

Doc Talk - The Fearsome “5” of Survival

by Eric Johnson, MD

In Teton Valley, “winter” may last until June. As we celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the Boy Scouts, the motto of “be prepared” is pertinent.

As I teach backcountry medicine and survival to many groups, I have used the “Fearsome Five” as an easy memory jogger to keep basics in mind when in a potential survival situation. This works whether you’re lost in the woods, capsized at sea, or surviving a winter night in the car or in the backcountry.

- 1) Fahrenheit.
- 2) Fluid
- 3) Food
- 4) Fatigue
- 5) Fitness

Fahrenheit refers to protection from the elements, i.e. shelter. One can survive days without fluids and weeks without food, however without protection from elements, you may not survive the night especially extremes in either heat or cold. Use what you’re given or be creative with what’s around you to build a protective shelter.

Fluid is a reminder that dehydration is an immediate threat. One may tolerate hours to days without fluids but your ability to perform, think and function is limited. Our bodies are mainly water, and it is a necessity for life.

We can tolerate living without Food for days to weeks and again our ability to function is severely limited if one does not have any resources. In a survival situation, one will require many calories to maintain bodily functions, so food is vital depending on how long one will be in that situation.

Fatigue reminds us that loss of physical and especially mental stamina is a major killer when trying to survive. It is vital to keep a positive mental attitude and not give up. Too many have perished by not trying when they had many of necessary resources with them. Many organizations teach “stop-think-act” as a way of trying to minimize panic and the negative thoughts that can work against our chances of survival.

Fitness is something we must strive for in any extended survival scenario. Minimizing injuries/illness/infection and maintaining our “health” as best as possible can make a huge difference.

OK, I said the fearsome five, but will add one more “F”...feet. Perhaps not so pertinent for survival at sea, but for any land-based situation, your ability to ambulate may be critical to minimizing your risks and maximizing your chance of self or assisted rescue. I have witnessed many individuals having to give up backcountry trips or mountain

summits due to simple, avoidable foot issues. Keeping our feet “healthy” may be critical to your survival.

There you go: the fearsome “five (six)” are simple reminders of what you must consider when life or death hangs in the balance. When in such a situation, keep that positive mental attitude, think through the fearsome five and SURVIVE!

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