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Fight or Flight in the Red Zone?

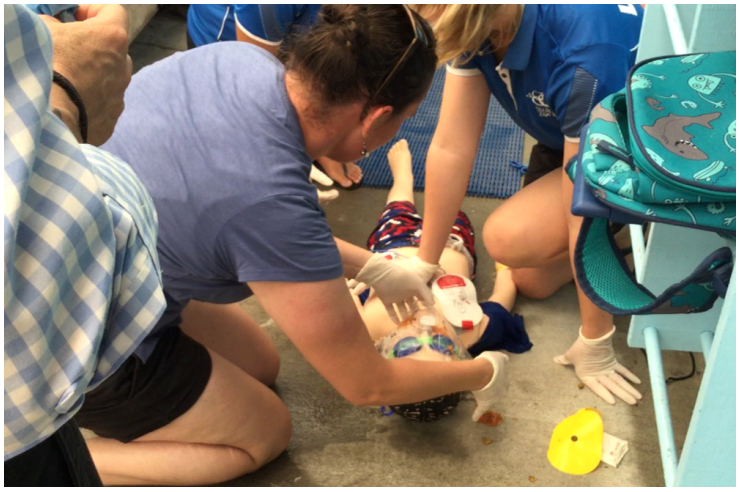
Fight or flight mode is a common description used in 'Red Zone' training – to help people understand how they react to fear and stress.

When an emergency occurs and someone is drowning, every millisecond counts! Knowing how your brain or your staff's brains react under pressure could make the vital difference to how people react and deal with the situation.

People react in a variety of ways in emergency situations - not all are predictable in advance. Psychologist John Leach, a specialist in human responses to emergency situations, developed his "10/80/10 rule of survival" after examining a variety of crises and human reactions to them. [1]

- 10 percent of people facing an emergency control their fears and act rationally
- 80% find themselves stunned and relatively unprepared to respond
- 10 percent become hysterical, and unable to cope with the situation at hand.

This explains why in emergencies some people often fail to do things they've been taught, and which under normal circumstances might seem obvious. Most survival experts agree that the only reliable way to shortcut this kind of impaired thinking is by preparing for an emergency in advance – not in a comfortable office but in a simulated environment. Your brain can only hold so much information at a given time and process that information at a certain rate. When every millisecond counts, the appropriate response must be prepared for in the cognitive database.



When you prepare for crisis situations you want to provide an environment where people can easily reduce the stall time. It can be very simple techniques but if you understand the psychology then you can develop those techniques fairly easily to actually make a difference. [2]

What is the Red Zone?

Fear and stress levels can be categorised using five heartbeat-per-minute (bpm) zones. The 'red zone' is the action phase where the heart is beating at 115-145 bpm. [3]

Find out more about the zones. [4]

What is High Fidelity Training?

Practice makes actions automatic, without [the need for] detailed thinking. [5]

Many emergency responders are using patient simulation as a learning technique and competency-based assessment method. High-fidelity patient simulation (HPS) refers to the use of computerised mannequins that simulate real-life scenarios.

Who uses it?

Defence forces, fire fighters, hospital staff and paramedics, all use high fidelity training. Evaluations of this type of training have proved its effectiveness by placing people in 'real life' situations and requiring them to respond.

We need to give lifeguards the opportunity to work in Fight or Flight mode in training so that they learn what it feels like, what effect that has on their ability and how to work through it.

[Gary Johnson]

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Some Q and A

Gary Johnson from See Clearly Now talks about emergencies...

The real thing is horrible, yucky, violent, and confronting.

How do people know how they will react?

Truth is we don't and it's a very hard thing to assess for during a job interview. Most males think they'll be right and so they fall the hardest when they aren't. Females are less sure and can surprise themselves when they are right.

Why is high fidelity training relevant to aquatics staff?

I meet lots of lifeguards who in an air conditoned and carpeted training room can complete tasks very quickly, sometimes even blind folded. Yet, when required to perform the same task under real conditions it doesn't go as well. This is because we haven't contextualised the task. [Gary Johnson]

Why is it so important for people to be put into real pressure situations?

Flight or fight is an evolutionary process that has seen us survive for millennia. We're pretty much hard wired now. Traditionally, those who froze got eaten, and that particular trait got wiped out. It still happens but not usually for long.

During an emergency event at the pool running or fighting aren't helpful. We need to learn to feel the fear and make more informed decisions than that. [Gary Johnson]

What helps?

The more time you spend in the Red Zone the more you'll understand that you need to adjust their approach. Slow down, breathe, work as a team. Focus on smaller tasks if that's your role. Don't get sucked into the small tasks for too long if yours is the big picture.

What are the challenges?

Because we've created such safe places, we don't get the exposure to emergency responses that other agencies do. This is why Red Zone training becomes important.

Insights into action

Train your staff to understand their fear and stress responses so they can prepare to manage them under pressure.

Relax – take a moment to be calm

Role clarity – what's your job right now?

Review – how is the situation changing?

Respond – what do I need to do now?

Further reading and resources

If you'd like to hear more from Gary Johnson watch here, or http://www.seeclearlynow.com.au/

Is High Fidelity Simulation the Most Effective Method for the Development of Non-Technical Skills in Nursing? A Review of the Current Evidence

Mental Reponses During Emergencies

Survival Psychology

In The Zone

References

[1] Leach, J. (2004) Why People Freeze in an Emergency: Temporal and Cognitive Constraints on Survival Responses, *Aviation Space Environment Medicine*

[2] Moore, I. (2011) Unthinkable Thinking.

[3] Grossman, D. (2004) On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace

[4] Siddle, B. (2005) Sharpening the Warrior's Edge

5 How to survive a disaster, accessed from http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150128-how-to-survive-a-disaster