

PrepTalks Discussion Guides are companion documents to PrepTalk video presentations and question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions. When used together with the videos, these guides help translate the research and expertise showcased in each presentation into action steps to improve disaster preparedness.

### Amanda Ripley: The Unthinkable: Lessons from Survivors

Ripley's PrepTalk combines the inspiring stories of disaster survivors with research into how the brain works when confronted with unusual events. She explains that unless we have had the experience and/or the training to help us act quickly during moments of great peril, our instinctive response may be the worst possible reaction. Ripley provides advice on steps emergency managers can take now to help individuals be more decisive in emergencies.

Ripley is a journalist and senior fellow at the Emerson Collective. She has written and presented about disasters, education, and human behavior. Her bestselling book, "The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes – and Why," has been published in 15 countries, and a documentary based on the book aired on the Public Broadcasting System in 2012.

*Your brain will go to great lengths to come up with ways to normalize the situation. You will try to fit what is happening into patterns from [what you have experienced] before. In a plane crash, many people will go for their overhead bags because that is what we always do.*

Amanda Ripley

### Partners for the Discussion

We encourage you to bring together those involved in all aspects of emergency management, community outreach, and alerts and warnings. This may include other members of emergency management agencies, public affairs personnel, safety officers in the workplace or schools, elected public officials, and other people or organizations involved with educating, informing, and training the public in disaster preparedness and response.

Watch the video to hear findings from Ripley's research with survivors and brain scientists. Use the discussion guide to identify strategies and tactics that can save lives by reducing delays to appropriate public action when disaster strikes.



## Discussion Prompts

### Topic 1: Planning for the Public’s Real Response

Ripley presents personal stories to highlight the three phases that most people will go through as a disaster is happening and in the moments after.

- **Denial:** Our brains want to normalize situations – to fit what is happening into patterns of things that we have experienced previously. If we don’t have training or experience in a particular emergency, we will create a non-disaster context that seems to make sense.
- **Deliberation:** The deliberation, or “milling,” phase is when people want to confirm the danger and potential actions with others and seek more information. Having knowledge and training in how to respond to a hazard will allow the brain to cognitively respond to the disaster much faster and reduce the time spent in deliberation.
- **Decisive Moment:** This moment occurs when individuals accept the reality of the situation and decide to act (or not).

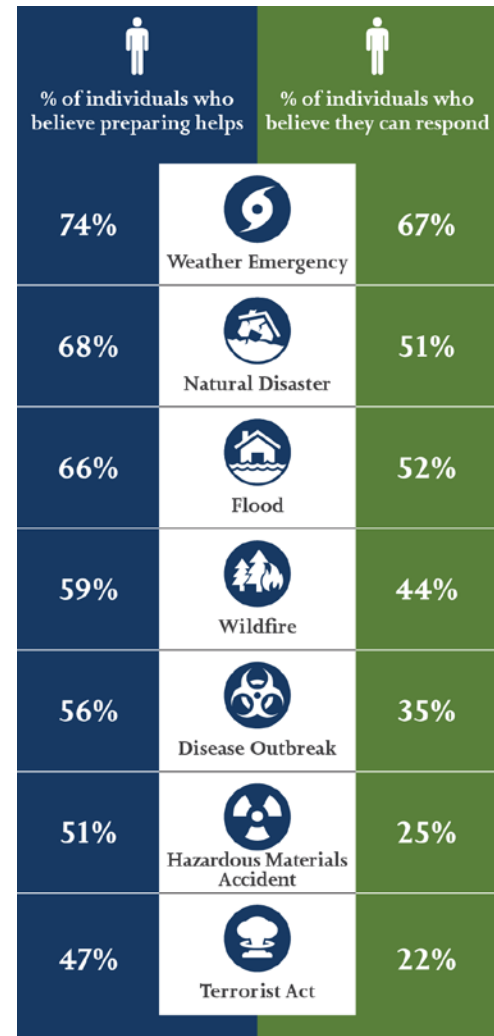
Although preparing and training is useful for any hazard, research shows that the percentage of people who believe preparing helps and the percentage of people who believe they can respond vary considerably by hazard.

Thinking about the three phases of human reaction and the likely hazards in your community, use the following prompts to focus your discussion:

- How well do the people in your community understand the hazards they may face? How well do individuals know the warning signs and the best protective actions? Do people believe that preparing helps and that they can respond? Are there segments of your population that are more likely not to know this information?
- Are there less familiar hazards that should be included in public education activities, such as threats from an active shooter, explosive devices, or a radiation or chemical event?

*The more you have a sense of what you can do the less likely that fear will shut down your response. A little fear is good, but too much will shut down your cognitive response.*

Amanda Ripley



Source: *Preparedness in America*, 2014

- Are your warning messages designed to minimize milling or delays? In his PrepTalk, “[Modernizing Public Warning Messaging](#),” Dr. Dennis Mileti provides more information on the milling phase and presents research-based guidance on message design. His research shows that each message should include, in this order, the message source; a description of the threat and its impacts; easily understood boundaries of the impact area; the protective actions to take, when to take them and how doing it reduces impact; and when people should expect updated information.
- How do your messages and your outreach encourage individuals’ belief that they are empowered to take action, and a belief that those actions can save their lives?
- Identify people in your community who have experienced disasters or life-threatening emergencies and invite them to tell their stories in community settings. Hearing from a disaster survivor gives people a personal connection to unthinkable events and provides a conversation starter for preparedness actions.

**Topic 2: Address the Unthinkable: Increase Training and Drills to Improve the Public’s Response**

Ripley shares how people who have experienced disasters, who have learned about warning signs and response actions, or who have participated in drills will likely take faster, more effective, immediate action. Discuss ways that you can encourage more people in your community to conduct drills and offer training in the workplace, in neighborhoods, at school, and in faith-based settings.

Discuss ways that you can incorporate the resources below in community outreach:

- Life-threatening emergencies can happen fast, and emergency responders aren’t always nearby. FEMA’s training, [You Are the Help Until Help Arrives](#), focuses on five actions that can save lives: call 9-1-1, protect the injured from further harm, stop any bleeding, position the injured so they can breathe, and provide comfort. The Department of Homeland Security’s [Stop the Bleed](#) campaign provides an infographic to teach people what steps to take for bleeding trauma. Include this training, as well as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), in your outreach efforts. Collaborate with the [American Red Cross](#) and other training providers.
- Your community may already have activities around [National Weather Service \(NWS\) severe weather weeks](#), and there are many initiatives with materials to help increase community preparedness including FEMA’s [National Seasonal Preparedness Messaging Calendar](#), the [NWS Storm Ready® Program](#), and National Fire Protection Association’s (NFPA) [Wildfire Community Preparedness Day](#). Think about how you can use these resources to encourage individuals to prepare and to practice the protective actions that can help them stay safe in a disaster. And be sure to include outreach for incidents that aren’t caused by weather, [installing smoke alarms](#) and practicing household evacuation from house fires – [especially important for children](#), and [active shooter drills](#).

*If you are in charge of emergency management you need to deputize information. You need to make sure everybody in your office building knows what the warning signs are [for the disaster], that they have gone down the stairs, and that they have trained for it physically.*  
Amanda Ripley

- How can you encourage businesses, homeowners associations, faith-based organizations, and other community organizations to conduct drills with their employees? How can you work with chambers of commerce or business improvement districts to encourage more training and drills? Research has shown that households are more likely to have taken preparedness steps if they have been exposed to disaster preparedness training at work. FEMA *Prepare Your Organization Playbooks* are self-guided, step-by-step playbooks to help organizations hold preparedness discussions, drills, and tabletop exercises for six different hazards ([earthquake](#), [flood](#), [hurricane](#), [tornado](#), [wildfire](#) and [winter storm](#)).
- To what extent do you encourage participation of the whole community in your current exercises? Consider hosting a whole community tabletop exercise. FEMA has developed whole community tabletop exercises for six hazards ([earthquake](#), [flood](#), [hurricane](#), [tornado](#), [wildfire](#), and [winter storm](#)).
- Ripley tells the compelling story of Tilly Smith, the 10-year-old girl who saved people from the 2004 tsunami in Thailand. A video interview with Tilly is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0s2i7Cc7wA>. What is your community doing to include youth of all ages in your preparedness education and activities? Resources for youth preparedness are available at <https://www.ready.gov/youth-preparedness>.

## Recommended Next Steps

- Work with your team to revise plans and processes to account for the phases of public response: denial, deliberation and decisive action.
- Update community education and outreach plans to minimize the public's denial and deliberation stages by increasing awareness of warning signs of different hazards and knowledge of the appropriate protective actions for each hazard. Include people who have experienced disasters in your outreach.
- Encourage community leaders to hold trainings and drills in the workplace, neighborhoods, faith-based settings, and schools. Include community members in government organized preparedness exercises.
- Strengthen your volunteer response programs like [Community Emergency Response Teams](#), and [Medical Reserve Corps](#). These programs increase the number of people in your community who can be "deputized" to assist in disasters.

*It is regular people, your friends and family, your co-workers, who will be there for you in a disaster. Our best chance is to trust them with more information sooner, more transparency than we are comfortable with. Then we know we are doing it right.*

Amanda Ripley



## Additional Resources

- Amanda Ripley Blog: 5 Ways to Refine Your Disaster Personality: <http://www.amandaripey.com/blog/5-ways-to-refine-your-disaster-personality>
- Amanda Ripley Blog: What a Real Drill Looks Like: <http://www.amandaripey.com/blog/what-a-real-drill-looks-like>
- You Are the Help Until Help Arrives: <https://community.fema.gov/until-help-arrives>
- Stop the Bleed: <https://www.dhs.gov/stopthebleed>
- American Red Cross training classes: <https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class>
- National Weather Service Weather and Water Preparedness Events Calendar: <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/severeweather/severewxcal.shtml>
- 2018 National Seasonal Preparedness Messaging Calendar: <https://www.ready.gov/calendar>
- NWS Storm Ready Program: <https://www.weather.gov/stormready/>
- NFPA Wildfire Community Preparedness Day: <https://www.nfpa.org/Public-Education/Campaigns/National-Wildfire-Community-Preparedness-Day>
- American Red Cross Sound the Alarm: <https://www.redcross.org/sound-the-alarm>
- Do Your Kids Know How To React To A Smoke Alarm: <http://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2016/02/22/do-your-kids-know-how-to-react-to-a-smoke-alarm/>
- Active Shooter Preparedness: <https://www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness>.
- FEMA *How To Prepare Your Organization* playbooks
  - Earthquake: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/98396>
  - Flood: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/98407>
  - Hurricane: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/98410>
  - Tornado: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/98412>
  - Wildfire: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/98414>
  - Winter Storm: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/98398>
- FEMA Whole Community Tabletop Exercises for Earthquake, Flood, Hurricane, Tornado, Wildfire and Winter Storm: <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/100098>
- Tilly Smith Interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOs2i7Cc7wA>
- Youth Preparedness: <https://www.ready.gov/youth-preparedness>
- Community Emergency Response Team program: <https://www.ready.gov/community-emergency-response-team>
- Medical Reserve Corps: <https://mrc.hhs.gov/HomePage>