

Here's what I've learned about disasters: Your neighbor is your savior

Disasters happen. When they do, it is normal, everyday people who are the heroes.

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By Amanda Ripley

On the day in July that a 20-year-old man named Thomas Crooks tried to assassinate former president Donald Trump, too many officials and agencies came up short, as we've heard again and again.

But we've heard far less about another category of first responders — one that appears at every major emergency — who have received very little scrutiny or credit.

Who were among the first to notice that there was a man behaving suspiciously on a nearby roof? Who repeatedly relayed this threat to law enforcement, insisting that they listen? And after the shooting stopped, who remained orderly and cooperative, generally speaking? It was regular people, like you and me, and it almost always is.

In a perfect world, we would not rely on the public as our first defense against mass shooters or any other threat. But here's the thing: we *will* rely on them when disaster strikes. That's just reality. So why not start recognizing what regular people do — and plan accordingly?

I've interviewed dozens of survivors of all kinds of catastrophes, from tsunamis to plane crashes, and I can tell you that they know extraordinary things, lessons rarely discussed in official homeland security briefings. I ended up writing a book about these ordinary people— and what they wanted the rest of us to know. Because it was not just helpful; it was *hopeful*.

Disasters don't always turn into the exact nightmare you expect. And you have more power in those moments than you think.

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The trouble is authority figures do not respect the potential of regular people. Instead, they underestimate them. They don't include them in their emergency plans. They don't help them prepare and train for these moments. They don't level with them about the risks they face. So, regular people have very little idea what to expect.

We don't know, for example, that we will probably get tunnel vision in a life-or-death situation, which means we can miss opportunities to help ourselves and others. We'll likely experience everything in slow motion. We probably won't feel *fear* at all, not right in the moment. Instead, we will go through a period of profound denial before we accept what is happening around us.

The biggest mistake many of us will make in a real-life disaster is to shut down and freeze altogether (a survival instinct researchers call "negative panic"). Sometimes this lethargy is helpful. Other times, it's deadly (in, say, a burning building).

After each calamity, the congressional hearings and media scrutiny always focus on the government — and what it did or didn't do. That's important. Leaders must be held accountable. But it's not the whole story. Regular people shouldn't feature into the equation only as either victims or perpetrators. We can do far better than we imagine.

Consider: The odds are somewhere around 50/50 that we'll see another pandemic that kills at least as many people as covid-19 before the year 2050, according to Metabiota, a risk-modeling company that tracks infectious-disease risks and outbreaks. If we prepared for this with regular people in mind, we could protect many more lives — and leave our institutions less broken, our civilization less scarred. But everything — *everything* — depends on rapidly building trust, which might be the scarcest resource of the 21st century so far.

Last time around, in March 2020, more than a week after covid-19 was declared a pandemic, Trump confided to journalist Bob Woodward that he was very intentionally misleading the public about the threat. "I wanted to always play it down," Trump said, according to Woodward's book "The Trump Tapes." "I still like playing it down, because I don't want to create a panic."

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Trump was not alone. From the beginning, Chinese officials concealed the severity of the outbreak, sharing false statistics and threatening health-care workers who dared to sound the alarm. Leaders in Italy, Brazil and India repeatedly played down the threat. In late February, Iranian officials minimized the danger of the virus and even boasted about sending face masks to China. Weeks later, Iran had one of the highest infection rates in the world.

The World Health Organization took over a year to admit that covid-19 was spread through airborne particles — despite accumulating evidence. But its director, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, was lightning quick to warn against “fear and panic.” Hysteria, he suggested in March (without any evidence), was as dangerous as the virus. “Let’s calm down and do the right things,” he said, telegraphing to billions of people that he did not trust them.

Somewhere along the line, authority figures stopped trusting regular people to handle the truth. I don’t know when or why this happened, but it is dangerous and self-fulfilling. The more officials distrust the public, the more the public will distrust them. Then the public becomes vulnerable to disinformation, conflict entrepreneurs and propaganda. When no one knows whom to trust, it’s extremely hard to act wisely and to reduce risk collectively. That pervasive cynicism, bottom-up and top-down, may now be more hazardous than any virus or earthquake.

Soon, we’ll commemorate the 23rd anniversary of 9/11. When we do, it’s worth asking: Who brought down the only plane that did not reach its target that day? The passengers aboard Flight 93, who learned that it would be used as a weapon if they did nothing. They deliberated, whispering behind their seat backs and gathering information over their phones. Then, in the decisive moment, they charged the cockpit and changed the course of history.

If regular people got as panic-stricken and selfish in a crisis as most of us think they will, Flight 93 would have almost certainly destroyed the White House or the U.S. Capitol. “It’s highly ironic that our elected representatives were protected on 9/11 by everyday people,” says homeland security expert Stephen Flynn.

The good news is that disasters have gotten dramatically less deadly over the past half century. That’s because we’ve built ever more impressive vaccines, stronger

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buildings and better warning systems, among other things. But at the same time, we are doing less and less to build better survivors. Last year, when wildfires swept across Maui, the head of the local Emergency Management Agency decided not to activate Maui's 80 outdoor, all-hazard emergency alert sirens. Why? He was worried the sirens might confuse people, since the sound is often associated with tsunami alerts.

The public, it appeared, could not be trusted to hear the sirens and investigate further. (Warning messages did go out to phones, but many people missed them because of power and cell-service outages.) At least 100 people died from those fires. "I was flabbergasted," one local told [Hawaii News Now](#). "We are not dumb. People would have known what to do."

The next catastrophe is coming. We need to rally all our resources, which means we need to catalyze a trust recovery — to make it easier for us to trust institutions and one another. Rebuilding that trust starts with recognizing the power that regular schmucks like you and me have. We should be telling stories in the media about our power and basing emergency plans around it. Because it's real.

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