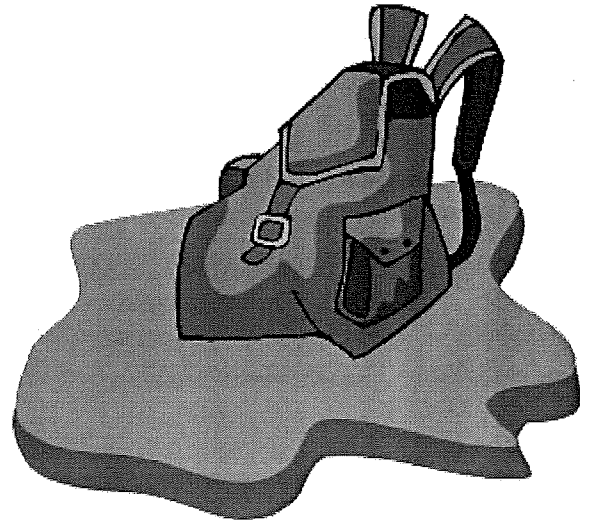
Later I was annoyed and entertained at my normal reaction to the unexpected. It made me even more determined to be the voice you hear in your head saying, "Make (and grab) your go-bag!"

So, with extreme humility I offer you up, once again, a quick guide to preparing for the unexpected, because what I have always said is true: "You never know how you are going to react in an emergency!"

## Expect The Unexpected

This is a brief overview of how to pre-plan for a sudden emergency. It isn't comprehensive. It is a nudge toward getting you better prepared for the unexpected by starting today. It is designed to help you start thinking about your own custom-designed plan for yourself or family. It is only intended to get you started now. Many people find preparing for emergencies or disasters too big a task, too expensive or time consuming, and they fall into the faulty thinking, "I'll do that as soon as I can afford it" or "I'll get to that later when I have time." The worst excuse of all is, "Nothing will happen here." This guide is intended to help you get started immediately. Take what you already have and build it slowly over weeks, months, and years.

Disasters happen. They are usually unexpected, sudden, and with little or no warning. You may have only a few seconds to prepare, and you might not be thinking clearly. You may not have seconds. You may need to run out the door in your pajamas or even naked. You could get a knock on the door telling you to evacuate, hear an alarm or siren or some other abrupt message that demands you to exit with less than a moment to think. Sometimes you might have minutes or hours to gather prepare. If you are in danger, don't wait. If you need to call 911, do it immediately.



However, just in case you have a few moments, and you have a bag of pre-prepared items located near your exit, you might be able to go out the door feeling as if you had a little bit more management over the situation. Disasters and emergencies are based on "something" being out of control. When something, or someone, is out of control, the best you can do is to try to manage the uncontrollable. This is a very short guide to that kind of preparation.

### **How to Know and Go**

Scenario: For some unexpected reason you have to exit your house immediately.

Imagine there is a knock on the door, public announcement, radio broadcast, earthquake, explosion, or some other unexpected event that demands you to evacuate. What you do next is critical. If you have already thought this through, you will be in better shape. If you have already made your plan in your mind, pre-staged a go-bag to grab as you run out the door, you might feel better. You need to know what you need to grab before you try to figure that out in the moment. You need to know and go.

For example, if you decide now that you never want to leave your grandmother's wedding rings behind, either wear them or put them in your grab and go-bag now. If you decide in advance that your cat will have to fend for himself, you won't stop to think about it in an emergency. On the other hand, if you want to save your cat and are willing to risk your life for your beloved critter, you have already made that choice and know before you go what is most important to you. You can put his carrier near the door in advance. You can make him a little kitty-emergency go-bag. It is definitely up to you. But decide in advance, and you won't have to think about it in the middle of a chaotic moment. You will know and go!

### **Get Ready Now**

Seasoned disaster planners get their own houses in order before helping others plan for emergencies. Preparing your own personal emergency go-bag is a good start. It is simple and inexpensive. Because there isn't an emergency right now, you can make your start on preparing for the "what-ifs" that could happen. You don't need to be afraid or paranoid. Stuff happens. Just don't be an ostrich with your head in the sand. The first level of emergency planning can help you feel as if you have taken care of some very simple basics. You might want to have some essentials ready to go as well as take time to think about how to secure some valued personal items. If you do this now it is more likely that you won't require immediate outside resources if evacuation must occur. You can go out the door in a hurry without making time-critical – and sometimes fatally tragic – blunders of people under extreme duress. Remember, if you need to go out the door, just go!

### **What the Go-Bag Isn't**

There are many levels and kinds of planning, from simple to complex. The go-bag is just one part of your bigger family plan, and it's a great way to start. But a go-bag isn't the end-all-be-all solution. In fact, a go-bag is not:

- Shelter-in-Place Preparation – Shelter-in-place preparation is what you need if you were told to stay indoors and shelter. Of course you can take your go-bag to a shelter or use it if you need to shelter-in-place. But preparing for a shelter-in-place involves different equipment, pre-planning your safe room, and planning what you would want and need to manage staying in one place for hours (or days) if required.
- Designed for a Long Period of Time – A go-bag isn't designed to keep you well prepared for weeks. It is just the first level of preparation that also gets the mind in tune for other types of potential emergencies. Having at least a three-day supply of food and water should be on the top of your "to-do" list! More is better, but do what you can do as soon as you can. Start your go-bag and continue your planning process.
- Family Emergency Planning – A go-bag is your custom-designed I'm-OTD-to-safety-right-now supply. It should only be one part of your comprehensive family plan. When thinking about emergency planning you can work in terms of the

range of possibilities from small and immediate to comprehensive and long-term.

### **What the Go-Bag is**

A go-bag is for going out the door. Whether you call it a go-bag, survival kit, emergency pack, shelter stay pack, or what I used to call "uh-oh-I-forgot-to-tell-my-sister-how-to-get-ready-before-her-family-evacuated-the-fire-that-burned-13-houses-in-her-neighborhood-so-now-I'm-telling-everyone-to-pre-plan-before-it-happens-to-you-or-your-sister bag."

It is a bag with a few basic self-care items, personal things, and perhaps valuables.

### **Survival Isn't for Wimps**

Unfortunately, disasters don't check your schedule for convenient times. During a voluntary or mandatory evacuation there just won't be time to think through your choices calmly. You may not be interested in the complex workings of neurology and brain perception that can be triggered during crisis, but trust me, people in crisis can do really unexpected things and have totally unanticipated behaviors. People in emergencies can experience any number of small or significant cognitive changes, physical and emotional demands, and from an "altered state of consciousness" due to stress, fear, terror, exhaustion, surprise, or shock. The unexpected event can create abrupt alterations in normal brain and body functions as your world shatters. It can be heinous to see someone trying to act normal during a disaster when all hell is breaking loose. It isn't unusual for people to attempt to rescue some essentially worthless object and it turning out to be the last thing they do. Or worse. (Yes, there are worse things. Don't ask.)

Human survival behavior isn't always a pretty sight. Your chances of survival increase when you pre-think, pre-plan, pre-stage, practice, and drill for the unexpected. You can't predict the unpredictable, but you can predict the unpredictable will predictably happen. You may minimize the long-term consequences of traumatic surprise if you consider that something unexpected might happen, you prepare in advance for the unexpected, and then relax because you know you have done all you can do in advance.

Plan for the worst, hope for the best, then move on and enjoy your life.

### **Stuff Happens**

You may find yourself in the path of a wildfire as the wind changes, a tanker truck or railroad car spilling random toxins, mass chaos, false alarm, flood, tsunami, earthquake, terrorism, gas leak, violent crazy person, or an unexpected UFO invasion. Who knows what's around the corner in our world today? When something unexpected happens, people naturally try to grab and protect their normal life and save their belongings. This is normal behavior in the middle of an abnormal situation. Unfortunately, normal doesn't always cut it during a disaster! A disaster is an abnormal circumstance. This is why first responders drill and practice all the time. It is heart wrenching to see people run back into burning homes desperately trying to retrieve pets or valuables and come out with a phone book, an old pillow, a teaspoon, and a broken heart. Trust me on this. You don't want to be one of those people. I teach emergency first responders to "take your own pulse first." Put your own house in order before you try to go out and be a hero. You can do the same thing. Take care of yours first. Feel confident about your own level of preparation for the unexpected.

### **Start Right Now**

Ok. Let's get started! Are you ready? Today, long before you may be required to make an exit, and in the honest hope that you never have to use it ... let's get going to make your go-bag!

**FIRST:** Do some action immediately ... right now! Even the smallest step will give you the confidence that you have made a start and can finish. Go find your flashlight. Don't worry about having everything necessary. Emergency planning is a marathon, not a sprint, and there is a really good chance nothing is going to demand you evacuate today!

Grab an extra pair of socks and put them with your flashlight.

Grab a hat and put it with your socks and flashlight!

You have started your go-bag!

Get the picture? Start with what you have today and go from there!

**NEXT:** As soon as possible get a bag for your go-bag. Choose a backpack you can carry. The bag can be purchased new, old from a thrift store, fancy or plain. The best would be a water-resistant backpack with lots of zipper compartments. But you need a container that will allow you to keep both hands free for other things such as opening doors, helping kids, holding pets' leashes, and dialing 911 after you are already out the door. Stash a couple of those extra annoying recycling grocery sacks you have in your pantry to use for other things.

### **Making Lists**

Get a small notebook that fits into your backpack and a pen. Or just paper. Remember, none of this has to be fancy. If you want to write on the back of a paper bag, do it! The point is for you to make your lists now so that if your brain isn't working during the emergency moment you will have already had your regular brain available when you weren't under duress.

### **The Out-The-Door (OTD) List**

This list goes on your door or somewhere visible to everyone to remind them of what to do in an emergency before they go out the door. It should only have a couple of reminders to help you get out the door immediately without thinking. Your OTD list can help you focus so you don't hesitate to exit promptly. When an alarm goes off in the middle of the night, your brain can be sleep-fuzzy on top of stress-wired and you might forget everything you know. (Trust me on this.) So you have this list on the door. You have to go now! Your OTD list will remind you if you have the chance, take a few seconds to grab your keys, phone, bag, and lock the door! OTD means you get out now. You can always borrow a phone later. Go-bags don't matter if you are dead.

During my recent event, I had my well equipped go-bag in the hall closet, but since I had just moved into this new apartment, I hadn't put up my OTD list on the door. So I was stressed and went out the door. Good for me. I mean, I'm good with that because getting out the door is always okay! Later I was annoyed. Now my OTD list is on my door. I also put a few more items in my go-bag to deal with the temperature discrepancy. It was a false alarm, but it was also a lesson learned.

### **The 5-Minute OTD List**

If you really had five minutes before you ran out the door, what would you take? Make a list of those things.

Ask the police officer who knocks on your door if you actually have five minutes. If you do, then go for it. If not, go now and forget all your stuff. Get safe first. Stuff is sad to lose, but losing your life just doesn't make sense. No item is more valuable than your life. If you really think there is something more valuable than your life, put it in a safety deposit box in the bank today.

To make a five-minute OTD list, walk through your house from room to room and write down the one thing in each room you would be able to carry in your backpack that is an absolute treasure to you. If you lost this item, you would truly and deeply suffer for the rest of your life. Some examples include Great-grandma's wedding ring, the only photo of your deceased child, a special book, a beloved wedding photo, the rubies, your laptop, etc. Make those critical choices now! If you can put those precious items in the go-bag now, do so. If not, write them on your five-minute OTD list.

List only one or two absolute treasures that fit in the go-bag you can grab as you are running through the house at breakneck speed with your list in hand because you have already pre-decided what you cannot live without. Put those items in or near your go-bag, and if you have an extra minute before you have to go out the door, you might be able to grab. If not, list them on the 15-minute OTD list. You can also make a 30- or 60-minute ODT list.

### **The Important Data List**

List your pin numbers, bank account numbers, phone and email numbers, and any other data that might be important in your world. Write them in code to keep your privacy. But in a crisis you might not remember your own name, much less the lengthy digit of your bank account.

When you are finished, put the OTD lists in your go-bag.

### **Start Packing Some Stuff**

Start with what you have. You can add and subtract later. Start assembling your go-bag items with only what you can manage and carry alone. Review the list below and add or subtract what you want. It's your list. This one is an example and far from complete. Consider it a fantasy shopping list of items you might work toward accumulating over time:

- Start with originals or copies of valuable documents. Credit card numbers, phone numbers, pin numbers, Social Security cards, health insurance cards, list of allergies, birth certificates, passports, banking information, a DVD of photos of personal items for insurance purposes, and an old utility bill to prove your home is (or was) where you think it is right now.
- Any special-needs items for children, seniors, or people with disabilities
- Prescription medications
- Supplies for your pets
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Blanket or sleeping bag (a silk sleep sack is awesome and light)
- Cell phone
- Earplugs (shelters are noisy)
- Emergency cash in small denominations
- Extra keys to your house and vehicle
- Extra eye glasses, hearing aid, or other vital personal items
- First-aid kit
- Gloves

- Large heavy-duty plastic bag
- List of emergency point-of-contact phone numbers
- Local map
- Manual can opener and other cooking supplies
- Permanent marker, paper, and duct tape
- Personal hygiene items such as soap, toilet paper, feminine supplies, sanitizer, etc.
- Photos of family members and pets for re-identification purposes
- Pocket knife
- Protein bars or small snacks
- Radio (hand crank or battery operated)
- Sturdy shoes or boots
- Toothbrush
- Weather-appropriate clothes (change seasonally)
- Water bottle (empty or full)

Good job. Now store your go-bag in a smart location near an exit.

As time and budget allow, you can continue to build and improve long-term emergency supplies. If you are able to add one or two items to your grocery list each time you shop, soon you will have an ample emergency supply in place. Make your “fantasy list” of what items you want to have on hand and ready for emergency care. Now, just keep plugging away at it until you feel well prepared.

### **Dr. Vali's Spam Rule**

Put stuff you like to eat in your go-bag. If you don't like Spam now, why would you want it during a disaster? It's more of a guideline than a rule. You don't need to purchase expensive gourmet items for your go-bag. Fill it with your favorites and make sure it is easy to manage and isn't too heavy to carry. Protein bars are a good idea. There are countless food items to choose from for your go-bag. Remember, this isn't your three-day food storage supply. This is just enough to get you by for a short duration.

Other ideas include: Pop-tarts, fruit snacks, fruit cups, baggies of dry cereal, rice chips/crackers, cheese snacks, jerky, raisins, granola bars, Crystal Light powder, chewing gum, crackers and cheese, peanut butter and crackers, etc.

### **The Rest of Your Team**

As soon as possible start assembling go-bags for all the other members of your family. As in airline safety, “First make sure your own oxygen mask is in place and then help those around you.” Once you are safe, you are better prepared to focus on others. Even a small child can carry a tiny backpack with a blanket, sweater, extra diapers, and a granola bar.

If you don't live alone and have others in the house, you can split up the load and assign tasks to others. You can have a “task” list near the OTD list on your door, dividing up the tasks of grabbing and going. Maybe Dad can grab the go-bags, Mom gets the keys, an older child gets cellphones, etc. Here are some examples of extra tasks to split up with others if

you have help and time:

- Turn off the gas and lights
- Grab insulin or medications in the refrigerator
- Cell phones, computers, and flash-drives with backup (remember to wait to make your calls until you are to safety)
- Lock doors and windows, set security alarms
- House and car keys
- Blanket and extra layers of clothing
- Pre-planned food items
- Put the cat out or grab the dog leash, or put the cat in carrier located near the door. I encourage pet owners to have "beloved critter go lists" and go-bags. You may want to collect supplies and make a plan just for your pets. I have seen chickens and cats inside cars at shelters. I have helped horse owners organize major plans, and I've seen large critters tied in safe zones with owners' names and phone numbers painted on their backsides.

A trick I learned from a flood survivor who had cats: Toss a large bag of dry cat food on the floor and cut a slit in the bag for easy access by the animal. Leave the toilet seat up for water. The cats lasted for two weeks alone inside and were safe during a major flood. Yes, there were some other messes to deal with, but the beloved animals were safe and sound.

### **Check the Checklist**

Make a list and check it. Add to the list. Check off things from the list.

- Got a bag(s) for my go-bag(s).
- Started creating first go-bag with at least one thing.
- Started my OTD: 5-minute, 15-minute, 30-minute, and 60-minute list.
- Gathered documents and made copies as needed.
- Wrote down critical pin and account numbers in my notebook list.
- Decided what I could add on my next grocery store trip.
- Made a fantasy shopping list.
- Started working on my other emergency plans.
- Informed family about the new plans.
- Decided on a family meeting place and a second back-up place.
- Called my loved ones and got them started on their emergency plans and go-bags.
- Feel good about myself and am confident that I can do this, one small step at a time.

### **Forget About It**

Good job! Now if you have to go out the door in a wild dash, you might remember to grab your bag. And guess what? You might forget it. No worries. Disasters and emergencies make even the best prepared forget things. What you want in your go-bag is up to you. It doesn't have to be fancy or expensive. Once you have the basics in place, you can improve the selection or upgrade anytime.

Now that you have a start, forget about it and move on with your life! The best part about being even slightly pre-prepared for emergencies or disasters is that you can relax and move on. I call this "fire-extinguisher thinking." Most people have an extinguisher in their home or office but do not spend their time worrying about fires. Fires happen. You have your gear. You move on. You aren't paranoid about fires; you are prepared. If you spend all your waking time fussing about a fire that might happen someday, you are paranoid and need to call me. On the other hand, fires do happen and if you have an extinguisher you are thoughtful.

I don't feel bad about forgetting my go-bag when I ran out the door in an emergency. It is always better to go out the door than try to grab stuff. I consider my most recent experience just another "tap on the shoulder" to continue to prepare for the unexpected. It was a successful drill with lessons learned. My neighbors are still talking about it as we ride the elevators together and share our complaints. Having had the honor of working in the midst of real disasters, a false alarm is nothing to complain about. But it sure was cold!

For more information on disaster preparations there are absolutely countless resources online and in your community to help you. Start researching ideas in your spare time. Google or search keywords: disaster, emergency preparations, emergency evacuation, planning for emergencies, American Red Cross, community emergency plans, city emergency plans, etc.

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