Most of us have thought about what it would be like to experience a frightening situation such as a robbery or a car accident, a plane crash or a fire, a hurricane or a tornado. We have imagined how we would react in those situations—would we be brave and save ourselves, would we be heroes and save other people, or would we perish? How would those precious moments be spent—pounding heart, sweating, praying, calling or texting a loved one. What would we say? Is there any way we could prepare ourselves for such situations? If there were, would you take the time to learn?

It turns out that we have something called disaster personalities. While it is difficult to determine why we do what we do in extreme danger, we can begin by taking a closer look at how the oldest part of our brain works. According to Amanda Ripley in her book, *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes and Why* (2008), our disaster personalities are older and more complex than we know and they also are impressionable.

Faced with extreme danger, our bodies and minds go into survival mode without even thinking about it. In fact, we don’t think we react. Physiologically we are mobilized for action. The hypothalamus signals the adrenal glands to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol for release into the bloodstream. These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to large muscle groups. And the blood chemically changes to coagulate more quickly so we bleed less if we are wounded.

Our pupils dilate to improve vision. Our livers release stored glucose to increase the body’s energy. Our body conserves energy by slowing down the digestive system, slowing the production of saliva, and sometimes we lose bladder control. Our bodies produce sweat to cool us. All of these physical changes prepare us to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment. In fact, this often is called survival mode because it all happens without us consciously doing anything.
The physical response we have to fear is just the beginning. According to research, nothing makes our bodies more alert than our brains than fear. We have all heard about or know someone who experienced a frightening situation that they cannot forget. They have nightmares, and they are always on edge. One of the reasons for this is that fear is a type of stress that is not natural, it is artificial. In other words, the fear is not in the brain, it is in the mind. The mind is the place where fear is created.

“Smith kept talking. The person with the gun rolled down the window and shot up the street. ‘I knew I could not stay. I had no place to go. I had no money. I had nothing.’”

Because Smith knows a lot about cars, he knew there was a latch somewhere in the trunk that would pop it open—he just had to find it. “I had a lighter in my pocket, so I used it to find the latch and when I did, it was funny because it had a picture of a man jumping out of the trunk on it. That’s what I wanted to do right then, but something kept telling me to wait, that the timing wasn’t right.” After the kidnappers abandoned the car, Smith opened the trunk and drove himself back to his hotel where he called the police and his family.

“Just keep thinking about my family and that I needed to get out of there. I was sweating, but I don’t really remember a lot of how I was feeling.” Smith did remember in detail everything that had happened to him that night though. He kept thinking about it, having nightmares for months afterward. Because he was able to recall everything, he was able to help put his kidnappers behind bars for a long, long time. Smith also experienced the imprinting of the frightening situation. “For about six or nine months after that, if I passed a mini-mart or something like that, and there were people around who looked like my kidnappers—young, black males—I wouldn’t get out of the car. I felt stupid about it, but I couldn’t.”

It seems our responses are not random physical reactions. According to Joseph LeDoux (1996) in his book, ‘The Emotional Brain’, they each play a role in the emotional reaction we have under duress. Our response to fear looks a lot like it does during other situations, so it is easier for scientists to study and to understand than other emotions. LeDoux says fear is fundamental in that there are key triggers that turn on our stress systems and well-developed responses that help us cope. According to LeDoux, there is a “survival arc”, which we all travel each time we are faced with a fearful situation.

First comes denial. An example comes from Anne (last name withheld). She arrived home from work to find her front door standing open. She describes her first thoughts as wondering why her husband had left the front door open. A bird flew past her as she walked in and found her living room to be in shambles—couches crunching turned upside down, photo frames on the floor. She thought, “Boy, he turned the house upside down trying to get that bird out of here.” It would be several more minutes of walking through other rooms in her house before she could realize that a burglar had broken in and robbed her. Later, she explained that she could not believe the off-the-wall scenarios her mind came up with just so her world would remain the same as when she had gone to work that day—safe.

Ripley writes that the duration of our denial depends on how we calculate risk, which is linked to our belief of how likely the frightening event is to happen or not. Anne stayed in denial much longer than David Smith, although he was sweating, but Smith did say he never considered anything like that happening to him. We calculate risk in our lives on a daily basis. For instance, there are potential big “D” disasters we might call catastrophes (choosing to ride out the hurricane) and potential little “d” disasters, which are present in our everyday lives (wearing a seat belt or not).

Second on the survival arc is deliberation. Ripley writes this is the part where we know something dreadful has happened, but we don’t know what to do about it. The final and third stage of the arc is action, she says. We now know we are in danger, we have surveyed the options and must choose a plan and execute. Sometimes panic, sometimes we become paralyzed with fear.

The arc does not always happen in a linear way. Ripley writes. Sometimes we move through the three phases—denial, deliberation and action—in a manner that looks more like the loops of a roller coaster. But why are some of us able to, like Smith, keep our cool enough to survive, while others of us hang out in the denial phase longer, like Anne? According to Ripley, the denial phase can be a time for us to gather the information we need to make a plan of action.

We know the amygdala is hardwired to trigger our primal coping skills physiologically. But what else is there to help us survive? Oddly enough, it is experience. Ripley writes, “Among experts who train police, soldiers and astronauts, nothing matters as much.” The more prepared we feel, the less fear we have, and the better our chances of survival. But how do we prepare to manage our fear response? We already know that our fear response is primordial. So, the idea that we can affect our disaster personalities is a radical one, as pointed out in Ripley’s ‘The Unthinkable.’ Our brains can literally change in structure and function. Therefore, we are able to hone our fear response, if we practice. However, most of us will never have the opportunity to train in a life-or-death situation, so there are not many occasions for us to get to know our disaster personalities. As we have all heard, life is not a dress rehearsal.

There is one way, as ancient as fear, we can learn to control our breath during a life-threatening situation. It is breathing. Ripley says if we can learn to control our breath during a life-threatening situation, our chances of survival increase. “Over and over again, when I ask combat trainers how people can master their fear, this is what they talk about,” she writes. “Of course they call it ‘combat breathing’ or ‘tactical breathing’ when they teach it to Green Berets and FBI agents. But it’s the same basic concept taught in yoga classes.”

Our breath is the window that connects the sympathetic nervous system (the stress control over) and the parasympathetic nervous system (the systems we do not control over: heart rate, digestive system, etc.). So, by breathing in a certain way, we can intervene in our primal fear response.

The yogis were on to something when they taught it to Green Berets and FBI agents. But it’s the same basic concept taught in yoga classes.

MaryAnne Banich Maasay, EdS, LPC, is an Affiliate Member of the AAMFT and is in private practice in Columbia, SC. She co-authored the chapter, Using Bibliotherapy in Transcultural Counseling in the book, Culture and Counseling: New Approaches, Allyn & Bacon (2000). She is currently working on a book about integrating counseling and spirituality.

References