

# Be Prepared

## Survival Skills

*Compiled by David Wescott, 2005-2022*

*The very first thing you run across is definitions. If there is no definition, you really can't get to work on the subject. If you don't have a proper definition, you don't know what your objective is. Mors Kochanski*

### **SURVIVAL**

### **Short-term – generally 72 hours**

**sur·viv·al** - 1- the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances.

2- an object or practice that has continued to exist from an earlier time.

*Survival is defined by recognizing a stress that is potentially lethal. The knowledge of what to do about it is called "Survival Knowledge." If you don't do something about it, you die shortly. Mors Kochanski*

*Anything that takes beyond 2 years to kill you is beyond this definition.*

The first objective of BASIC SURVIVAL is to stay alive for at least four days, the length of time that is reasonable to expect a person to survive without water. Getting by for four days is also the average time it takes for an air search to find you.

**Cody Lundin** defines survival in a way that blends physiology, psychology, and personal responsibility—often with a strong emphasis on self-awareness and priorities. Cody's approach stands out because it's the most biology-driven and priority-focused, giving you a clear, almost checklist-like way to think under pressure.

**Cody defines survival as:** "The ability to stay alive by meeting your body's critical needs in order of priority and priorities change depending on context."

- Most survival situations are preventable. Poor decisions (lack of preparation, bad judgment) are the real cause of danger.
- You're usually not "lost forever"—rescue is likely. Survival is about bridging the gap until you're found or get out.
- Panic is the real enemy. Staying calm and thinking clearly is often what determines survival.
- Temperature regulation, and hydration come before everything else.

**Dave Ganci** defines survival not just as staying alive, but as the ability to stay alive with purpose, using knowledge, mindset, and resources to overcome life-threatening situations.

His teaching centers on three core elements:

- **Mindset first** – Staying calm, thinking clearly, and refusing to give up is the most critical factor.
- **Skill and knowledge** – Knowing how to find shelter, water, fire, and food.
- **Resourcefulness** – Using what you have (even very little) to solve problems.

He emphasizes that survival is not just physical, but also mental and emotional—the will to live and adapt is what truly determines outcomes.

**Gene Fear** defines survival as staying alive until you can be rescued or return to safety. He emphasizes that **survival is temporary**, not about long-term living in the wild, but about getting through an emergency.

Fear's definition is about efficiency and practicality: do what's necessary, nothing extra, and survive the situation.

### **US Military Definitions**

- **The United States Army** defines survival as more than just staying alive—*it's the ability to continue functioning and eventually return safely, even in hostile or austere environments.*

- **The United States Air Force** defines survival in a way that's very similar to the Army, but with a stronger emphasis on aircrew isolation situations—like being downed behind enemy lines or stranded after an aircraft incident.

*The ability to remain alive, evade capture, and recover safely while maintaining the physical and mental capacity to return to duty.*

- **The United States Navy** defines survival through the lens of maritime and overwater environments, where the primary threats are drowning, exposure, dehydration, and isolation at sea.

*The ability to remain alive, afloat, and capable of rescue in maritime or isolated environments while maintaining physical and mental effectiveness.*

- **U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)**—survival is defined more aggressively and comprehensively than in conventional forces. It's not just about staying alive—it's about continuing the mission under extreme conditions.

*The ability to stay alive, maintain combat effectiveness, and accomplish the mission in any environment—using any available means—while denied normal support.*

**Survival skills are techniques used to sustain life in any type of natural or built environment.** These techniques are meant to provide basic necessities for human life, including water, food, and shelter. Survival skills also support proper knowledge and interactions with animals and plants to promote the sustaining of life over time.

Survival skills are basic ideas and abilities that ancient people invented and passed down for thousands of years. Today, survival skills are often associated with surviving in a disaster situation.

Outdoor activities such as hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, fishing, and hunting all require basic wilderness survival skills, especially to handle emergencies. Survival skills are often used by people living off-grid lifestyles such

as homesteaders. Bushcraft and primitive living are most often self-implemented but require many of the same skills.

**Wikipedia**

*Wilderness Survival is about methods and psychology for dealing with unexpected and adverse circumstances that threaten our lives outdoors. More often we are talking about a relatively short period in which we either return to safety or perish.*

**Leon Durbin, Wildwood Bushcraft 2013**

Here are some dictionary definitions found for “Survival”:

“The process of remaining alive or in existence.”

“The process of carrying on despite hardships, trauma.”

“The act of perseverance or remaining functional or viable.”

“The act or fact of surviving, especially under adverse or unusual circumstances.”

**For Ray Mears**, survival isn’t about heroic struggle at the edge of death—it’s about knowledge, preparation, and living comfortably in nature. A commonly cited idea from Mears is: Survival is not an emergency situation—it’s a way of thinking. Mears emphasizes staying calm, thinking clearly, and avoiding panic. Good decisions early prevent emergencies later. Understanding your environment—weather, plants, animals, terrain—means you’re far less likely to end up in danger in the first place. The best survival situation is the one you never get into. Planning, skills, and awareness are more important than reacting to disaster.

**Mors Kochanski** had a very practical, no-nonsense definition of survival, shaped by decades of teaching in the Canadian boreal forest.

One of his most famous ideas is “The more you know, the less you carry.”

Mors defines survival as: “The ability to stay alive and maintain function in the wilderness using knowledge and skills.”

- His approach is very priority-driven and practical—do the most important thing first to stay alive.
- Unlike generic survival advice, he stresses: “You must adapt your strategy to the specific ecosystem (e.g., boreal forest vs desert). What matters most changes with climate—fire is critical in cold, water in hot environments

**Kochanski:** Survival = meeting your needs efficiently with skill and knowledge

**Mears:** Survival = a mindset that avoids crisis and promotes comfort

**Lundin:** Survival = managing your body’s needs in the right order

## **Mors Concepts - "Survival" implies a desire/need to leave!**

### **Survival**

When digging deep enough one may find that many survival episodes are due to ignorance, stupidity, overestimation of stamina or technical ability, poor judgment, lack of experience, inattention, lack of forethought, and so on.

When potentially lethal stresses are experienced by the human body, death will eventually result if these stresses are not relieved. For example, man functions within fairly narrow limits of body temperature. The stresses of wet and cold can be very severe. Survival knowledge allows one to avoid or deal with these stresses through preparation and appropriate action.

The knowledge you would apply that may range between being confronted with a slow (slower) acting lethal stress or the split second reaction required to a sudden danger, as for example freezing to death or escaping a vehicle that has broken through the ice. Anticipate the problems you may have in the event of an emergency and train yourself on how to cope with these problems.

#### **Survival - Basic - Advanced**

- **Basic Wilderness Survival - 1 Day - 1 Month**
- **Intermediate Wilderness Survival - 4 Months - 1 Season**
- **Advanced Wilderness Survival or Wilderness Living - 4 Seasons**

### **Levels of survival**

- 1) **Basic Survival:** Make prior arrangements so that rescuers know when and where to look for you when you are overdue. When in trouble wait for rescue. There is no need to live off the land. One should know the most basic skills to survive: a) In the cold when there is no snow, b) In the cold when there is snow so deep that snowshoes are needed to travel, c) In the summer with its insects, bears, and river crossings, and d) Know how to use a basic survival kit. Your clothing is the most important survival tool you have. Dress properly and any emergency you may have to endure becomes more manageable. Carry on your person a dependable means of fire lighting, a good knife, an appropriate first aid kit, and a map and compass and know how to use these items. Depending on your circumstances and background, a well chosen 'survival kit' may be appropriate. The less you know, the more comprehensive your kit may be; the more you know the less you have to carry.
- 2) **Intermediate Survival:** Where there is the potential of a long waiting period to be rescued, living off the land may be required and the appropriate gear such as firearms and fishing tackle may be carried.
- 3) **Advanced Survival:** Advanced skills make one independent of any modern technological aids.

- 4) **Beyond Advanced Survival:** The skills for coping with any wilderness survival stresses are great enough to get by indefinitely.
- 5) **Pure Survival Knowledge:** Is a small fraction of the total knowledge used to live the ancient gatherer-hunter subsistence lifestyle.

***The Basic Principles are Universal  
The Techniques are Specific***

- **Urban Survival**
- **Jungle Survival**
- **Ocean Survival**
- **Desert Survival**
- **High Altitude Survival**
- **Cold Weather Survival**

***Survival?***

- **Basic Existence - Wilderness Living**
- **Primitive Technology vs Experimental Archaeology**
  - **Earthskills - Bushcraft**

***The Survival Experience***

- **1<sup>st</sup> 6 Hours - Affects everything else that happens to you after this.**
- **36 Hours - Environmental factors can be fatal.**
- **24 Hours - Typical end to the scenario - Panic.**
- **48-72 Hours - Average time to achieve rescue.**

***Limits of Operation***

- **How much can you carry ?**
- **How far can you travel ?**
- **How much heat can you stand ?**
- **How much water do you need ?**
- **What tools are best ?**

***Three Points of Attack***

- **PREVENTION**
- **MITIGATION**

***(Risk Management - Training - Kit) - "The more you know, the less you need"***

- **REHABILITATION - REJUVINATION**

**THREE ELEMENTS THAT AFFECT YOUR TASK**

- **YOU**
- **YOUR TOOLS**
- **AVAILABLE MATERIALS**

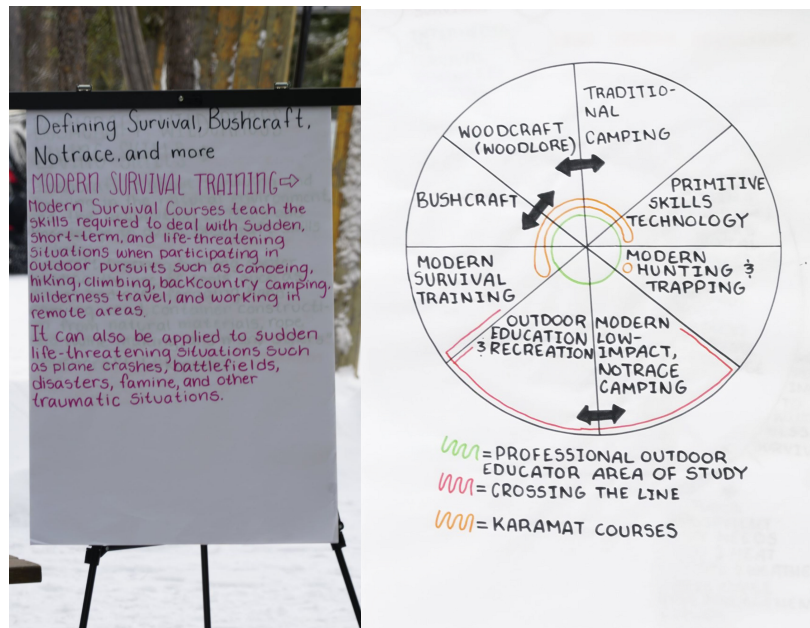
**PHASES OF MASTERING COMPETENCE**

- **Acquire the knowledge**

- Practice the skills
- Become fast with quality and safety
- Do it blindfolded
- Know when to quit

### RESCUE

- Most victims will rescue themselves or be rescued by an outside agency within 72 hours.
- Most fatalities are caused by hypothermia
- Most fatalities will occur within the first 24 hours



**MODERN SURVIVAL TRAINING - By Dale Kiselyk**

*Modern Survival courses teach the skills required to deal with sudden, short-term, and life-threatening situations when participating in outdoor pursuits such as canoeing, hiking, climbing, backcountry camping, wilderness travel, and working in remote areas.*

*It can also be applied to sudden life-threatening situations such as plane crashes, battlefields, disasters, famines and other traumatic situations.*

### **What does the term “survival” mean to you?**

**CL:** It means nothing. It’s just a catchall word that used to mean that if you didn’t do something correctly, you were dead, but it’s gotten a lot worse because of the media, YouTube, Facebook, TV shows, etc., where you have people reciting a word they have no experience with. The word I dislike even more is “survivalist,” because it has no definition and that’s why the media uses it. They can get away with a no-definition statement about someone, and therefore they don’t have to vet that individual.

Also, regarding survivalists, last time I heard they shoot cops and blow up federal buildings and that's not what I do in my courses.

### **How would you define what you do?**

**CL:** I think what I do is I keep people alive, and in that respect, I give people more confidence and freedom. We have **the big four** at my school. One is **modern outdoor survival skills** — that's what happens if you and your sweetheart are out and the Jeep breaks down or the classic day hike gone bad where someone needs search and rescue. That's modern outdoor survival skills or wilderness skills.

Then there's **primitive living skills**. People refer to this as bushcraft, and that's the course where you can make fire with sticks, make stone knives, live like indigenous cultures, and learn about the native cultures of whatever continent you're on, and that really isn't as applicable to a modern survival situation.

We also have **urban preparedness** without the zombies, so that's like if the grid goes down because of an electrical storm or whatever, and you learn how you go to the bathroom in your backyard safely, how to have alternative communications, hygiene, sanitation, knowing where the water's coming from, how to disinfect it, stored food, etc.

And I teach **homesteading** as well, which is more long-term survival. I hate to use that word.... But it's more endurance type stuff and sustainable living. So, when you say "survival" to me, I'll say "What kind?" I'm dealing with people's safety, and it's important to inform a potential student what they're getting into because when you're dealing with content without context you can get people hurt or killed.

## **OUTDOOR LIVING SKILLS**

**Gene Fear** chose the title *Outdoor Living Skills* (1972) very deliberately—it reflects the core idea of the book: practical, everyday skills for living comfortably outdoors, rather than extreme survival.

Fear wanted to shift the mindset away from emergency survival situations and toward enjoying time outdoors. His philosophy is that with the right preparation and knowledge, being outside isn't about barely getting by—it's about living well.

The word "skills" suggests that these abilities (like fire-building, shelter-making, navigation, and camp cooking) can be learned and improved—not just instincts you either have or don't.

Outdoor competence isn't about crisis—it's about confidence, comfort, and capability in nature.

*Too much emphasis is put on the difficulty of survival. It's easy as living in your own home. Nature provides everything. All you have to do is look and take it. Nature takes very good care of you. All you have to do is respect her, but she'll eat you alive if you don't. Survival is a term I use purely for communication! It is living off the land. What I really mean by survival is prospering. It is. It is the easiest state for man to be in because there are no troubles or worries. It is all provided there for you.*

**Tom Brown Jr. - From *The Search: An Interview With Tom Brown, Jr.***

**Basic Existence Skills** - " Basic existence is usually confused with wilderness survival. Wilderness survival knowledge, in its elementary stages is a small, specialized aspect of Basic Existence knowledge. Surviving as compared to living indefinitely in a given environment, differs immensely in the level of knowledge and competency of the participant.

**Basic Existence Skills allow you to live in a wilderness environment for a lifetime by use of the simplest of technologies.....**Becoming competent in the Basic Existence Skills that provide a relatively comfortable living for the long-term may take years of learning and practice, while the most elementary basic survival skills may be learned in a weekend. To the aboriginal the natural environment meets all daily living needs, but modern man may find the very same environment to be lethal in as short a time as 36 hours.

*Normal daily living in a natural environment using techniques that generally cannot be simplified any further where there is no threat to life of someone accustomed to the environment".* Often confused with wilderness survival, but wilderness survival in its elementary form is only a small specialized aspect of basic existence knowledge.

Living/existing = higher knowledge and competency than survival. The Arab, Sami, Inuit. "To infer that Native People survive in their own element is probably an insult. If any Native starved to death in his environment it is not likely from any lack of knowledge. It just happens that the vagaries of nature sometimes provide nothing to eat. There may not be a survival ploy that can help in certain dismal situations no matter how competent you may be, outside of seeing the problem developing soon enough to have the time and resources to take corrective action well before hand".

**Basic Existence Skills** = skills that allow you to live a comfortable existence for a lifetime in wilderness with the simplest/aboriginal technologies - environment meets all basic needs ... take a lifetime to learn.