RIVALSHOT ACADEMY · COURSE BOOK

If Something Happens: Exits, Help and Recovery

A companion book for visitors and venue staff

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Foreword: How to use this book

This book goes with the RivalShot Academy course If Something Happens: Exits, Help and Recovery. The course has six short lessons. This book takes the same six ideas a little further, with more examples, checklists you can copy, and questions to talk over with friends, family or coworkers.

It is written for two groups of people at once. The first is the public: anyone who visits cafés, visitor centers, libraries, open houses, gyms, places of worship or community halls. The second is the people who work or volunteer in those places, behind the counter, at the front desk or at the welcome table. In an emergency, both groups need each other. Visitors look to staff for direction, and staff rely on visitors to move, to listen and to pass on what they noticed. Each chapter has a short section for venue staff, but visitors will find it useful too, because knowing what staff are doing makes it easier to help them.

A few promises about how this book is written.

It is calm and non-graphic. The examples are ordinary: a fire alarm at lunchtime, a smell of smoke, a power cut, a storm warning, someone taken ill. Nothing here describes injury in detail or dramatizes violence. The habits in this book are the same whatever the cause of an emergency, and you do not need to imagine the worst to practice them.

It is opt-in. You can read one chapter and stop. You can skip a chapter that does not feel right today. You can put the book down in the middle of a page. If a topic brings up memories of

something you have lived through, that is a normal reaction, and it is fine to pause and come back later, or not at all. Chapter 6 lists places to reach out if you would like support.

It never asks you to confront anyone. Leaving, asking staff and calling for help are always valid choices. Nothing here teaches tactics, and nothing here suggests you should put yourself between danger and anyone else.

It does not teach medical procedures. Where first aid comes up, the advice stays simple: check that it is safe for you, call for help, tell responders where the person is, and get hands-on training from a certified instructor if you would like to learn more.

It does not make legal or professional determinations. Emergency procedures, building rules and workplace requirements vary from place to place. When this book describes a habit, it is a habit, not a statement of what the law or your local emergency service requires. When in doubt, follow staff, officials and your local emergency service, and check the official source for your area.

How the chapters work

Each chapter follows the same pattern. It opens by developing the lesson's main idea. Then comes **In practice**, two short fictional stories that show the idea in an everyday setting. Every person and place in those stories is invented. Next is a **Checklist** you can copy onto a card or into your phone, a few **Key terms**, three **Talk it through** questions for a conversation with others, and a **Journal prompt** for private reflection. There are no tests in this book and no right answers to the discussion questions.

At the back you will find a **Glossary**, a section called **Where to go next** with official resources and advice on finding qualified hands-on training, and the **Sources** this book relied on, each with the date it was checked.

A note on numbers and places

This book was written in the United States, so it uses 911 as the emergency number and mentions U.S. support lines. If you live elsewhere, or travel, learn the local emergency number before you need it. Numbers and services can change; the Sources section shows when each one was checked.

One small promise to yourself

The point of this book is not to make you think about emergencies more often. It is the opposite. A few small habits, practiced lightly, let you stop thinking about "what if" and get on with your day. Most of the time, the plan you make will never be used. That is a good outcome, not wasted effort.

Chapter 1. Arrive with a quiet plan: exits, help points and shelter

Think about the last time you walked into a café you had never visited. You probably noticed where to order, whether there was a free table, maybe where the restroom was. Your brain did that quickly and without effort, because those things mattered to you in that moment. This chapter asks you to add one more thing to that quick scan: where you would go, and who you would ask, if the place suddenly needed to empty.

That might sound like a gloomy addition to a cup of coffee. It does not have to be. The habit takes about ten seconds, and once it becomes routine it feels no heavier than noticing where the napkins are. What it gives you is a small amount of knowledge, gathered in a calm moment, that you would otherwise have to find in a stressful one.

Why a plan made in calm moments helps

When something unexpected happens, people do not suddenly become different from who they were a minute before. They tend to do what is familiar. Many of us head back toward the way we came in, simply because that is the route we know, even when another exit may be closer. Many of us look for someone in charge before acting. These are not mistakes. They are how human attention works under pressure: it narrows, and it reaches for what it already knows.

That is exactly why a little preparation helps. If you already noticed a side exit on the way in, it is part of what you know. If you already saw where the staffed desk is, you know where to look for direction. You have not made yourself braver. You have simply made the right choice more familiar.

The ten-second look

Here is the whole habit. When you arrive somewhere, look for three things.

1. **The door you came in.** You already know this one. It is a perfectly good way out, as long as it is not the only one you know.
2. **A different way out.** This might be a door at the back, a side exit, a marked emergency door you would never normally use, or a route through another room. Fire-safety advice for public buildings makes the point that some exits will be in front of you and some behind you, and that the closest one may not be the way you came in.
3. **A help point.** This is wherever you would go to ask a question: a staffed information desk, a counter, a person in a uniform or lanyard, a first-aid sign, a security booth.

That is all. You do not need to memorize a floor plan. You are simply putting two exits and one helper into the back of your mind.

If you notice that an exit is blocked by stacked chairs, or chained shut, tell a member of staff. Public fire-safety advice says that if exits are blocked and the problem is not dealt with, it is reasonable to leave. You do not need to argue or explain; you can simply choose not to stay.

Exits you might not notice

Some exits hide in plain sight. In a café, the back door may be beyond the counter, in a corridor that leads past the restrooms. In a visitor center, the theater may have its own side door straight onto a lawn or ramp. At an open house in a converted warehouse, a large roller door at the back may be the main route out for a crowd. In a library, there may be a stairwell at each end of the building.

Exit signs are your friend here. Get into the habit of noticing them: the small illuminated signs above doors and at the ends of corridors. They are designed to be seen, but many of us have learned to ignore them because they are always there. For ten seconds, stop ignoring them.

Help points come in many forms

A help point is not only a desk. In a small café, it might be the person at the till. At a community event, it might be a volunteer in a bright T-shirt. At a large visitor center, it might be a ranger, a staffed information desk, or a phone on the wall. Notice who seems to know the place. In an emergency, these are the people most likely to know the venue's plan, and the people you can tell if you notice something.

Help points also work in the other direction. They are where you can ask your question in advance. "If there were ever an alarm, what's the plan for someone who can't use the stairs from the upstairs gallery?" is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask at an information desk. Staff who know their plan will usually be glad to tell you.

When “stay” is the instruction

Most of this book is about leaving, because leaving is the usual answer when a public place has a problem. But it is not the only answer. During a severe-weather warning, for example, the safer instruction may be to stay inside and move away from large windows to an inner room or hallway until it passes. Workplace emergency plans can include sheltering in place as well as evacuation, which is one reason staff are your best guide.

You do not have to work out which situation calls for which response. You only have to know that “stay” is sometimes the instruction, that it is part of the plan rather than a failure of it, and that the help point you noticed on arrival is where you can ask. Listening for instructions is part of your quiet plan.

Planning with the people you are with

If you are with others, add one relaxed sentence to your ten-second look: “If we ever get separated, let’s meet by the flagpole outside.” Choose a public landmark that is easy to describe and well away from the doors: a flagpole, a bus shelter, a particular tree, a corner of the parking lot. Never choose someone’s home. The aim is not to sound like a drill. It is to make sure that, if a crowd ever splits your group, everyone knows where to go without phones.

If you or someone you are with uses a wheelchair, walks with a cane, has low vision, or is a small child, add one question to staff about the simplest or step-free route, and what the building’s emergency plan offers if stairs are hard. An elevator you use every day is not automatically a way out in a fire; follow staff and responders. People who live with a disability often have their own well-practiced plans, and the most helpful thing a companion can do is ask what they are. Chapter 4 says more about this.

For venue staff: your first-shift look

If you work or volunteer at a venue, your arrival habit is slightly different. It happens on your first shift, and again whenever something changes: a new layout, a big event, a different shift pattern. The questions are:

- Which exits do visitors use, and which do staff use?
- Where is the assembly point outside?
- Who calls emergency services, and who meets responders?
- Who checks rooms that people might be in without anyone noticing, such as restrooms, quiet rooms or meeting spaces?
- What is the plan for a visitor who cannot use the stairs?
- Is there a plan for sheltering inside, and where?

Many workplaces have an emergency action plan that answers these questions. Free federal guidance from OSHA is available to help small service and retail businesses put such a plan together. If you cannot find your workplace's plan, ask a manager. You are not being difficult; you are doing your job.

One genuinely useful thing a front-desk worker can offer in an emergency is a calm, one-sentence direction: "The nearest way out is through that door and to the left." You can only say that sentence if you have thought about it before.

What this does not mean

The arrival look is about the building, not the people in it. It is not a reason to scan strangers, guess who might cause trouble, or judge anyone by how they look, dress, speak or move. Nothing in this course teaches you to treat other visitors as suspects, and doing so is both unfair and unreliable.

It does not mean you must sit next to an exit, avoid busy places, or leave because you could not spot a second door in ten seconds. It does not mean you should feel anxious. Most visits end with the plan unused. That is a good visit. Noticing changes in your surroundings more broadly is a related topic beyond the scope of this book.

In practice

The rainy-day library. A retired bus driver spends most Tuesday afternoons in a fictional public library, reading newspapers in the quiet room upstairs. One week, on his way up, he notices for the first time the small green exit sign at the far end of the quiet room. He had walked past it for years. He opens the door just enough to see a stairwell going down to a side street. Later, he mentions it to the librarian at the desk, who says, “Yes, that’s our second way out upstairs. If the alarm ever goes, we’ll send people that way.” Nothing ever happens. But the next time he sits down, his eyes find the sign without effort, and he goes back to his newspaper.

The new volunteer. A college student starts volunteering at the welcome table of a fictional community arts center. On her first Saturday, before the doors open, she asks the event coordinator three questions: where people gather outside if the alarm sounds, who calls 911, and what she should do. The coordinator says the gathering point is the bike racks across the parking lot, that she herself makes the call, and that the volunteer’s job is to point visitors at the welcome table toward the main doors. The student writes “bike racks, main doors” on a sticky note under the table. She never needs it that day. But when a visitor asks her,

an hour later, “Where’s the nearest way out from here?” because his toddler is overwhelmed by the noise, she knows the answer straight away.

Checklist

- When you arrive, find the door you came in, a different way out and a help point.
- Notice exit signs; look behind you and to the sides, not only ahead.
- If an exit is blocked or chained, tell staff; if it is not fixed, you can leave.
- Agree a public meeting landmark with anyone you are with.
- Ask staff about a step-free or simplest route, and the emergency assistance plan, if anyone in your group needs it.
- Remember that “stay inside” is sometimes the instruction, and listen for it.
- If you work at a venue, know your exits, assembly point, who calls and your own role.
- Then put the plan away and enjoy where you are.

Key terms

- **Arrival look:** a quick, calm check for two ways out and a help point when you enter a place.
- **Help point:** any staffed desk, counter, person or sign where you can ask for help or information.
- **Meeting place:** a public landmark outside where your group agrees to gather if separated.
- **Shelter in place:** an instruction to stay inside, often in a particular area, rather than leave.

- **Emergency action plan:** a workplace's written plan for what staff do in an emergency.

Talk it through

1. Think of a place you visit often. Without looking it up, can you name its second way out? What does your answer tell you about how you usually move through that place?
2. Why might people head for the door they came in by, even when another exit is closer? What might help someone choose a closer exit?
3. If you were a new staff member at a busy venue, which question about the emergency plan would you most want answered on your first day, and who would you ask?

Journal prompt

Choose one public place you will visit this week. Before you go, write down what you expect its two ways out and help point to be. After you visit, write what you actually found, and what surprised you.

Chapter 2. Decide early, move calmly

Picture a room full of people when a fire alarm starts. If you have ever been in one, you may remember what happened next: very little. People looked up. They looked at each other. Someone said, “Is that a drill?” Someone else kept talking. A few people reached for their phones as if the screen might explain the noise. And then, slowly, often only when a staff member said something, the room began to move.

This chapter is about that pause, why it happens, and how to make it shorter for yourself and the people with you.

The pause everyone shares

Hesitating when an alarm sounds is one of the most ordinary things a person can do. It is not a sign of foolishness or weakness, and nobody who has hesitated deserves blame for it. There are good reasons it happens.

We take cues from each other. In an uncertain moment, we look at the people around us to work out what is going on. If everyone else is sitting still, sitting still feels like the right thing to do. The trouble is that everyone else is looking at us for the same reason.

We expect normal. Many alarms turn out to be tests, faults or burnt toast. Our minds sensibly reach for that familiar explanation. It has often been right before, which is exactly why it can be hard to set aside.

We do not want to overreact. Getting up and leaving while others stay seated can feel embarrassing. Nobody wants to be the person who panicked over nothing.

We are in the middle of something. A meal, a conversation, a film, a purchase. Stopping halfway feels wasteful.

Each of these is understandable. (How stress shapes attention and choices is a related topic in its own right.) Together, they can turn a simple instruction, "leave the building," into several minutes of waiting. And the early minutes are usually when leaving is easiest: corridors are clear, doors are open, and nobody is rushing.

A rule made in advance

One practical way to shorten the pause is to make the decision before the alarm ever sounds. Choose a personal rule and say it to yourself now, in a calm moment:

> "If I hear an alarm, see smoke, or staff ask us to leave, I go. I'll find out why once I'm outside."

Public fire-safety advice says much the same thing: if an alarm sounds, you see smoke or fire, or something else seems wrong, leave promptly and in an orderly way, using the closest exit. Your rule simply makes that advice personal.

A rule like this can help because it removes the debate. When the alarm sounds, you are not deciding whether to leave; you already decided. You are just following through. A rule you chose in a calm moment does not have to win an argument with embarrassment in a loud one.

Say your rule out loud once, today. It may feel a bit silly. That is fine. Words you have spoken before come more easily when you need them.

Giving others permission

Something useful happens when one person moves first. Others see it and feel permission to do the same. You do not need to make a speech. A short, calm sentence to your companions is enough: "That's the alarm. Let's go." People nearby will hear it, and some will follow.

You are not responsible for everyone in the room. You do not need to direct strangers or argue with anyone who wants to stay. But your calm example is a quiet gift to the people around you.

What moving well looks like

Moving well in an evacuation is mostly about leaving things behind and keeping things simple.

- **Leave belongings.** Bags, coats, laptops, shopping and drinks stay where they are. Official guidance for public places is clear that belongings stay behind. If your phone is already in your pocket, good. If it is on the table, it can be on the table.
- **Walk, don't run.** Running causes trips and collisions, especially on stairs.
- **Keep to one side.** On stairs and in corridors, keep to one side so others can pass, including staff and responders coming the other way.
- **Use the nearest usable exit.** This may not be the door you came in by. The arrival look from Chapter 1 pays off here.

- **Follow directions.** Listen for staff and responders and go where they direct, even if it is not the way you expected. They may know something you do not, such as which route is clear.
- **Use short words with your group.** "This way." "Hold my hand." "Keep walking." Short phrases are easier to hear and follow over noise.

When the instruction is to stay

Sometimes the early decision is to stay put. If staff or officials direct people to shelter inside, for example during a severe storm, follow that instruction just as promptly as you would an instruction to leave, and listen for updates. Deciding early is about acting on the instruction you are given, not about always heading for the door.

If you are ever unsure which applies, ask the nearest staff member on your way to wherever they are directing people. "Are we leaving or staying?" is a perfectly good question.

When there is no alarm, but something seems off

Not every situation comes with an alarm. Sometimes there is only a sense that something is wrong: a strong smell of gas, water pouring through a ceiling, lights flickering and a burning smell, or a crowd suddenly pressing toward one door. You do not need anyone's permission to leave an optional visit. Walking out calmly, and telling a staff member what you noticed on your way, is a complete and reasonable response.

You do not need to be sure. You do not need to investigate. If you are wrong, the cost is a few minutes and perhaps a cold coffee. If you are right, you have given staff useful information early.

For venue staff: being the cue

When an alarm sounds, visitors look at staff. If staff look uncertain, visitors stay put. If staff move, visitors move. That gives you, as a member of staff, a great deal of influence in those first moments.

Deciding early, for staff, means not waiting for a manager to confirm what the alarm already said, unless your plan gives you a different, specific role. It means using short, confident instructions with a pointing arm: "Please leave now through this door and turn left outside." Explanations can wait. Visitors do not need to know why; they need to know where.

It also means letting go of the transaction in front of you. A busy counter may feel pressure to finish a sale, a check-in or a booking. The plan comes first. The register can be closed, the line can wait and so can the paperwork.

Practicing without imagining disasters

You might wonder whether thinking through an evacuation will make you anxious. A short, calm rehearsal is meant to do the opposite. Try it like this: picture yourself somewhere ordinary, a café you like, and hear an alarm. Then picture only your first few moves: stand, leave the bag, say "Let's go," walk toward the exit you noticed on arrival. Stop there. You do not need to picture anything beyond the door.

This is not about imagining what might go wrong. It is about giving your body a familiar first step. If you notice the exercise making you uneasy, stop. It is optional.

What this does not mean

Deciding early is not panicking. It is not pushing past people, shouting guesses about what is happening, or filming instead of walking. It is calm, prompt movement.

It does not mean you were wrong if the alarm turns out to be a test or burnt toast. A few minutes on the sidewalk is a small price, and you would make the same choice again.

It does not mean overriding staff or officials. If they direct you to stay, or to use a particular route, their instruction is part of the plan.

And it does not mean judging the people who hesitated. They were doing what people do. Your calm example is more helpful than any criticism.

In practice

The swim-center lobby. A father is waiting in the lobby of a fictional community swim center while his two children finish a lesson. The fire alarm sounds. The receptionist looks up, then picks up a phone. Other parents keep scrolling. The father remembers the rule he set himself after a work safety talk: alarm means go. He walks to the pool door and asks the instructor, "Are you bringing the kids out?" The instructor is already gathering the children in towels and leading them through the pool's own fire exit to the parking lot. The father goes out the front door and walks around to meet them. Outside, he hears the receptionist tell someone it was a fault in the system. He shrugs. The children think standing in the parking lot in towels was the best part of the day.

The café counter. A barista is halfway through taking a large order when a smell of smoke drifts from the back. A moment later the alarm sounds. The customer at the counter keeps reading out his order. The barista sets down the order pad and says, "I'm sorry, we need everyone to leave now. Out the front door, please, and keep going to the sidewalk." She points. She does not explain. The customer hesitates, then goes. Her colleague checks the restroom corridor as their plan says. Outside, the customer jokes that he will finish his order later. She smiles and says she will hold his place.

Checklist

- Write your personal rule for alarms in one sentence, and say it aloud once.
- When an alarm sounds, act on it; you do not need to see smoke or get confirmation.
- Leave belongings behind.
- Walk, keep to one side, and use the nearest usable exit.
- Use short, clear words with your group: "This way." "Keep walking."
- Follow staff and responder directions, including an instruction to stay inside.
- If something seems wrong but there is no alarm, you may leave calmly and tell staff on the way.
- If you are staff, give short directions with a pointing arm, and let the transaction wait.

Key terms

- **Personal rule:** a short decision you make in advance about what you will do when a signal occurs.
- **Social cue:** information we take from how other people are behaving, especially when we are unsure.
- **Nearest usable exit:** the closest exit that is open and clear, which may not be the one you entered by.
- **Evacuation:** leaving a building or area because of a hazard or an instruction to leave.

Talk it through

1. Think of a time you heard an alarm in a public place. What did people around you do? What did you do, and why?
2. What makes it hardest for you to leave promptly: embarrassment, belongings, being in the middle of something, or something else?
3. If you work with the public, what short instruction would you give visitors when the alarm sounds, and where would you point?

Journal prompt

Write your personal rule for alarms. Then write two sentences about what might make you hesitate, and one sentence you will say to yourself or your companions to get moving anyway.

Chapter 3. Make the call count: where you are, then what you saw

At some point in an emergency, someone has to call for help. In the United States, that means dialing 911. It sounds simple, and in many ways it is. But a few habits make the difference between a call that sends help quickly to the right door and a call that takes longer than it needs to. This chapter is about those habits.

Who calls?

In a crowd, two things often go wrong. The first is that everyone assumes someone else has already called. The second is that someone calls before they have moved away from the problem, so they are trying to talk while still in danger.

The most useful call usually comes from someone who has already moved somewhere safer, who knows where they are, and who can describe what they noticed in plain words. Official guidance for public places puts the order simply: get safe first, then call.

If you are unsure whether anyone has called, it is better to call. An extra call costs little, and a second caller may have a detail the first did not. In a staffed venue, it also helps to tell staff that you have called.

Location comes first

Nothing else can happen until responders know where to go. That is why location is the first and most important thing you give. Call-takers must verify where the emergency is, so expect to be asked even if you think they can already see your location on a screen. Some local emergency services describe an accurate location as critically important.

In a venue, a street address is helpful, but it is often not enough. A large building may have several entrances on different streets. A park may have several buildings. A parking garage may have several levels. The details that send help to the right door are often more useful than the address alone:

- **The name of the place.** "The river visitor center."
- **Which entrance.** "The main glass doors by the bus stop."
- **Which floor or level.** "Second floor." "Level three of the garage."
- **Which side or area.** "The back of the café, by the kitchen."
- **A landmark.** "Near the blue stairwell." "Next to the big oak tree."

If you do not know the address, look around. A sign on the building, a receipt in your pocket, a map on your phone or the name of a nearby business can all help. If you are traveling, a road name, a nearby exit or a landmark can do the same job.

Building your location sentence

Here is a habit worth practicing. When you arrive somewhere, say silently to yourself:

> "I'm at , entrance, ___ floor, near ___."

For example: "I'm at the Lakeside Community Hall, Fourth Avenue entrance, ground floor, near the coat racks." It takes a few seconds, and it turns the hardest part of a call into something you have already rehearsed.

Try it somewhere new once a week until it feels automatic. You will start to notice how often you do not quite know the name of the place you are in, which entrance you used, or what floor you are on. That noticing is the habit forming.

Then say what you noticed

Once the call-taker knows where you are, they will want to know what is happening. Describe what you saw, heard or smelled, as plainly as you can.

The key is to describe what happened, not your theory about why. Compare these:

- "Smoke is coming from the back of the café, near the kitchen door, and staff are getting people out."
- "I think the kitchen exploded."

The first gives the call-taker facts they can act on. The second is a guess that might send the wrong kind of help or cause unnecessary alarm. Our minds jump to explanations very quickly. Part of this habit is gently setting those explanations aside and reporting what you actually observed.

If someone is hurt or unwell, say where they are, how many people need help, and whether they are awake and talking, if you know. You do not need to guess at a medical cause. “A man has collapsed by the coat racks and isn’t responding to his name” is more useful than “I think he’s having a heart attack.”

If you do not know something, say “I don’t know.” That is useful information too. It tells the call-taker what still needs to be found out.

The rhythm of a call

Expect questions. Call-takers are trained to ask about where, what, when and who, in an order that helps them decide what help to send. Answering their questions keeps the call moving, even if it feels slow.

A few things help:

- **Stay as calm as you can.** Speak slowly and clearly. Take a breath before you start.
- **Answer what is asked.** The call-taker’s questions are designed to get the right help moving.
- **Follow instructions.** The call-taker may ask you to do something, or not to do something. Follow what they say.
- **Do not hang up until told it is okay.** Help may already be on its way while you are still talking, and the call-taker may need to ask something else.
- **If you dial by mistake, stay on the line and say so.** That way the call-taker does not have to call you back or send someone to check.

If speaking is hard

Not everyone communicates the same way. If you are deaf or hard of hearing, have a speech disability, are still learning English, or might be in a situation where speaking is difficult, ask your local emergency service ahead of time what options exist where you live. Options vary from area to area, so check the official information for your own location rather than assuming.

It can also help to carry a short printed card or keep a note on your phone that explains how you communicate, so responders can understand you quickly. Disability preparedness guidance suggests exactly this kind of card. It is a small thing to prepare in a calm moment.

Telling staff, too

In a staffed venue, also tell staff what you saw, briefly, even if you think they already know. Their plan may include calling emergency services, meeting responders at a particular entrance, or knowing who is still inside. Your detail might be the piece they were missing.

Keep it short and factual: “I smelled smoke in the back hallway by the kitchen, just before the alarm.” Then follow their directions.

For venue staff: the local detail

If you work at a venue, your emergency plan should say who makes the call. If it is you, the location habit above is doubly important, because you know the building far better than any visitor. You can tell responders which entrance to use, where the problem is, and where anyone who needs help is waiting.

If someone else makes the call, your job may be to pass information to them, or to meet responders at a particular door and guide them in. Either way, the most valuable thing you can add is local detail that only someone who works there would know.

What this does not mean

Calling does not make you responsible for the outcome. Your job is to pass on what you know. Responders take it from there.

Calling never requires you to stay near danger to keep reporting. If the call-taker asks you to stay on the line, you can still move to somewhere safer while you talk.

You do not need to be certain it is an emergency. Deciding that is the call-taker's job, not yours.

You are not expected to guess at anyone's intentions. And a description of someone's appearance is never a substitute for describing what actually happened.

Finally, procedures vary from place to place. Treat this chapter as a set of habits, not as a statement of what your local emergency service requires. If you want to know how emergency calls work where you live, check your local emergency service's official information.

In practice

The train platform. A nursing student is waiting on a fictional commuter-rail platform when an older woman sitting on a bench slumps sideways and does not answer when another passenger speaks to her. The student looks around: there is no traffic, nothing falling, nothing dangerous nearby. She calls 911. Her first sentence is the one she has practiced: "I'm at Maple Street sta-

tion, the outbound platform, on the bench by the ticket machines." Then: "An older woman has slumped over and isn't answering when people talk to her." The call-taker asks questions, and she answers each one. A station attendant walks over, and the student says, "I've called 911; they're on the line." She stays on the line until she is told she can hang up. She does not try anything she has not been trained to do. Later, she signs up for a certified first-aid class.

The open house where staff had already called. A visitor at a fictional open house in a historic townhouse notices a burning electrical smell near a lamp in the upstairs library. The alarm has not sounded. She goes downstairs to the volunteer at the front table and says, "There's a burning smell by the lamp in the upstairs library." The volunteer radios the house manager, who has a plan for exactly this. The manager asks everyone to step outside as a precaution and calls the fire department, giving the address and "upstairs library, front of the house." The visitor did not call herself. She did not need to. She passed a clear, factual detail to the person whose role was to act on it.

Checklist

- Get somewhere safer before you call.
- If you are not sure anyone has called, call.
- Give your location first: place name, entrance, floor, area and landmark.
- Then describe what you saw, heard or smelled, not your theory about why.
- Say "I don't know" when you don't know.
- Answer questions, follow instructions and stay on the line until told it is okay to hang up.

- Tell staff what you noticed, briefly.
- If speaking is hard for you, find out in advance what options exist where you live, and carry a short card about how you communicate.

Key terms

- **Call-taker:** the person who answers an emergency call and gathers information to send help.
- **Location sentence:** a short, practiced description of where you are: place, entrance, floor, landmark.
- **Observation:** something you directly saw, heard or smelled.
- **Assumption:** an explanation or guess about why something happened, which you did not directly observe.
- **Responder:** a firefighter, emergency medical worker, police officer or other person sent to help.

Talk it through

1. Where are you right now? Try your location sentence aloud. What did you have to look up or guess?
2. Think of something you saw today. Describe it once as an observation, then once as an assumption. How are they different?
3. Why might people in a crowd assume someone else has already called? What could you do to avoid that trap?

Journal prompt

Pick a place you will be this week. Write the exact first sentence you would say to a call-taker from there, then two plain things you might describe. Note anything you would need to find out to make your sentence complete.

Chapter 4. Help others leave without taking over

When a public place has to empty, the people around you become your first source of help, and you become theirs. Long before responders arrive, it is strangers who hold doors, point the way, carry a toddler's bag, and walk at someone else's pace. This chapter is about doing that well: helping in a way that is useful, respectful and safe for you.

Everyday bystander decisions are a broader related topic. This chapter focuses on one moment: getting people out.

The order matters

Official guidance for public places is clear about the order: take care of yourself first, then help others if you are able. That can feel uncomfortable, even selfish. It is neither.

A helper who is stuck, hurt or overwhelmed cannot help anyone. Worse, they become one more person who needs help. Getting yourself out, or at least to a safer place, is often what makes it possible to help at all. And very often, the most useful help you can give is information: telling responders who is still inside and where. You can only do that if you are out.

So the first question is always, "Am I safe enough to help?" If the answer is no, getting out and passing on information is your help.

Asking is the core skill

The heart of helping well is asking. A quick question respects the person, and it gets you to the right kind of help faster than guessing. Try phrases like:

- "The alarm's going. Would you like a hand getting out?"
- "What's the best way for me to help?"
- "Do you want me to walk with you, or would you rather I let staff know where you are?"

Notice that these questions give the other person a choice. They might say yes. They might say no thank you. They might tell you something specific that you would never have guessed. All of those answers are useful.

Following someone's lead

Many people, including wheelchair users, people who are blind or have low vision, people with hearing loss and people with other disabilities, have thought about emergencies far more than most of us have. They know their own bodies, their equipment and the routes that work for them. Disability preparedness guidance encourages people to build a support network, to arrange ahead of time with people who can help them leave a building, and even to show others how their wheelchair works. That tells you something important as a helper: the person in front of you may already have a plan. Your job is to fit into it, not replace it.

In practice, that means:

- **Ask before you touch.** Do not grab a wheelchair, push someone's chair, take a cane, hold a guide dog's harness or take someone's arm without asking first. These are part of

how the person moves safely; moving them without permission can throw off balance or control.

- **Offer specific help.** "I can walk beside you on your left," or "I'll hold the door," is easier to accept than a vague "Can I help?"
- **Go at their pace.** Hurrying someone who is moving carefully can cause the very fall you are trying to prevent.
- **Use their words.** If someone tells you what they need, do exactly that.

People who may not have heard

Some people may not know there is an emergency at all. Someone wearing headphones, someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, or someone deeply focused on a task may not notice an alarm. Flashing lights help, but not everyone is facing them.

If you see someone who seems unaware, step into their line of sight before you speak. Point to the exit and say, or clearly mouth, "Fire alarm. We need to leave." A wave from in front of them is often enough to get their attention. Calling out from behind, or from across a room, may not reach them.

Children and caregivers

Parents and caregivers with small children have a lot to manage in an evacuation: strollers, bags, several small people who may not want to go where they are asked. An offer of specific help is often welcome. "Can I hold the door?" "Would you like me to carry the bag?" "Shall I walk with your older one?" Respect their answer; some parents would rather keep their children close and their hands free.

If you are with children yourself, short, calm words help most: "Hold my hand. We're walking outside." Children take their emotional cues from the adults around them. Your calm is part of what keeps them calm.

People who freeze

Some people, in a sudden emergency, simply stop. They are not being difficult; they are overwhelmed. Short, kind, direct words often help: "Come with me. This way." Long explanations or questions can add to the overload. If they still do not move, and you cannot safely stay, tell staff or responders exactly where they are.

When you cannot help someone out yourself

There will be times when you cannot get someone out. A person who cannot use stairs may decide with staff where to wait for assistance. Someone may decline your help. You may not be able to stay safely.

In all of these cases, information is the most valuable thing you can carry. Tell staff or responders exactly where the person is and anything they told you about what they need: "Studio four, second floor, a man using a walker, moving toward the east stairs." That one sentence can save responders minutes of searching.

Unless you are trained, do not try to lift or carry someone, or carry their wheelchair down stairs. It risks injury to both of you and to people around you.

When someone is hurt or taken ill

If someone is injured or suddenly unwell, the first steps are the ones from Chapter 3:

1. **Check that you are not walking into danger.** Your safety comes first.
2. **Call for help,** or make sure someone has, with a clear location.
3. **Tell responders where the person is** when they arrive.

Staying nearby and speaking calmly, when it is safe to do so, can matter a great deal. "Help is on the way. I'm staying here with you." Many people find that simple presence reassuring.

Beyond that, hands-on first aid is a skill best learned in person from a certified instructor. Reading about it is not the same as practicing it with an instructor who can watch and correct you. The American College of Surgeons runs Stop the Bleed, a program that teaches members of the public bleeding-control basics in hands-on classes, which you can find through its course finder. Other recognized organizations offer certified first-aid and CPR classes in many communities. This book does not teach those skills, and it would not be safe to learn them from text.

For venue staff: your helping role

Venue staff often have specific helping roles in their emergency plan. These might include:

- checking restrooms, quiet rooms and other spaces where people might not hear or notice an alarm;
- holding doors and guiding visitors to the assembly point;
- staying with a visitor who needs assistance, if the plan provides for that;

- passing information about anyone still inside to the person meeting responders.

Know your role before the day it matters. Know who is responsible for meeting responders, and how information about people still inside reaches them. And remember that your calm voice is itself a kind of help. Visitors tend to follow it.

Three words: ask, offer, tell

If you remember nothing else from this chapter, remember three words:

- **Ask** what the person needs.
- **Offer** one specific thing you can do.
- **Tell** staff or responders about anyone still inside, and where.

Practice the opening question out loud once today. It should sound natural and kind, not heroic.

What this does not mean

Helping is never an obligation to stay in danger, to go back inside, or to move someone against their wishes. A person can decline your help, and you can decline to help when it is not safe for you. Neither choice makes anyone a bad person.

You are not a rescuer, and this book does not make you one. Getting yourself out and passing on accurate information is real help. Often it is the most important help there is.

In practice

The café with headphones. A fictional neighborhood café is busy on a weekday afternoon when the fire alarm sounds and the lights by the door start to flash. Most people get up. At a corner table, a young woman is typing on her laptop with large headphones on, facing the wall. A retired teacher on her way out notices her. Instead of calling out from the door, she walks to where the young woman can see her, waves, points at the exit and says clearly, "Fire alarm. We need to leave." The young woman pulls off her headphones, signs "thank you," closes her laptop lid and leaves it on the table. Outside, the teacher realizes the young woman is deaf; she had not heard the alarm or the teacher's first call. The flashing lights had been behind her. A wave and a pointing hand, from the front, made the difference.

The visitor center family. A family of four generations is at a fictional visitor center: a great-grandmother with a walker, two parents and a toddler in a stroller. The alarm sounds. A visitor nearby asks, "Would any of you like help getting out?" The great-grandmother answers before anyone else: "I'm fine on the ramp, but I'm slow. Could you let the ranger know we're coming out the side?" The visitor does exactly that on her way. The ranger props the side door and waits. Nobody carried anybody. Nobody was hurried. One question and one sentence passed on did the job.

Checklist

- Take care of yourself first; help others if you are able.
- Ask before you help: "What's the best way for me to help?"
- Do not touch a wheelchair, cane, guide dog harness or someone's arm without asking.
- Offer one specific thing, and go at the other person's pace.

- Get attention from someone who may not hear by stepping into their line of sight and pointing.
- If you cannot help someone out, tell staff or responders exactly where they are.
- Do not try to lift or carry someone unless you are trained.
- If someone is hurt: check it is safe, call for help, tell responders where they are, and consider certified hands-on training.

Key terms

- **Ask, offer, tell:** a simple three-step approach to helping others leave.
- **Line of sight:** where a person is looking; stepping into it helps someone who may not hear you.
- **Support network:** people someone has arranged in advance to help them in an emergency.
- **Certified hands-on training:** in-person instruction from a qualified instructor, such as a first-aid or bleeding-control class.

Talk it through

1. Why might asking "What's the best way for me to help?" work better than simply taking someone's arm?
2. Think of the people you most often go out with. Would any of them want help leaving a building quickly? How could you ask them about it, respectfully, in a calm moment?
3. If you work at a venue, which helping role does your plan give you? If you do not know, who could tell you?

Journal prompt

Write the opening question you would use to offer help in an evacuation. Then write one specific thing you could offer, and one sentence you would use to tell staff about someone still inside.

Chapter 5. Outside: regroup, account for people, stay out

Stepping out of a building after an alarm can feel like the end of the event. You are out; you are fine. But the next few minutes outside matter more than you might expect. Responders need room to work. Staff need to know who is out. Families and friends need to find each other. And, in the rush of relief, people sometimes make choices they would not make on a calmer day, such as stopping right by the door or going back in for a bag.

This chapter is about those minutes. Almost everything that helps here is simple, and none of it involves going back inside.

Keep walking

The first thing to do outside is keep walking until you are well clear of the doors. It is natural to stop as soon as you feel the fresh air. But crowds that stop just outside an exit create a bottleneck. The people behind them cannot get out, and the responders arriving cannot get in.

How far is far enough? Far enough that you are not blocking any door, path or driveway, and far enough that staff and responders can easily move around you. If staff direct you to a particular place, go there.

Meeting places and assembly points

Chapter 1 suggested agreeing a meeting place with the people you are with: a public landmark well away from the doors. This is the moment that small agreement pays off. Fire-safety advice for

public buildings recommends exactly this, because groups often get separated in an evacuation. People leave by different exits, get carried along by the crowd, or stop to help someone.

Many venues also have an assembly point, a place where staff gather visitors and colleagues so they can check who is out. If staff direct you to an assembly point, go there, even if it is not where you planned to meet. You can always walk to your meeting place afterward, once staff know you are safe.

Count your people

Once you reach your meeting place or the assembly point, count your people. Who did you come with? Are they all here?

If everyone is accounted for, tell staff if they ask. If someone is missing, the next section matters.

If someone is missing

If someone in your group is missing, do not go back inside to look for them. Instead:

1. **Tell staff or responders straight away.** Give the details that help them search: the person's name, roughly how old they are, and where you last saw them. "My son, Leo, eight years old, was at the craft tables in the main hall."
2. **Check your phone.** People who leave by a different exit often send a message as soon as they are out.
3. **Look around the outside area.** Separated people frequently come out of another door and end up somewhere nearby, such as a different corner of the parking lot.

Staff and responders know the building, know which areas have been checked and have the training and equipment to search safely. Putting clear information in their hands is far more useful than searching yourself.

Once out, stay out

Public fire-safety advice is plain on this point: once you are out, stay out. Never go back into a burning building, and leave any rescue inside to trained responders.

That applies to belongings, too. Phones, bags, coats and keys can be collected later, once staff or officials say it is safe to go back in. It can be frustrating to wait outside without your coat or your car keys. It is still the right choice.

If you are not sure whether it is safe to go back in, ask staff. Wait for a clear answer.

Telling people you are okay

Once your group is together, tell the people who will worry that you are okay. A short message is enough:

> "There was an alarm at the visitor center. We're all out and fine. I'll call later."

Short messages are quick to send and quick to read, and they settle worried relatives without starting a long conversation while you are still in a busy, noisy place.

Be careful what you share

In the minutes after an evacuation, information moves fast, and not all of it is accurate. Someone hears a guess and repeats it as a fact. Someone posts a photo. Before long, people far away are worried about something that did not happen.

A few habits help:

- **Share facts, not guesses.** If you do not know what caused the alarm, say so.
- **Think before you post photos.** Images of people who are frightened, upset or hurt can harm them and their families. Ask yourself whether the photo is yours to share.
- **Follow official updates.** The venue and local officials will share accurate information as it becomes available. Rely on those rather than on what someone heard from someone else.

Your body after a fright

You may notice your body reacting after an evacuation, even if nothing serious happened. Common reactions include shaky hands, a racing heart, sudden tiredness, laughter, tears, feeling cold, or an odd calm. These reactions are normal after a fright, and they usually ease.

Some simple things help:

- Sit down if you can.
- Have some water.
- Stay with someone you know, or with the group.
- Breathe slowly, a few times.

- If you saw something upsetting, it is fine to step away from the crowd and the conversation.

Chapter 6 talks about the days that follow. For now, it is enough to notice how you feel and be kind to yourself.

Talking to responders

Responders may ask people what they saw. If they ask you, share what you know plainly, in the way Chapter 3 describes: where, what, when. Say so if you do not know. You do not need to guess, and you do not need to have an opinion about what caused anything.

When staff or officials tell you that you are free to go, you can go home. You do not need to stay until the end, give interviews or post updates.

For venue staff: the busiest part of the plan

For staff, the time outside is often the busiest part of an emergency plan. Depending on the plan, your role might include:

- guiding visitors to the assembly point and keeping doors and paths clear;
- accounting for colleagues and, where the plan provides for it, visitors;
- meeting responders at the agreed entrance;
- passing on information about anyone who needs help or is unaccounted for;
- telling visitors when it is safe to go back in, or when they may leave.

A simple role that you have walked through beforehand leaves less to improvise on the day. If you are not sure what your role is outside, ask your manager before the day it matters.

Three words: clear, count, tell

If you remember nothing else from this chapter, remember three words:

- **Clear:** move well clear of the doors.
- **Count:** count your people.
- **Tell:** tell staff about anyone missing, and tell family you are okay.

What this does not mean

Being outside does not oblige you to stay until the end, give interviews or post updates. Once staff or officials say you are free to go, you can go.

Getting separated from your group is not a failure. It happens all the time, and it is exactly what meeting places are for.

And it never means going back inside on your own, whether for a person or for a phone.

In practice

The open-house friends. Three friends are touring a fictional open house in a renovated mill building when a smoke alarm sounds. Two of them leave together through the main doors. The third, who was upstairs, follows a staff member's directions down a different stairwell and out a side door. Outside, the two friends cannot see her, and one starts to head back toward the main

doors. The other says, “Wait. We said the bus shelter.” They walk to the bus shelter across the road. Two minutes later their friend arrives, laughing, from the other direction. They tell the volunteer at the gathering point that all three of them are out, send a message to a parent who knew they were going, and walk to a café down the street. The bus shelter, chosen in ten seconds on the way in, did all the work.

The café headcount. A fictional café has four staff on shift when the alarm sounds. Their plan says the shift lead counts staff at the lamppost across the street, and the barista nearest the front door holds it open while customers leave. Outside, the shift lead counts three staff, not four. She does not go back in. She asks, “Who’s missing?” Someone says the dishwasher was taking out recycling through the back door. The shift lead walks around the corner, keeping well away from the building, and finds him by the bins, unaware there had been an alarm until he heard it from outside. She brings him to the lamppost, then tells the arriving firefighters, “Four staff, all out. Customers left through the front. Nobody inside as far as we know.” Clear, count, tell.

Checklist

- Keep walking until you are well clear of doors, paths and driveways.
- Go to your agreed meeting place, or the venue’s assembly point if staff direct you.
- Count your people.
- If someone is missing, tell staff or responders their name, age and where you last saw them.
- Check your phone and look around the outside area.

- Do not go back inside, for a person or for belongings, until staff or officials say it is safe.
- Send a short "we're out and fine" message to those who will worry.
- Share facts, not guesses; think before posting photos.

Key terms

- **Assembly point:** a place outside where staff gather people after an evacuation to check who is out.
- **Accounting for people:** checking that everyone in a group, or everyone on shift, is safely out.
- **Handover:** passing clear information to the person whose role it is to act on it.
- **Re-entry:** going back into a building after an evacuation, which should wait until staff or officials say it is safe.

Talk it through

1. Why do crowds tend to stop right outside an exit? What could you say to your group to keep them moving?
2. If someone you came with was missing, what would make it hard not to go back in? What would you do instead?
3. What would you want to know before posting anything about an evacuation you were part of?

Journal prompt

Choose a public meeting place you could use with family or friends at a venue you visit regularly. Write the relaxed sentence you would use to agree on it, and the short "I'm okay" message you would send afterwards.

Chapter 6. The days after: recovery, support and talking with children

Even an event that ended well can stay with you. An evacuation where everyone got out, a frightening phone call, seeing someone taken ill in a café: any of these can echo for a while afterward. This chapter is about what that echo can look like, what tends to help, where to reach out, and how to talk with children about what happened.

If you are reading this chapter because of something you have recently lived through, please go gently. You can stop at any point. The support lines listed below are there for you.

Common reactions

After a frightening event, people commonly:

- have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep;
- replay what happened, sometimes when they do not want to;
- jump at sudden noises, or at the next alarm they hear;
- feel irritable, tearful, flat or numb;
- feel guilty about something they did or did not do;
- find it hard to concentrate;
- notice physical things, like headaches or an upset stomach.

Some people feel very little at all, and that is normal too. There is no correct reaction to an unsettling event. For many people, these feelings ease with time.

Reactions can also return later. An anniversary, a similar sound, a news story or a visit to the same place can bring feelings back for a while. SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline specifically lists anniversaries and trigger events among the reasons people reach out. That is not a sign that you have gone backward. It is how memory works.

What tends to help

Ordinary things can help more than you might expect:

- **Regular meals and sleep,** as far as you can manage them.
- **Moving your body,** even a short walk.
- **Time with people you trust.** You do not have to talk about what happened; just being with others helps.
- **Less repetitive news.** Watching the same coverage over and over tends to keep the event fresh. It is fine to switch off.
- **Small routines.** Making a coffee the way you always do, a regular phone call, a familiar walk.
- **Choosing when to talk.** Talking about what happened can help, but you get to choose when, and with whom.

Official guidance for public places ends with a similar message: be mindful of your mental health, and consider professional help for yourself and your family if you need it.

When and where to reach out

If distress stays heavy, gets in the way of daily life, or simply feels like more than you want to carry alone, reach out. In the United States:

- **SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline:** call or text **1-800-985-5990**, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the U.S. and its territories. It is open to anyone experiencing emotional distress related to disasters, including incidents of mass violence. You can contact it for yourself or about someone else. Press 2 for Spanish; counselors can also be reached in over 100 other languages through interpreters. Counselors can talk through what you are feeling and offer healthy coping tips.
- **988:** if you or someone else is in crisis, call or text 988.
- **911:** if anyone is in immediate danger, call 911.

Your own health care provider, a counselor, a faith leader or a trusted community organization can also be good places to start. Needing help is not a failure to cope. It is a way of coping.

Children notice more than we think

Children often notice more than adults expect, even if they were not directly involved. They also take their emotional cues from the adults around them. If the grown-ups are calm, children are more likely to feel safe.

Children's reactions vary with age. According to guidance from the National Institute of Mental Health:

- **Young children (around five and under)** may become clingy, have tantrums, become more fearful, go back to things they

had outgrown, such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking, or play out the event in their games.

- **Older children and teenagers** may withdraw from family and friends, struggle at school, avoid reminders of what happened, or show anger or resentment.
- **At any age,** children may have stomachaches, headaches, nightmares or sleep problems, trouble concentrating, or lose interest in things they usually enjoy.

Many of these reactions are normal and lessen over time.

How to talk with a child

There are no perfect words. Calm, honest and brief is usually enough. Some things that tend to help:

- **Let them lead.** Invite them to talk, draw or write about what happened, without pushing them before they are ready.
- **Answer the questions they actually ask,** honestly and at their level. You do not need to tell them everything; you do need to tell them the truth.
- **Let feelings be.** Let them be sad or cry. Do not get angry if they show strong emotions, and do not expect them to be brave or tough.
- **Avoid promises you cannot keep.** "That will never happen again" is one of them. Instead, offer true reassurance: what went right, who is helping, and what your family does to stay safe.
- **Keep routines.** Regular meals, bedtime stories, family games. Routines tell a child that the world is still predictable.
- **Give small choices.** Letting a child choose what to wear or what to eat for lunch can help them feel some control.

- **Limit repeated news.** Caregiver guidance recommends limiting children's exposure to repetitive news reports about frightening events.
- **Look after yourself, too.** Caregivers who support their own coping are better able to support their children.

Turning worry into a job

One gentle approach some families try is to give a child a small, positive role in the family's safety habits. "Next time we go somewhere new, do you want to be the one who finds the exit signs?" turns a worry into a job, and a job into a bit of confidence. Keep it light and optional; it should feel like a game, not a drill.

When to seek professional help for a child

Reach out to a child's health care provider if reactions last more than about a month. Seek help sooner if a child:

- has repeated flashbacks;
- seems very sad, depressed or emotionally numb;
- is startled constantly;
- shows signs of panic, such as a racing heart and sweating.

If you are worried about a child's safety, or a child talks about wanting to harm themselves, reach out straight away: call or text 988, or call 911 if there is immediate danger.

For venue staff and teams

Staff who were on shift during an evacuation were there too. They may have been busy following the plan in the moment and only feel the effects later. Managers can help by checking in with their

teams after an event, briefly and without pressure to talk. Saying "That was a lot. How are you doing? Here's where you can get support if you want it" gives people room to recover in their own way.

A short, calm conversation about what went well in the plan, and what could be smoother next time, can also help a team feel more confident. Keep it about the plan, not about blaming anyone.

What this does not mean

This chapter is not therapy, a diagnosis or a substitute for professional care. If you are worried about yourself or someone else, please reach out to the services above or to a health care provider.

Feeling fine is not a sign you did not care. Feeling shaken for a while is not a sign of weakness.

Talking with children does not require perfect words. Calm, honest and brief is enough.

And if a child or an adult does not want to talk about it, that choice deserves respect. You can let them know you are there whenever they are ready.

In practice

The quiet teenager. A fourteen-year-old was at a fictional café with friends when a kitchen fire caused an evacuation. Everyone got out, and the fire was small. But over the next two weeks, her mother notices she has stopped going to the café with her friends and spends more time alone in her room. Her mother does not push. One evening, while they are doing the dishes to-

gether, she says, “I’ve noticed you haven’t been to the café lately. That was a scary afternoon. I’m around if you ever want to talk about it.” Her daughter shrugs. A few days later, in the car, she says, “I keep thinking about the smoke.” They talk for ten minutes. Her mother listens more than she speaks, and asks whether she would like to talk to someone else too. They agree to see how things are in a couple of weeks, and to call the family doctor if things are not easing. The next weekend, her daughter goes back to the café with one friend.

The front-desk worker. A front-desk worker at a fictional visitor center guided dozens of visitors out during an unexpected evacuation caused by an electrical fault. He did everything his plan asked. Afterward, he finds himself replaying the moment the alarm sounded, and he jumps every time the phone at the desk rings. On the third day, his manager stops by and asks how he is doing. He admits he is not sleeping well. His manager mentions the Disaster Distress Helpline and the workplace’s own support options, and adds, “You did the plan exactly right.” That evening, he texts the helpline and talks with a counselor about what he has been feeling. Over the next couple of weeks, the jumpiness fades. He also suggests a short team conversation about what went well, which helps his colleagues, too.

Checklist

- Expect that feelings may come and go for a while; there is no correct reaction.
- Keep regular meals, sleep and small routines as best you can.
- Spend time with people you trust, and limit repetitive news.

- If distress stays heavy, reach out: SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline 1-800-985-5990 (call or text), 988 in a crisis, 911 for immediate danger.
- With children: let them lead, answer honestly, allow feelings and avoid promises you cannot keep.
- Keep children's routines and limit their exposure to repeated news.
- Contact a child's health care provider if reactions last more than about a month, or sooner if they are severe.
- Look after yourself, too.

Key terms

- **Distress:** emotional strain that can follow a frightening or upsetting event.
- **Trigger or reminder:** something, such as a sound, place or date, that brings back feelings about an event.
- **Disaster Distress Helpline:** a SAMHSA support line, by call or text, for people experiencing distress related to disasters.
- **988:** the number to call or text in the United States if you or someone else is in crisis.
- **True reassurance:** comfort based on what is actually true, rather than promises that cannot be kept.

Talk it through

1. What ordinary routines help you feel steady after a stressful day? Which could you share with others?
2. Why might a promise like "That will never happen again" backfire with a child? What could you say instead?

3. If you were a manager after an evacuation, how would you check in with your team without pressuring anyone to talk?

Journal prompt

List three people or support lines you could reach out to after a hard day, and one ordinary routine that helps you feel steady. If you care for children, write how you might begin a calm, honest conversation with them after an unsettling event.

Glossary

Accounting for people. Checking that everyone in a group, or everyone on shift, is safely out after an evacuation.

Arrival look. A quick, calm check, taking about ten seconds, for the door you came in, a different way out and a help point.

Ask, offer, tell. A three-step approach to helping others leave: ask what they need, offer one specific thing, tell staff or responders about anyone still inside.

Assembly point. A place outside where staff gather visitors and colleagues after an evacuation to check who is out.

Call-taker. The person who answers an emergency call and gathers the information needed to send help.

Certified hands-on training. In-person instruction from a qualified instructor, such as a first-aid, CPR or bleeding-control class, that ends with practiced skills rather than reading alone.

Clear, count, tell. A three-step routine for the minutes outside: move clear of the doors, count your people, tell staff about anyone missing and tell family you are okay.

Disaster Distress Helpline. A SAMHSA support line in the United States, by call or text at 1-800-985-5990, for anyone experiencing emotional distress related to disasters.

988. The number to call or text in the United States if you or someone else is in crisis.

Emergency action plan. A workplace's written plan describing what staff do in an emergency, such as evacuation routes, sheltering, alarms, who calls for help and who meets responders.

Evacuation. Leaving a building or area because of a hazard or an instruction to leave.

Handover. Passing clear information, such as a missing person's name, age and last known location, to the person whose role is to act on it.

Help point. Any staffed desk, counter, person or sign where you can ask for help or information.

Location sentence. A short, practiced description of where you are: place name, entrance, floor or level, and a landmark.

Meeting place. A public landmark outside, agreed in advance, where your group gathers if separated. Never a private home.

Nearest usable exit. The closest exit that is open and clear, which may not be the one you came in by.

Observation. Something you directly saw, heard or smelled, as opposed to an assumption about why it happened.

Personal rule. A short decision you make in advance, such as "If I hear an alarm, I go," so that you do not have to decide under pressure.

Re-entry. Going back into a building after an evacuation. It should wait until staff or officials say it is safe.

Responder. A firefighter, emergency medical worker, police officer or other person sent to help.

Shelter in place. An instruction to stay inside, often in a particular area, rather than leave.

Social cue. Information we take from how other people are behaving, especially when we are unsure what to do.

True reassurance. Comfort based on what is actually true, such as what went right and who is helping, rather than promises that cannot be kept.

Where to go next

Finding qualified hands-on training

Reading builds understanding; hands-on training builds skill. If this book has made you want to be more useful when someone is hurt or taken ill, look for an in-person class taught by a certified instructor.

- **Bleeding control.** The American College of Surgeons runs the Stop the Bleed program, which offers hands-on bleeding-control classes for members of the public. Its website has a Find a Course tool: https://www.stopthebleed.org/.
- **First aid and CPR.** Many recognized organizations, hospitals, fire departments and community colleges offer certified first-aid and CPR classes. Ask your local fire department or health care provider which classes are offered near you, and check that the instructor is certified by a recognized program.
- **Workplace emergency training.** If you work at a venue, ask your manager what emergency training your workplace offers, and when the plan was last reviewed or practiced.

When you choose a class, check who teaches it, what certification it leads to, how long the certification lasts and whether it includes hands-on practice with an instructor. This RivalShot Academy course is an educational reading course only. It saves no completion record and is not a certification, qualification or license of any kind.

Official resources

These are the official pages this book relied on, plus some related pages that venue staff and families may find useful. Each was checked on 2026-10-15; pages and numbers can change, so check the current version.

- **Ready.gov** (https://www.ready.gov/) is the U.S. government's general preparedness site, with pages on making a plan, building a kit, evacuation, sheltering, people with disabilities and recovering from disasters.
- **SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline** (https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline) offers 24/7 call or text support at 1-800-985-5990. SAMHSA's coping tips page has more on looking after yourself after a traumatic event.
- **NIMH** publishes guidance for parents and caregivers on helping children and adolescents cope with disasters and other traumatic events.
- **OSHA's Evacuation Plans and Procedures eTool** helps small, low-hazard service and retail businesses put together an emergency action plan.
- **FEMA's IS-906, Workplace Security Awareness,** is a free online independent-study course for private-sector and public-sector employees about improving workplace security and deciding what actions to take in a security situation.
- **CISA's preparedness resources** include no-cost materials and an emergency action plan product suite intended for organizations and venue operators. Some of that material addresses violent incidents directly; it is not graphic, but read it when you are ready, and skip it if it is not right for you.

Related topics

If you would like to keep learning, these neighboring topics are worth exploring:

- Noticing changes in your surroundings and checking before you conclude.
- How stress affects attention and choices.
- Everyday bystander decisions.
- Safety for people who work with the public.
- Planning for the places you spend most of your time: home, vehicle and routine.
- Travel, transit and parking safety.

Sources

Each source below was re-read on the date shown. This book uses them only for the specific statements described in the chapters; all examples, stories and wording are original.

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RivalShot Academy · Original course book, authored 2026-10-15.

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