

Disaster in a Box

Experts will tell you that the best time to formulate a strategy for surviving a natural disaster is before it happens, though most people prefer to wait until afterward. By "natural disaster" I mean something really awful—a devastating flood, a horrific fire, or a Brittany Spears marriage.

For most of my life, my Disaster Survival Plan has consisted of one overriding principle: Let It Happen to Other People. But experts advise there are things you should do to prepare yourself, such as not showing up at the emergency shelter without having first consumed enough food and water to last you five days.

Another way to get ready to assemble an Emergency Supply Kit containing everything you'll need to survive a disaster. To determine what should go into this kit, I decided to consult my teenage son, whose room is the very definition of "disaster."

"A fifty-two-inch flat-screen television," he declared immediately.

"We don't have a flat-screen television," I pointed out.

"Right, we'll have to buy one."

As a man, I had to agree that we needed to purchase a big-screen television immediately. "Right. Large television, generator to run it, plus enough gasoline to get us through basketball season." We beamed at each other, but then I was struck with a horrible thought. "Wait a minute, what if cable goes out, too?"

"No cable?" he demanded. "Then I'm not doing it."

"Son," I said gently, "it will be a natural disaster. People will be suffering. Surely we can get by for awhile on DVDs."

When my older daughter called a few hours later, my son and I were still arguing over what movies to include. "Would you please explain to your brother that we're more likely to learn survival skills from *The Matrix* than from *War of the Worlds*?" I requested testily. She wanted to know what lay behind this intellectual debate, so I explained about the Emergency Kit.

"And all you have so far is a TV and some movies," she observed skeptically.

"No, you're forgetting the home theater system."

"Aren't you neglecting something a little more important?"

"The remote control comes with it."

"What about food?" she prodded. "Won't you want to eat?"

I had to admit that this made a certain amount of sense. I hung up. "We'll need to get potato chips," I told my son. He wrote it down.

"Video games?" he asked.

"Son, we've got more than 100 movies on the list. We won't have *time* for video games."

Then we discussed water—not to drink, because we had beer and soda, but to bathe with. My son argued against it because he already eschews showering in favor of a body spray that leaves him smelling like an internal combustion engine. I pictured spending five days with that and said if he didn't bathe he would have to spend the disaster somewhere else.

When we were finished, we had 300 items on the list. Unfortunately, we couldn't really afford to buy any of them.