

# A Quick *Updated* Guide On How To Prepare For the Unexpected

## Dr. Vali's Survival Guide Series

- ✓ expect the unexpected
- ✓ how to know and go
- ✓ get ready now
- ✓ what the go bag isn't
- ✓ what the go bag is
- ✓ survival isn't for wimps
- ✓ stuff happens
- ✓ start right now
- ✓ get your go bags
- ✓ start packing some stuff
- ✓ Dr. Vali's spam® rule
- ✓ the rest of your team
- ✓ check the check list
- ✓ fugged about it

# Introduction

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Last week I spent a few hours in the freezing rain with a few hundred of my new best friends. Someone had tripped the fire alarm in my condo at 2 am. In my sleepy haze of panic I was able to throw on a layer of clothes, grab my coat and made it down waaaaaay too many flights of stairs from my penthouse unit while my adrenalin played havoc with my tummy and brain functions. The temperature was not at all what I had been used to while living in Hawaii. The day of the Japanese Tsunami, I had spent alone in nervous well-prepared-high alert emergency mode while the sirens blasted their eerie tones every few minutes, but I was warm. I had my tropically appropriate go-bag and extra gear. I felt I had done everything I could to prepare and so even felt I had time to go get a fancy coffee drink while waiting for the possible "big wave" to hit Oahu. Last week I was jerked out of my bed and ran like a normal human being and left my go-bag in my hall closet. I also left my keys to my apartment on the table. And apparently my brain was somewhere else. Later I was annoyed and entertained at my normal reaction to the unexpected. And it made me even more determined to be the voice that you hear in your head saying, "MAKE (and grab) YOUR GO BAG!" So, with extreme humility I offer you up, once again, a Quick Guide to Preparing for the Unexpected. Because, apparently what I have always said is true, "You never know how you are going to react in an emergency!"

# Key Concept: Expect the Unexpected

**T**his is a brief overview of how to pre-plan for a sudden emergency. It isn't comprehensive. It is a nudge toward getting you better prepared for the unexpected by starting TODAY. It is designed to help you start thinking about your own custom-designed plan for yourself or family. It is only intended to get you started NOW. Many people find preparing for Emergencies or Disasters too big a task, too expensive or time consuming, and fall into the faulty thinking, "I'll do that as soon as I can afford it." Or they think, "I'll get to that later when I have time." Or the worse excuse of all, "Nothing will happen here." This Quick Guide is intended to help you get started immediately. Starting what you already have you can take your own sweet time to build on it over weeks, months and years.

Disasters happen. They are usually unexpected, sudden and give little or no warning. You may only have a few seconds to think. And you might not be thinking clearly. You may not even have seconds. You may need to run out the door in you pajamas or naked. You could get a knock on the door telling you to evacuate, hear an alarm or siren, or some other abrupt

message that demands you exit with less than a moment to think. Sometimes you might have minutes or hours to gather your wits about you. If you are in danger, don't wait. If you need to call 911...do it immediately. However, just in case you have a few moments, and you have a bag of pre-prepared items staged right by your exit, you might be able to go out the door feeling as if you had a little bit more control over the situation. This is a very short guide to that kind of preparation.

# Key Concept: How To Know and Go

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**Scenario:** *The sirens or alarms go off. You have to exit your house immediately.*

**I**magine there is a knock on the door, public announcement, radio broadcast, earthquake, explosion, or some other unexpected weird thing that demands you evacuate. What you do next is critical. If you have already thought this through you will be in better shape. If you have already made your plan in your mind, pre-staged a Go Bag to Grab as you run out the door you might feel better. You need to **KNOW WHAT YOU NEED TO GRAB BEFORE YOU TRY TO FIGURE THAT OUT IN THE MOMENT**. You need to **KNOW AND GO**. For example: If you decide now that you never want to leave your Grandmother's wedding rings behind...either wear them or put them in your Grab And Go Bag now. If you decide in advance, that your cat will have to fend for himself, you won't stop to think about it in an emergency. On the other hand, if you want to save your cat and are willing to risk your life for your beloved critter, you have already made that choice and **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO** what is most important to you. You can put his carrier near the door in advance. You can make him a little kitty-emergency Go Bag. It is definitely up to you. But decide in advance and you won't have to think about it in the middle of a chaotic moment. You will **KNOW AND GO**.

## Key Concept: Get Ready Now

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**S**easoned disaster planners get their own houses in order before helping others plan for emergencies. Preparing your own personal emergency Go Bag is a good start. It is simple and inexpensive. Because there isn't an emergency right now you can make your start on preparing for the "what-ifs" that could happen. You don't need to be afraid or paranoid. Stuff happens. Just don't be an ostrich with your head in the sand. A first level of emergency planning can help you feel as if you have taken care of some very simple basics. You might want to have some simple basic essentials ready to go as well as take time to think about how to secure some valued personal items. If you do this now it is more likely that you won't require immediate outside resources if you need to evacuate. You can go OTD (out the door) in a hurry without making the time critical, and sometimes fatally tragic blunders of people under extreme duress. Remember: IF YOU NEED TO GO OTD, JUST GO! Safety First!

# Key Concept: What the Go Bag Isn't

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**T**here are many levels and kinds of planning, from simple to complex. The Go Bag is just one part of your bigger family plan, and a great way to make a start. But a Go Bag isn't the end-all-be-all. In fact:

**A Go Bag is not shelter-in-place preparation.** Shelter in place preparation is what you would need if you were told to stay indoors and shelter. You can take your Go Bag to a shelter, or use it if you need to shelter-in-place. Shelter-in-place involves different equipment, pre-planning your safe room and what you would want to do to manage staying in one place for hours or days if required.

**A Go Bag is not designed for a long period of time.** A Go Bag isn't designed to keep you well prepared for weeks. It is just the first level of preparation that also gets the mind in tune for other types of potential emergencies. Having at least a 3-day supply of food and water should be on the top of your "to-do" list! More is better, but do what you can do as soon as you can.

**A Go Bag isn't Family Emergency Planning.** A Go Bag is your custom-designed I'm-out-the-door-to-safety-right-now supply. It should only be one part of your comprehensive family plan.

# Key Concept: What the Go Bag Is

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**A** Go Bag is for GOING OTD. **Whether you call it a go bag, survival kit, emergency pack, shelter stay pack, or** what I used to call “Oh-Oh-I-Forgot-To-Tell-My-Sister-How-To-Get-Ready-Before-Her-Family-Evacuated-The-Fire-That-Burned-13-Houses-In-Her-Neighborhood-So-Now-I’m-Telling-Everyone-To-Preplan-Before-It-Happens-To-You-Or-Your-Sister-Bag” and now call my “Duh, you-forgot-your-own-cool-go-bag-was-right-by-the-door-when-the-condo-was-evacuated-bag” ...it is a bag with a few basic self-care items, some personal things, and perhaps some valuables.

# Key Concept: Survival Isn't For Wimps

**U**nfortunately, disasters don't check your schedule for convenient times. During a voluntary or mandatory evacuation there just won't be time to think through your choices calmly. You may not be interested in the complex workings of neurology and brain perception that can be triggered during crisis, but trust me, people in crisis can do really unexpected things and have totally unanticipated behaviors. People in emergencies can experience a number of cognitive changes, physical and emotional demands, and act from somewhat of an "altered state of consciousness" due to stress, fear, terror, exhaustion, surprise, or shock. The unexpected event can create abrupt alterations in normal brain and body functions as your world shatters. It can be heinous to see someone trying to act normal during a disaster when all hell is breaking around them. For example, I have seen people trying to rescue some worthless or special objects and it turns out to be the last thing they do. Or worse. (Yes. There are worse things. Don't ask.)

Just understand this: Human Survival behavior isn't always a pretty sight. Your chances of survival increase when you pre-think, pre-plan, pre-stage, and practice and drill for the unexpected. You also lessen your chances of suffering the long-term consequences of traumatic surprise if you consider that something unexpected might happen, you prepare in advance for the unexpected, and then relax because you KNOW you have done all you can do in advance. Good advise: Plan for the Worst, Hope for the Best, then move on and enjoy your life.

# Key Concept: Stuff Happens

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**Y**ou may find yourself in the path of a wildfire as the wind changes, a tanker truck or railroad car spilling random toxins, mass chaos, false alarm, flood, tsunami, earthquake, terrorism, gas leak, violent crazy person, or an unexpected UFO invasion. Who knows what's around the corner in our world today? I mean really...right? When something unexpected happens, people naturally try to grab and protect their normal life and often try to save their belongings. This is normal behavior in the middle of an abnormal situation. Unfortunately, normal doesn't always cut it during a disaster! A Disaster is an abnormal circumstance. This is why first responders drill and practice all the time. It is heart wrenching to see people run back into burning homes desperately trying to retrieve pets or valuables and come out with a phone book, an old pillow, a teaspoon, and a broken heart. Trust me on this. You don't want to be one of those people. Like I teach Emergency First Responders, take your own pulse first. (See this article on free downloads on my website: [www.improvizion.com](http://www.improvizion.com))

# Key Concept: Start Right Now

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**O**k. Let's go get this thing done! Are you ready? Today, long before you may be required to make an exit, and in the honest hope that you never, ever, ever, ever have to use it.... let's get going to make your GO BAG! (Cool!)

Do some action IMMEDIATELY...NOW! Even the smallest step will give you the confidence that you have made a start and can finish. Example, go find your flashlight. Good job. Don't worry about having everything necessary. Emergency planning is a marathon, not a sprint and there is a really good chance nothing is going to demand you evacuate today... But then again...

# Key Concept: Get Your Go Bags

**C**hoose a backpack that you can carry. Purchased new, or old from a thrift store, fancy or plain, doesn't matter. The best would be a water resistant backpack with lots of zipper compartments. But you need a container that will allow you to keep both hands free for other stuff, like opening doors, helping kids, leashes of pets, and dialing 911 after you are already OTD. Stash a couple of those extra annoying recycling grocery sacks that you have in your pantry to use for extra other stuff later.

It's LIST TIME! Get a small notebook that fits into your backpack and a pen. You will be making lists so that if your brain isn't working during the moment, you will have already had your regular brain available when you weren't under duress.

## THE OTD NOW LIST

This list goes on your door, or a cupboard, or visible to everyone to remind them of what to do in panic. It should only have a couple of REMINDERS to help you get out the door immediately without thinking. Your OTD NOW List is only to help you focus so you don't hesitate to exit promptly. When an alarm goes off in the middle of the night your brain can be sleep-fuzzy on top of stress-wired and you might forget everything you know. Trust me on this. So you have this list on the door and generally it should only take a few seconds to grab any OTD items. This is not about grabbing

anything else or thinking about it. You have to go NOW. Your OTD NOW list will remind you that if you have the chance, take a few seconds to grab your keys, phone, bag, and lock the door! OTD means you get out now. You can always borrow a phone from someone later and keys and go-bags don't matter if you are dead.

During my recent event, I had already placed my Go-bag in the hall closet, but had not yet put up my OTD NOW list on the door. So I went OTD. I'm good with that because getting OTD is always okay! Now my list is up, just in case. And I did put a few more items in my go-bag to deal with the temperature discrepancy. Lessons learned.

## THE 5-MINUTE OTD LIST

If you really have 5 minutes you can grab a few things. Ask the police officer who knocks on your door if you actually have 5 minutes. If you do, then go for it. If not, GO NOW AND FORGET ALL YOUR STUFF...GET SAFE FIRST.

To make a 5 minute OTD list, you go from room to room and write down on your list the one thing in each room that you would be able to carry in your backpack that if lost you would really suffer for the rest of your life (Examples: Grandma's wedding ring, the only photo of your deceased cousin, a special book, a wedding photo, the diamonds). Make those critical choices NOW. If you can put those precious

## Key Concept:

### Get Your Go Bags (continued)

items in the Go Bag now, do so. If not, write them on your 5-MINUTE OTD LIST.

List only one or two absolute treasures that fit in the go bag that you can grab as you are running through the house at breakneck speed with your list in hand because you have already pre-decided what you cannot live without, put those items in or near your Go Bag, and if you have an extra 1 minute before you have to go out the door you might be able to grab. If not, list them on the 15 Minute OTD LIST

#### THE 15-MINUTE OTD LIST

If you really have 15 minutes you can grab a few things. If you do, then go for it. If not, GO NOW AND FORGET ALL YOUR STUFF...GET SAFE FIRST.

Do the same exercise, only now think what you would do if you had 15 minutes instead of 5. What would change?

#### THE 30-MINUTE OTD LIST

If you really have 30 minutes you can grab a few things. If you do, then go for it. If not, GO NOW AND FORGET ALL YOUR STUFF...GET SAFE FIRST.

Do the same exercise, only now think what you would do if you had 30 minutes instead of 5. What would change?

#### THE 60-MINUTE OTD LIST

If you really have 60 minutes you can grab a few things. If you do, then go for it. If not, GO NOW AND FORGET ALL YOUR STUFF...GET SAFE FIRST.

Do the same exercise, only now think what you would do if you had 60 minutes instead of 5. What would change?

#### THE IMPORTANT DATA LIST

List your pin numbers, bank account numbers, phone and email numbers and other such data that might be important in your world. Write them in code to keep your privacy. But in a crisis you might not remember your own name, much less the lengthy digit of your bank account. When you are done, put the OTD lists in your go bag.

# Key Concept: Start Packing Some Stuff

**S**tart with what you have. You can add and subtract later. Start assembling your Go Bag items with only what you can manage and carry alone. Review the list below and add or subtract what you want. It's your list. This one is an example and far from complete. Consider it a fantasy shopping list of items you might work toward accumulating over time:

- Start with originals or copies of valuable documents. Credit card numbers, phone numbers, pin numbers, Social Security cards, health insurance cards, list of allergies, birth certificates, passports, banking information, a DVD of photos of personal items for insurance purposes, and an old utility bill to prove your home is (or was) where you think it is right now.
- Any special-needs items for children, seniors or people with disabilities
- Supplies for your pets
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Blanket or sleeping bag (a silk sleep sack is awesome and light)
- Cellphone
- Earplugs (shelters are noisy)
- Emergency cash in small denominations
- Extra keys to your house and vehicle
- Extra eye glasses, hearing aid or other vital personal items
- First Aid kit
- Gloves
- Large heavy-duty plastic bag
- List of emergency point-of -contact phone numbers
- Local map
- Manual can opener and other cooking supplies
- Permanent marker, paper and duct tape
- Personal hygiene items including toilet paper, feminine supplies, hand sanitizer and soap
- Photos of family members and pets for re-identification purposes
- Pocketknife
- Prescription medications
- Protein Bars or small snacks
- Radio, hand crank, or battery operated
- Sturdy shoes, a change of seasonal clothes, and a warm hat, jacket
- Toothbrush
- Weather appropriate clothes (change seasonally)
- Waterbottle (empty or full)

Good Job. Now store your Go Bag in a smart location near an exit.

As time and budget allows you can continue to build and improve long-term emergency plans and supplies. If you keep thinking about it you can evolve your family plan. And if you just add one or two items to your grocery list each time you shop you will soon have an ample emergency supply in place. Make your "fantasy list" of what you want to have on hand and ready for emergency care. Work at it.

# Key Concept: Dr. Vali's Spam<sup>®</sup> Rule

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**T**he Spam Rule: Store stuff you like. If you don't like Spam now, why would you want it during a disaster? On the other hand, when I lived in Hawaii Spam ruled. It's totally okay to have yummy stuff in your Go Bag if it doesn't weigh too much for you to carry. I think that protein bars are a good idea.

## **Other Good Ideas:**

Pop Tarts

Fruit Snacks

Fruit Cups

Fish Crackers

Baggies of Dry Cereal

Rick Chips/Crackers

Cheese Snacks

Jerky

Raisins

Granola Bars

Crystal Light powder

Chewing Gum

Crackers and Cheese

Crackers and Peanut Butter

# Key Concept: The Rest Of Your Team

**A**s soon as possible start assembling Go Bags for all the other members of your family. As in airline safety, “first make sure your own oxygen mask is in place, then help those around you.” Once you are safe you are better prepared to focus on others. Even a small child can carry a tiny backpack with a blanket, a sweater, extra diapers, and a granola bar.

If you don't live alone and have others in the house you can split up the load and assign tasks to others. For example, you can have a “task” list on the OTD list on your door splitting up the tasks of grabbing and going. Maybe Dad can grab the go-bags, Mom can grab the keys, an older child can grab the cellphones, etc. Here are some examples of extra tasks to split up with others if you have help and time:

- Turn off the gas and lights
- Grab the insulin or medications in the refrigerator
- Cell phones, computers, and flash-drives with backup (Remember to wait to make your calls until you are to safety)
- Lock doors and windows, set security alarms.
- House and car keys
- Blanket and extra clothes layers
- Pre-planned food items
- Put the cat out or grab the dog leash, or put cat in carrier that is by the door. (Most pet owners have Beloved Critter Go List, supplies and plan just for their pets I have seen chickens and cats inside cars at shelters, and horses tied to fences a mile away from homes with names and phone numbers painted on their backsides)

# Key Concept: Check the Checklist

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- Grab your notebook and make certain you have completed the following:
- Got a bag(s)
- Started creating a Go Bag with at least one thing
- Started my lists
- Gathered documents and other stuff I want to have
- Decided what I could add on my next grocery store trip
- Worked on my other emergency plans
- Informed the family about the new plans
- Called my other loved ones and got them started on their Plans and Go Bags.
- Feel better prepared and getting on with my wonderful non-emergency-there-is-no-disaster-now-life

# Key Concept: Fuged Aboutit

**G**ood Job! Now if you have to go OTD in a wild dash, you might remember to grab your bag. And guess what. You might forget it. No worries. Disasters and emergencies can make even the best prepared forget everything. What you want in your Go Bag is up to you. It doesn't have to be fancy or expensive. Once you have the basics in place you can improve the selection or upgrade anytime. For more information on Disaster Preparations there are countless resources online and in your community to help you.

Now that you have made a start, "fugedaboutit" and move on with your day and your wonderful life! The best part about being even slightly pre-prepared for emergencies or disasters is that you can then emotionally and physically move on. I call this "fire-extinguisher thinking;" which means, most people have an extinguisher in their home or office but do not spend their time worrying about fires. Fires happen. You have your gear. You move on.

One of my favorite expressions is the variation on the theme about paranoia. You know the saying, right? "When someone is out to get you, paranoia is just good thinking!" I encourage you to have a healthy micro-dose of paranoia. What is the dosage? Just enough to get your go bag started today.

I don't feel bad about going OTD in an emergency. It is always better to go OTD than try to grab stuff. I consider my most recent experience just another "tap on the shoulder" to continue to prepare for the unexpected. It was a successful drill with lessons learned. My neighbors are still talking about it as we ride the elevators together and share our complaints. And, having had the honor of working in the midst of real disasters, a false alarm is nothing to complain about. But darn it was cold!

# About the Author

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Vali J. Hawkins Mitchell, Ph.D., LMHC, REAT, is a Certified Traumatologist, and holds a Doctorate in Health Education and Masters degrees in Applied Psychology and Expressive Art Therapy. She has an internationally recognized platform as the leading authority in the field of Emotional Continuity Management and is a highly regarded public speaker and trainer.

A valued mentor and keynote speaker she offers critical insights on the real human factors of disaster and emergency planning based on her responses to major events such as the World Trade Center, Hurricane Katrina, Samoan earthquake and Indonesian tsunami, and Pacific Northwest Wildfires. She is considered by many as the leading authority in the field of Emotional Continuity Management.

Academically, Dr. Hawkins Mitchell has been adjunct faculty at a number of universities and colleges, including Washington State University, the World Medicine Institute, Lane Community College, and has contributed original research in the area of Psychosocial Dynamics of Families with Pediatric Illness, Tools of Trauma Management for Emergency Care and Health Care Delivery professionals, and the Use of Quantum Poetry for Trauma Management. She has been trained by the National American Red Cross as a Disaster Mental Health provider and National Diversity Instructor, and is a private practice therapist and consultant for a company

that holds a contract with the Department of Defense. She has been working directly with military families and service members in all branches, since 2007.

She travels extensively training individuals and teams, private and government agencies, small private mom-n-pop companies and large corporations with methods to custom design a plan for Emotional Management of employees the actually fits the situation. Her original short article on creating a go-bag has been adopted by a number of City Emergency Management Planners and her work has been well received a Canada, the UK and around the Pacific Rim.

The author of Emotional Terrors in the Workplace: Protecting Your Bottom Line, Dr. Vali's Survival Guide: Tips for the Journey, and a number of plays, musicals, and children's titles, she is a performance musician and award winning artist. She is a Registered Expressive Arts Therapist and currently has her art studio and professional office in Seattle, Washington.

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