"PREPARE not Scare"

Because a life lived in fear is no life at all



Author Cat Douglas-Clarke

Get Ready, Then Get Living!

Prepare, Not Scare

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is no life at all

Cat Douglas-Clarke

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This book shares common sense ideas and the author's own opinions. It is not expert, medical, legal or financial advice. Always follow official guidance from your own government, emergency services and health professionals.

About the Author

Cat Douglas-Clarke isn't an emergency planner, a survival expert or someone with a bunker full of tinned peaches. She's a mum who works in workplace wellbeing, and who spends her days helping people feel more supported, more connected and a little less alone.

Like a lot of people, she found herself watching the news with a knot in her stomach. Instead of letting the fear win, she decided to do something useful with it. This book is the result: written by someone who simply wants to help people feel ready, and then get on with living.

Cat is passionate about real conversations, real connection and making sure nobody gets left behind. She's also the author of *Not My Problem*, a book about the idea of "normal" and what it costs the many of us who never quite fitted it.

If this book helps you, even a little, she'd love to hear from you. And she'd love it even more if you passed it on to someone you care about.

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A Note Before We Begin: Prepare, Not Scare

Let's get one thing straight before we start. This is not a scary book.

I know. The cover mentions war. The chapters mention cyber attacks, power cuts and empty shelves. If you picked this up with a knot in your stomach, I completely understand. But I promise you, that knot is going to be a lot looser by the time you close the last page.

Because this book was written to do the exact opposite of scaring you. It was written to prepare you. And those two things are not the same at all. In fact, they're opposites.

Scare makes you freeze. It keeps you up at 2am scrolling. It sends you to the supermarket to fight a stranger for the last pack of loo roll.

Prepare lets you breathe. It's a few bottles of water, a torch, some numbers written on paper, and a neighbour who knows your name. Then you close the cupboard door and get on with your life.

That's the whole idea. **Prepare, not scare.** You'll see it everywhere in this book, because I want it stuck in your head like a catchy song you can't get rid of.

The Thread Through Everything

There's one more thought that runs through every page, like a thread through a jumper.

We have always lived with fear. Every generation, everywhere in the world, has had its own version. Wars. Bombs. Plagues. Crashes. Floods. Famines. Somebody, somewhere, has always been reading a frightening headline over their breakfast.

And every generation has had to learn the same lesson: **a life lived in fear is no life at all.**

I believe that with my whole heart. Fear will always find something to whisper about. If we wait for the world to feel completely safe before we let ourselves live, we'll be waiting forever, and we'll miss everything good along the way. The laughter. The sunsets. The birthday cakes. The cuddles on the sofa.

So this book isn't asking you to be frightened. It's asking you to get ready, so you can stop being frightened.

What You'll Find in Here

- **The bigger picture, kept short.** Just enough to understand why it all feels scary, and why it doesn't need to.
- **A mindset for uncertain times.** How to stay hopeful, keep your joys on the calendar and keep living your life.
- **The practical stuff.** Water, food, warmth, light, money, staying in touch, health and keeping the kids happy, with simple steps you can actually take.
- **The old ways.** How people managed for thousands of years before the internet, and why a lot of it is rather lovely.
- **The people stuff.** Your mind, your children, your neighbours and your community, because that's what really gets us through.
- **A bit of fun.** Because if we can't laugh about the fact that the average emergency chocolate stash lasts about four days before somebody eats it, what's the point?

You'll also notice two little sections at the end of most chapters. One's called *Living, not just surviving*, and it's my reminder that all of this is about living fully, not hiding. The other's called *For the children*, because whatever happens in the world, our kids come first.

Wherever You Are in the World

This book is for everyone, everywhere. Power cuts, storms, cyber attacks and uncertain times don't care which country you live in.

Sometimes I'll mention specific examples, like the UK government's advice or a helpline number in Britain. That's just to give you a real example. **Wherever you live, please take five minutes to look up your own country's version.** Search online for your government's emergency preparedness advice, your local emergency number, and any helplines in your area. Then write them down on paper (you'll find out why that matters in Chapter 8).

This Isn't Expert Advice

I'm not an emergency planner, a doctor, a soldier or a scientist. I'm just someone who wants to help. This book shares common sense ideas and the things ordinary people have always done to get through hard times. **It isn't expert, medical, legal or financial advice.** Always follow official guidance from your own government, emergency services and health professionals, and check the latest advice where you live.

How to Read It

Cover to cover with a cup of tea, or dip in and out. If you've only got ten minutes, go straight to Chapter 15 for your *Prepare, Not Scare* plan.

And please, don't read it alone if it starts to feel heavy. Read it with your partner, your best friend, your mum, your neighbour. Talk about it. Laugh at the silly bits (there are plenty). Being ready is a team sport, and the team is everyone around you.

Right. Kettle on. Let's do this.

CHAPTER 1

We Have Always Lived with Fear



Let's start with a little confession that I suspect a lot of us share.

It's late. The house is quiet. You've been reading the news on your phone, which is always a mistake after 10pm. Something about cyber attacks. Something about a war that seems to be getting closer. And before you really know what you're doing, you've ordered a wind up torch, a power bank and a pack of solar lights. Possibly some tinned peaches. Definitely more batteries than any household has ever needed.

Then you sit back and think: *hang on. Is this fear? Have I just panic bought my way into a slightly more prepared future?*

And then a second thought arrives, right behind the first one.

Haven't we been here before? Over and over again?

Yes. We Have.

We really have. Every generation in history has had its moment of thinking *this is it*.

Our great grandparents lived through world wars, flu pandemics and the kind of poverty most of us can't imagine. Our grandparents grew up with rationing, air raids and the fear of the bomb. In the Cold War, children in classrooms around the world practised hiding under their desks, as if a wooden desk was going to save anybody. Governments printed leaflets telling families how to build a shelter out of doors and cushions.

Then came the oil crises, the strikes and the power cuts. Then the nervous countdown to the year 2000, when we were all told our computers might stop working at midnight and planes might fall out of the sky. (They

didn't. Lots of people were left with an awful lot of tinned soup.) Then terror attacks. Financial crashes. A global pandemic, when the whole world discovered that the thing humanity panics about most is apparently toilet roll.

And every single time, here we are. Still making tea. Still falling in love. Still raising children. Still laughing at terrible jokes.

That's not luck. That's people. Ordinary people who got scared, did a few sensible things, looked after each other and then got on with living.

So, Was Ordering Those Things Fear?

Here's where I've landed. **It depends on how you do it, not what you buy.**

Fear buying is frantic. It happens at 2am. It empties shelves. It buys far more than you need, and it leaves you feeling worse, not better. You end up with forty tins of something nobody in your house actually eats and the same knot in your stomach.

Preparing is different. It's calm. It's a few sensible things, bought once, put in a box and then forgotten about until you need them. It leaves you feeling lighter, because the worry finally has somewhere to go.

That's the difference between scare and prepare. Same torch. Completely different feeling.

And honestly, most of what you buy will end up being used for perfectly ordinary things. The power bank will charge phones on long journeys. The solar lights will end up in the garden on summer evenings. The torch will be used mainly to find things that have rolled under the sofa. That's fine. That's exactly how it should be.

Why This Book Exists

When you start reading the news properly, really reading it rather than skimming headlines while stirring your coffee, you notice something. Everybody's talking about the threat. Hardly anybody's talking about the people.

What happens to a family when the card machine stops working? What happens to a teenager when their phone goes dead and their friends go silent? What happens to the older lady at the end of the road who orders her

heart tablets online? What happens to our calm, our sense of community, our sense of who we are?

Those are human questions. And they're the ones this book is here to answer.

Because here's the thing. Every one of those problems has already been solved. Our grandparents solved them. Their great grandparents solved them. People in every corner of the world solve them every day. And the solutions are mostly simple, cheap and often rather lovely. A tin of cash on the top shelf. A radio. A paper address book. A pack of cards. A knock on a neighbour's door.

Back to Our Roots

Think about how much of your life now runs through the internet. Your money. Your shopping. Your heating, maybe. Your doctor. Your children's homework. Your news. Your friendships. Your photos, stored in a cloud somewhere you'll never visit. Possibly your ability to know what day the bins go out.

None of that is bad. A lot of it is wonderful. But it does mean that if the internet stopped working for a week, many of us genuinely wouldn't know how to do basic things. How to pay for bread. How to find out what's happening. How to get hold of a friend across town. How to entertain a bored eight year old for an entire rainy afternoon without the help of a tablet. (That last one is the true test of character.)

So this book is going to take you gently backwards. Not in a misty eyed, everything was better in the old days way. The old days had plenty wrong with them. Nobody's suggesting we bring back outside toilets. But in a practical way. We're going to dust off the old solutions and put them back within reach.

And I suspect you'll find some of them are worth keeping even if nothing bad ever happens. A paper address book. An evening with no screens. Knowing the names of the people on your street. If the worst never comes, those things will still have made your life richer.

Hope, Not Optimism

I want to be clear about one more thing. This isn't an optimistic book. Optimism says *everything will be fine*. I don't know that, and neither does anybody else.

This is a hopeful book. Hope says *whatever happens, we'll find a way through it together*. I'm not optimistic that the world will suddenly become peaceful and sensible next Tuesday. I am deeply, stubbornly hopeful about people.

Who This Book Is For

It's for anyone who's felt that knot in their stomach watching the news and wondered *what would I actually do?*

It's for parents and grandparents who want to protect the children in their lives without frightening them.

It's for people living on their own who want to feel less alone.

It's for people on tight budgets, because being ready should never be a luxury. I'll point out what's free, what's cheap and what can wait.

It's for community leaders, teachers, faith groups, sports coaches, volunteers and anyone else who quietly holds a neighbourhood together.

And it's for the sceptics too. If you're reading this thinking *nothing's going to happen, this is all a bit much*, then wonderful. I hope you're right. But humour me. Fill a few bottles of water. Learn the names of three neighbours. If nothing ever happens, you've lost nothing and gained a few friends.

Living, Not Just Surviving

So here's the promise this whole book is built on. We do the sensible things so we can stop carrying the fear around. We get ready, and then we get on with living.

Because we have always lived with fear. Only the names change. And a life lived in fear is no life at all.

Little by little. Together. Prepare, not scare. Let's go.

CHAPTER 2

A Mindset for Uncertain Times



Let's get the bigger picture out of the way quickly, because honestly, it's the least important part of this book.

The Whole Picture in a Nutshell

There's tension in the world. Alongside the wars you see on the news, there's a quieter one that people call a shadow war: cyber attacks, sabotage and fake news, designed to unsettle us rather than conquer us. Add in wilder weather, and it's no wonder governments are now asking households to be ready to manage for three days without power, water or the internet.

That's it. That's the bit you need to know. Everything else in this book is about what to do with it, and how to feel about it.

Three Facts Worth Knowing

I promised to keep the facts short. Here are the only three you really need.

Sweden has been posting a booklet about what to do in a crisis through every letterbox since 1943. That's over eighty years of being ready. And the Swedes are still famous for their coffee breaks and their long summer holidays. Being ready didn't stop them living. If anything, it set them free to.

In the UK, only about 4% of households have three days of drinking water at home. Which means if you fill six big bottles this week, you're officially in the top 4% of your country. Gold star. Tell everyone.

Over the last hundred years, deaths from natural disasters have fallen by more than 90%. Not because disasters stopped, but because

people got ready. Early warnings, better planning, neighbours looking out for each other. We got safer because we prepared.

That last one is the most hopeful fact I know. Preparation works. It always has.

Worry Isn't a Plan

Here's something worth saying out loud. Worrying feels like doing something. It isn't. You can lie awake for a hundred nights fretting about power cuts, and you'll be no more ready than when you started. Just more tired.

A plan is different. A plan is a few bottles of water, a torch, some numbers on paper and a chat round the kitchen table. Once it's done, it's done. The worry has somewhere to go, and you can get on with your life.

So every time the worry pops up, try asking yourself one question: *is there one small thing I could do about this today?* If there is, do it. If there isn't, let the worry go for now. It'll still be there tomorrow if you need it (it always is, the cheeky thing).

Zoom Out

When the news feels huge, it helps to zoom out. As we saw in Chapter 1, every generation has had its own frightening moment, and every one of them felt like *this is it* to the people living through it.

And yet here we all are. The human race is remarkably good at getting through things, especially when we do it together.

You come from a long line of people who made it. That's not nothing. That's everything.

Keep Your Joys on the Calendar

This might be the most important piece of advice in the whole book.

Don't cancel the good stuff. Book the holiday. Plan the birthday party. Say yes to the night out. Put the family barbecue in the diary. Learn the thing you've always wanted to learn. Start the garden.

Fear has a sneaky habit of making us put life on hold. *I'll wait until things calm down.* But things never really calm down, not completely. If we

wait for a perfectly safe world before we let ourselves enjoy this one, we'll miss the whole lot.

So get ready, yes. And then live like you mean it.

Look for What's Going Right

Our brains are wired to notice danger. It kept our ancestors alive when there were things with teeth around every corner. But it means we notice the one scary headline and miss the hundred lovely things happening on the same day.

So balance it out on purpose. Notice the neighbour who took the bins in. The stranger who held the door. The teenager who helped the old man with his shopping. The sunrise that didn't care about the news at all. They're everywhere, once you start looking. And the more you look, the more you'll see.

Hope Is a Habit

Hope isn't a feeling that just turns up one day. It's something we practise. A bit like a muscle, it gets stronger the more you use it.

You practise hope every time you plant a seed, plan something nice, help someone out, or tell your children *whatever happens, we'll be OK together*. You practise it every time you choose a cup of tea with a friend over another hour of scrolling.

You don't have to feel hopeful to act hopeful. Do the hopeful thing first. The feeling usually catches up.

Be the Calm One

In every family, every street and every workplace, there's someone people look to when things get wobbly. The calm one. The one who says *right, kettle on, let's work out what to do.*

You can be that person. Not because you're never scared, but because you've thought about it in advance. That's what this book is really for. Not to make you an expert. Just to make you the calm one.

Living, Not Just Surviving

There's a difference between surviving and living. Surviving is getting through the day. Living is enjoying it.

The people who came before us didn't just survive hard times. They danced through them. They fell in love during air raids, got married in borrowed dresses and held street parties with whatever they could find. Not because they didn't know the world was dangerous. Because they did, and they decided to live anyway.

That's the invitation of this whole book.

For the Children

Our kids hear far more than we think. If they ask whether there's going to be a war, they don't need a lecture. They need something honest and steady: *Some countries are arguing and fighting, and that's sad and serious. Lots of clever grown ups are working really hard to keep everyone safe. And our family has a plan, so whatever happens, we'll be OK together.*

Then go and do something fun together. Because the best way to show children that life goes on is to let them see you living it.

CHAPTER 3

What a Cyber Attack Could Actually Feel Like



When most of us picture a cyber attack, we picture the film version. A hacker in a hoodie, screens full of green numbers, every light in the city going off at once, and some very dramatic music.

Real life is much less cinematic. A serious cyber attack would probably feel less like a disaster film and more like a really rubbish week where nothing quite works. Less *Hollywood blockbuster*, more *why won't the card machine take my card*. And once you understand that, a lot of the fear drains out of it.

So instead of a technical lecture, here's a story. It's not a prediction, and nobody in it is a real person. It's you. Your household. Your street. Wherever in the world that street happens to be.

Imagine a Week Like This

Tuesday morning. You pop to the shop for milk on the school run. The card machine beeps and says *connection error*. A queue starts to build. The shopkeeper looks flustered. A couple of people have cash; most are staring at their phones as if glaring at them will help. If you've got a note tucked in the back of your purse or wallet, you buy milk, bread and a few bits for a neighbour who's stuck. On the way home your banking app tells you services are *experiencing issues*. Then your phone goes quiet altogether.

Tuesday afternoon. School sends the kids home early because the systems are down. Your teenager is furious, because there's no signal and they can't message their friends, which in teenage terms is roughly equivalent to

the end of civilisation. Your youngest thinks an afternoon off is the greatest thing that's ever happened. Then, as it starts to get dark, the power goes off.

Tuesday night. This is the moment that decides how the whole week will feel.

Imagine going to the cupboard where, a few months ago, you put a plastic box. Inside there are torches, a wind up radio, batteries, a first aid kit, a pack of cards, a list of phone numbers on paper and a bit of cash. You tune the radio to your local station. The news is sketchy but calm. Something's happened to some of the country's computer systems. People are working on it. Check on your neighbours. Stay home if you can.

You eat cold sandwiches by torchlight. The youngest declares it the best night ever. You play cards. The teenager eventually stops sulking and wins three games in a row, then sulks again because there's nobody to post about it to. Everyone goes to bed in jumpers.

Wednesday. The power's back, but the internet's still patchy and card payments are on and off. The big supermarket has long queues, and the bottled water and toilet roll have vanished (of course they have; it's practically tradition). But you don't need to go. You've got enough. So instead you knock on the door of the older lady who lives on her own a few doors down. She's fine, but she hasn't got a radio, so you lend her your spare. You agree she'll put a card in her window: green for *I'm fine*, red for *please knock*.

Thursday. The water goes off. You've got bottles stored, so you're OK. Drinking and cooking first, washing later. In the afternoon, a few neighbours wander out onto the pavement. Someone's got a camping stove and boils a big pan of water for tea. Someone else brings biscuits. Someone's dog makes friends with everyone. And for the first time in years, the whole street is chatting.

Friday. Things start coming back. Water's on, with a notice to boil it for a few days. Cards are working. Phones are getting better. Your teenager gets their signal back, scrolls for four minutes and announces they missed absolutely nothing. Your youngest asks if you can have a torchlight card night every Friday from now on.

What Made the Difference

Nothing in that week was a catastrophe. It was stressful and inconvenient and, frankly, a bit annoying. But look at what turned it from a crisis into something you coped with:

- A little bit of cash.
- A torch and a radio that didn't need power or the internet.
- Enough water and food to stay out of the queues.
- A plan you'd talked about, so nobody panicked.
- Knowing your neighbours.
- Something to do with the kids that made it feel like an adventure, not an emergency.

Now picture that same week without any of those things. No cash, so no milk. No radio, so no idea what's going on and a head full of rumours. No water, so a long queue with two upset children. No idea who lives next door.

Same week. Completely different experience.

That, in one story, is the whole point of this book. Prepare, not scare.

The Domino Problem

There's one idea from this chapter worth keeping, because it makes everything else make sense.

These days almost everything is connected to everything else. The shop's card machine needs the internet. The phone mast needs electricity. The water pumps are run by computers. So when one thing goes down, it can knock over the next thing, and the next. Call it the domino problem.

And here's the lovely, hopeful bit: **you can put your own little wall in front of the dominoes.** Water in a bottle means a broken pump doesn't reach you. Cash in a tin means a broken card machine doesn't stop you buying bread. A radio means a dead phone doesn't leave you in the dark. Every chapter after this one is really just about building those little walls, one at a time, without any fuss.

And If It Went on Longer?

Most experts think a long disruption is unlikely. But if it ever did happen, everything in this book still applies, just stretched out: more water, more food, growing and sharing, and leaning on each other the way our grandparents did. You'd follow official advice, which in almost any serious emergency comes down to three words: **go in, stay in, tune in.** And you'd already have the foundations in place, because you're not preparing for a hundred different disasters. You're building one set of foundations that holds up whatever happens.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Did you notice something about that imagined week? The best bits weren't the torches or the water. They were the card games, the cup of tea on the pavement, the dog making friends, the youngest declaring it the best night ever. Even in a rubbish week, life kept happening. Laughter kept happening. Neighbours kept happening.

That's what fear forgets to tell us. It shows us every way things could go wrong, and none of the ways we'd cope, or the moments of joy that would still find us. Our grandparents knew this. They sang in the shelters. They held street parties in the middle of rationing. They didn't wait for the world to be safe before they started living. And neither should we.

For the Children

That imagined week is a lovely one to talk through with older children, because it shows them that even when things go wrong, families cope. Read it together and ask: *What would we do? Where's our torch? Which neighbours might need us to knock?* Kids love being given a job, so let them be in charge of the radio, the cards or the neighbour check.

For little ones, keep it really simple. *Sometimes the electricity and the internet stop working for a little while. When that happens, we've got a special box with torches and games, and it's a bit like camping at home.*

Camping at home. Honestly, use that phrase. It works wonders.

Your Steps from This Chapter

- Have a slow wander round your home and notice everything that needs the internet or electricity. Just notice.
- Ask yourself which one thing going down would hit your family hardest. Start there.
- Find your local radio station's frequency and write it down on paper.

CHAPTER 4

The First 72 Hours



If there's one chapter worth reading twice, it's this one. The first three days of anything are when we feel most wobbly, and they're also when a little bit of preparation makes the biggest difference.

Why three days? Because that's roughly how long it can take for help to get properly organised after something big happens. Emergency services everywhere are brilliant, but they need time to get going, and they need to reach the people in real danger first. That's why so many governments now use the same simple rule: if you can look after yourself for three days, you free up help for someone who can't.

I love that way of looking at it. Being ready isn't selfish. It's one of the kindest things you can do for your community.

The First Hour: Just Pause

When something big happens, our bodies go straight into alarm mode. Heart racing. Mind racing. Hand reaching for the phone to check the group chat. That's completely normal. It's an ancient part of us trying to keep us alive. Unfortunately, that ancient part of us was designed for running away from sabre toothed tigers, not for making sensible decisions about the freezer.

So the very first thing to do is pause. Take three slow breaths, making the out breath longer than the in breath. It sounds too simple to work. It isn't. It tells your body you're not being chased by anything with teeth.

Then ask yourself four questions:

1. **Is anyone in danger right now?** If so, deal with that first. Call your emergency number if you can. If you can't get through, go to where help will be: a hospital, a fire station, a police station.
2. **Is it safe to stay at home?** In most power cuts or cyber problems, home is the safest place to be. Go in, stay in, tune in. The only exceptions are fire, flood, a gas leak, or being told to leave.
3. **Where are my people?** If the kids are at school, remember that schools have emergency plans and will look after them. Try not to rush across town in a panic unless that's what you've agreed in advance.
4. **What do I actually know?** Not what someone said in a group chat. Not what a man in the queue at the petrol station said. What do you actually know?

Know Your Emergency Number

This sounds obvious, but it's worth saying. Emergency numbers are different around the world. **999** in the UK. **112** across the European Union, and it also works from mobiles in many other countries. **911** in the USA and Canada. **000** in Australia. **Look up yours, and the number for non emergency medical help, and write them on paper.** Even the ones you think you'll never forget. In a panic, people forget.

The First Day: The Basics

Once you've had that pause, here's what to do. You won't need all of these every time.

Get the radio on. A battery or wind up radio is your best friend in a crisis. Your national or local broadcaster will have emergency information. Listen to the news on the hour, then turn it off. Constant news isn't information. It's anxiety on a loop.

Save your phone battery. Turn on low power mode, turn the brightness down and stop scrolling (I know, I know). Use it only for short, important messages. Texts often get through when calls won't. And keep a charged power bank in your emergency box.

If the power goes, ring your electricity company's power cut line. In the UK, that's simply 105, a free number that puts you through to your local network. Wherever you live, find your own power cut number now, while you can still look it up, and write it down.

Keep the fridge and freezer shut. A closed fridge usually keeps things cold for about four hours. A full freezer can keep food frozen for about two days. Every time you open the door to stare hopefully at the contents, you let the cold out. So eat what's in the fridge first, then the freezer, then the cupboard.

Fill up what you can. If the water's still on but you're worried it might not be, fill some clean bottles and run the bath. The bath water is for flushing and washing, not drinking, however tempting it looks.

Knock on a door. Within the first day, check on the people around you who might be struggling. Older neighbours. People living alone. New parents. Anyone who relies on medical equipment. A knock and *are you alright, do you need anything?* can turn someone's frightening night into a safe one.

Stay put if you can. Traffic lights might be out. Fuel might be hard to find. If you don't need to go anywhere, don't.

Please Read This Bit Twice

This is the most serious part of the whole book, so no jokes here.

In real power cuts, people don't usually get hurt by the power cut itself. They get hurt by the things they do to cope with it.

- **Never, ever use a barbecue, camping stove, patio heater or generator indoors**, or in a garage or porch attached to the house. They give off carbon monoxide, which you can't see or smell and which can kill quickly. Cook outside, in the open air. And get a battery powered carbon monoxide alarm and test it.
- **Use torches, not candles, whenever you can.** Candles feel cosy, but torches are much safer. If you do use candles, put them in a proper holder, away from curtains, children and pets, and never leave them burning when you leave the room or fall asleep.

- **Watch the stairs in the dark.** Keep a torch by the bed and one by the stairs. Head torches are brilliant.
- **Unplug the expensive stuff** during a power cut so a surge doesn't damage it when the power comes back. Leave one light switched on so you know when it's back.

The Conversation That Costs Nothing

The single most valuable thing you can do for the first 72 hours doesn't cost a penny. It's a conversation.

Sit down with your household, ideally round the kitchen table with something nice to eat (bribery is a perfectly valid planning tool), and work out the answers to these questions together. Then write them down on paper and keep a copy in your emergency box and in everyone's bag.

- **If the phones are down and we're apart, where do we meet?** One place close to home, like a neighbour's house, and one further away in case you can't get home.
- **Who collects the children?** And does the school have that person's name?
- **Who checks on whom?** Grandparents, an elderly neighbour, a friend who lives alone.
- **What are our important numbers?** Be honest. How many phone numbers do you actually know by heart? If your phone dies, those numbers die with it.
- **Where's our emergency box?** Everyone should know, including the kids.
- **What about the pets?**

This conversation isn't as grim as it sounds. Kids in particular tend to have very strong opinions about which board games count as essential survival equipment. Let them win that one.

Your Emergency Box

There's a full checklist at the back of the book. But here are the basics, based on the advice most governments give:

- Water: three litres per person per day, for three days
- Food that doesn't need cooking or a fridge, ideally things you already eat
- A tin opener that doesn't need electricity
- A torch for each person, and spare batteries
- A wind up or battery radio
- A charged power bank
- Some cash, in coins and small notes
- Copies of important documents, and a paper list of phone numbers and everyone's medicines
- A first aid kit
- Blankets and warm clothes
- Hand sanitiser, wet wipes and loo roll
- Any medication you need
- Baby supplies if you need them (ready to feed formula is best, because you might not be able to boil water)
- Pet food

Please don't rush out and buy all of that this weekend. Check what you've already got, make a list, and add a few things each time you shop. And check the box twice a year. Attaching it to something you already do helps, like the clocks changing or a birthday.

A Grab Bag, Just in Case

Occasionally the safest thing is to leave home: a flood, a fire nearby, a gas leak, or being told to go. For that, it's worth having a small bag for each person that's light enough to carry. Copies of documents, a few days of medication, a phone charger, spare glasses, a bit of cash, a torch, a change of clothes, a snack, some water, and something comforting for each child.

One exception: if you're escaping a fire, take nothing at all. Just get out.

Get on the List for Extra Help

In the UK, households can join something called the **Priority Services Register**, for free. It tells your electricity, gas and water companies that you might need extra help in a power cut or water outage: early warnings, bottled water brought to your door, or someone checking you're OK. Households with young children, older people, disabled people and anyone who relies on medical equipment at home can usually join.

Many countries and utility companies have something similar. **Wherever you live, ask your energy and water providers whether they keep a list of customers who need extra support,** and sign up if you're eligible. Do it now, while everything's working.

If You're Out When It Happens

Life doesn't wait for us to be home with our emergency box, does it? So think about what you'd do if you were out and about.

In the car. If traffic lights go out, treat every junction with extra care, go slowly and be patient. If fuel becomes hard to get, don't make journeys you don't need to. Keep a little car kit: a blanket, a torch, water, some snacks, a phone charger and a paper map.

At the shops. If the card machines stop, don't panic and don't join a rush. Buy what you need with any cash you've got, and go home. Leave the rest for others.

On public transport. Trains and buses may stop. Know roughly how you'd get home on foot if you had to, and who you could ask for a lift. If you're stuck, stay with other people and listen for official announcements.

At work. Keep a few things in your bag or drawer: a charger, a small torch, a snack, water, any medication you'd need, and a card with your family's numbers and meeting place. There's more on this in the bonus chapter on work.

On the school run. If you can't get to school, the school will look after your children. That's what your family plan and emergency contacts are for. Head for the plan, not the panic.

Days Two and Three: Find a Rhythm

If it goes on beyond the first day, the most important thing is to move out of crisis mode and into a routine. We all cope so much better when the day has a shape.

- Get up at your normal time. Get dressed. (Yes, properly. Pyjama days are for fun, not for emergencies.)
- Eat at regular times, even if it's just sandwiches.
- Listen to the news at set times, then turn it off.
- Give everyone a job: water monitor, torch keeper, neighbour checker, games organiser.
- Get outside in the daylight if it's safe.
- End the day with something good. A game. A story. A song. A chat.

Three days isn't very long. You can do three days. And with a little bit of preparation, you can do three days with some laughter in them too.

Living, Not Just Surviving

A chapter about the first 72 hours can feel heavy. So here's how to think about it. You don't make a family plan because you expect the worst. You make it so you can stop thinking about the worst. Once it's written down and the box is in the cupboard, you can close the door and get on with your life.

That's the whole point. Being ready gives you permission to stop worrying. Scare keeps you staring at the cupboard. Prepare lets you close it and go and put the kettle on.

For the Children

Our kids take their cue from us. If we're frantic, they're frightened. If we're calm and a bit matter of fact, they relax.

So when something happens, before you do anything else, get down to their level, look them in the eye and say something simple: *The power's gone off. That's OK. We know what to do. Let's go and get the torches.*

Then give them a job straight away. Doing something is the best cure for fear, at any age.

Make each little one a small comfort bag for the emergency box. Their own torch (children adore having their own torch), a small favourite toy, a book, some stickers and a treat. Let them choose what goes in, and swap things around every few months so it stays exciting.

And make sure every child who's old enough knows three things off by heart, and has them written on a card in their school bag: their address, the phone number of a grown up they trust, and your family meeting place.

CHAPTER 5

Water, Warmth and Light



Strip everything right back and there are three things we need before anything else. Water, warmth and light. Our bodies shout loudest about these, and they're what make us feel safe, or not.

Our grandparents had a much closer relationship with all three than we do. They knew where their water came from. They knew how to keep a house warm with one fire and a draught excluder shaped like a sausage dog. And they knew that dark evenings were for stories and cards, not screens. There's a lot to learn from them here.

Water: The One That Matters Most

We can go weeks without food, but only a few days without water. That's why it's at the top of every government's list: **three litres of drinking water per person, per day, for at least three days.**

For a family of four, that's thirty six litres. Sounds like a lot. It's actually just six of those big six litre bottles from the supermarket. Pick up one or two every time you shop and you'll be there within a month, with nobody even noticing (except possibly your back).

If you only do one thing after reading this book, make it this. Remember, in the UK only about 4% of households have three days of water. If you do this, you're already ahead of nearly everyone.

Storing it

- Shop bought bottled water is the easiest. Keep it somewhere cool and dark. Check the dates every six months, drink the older bottles in normal life, and replace them. Nothing wasted.
- You can also fill clean, food safe containers with tap water. Label them with the date and refresh them every six months.
- Don't use old milk bottles. They're really hard to clean properly, and nobody wants a surprise yoghurt.
- If you can, store it in a few different places. Under the stairs, in a wardrobe, in the garage if it won't freeze.

Water you didn't know you had

There's often more water at home than you realise. If you've got a hot water tank, it holds a lot (ask whoever services your boiler how to drain it safely). The water in the toilet cistern, the tank not the bowl, is fine for washing if you don't use chemical blocks. Even the juice in tinned fruit counts.

Making water safe

If you run out, or you're told the tap water isn't safe, treat water before drinking it.

- **Boil it.** Bring it to a proper rolling boil for at least a minute, then let it cool. If the power's off, do this outside on a camping stove. Never indoors.
- **Purification tablets** are cheap, tiny and last for years. Pop a pack in your emergency box and follow the instructions on the packet exactly.
- **If it's cloudy,** strain it through a clean cloth first, then boil or treat it.

If you're ever told to boil your water, follow that advice to the letter, including for brushing teeth and making up baby bottles.

Water for everything else

Drinking water is precious, so use other water for other jobs. A water butt in the garden is brilliant, especially if you live somewhere that rains a lot (you know who you are). Use it to flush the loo by pouring a bucket firmly into

the bowl. Have a strip wash at the sink with a bowl and a flannel, the way our nans did most days. And keep plenty of hand sanitiser and wet wipes, because tummy bugs spread fast when people can't wash properly.

Warmth: Make One Room Cosy

Most of us don't realise how dangerous the cold can be in a long power cut, especially for babies, older people and anyone who's poorly. The good news is that staying warm is mostly about being clever, not spending money.

Pick one warm room

If the heating's off, don't try to heat the whole house. Pick one room and make it your warm room. Ideally a smaller one, on the sunny side of the house, with as few outside walls as possible, and not too far from the loo.

Everyone moves in there for the evening and the night. Close the door. Roll a towel along the bottom. Hang a blanket over the door and the windows at night, and open the curtains in the day to let any sun in. Our grandparents did this without even thinking. The front room was for best. Everyone lived in the kitchen, because that's where the warmth was.

Layers, layers, layers

- Lots of thin layers are warmer than one thick one.
- Wear a hat indoors, especially at night. You'll look ridiculous. You'll also be warm.
- Thick socks, gloves, a scarf.
- Put blankets *under* you as well as on top. A surprising amount of heat disappears into the mattress.
- Snuggle up. Families with young children might want to sleep together in the warm room. Old fashioned, cosy, and it works.

Warm food, warm drinks, warm hearts

A hot drink and a hot meal warm you from the inside and lift your mood like nothing else. Boil water once in the morning, on a camping stove outside if the power's off, and keep it in a good flask. Tea all day. If you've still got

power, fill hot water bottles, but never with boiling water straight from the kettle, and never let a baby or small child sleep with one against their skin.

And move! Star jumps with the kids, dancing round the kitchen, a brisk walk round the garden. It sounds daft. It works. Bonus points if the neighbours see you.

Fires

If you've got a properly fitted wood burner or fireplace with a swept chimney, it's an absolute treasure in a power cut. Keep dry logs and kindling, and matches in a tin. Get the chimney swept every year, and have a carbon monoxide alarm in that room.

If you haven't got one, please don't improvise. Remember the carbon monoxide rule from Chapter 4: nothing that burns fuel comes indoors unless it's made and fitted for it.

Who needs us most

Babies can't keep themselves warm well. Older people often don't feel the cold until they're already in trouble. People with heart or lung conditions are more at risk. In a cold spell without power, these are the people to check on first, and to bring into your warm room if they're on their own.

And When It's Too Hot

Depending on where in the world you live, heat might be a much bigger worry than cold. And summers are getting hotter almost everywhere.

If it's a scorcher and the power's off, keep curtains and blinds closed on the sunny side during the day, and open windows at night when it's cooler. Drink water little and often, even if you don't feel thirsty. Wear loose, light clothes. A damp flannel on the back of the neck or a cool foot bath works wonders. Eat lighter meals. Stay out of the sun in the middle of the day. And check on older neighbours, who often don't realise they're overheating until they're unwell.

Watch for heat exhaustion: headache, dizziness, feeling sick, being very thirsty, heavy sweating, cramps. Get the person somewhere cool, give them

water and help them cool down. If they're confused, stop sweating or don't improve, call your emergency number.

Light: More Torches Than You Think

When the lights go out, it's the darkness that makes most of us anxious, especially the kids. It's also when people walk into door frames. So the rule is simple: have more torches than you think you need. Nobody in the history of the world has ever said *I wish I'd bought fewer torches.*

- **One torch per person**, plus a couple of spares. Children love having their own, and it stops the arguments.
- **Head torches** are a game changer. Hands free for cooking, reading or getting to the loo in the night. You'll look like a miner. Embrace it.
- **A lantern** lights up a whole room, which makes the evening feel so much cosier.
- **Solar garden lights** are a lovely cheap trick. Bring them in at night, pop them in a jar, and put them back outside in the morning to charge.
- **Wind up torches** need no batteries at all.
- **Batteries.** Keep a stock of the sizes you need, and check them twice a year.

Candles feel romantic. Our nans used them. But they also had a lot more house fires than we do. Torches first, always.

Making friends with the dark

Once the first panicky half hour passes, a dark house can actually be quite peaceful. Nobody's staring at a screen. People talk. For most of human history, people went to bed earlier in winter and got up with the light, and plenty of research now suggests that darker evenings are good for our sleep. A power cut might just be a chance to reset.

The Bit Nobody Wants to Talk About

Toilets. There, I've said it.

If the water's off for more than a day, you need a plan, because this is where illness spreads. If you've got water from a water butt or the bath, flush with a bucket. If you've got no water at all, line the toilet bowl with a strong bin bag, use it, add a handful of cat litter, sawdust or soil, tie it off, and put it in an outside bin with a lid until things are back to normal. Not glamorous. Very effective. Nobody will be writing poems about it.

Keep strong bin bags, loo roll, hand sanitiser, wet wipes and nappy bags in your emergency box. Wash or sanitise hands after the toilet and before touching food, every single time. And keep a good supply of period products.

Your Steps from This Chapter

- Buy or fill your first six litres of drinking water this week.
- Put a pack of water purification tablets in your emergency box.
- Choose your warm room (or cool room) and put two spare blankets in it.
- Count your torches. One per person. Buy batteries.
- Get, or test, a carbon monoxide alarm.
- Think about a water butt if you've got a garden.

Living, Not Just Surviving

There's something lovely about water, warmth and light. They're the things fear makes us panic about, and they're also the things that make a house feel like a home. A cup of tea. A warm room. A lamp glowing on a dark evening.

When you stock a few bottles of water and find a torch for everyone, you're not building a bunker. You're protecting the simple things that make life worth living. And in the meantime, light the lamp, put the kettle on and enjoy them. That's what they're for.

For the Children

Water, warmth and light are brilliant ways to get kids involved without scaring them.

Give them a **water job**. Little ones can count the bottles. Older ones can check the dates. Science mad kids will love filtering muddy water through a cloth, then boiling it with you. It's a proper experiment, and they'll tell their teacher about it for weeks.

Turn the warm room into a **den**. Blankets over the table, cushions on the floor, battery fairy lights, a pile of books. A night in a blanket den with the whole family is the kind of thing children remember for the rest of their lives, not as something scary, but as something magical.

Play **torch games**. Shadow puppets on the wall. Torch tag. Reading under the covers with a torch, which for once they're actually allowed to do. Poke holes in a cardboard box and shine a torch inside to make your own stars.

And keep a small torch by every child's bed. Being scared of the dark is real and completely normal. A torch they control gives them power over it.

CHAPTER 6

Food: The Cupboard, the Garden and the Old Ways



Food is where the old ways really shine.

Think about our grandparents' generation, wherever in the world they lived. They could make a meal out of what looked like an empty cupboard. A bit of bacon or beans, an onion, a few potatoes and a handful of oats became a pot of soup that fed the whole family for two days. Nothing was wasted. Everything was stretched. And everyone sat round the table to eat it together.

That's the spirit of this chapter. Not a bunker full of tins. A kitchen that can look after you.

First, Can We Talk About Panic Buying?

You'll remember 2020. Empty shelves all over the world. No loo roll, no pasta, no flour. Grown adults wrestling over the last bag of rice. Future historians are going to have a field day.

Here's the fascinating bit. Research in the UK afterwards found that only a tiny number of people actually bought huge amounts. Most of those empty shelves were caused by ordinary people, people like you and me, each buying *just a little bit extra* at exactly the same time. Supermarkets that run on daily deliveries simply can't cope with millions of us adding a few things to the trolley at once.

So two things. First, the best time to build up your cupboard is now, slowly, while nobody else is doing it. Second, if something happens, the

kindest thing you can do is **not** rush to the shops. If you've already got what you need, stay home and leave the shelves for those who haven't.

Being prepared isn't hoarding. Being prepared is the cure for hoarding. Prepare, not scare.

The Everyday Cupboard

The golden rule: **store what you eat, and eat what you store.**

There's no point filling a cupboard with tins of something nobody in your house will touch. (We all have that one tin of mysterious beans that's moved house with us three times. That doesn't count.) Look at what you already buy and keep a bit more of it. When you use something from the back of the cupboard, put it on the shopping list. New things go to the back, old things come to the front. That's it. That's the whole system.

Add one or two extra things each week, and within a couple of months you'll have three days' worth without even noticing.

Things that keep well

- Tins: beans, tomatoes, soup, fish, meat, vegetables, fruit, rice pudding, custard
- Pasta, rice, oats, lentils, noodles
- Flour, baking powder, bicarbonate of soda, yeast, sugar, salt
- Long life milk and plant milks
- Peanut butter, jam, honey, spreads
- Crackers, oatcakes and crispbread
- Dried fruit and nuts
- Stock cubes, herbs, spices, oil, vinegar
- Tea, coffee, hot chocolate, squash
- Treats. Chocolate, biscuits, sweets. I'm completely serious. Morale is a survival tool. (Top tip: hide the emergency chocolate somewhere nobody will look. Behind the vegetables usually works.)

No cook meals

For the first few days, aim for food that doesn't need cooking or a fridge. Crackers with tinned fish or peanut butter. A tin of beans mixed with a tin of sweetcorn and a splash of oil and vinegar. Cereal with long life milk. Tinned fruit with rice pudding. Not exactly fine dining, but filling, safe and perfectly fine for a few days. There's a three day no cook meal plan in the appendix.

Special diets

If anyone at home has allergies, coeliac disease, diabetes or another dietary need, build your cupboard around them first, because specialist foods are often the first to disappear. The same goes for baby formula: ready to feed is best, because you might not be able to boil water safely. And don't forget the pets, who will not accept a power cut as an excuse for dinner being late.

Cooking Without Power

After a day or two, a hot meal makes an enormous difference to how everyone feels.

A camping stove, outside. A simple gas camping stove and a few spare canisters is one of the best things you can own for a power cut. Outdoors only, out of the wind, on a steady surface. Never inside. Not even with the window open.

A barbecue, outside. Same rule. And yes, you can cook beans on a barbecue. Nobody will judge you.

A wood burner, if you have one. Many have a flat top where a kettle or pan can sit.

The haybox: a brilliant old trick. In wartime, families all over the world saved fuel with what the British called a haybox. You bring a pot of stew, soup, porridge or rice to the boil, put the lid on, then wrap the whole thing in blankets or towels, or tuck it into a box packed with cushions. The heat stays in and the food keeps slowly cooking for hours without any more fuel. It's basically a slow cooker made of duvets. Porridge left overnight is

ready by morning. Just bring anything with meat back to a proper boil before eating it.

A flask. Boil water once in the morning, keep it in a good flask, and you've got tea, instant soups and porridge all day.

Bread Without a Bakery

Bread is the thing people panic about most, and it's one of the easiest things to make.

Soda bread needs no yeast and no waiting. Flour, bicarbonate of soda, salt and buttermilk (or ordinary milk with a squeeze of lemon). Mix, shape, bake. You can even cook it in a covered pot on a stove.

Flatbreads are simpler still. Flour, water, a pinch of salt, a drop of oil. Roll thin and cook in a dry pan for a minute each side. Almost every culture in the world has its own version, from tortillas to chapatis, and every one of them has kept families fed through hard times.

Three Recipes to Know by Heart

Here are three simple recipes that use what's in the cupboard and feel like a hug in a bowl. Write them on a card and keep them in your emergency box.

Simple soda bread

You'll need 500g plain flour (or half plain, half wholemeal), 1 teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda, 1 teaspoon of salt and 400ml of buttermilk. No buttermilk? Use 400ml of ordinary milk with a tablespoon of lemon juice or vinegar stirred in, and leave it for five minutes.

Mix the dry things in a big bowl. Make a well in the middle, pour in the milk and stir with a knife until it just comes together. Don't overwork it. Shape it into a round, cut a deep cross on top, and bake at 200°C for about 30 to 35 minutes, until it sounds hollow when you tap the bottom. No oven? Cook it slowly in a heavy lidded pan on a low heat, turning it once, until it sounds hollow. Eat it warm with butter and jam. Bliss.

Pan flatbreads

You'll need 250g plain flour, a pinch of salt, a tablespoon of oil and about 150ml of water.

Mix everything into a soft dough, knead for a couple of minutes, then split it into six balls. Roll each one out thin. Cook in a hot, dry frying pan for about a minute each side, until it puffs and gets golden spots. Wrap them in a tea towel to keep them soft. They're perfect with soup, beans, cheese, anything. And they only need a camping stove.

Grandma's cupboard soup

Every family in the world has a version of this. Gently soften a chopped onion in a big pan with a little oil. Add whatever vegetables you've got, chopped: carrots, potatoes, celery, leeks, a tin of tomatoes. Pour in enough stock to cover (a stock cube and boiling water is fine). Add a tin of beans, some lentils, a bit of bacon or leftover meat if you have it. Simmer gently until everything's soft. Season well. It's even better the next day, which is exactly what you want when fuel is precious. Use the haybox trick: bring it to the boil, wrap it up, and let it carry on cooking on its own.

Grow Something, Anything

In the Second World War, Britain had its *Dig for Victory* campaign and America had its *Victory Gardens*. Lawns, parks and even bomb sites were turned into vegetable patches. People who'd never grown a potato in their lives became surprisingly good at it.

Nobody's asking you to dig up your lawn. But growing even a little of your own food does three lovely things. It gives you fresh food that doesn't depend on a lorry. It teaches you a skill that could really matter one day. And it's one of the best things you can do for your mental health.

No garden? Herbs on the windowsill. Salad leaves in a tray that grow back when you cut them. Cress and pea shoots on damp kitchen roll, ready in a week, and kids adore it.

A small garden or balcony? Potatoes in a bag. Beans and peas up a fence. Tomatoes in a pot. Courgettes, which will produce more than any

family can possibly eat (you'll be leaving them on neighbours' doorsteps like a courgette fairy). Hardy greens like kale.

Want to go further? Look into allotments or community gardens near you, because waiting lists can be long. And here's the best tip of all: **ask the older growers.** Every community has someone who's been growing vegetables for fifty years and would be thrilled to show you how.

Keep a few packets of seeds too. They're cheap, they last a couple of years, and in a long crisis a packet of seeds could be worth more than money.

Foraging, Carefully

Wherever you live, there's probably wild food nearby. Blackberries, wild garlic, apples from old trees, young nettles picked with gloves for soup. Foraging is a lovely thing to do as a family in normal times.

But one firm rule: **never eat anything unless you're 100% sure what it is.** Some deadly plants look very like edible ones, and wild mushrooms should only ever be eaten if an expert has identified them. A good local identification book is worth having on the shelf, because the app might not work.

The Lost Art of Preserving

Before fridges, every home preserved food. It's how people got through the winter. Jam and chutney turn a glut of fruit into something that lasts a year. Pickling keeps vegetables for months. Sauerkraut needs nothing but cabbage and salt. Apple rings dry beautifully in a low oven.

Learn these from a good, reliable source and follow the safety advice properly, especially around clean jars. Done right, they're safe and delicious, and there's something deeply smug, in the nicest possible way, about a cupboard full of jars you made yourself.

Make It Stretch

In a longer disruption, the most useful skill isn't cooking. It's stretching. Our grandparents were geniuses at this.

- **Bulk meals out** with oats, lentils, beans, rice, potatoes and veg.

- **Waste nothing.** Veg peelings and bones make stock. Stale bread makes bread pudding. Leftovers become soup, hash or pie.
- **Cook once, eat twice.**
- **Share.** One big pot of soup for three households uses far less fuel than three little ones.

And that last one leads to one of the best pictures in this whole book, which we'll come back to in Chapter 12. A community hall. A big pot. A queue of neighbours holding bowls. That's not a picture of things falling apart. That's a picture of a community at its very best.

Your Steps from This Chapter

- This week, add three things your family actually eats to the back of the cupboard.
- Write down five meals you could make with no cooking at all.
- Get a camping stove and spare gas, or know whose you can borrow.
- Try a haybox meal one weekend, just for fun.
- Bake soda bread or flatbreads with someone you love.
- Plant something. Even a tray of cress.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Food has always been one of the ways people refuse to let fear win. In wartime, with rationing and bombs falling, families still found a way to make a birthday cake and saved up sugar for a celebration. They still sat round the table together. They still invited the neighbours in.

A full cupboard isn't about fear. It's about being able to say *come in, sit down, I'll make you something*, whatever's happening outside. That's the kind of life worth living. Generous, warm and well fed, whatever the headlines say.

For the Children

Food is one of the most comforting things in a child's world, so keep it as normal as you possibly can. Their usual breakfast, their favourite bowl, the

same mealtimes. In a strange week, that bowl of cereal isn't just food. It's reassurance.

Put their favourite snacks and treats in the cupboard too. A crisis is not the moment to start a healthy eating drive. It's the moment for hot chocolate and an extra biscuit.

Get them cooking. Toddlers can stir. Primary age kids can make sandwiches and roll out flatbreads. Teenagers can cook a whole family meal, and feeling useful does wonders for a teenager's mood (and possibly yours, if it means you don't have to cook).

And grow something together. A child who's grown a pea shoot from a seed on the windowsill has learned something no screen can teach them: that they can make food, and life, with their own two hands.

CHAPTER 7

Money, Cash and Swapping



The moment the card machines stop working, you realise something quite profound. Money is really just an agreement between people. And when the digital version of that agreement breaks, we simply fall back on older versions. Cash. A tab at the corner shop. A favour for a favour. A cake in exchange for a lift into town.

There's something rather beautiful in that, if you let yourself see it.

Why Cash Still Matters

Most of us barely touch cash any more. Tap, tap, tap. Some of our children genuinely think money comes out of a phone. But in nearly every real disruption of recent years, card payments are one of the first things to go.

When the power went out across Spain and Portugal in April 2025, cash machines stopped working, people were queuing at banks within hours, and shopkeepers were counting money out by hand because the tills had died. The people with a few notes in their pocket could buy bread, water and batteries. The people without had to rely on kindness.

That's why so many governments now include cash on their emergency checklists. So here's some gentle advice.

How much?

This isn't financial advice, and every household is different. But here's what feels sensible:

- Enough to cover the basics for a few days if cards didn't work. Food, fuel, a prescription. Whatever amount you can manage without it causing you hardship.

- **Small notes and coins.** Nobody will have change for your biggest note, and you don't want to overpay wildly for a loaf of bread.
- Build it up slowly. A little here and there.
- Keep it somewhere safe and private, and only tell the grown ups who need to know. (Not in the biscuit tin. Everybody checks the biscuit tin.)
- Don't keep huge amounts at home. It's not safe and your insurance probably won't cover it.

And if money is tight and putting cash aside feels impossible right now, please don't feel bad. Do what works for your circumstances. Your neighbours and your community are worth just as much as any tin of cash.

A Little Paper Trail

This is the step almost everyone skips, and it really matters.

If the internet was down for a long time, or a bank had a problem with its systems, you'd want to be able to show what you have and what you owe. So make a simple paper record and keep it somewhere safe:

- Your bank's name, phone number and nearest branch
- Your mortgage or rent details, and your landlord's number
- Your energy, water and phone suppliers and account references
- Insurance policies
- Pensions and benefits, and who to contact
- Regular bills and when they're due

Not your PINs. Not your passwords. Not full card numbers. Keep those somewhere completely separate, or better still, just in your head.

Watch Out for the Scammers

Every crisis brings out people who try to profit from fear. Expect fake messages pretending to be your bank, telling you to move your money to a *safe account*. Fake government messages offering emergency payments if you hand over your details. People at the door offering to fix things or sell you supplies at prices that would make a pirate blush.

The rule is simple. If someone contacts you, wants money or details, and is in a hurry, during a crisis, it's almost certainly a scam. Hang up. Close the door. Check with someone you trust. And please check on older neighbours, because they're so often the ones targeted.

Swapping: The Oldest Economy There Is

Now for the fun bit.

For most of human history, people didn't use money for most things. They swapped. They shared. They remembered who'd helped them and they paid it back. In villages and close neighbourhoods all over the world, that never quite died out. Ask any farmer how many favours are owed up and down the valley and you'll get a long, complicated and very affectionate answer.

In a longer disruption, swapping comes back naturally. And what's lovely about it is that it puts value back on people our modern world tends to overlook. The person who can fix a bike. The one who bakes. The retired nurse. The teenager who's brilliant with little ones. The grandad who can sharpen absolutely anything. Suddenly, they're the richest people on the street.

What tends to be valuable

Coffee, tea, chocolate and sugar. Batteries and torches. Matches and lighters. Soap, toothpaste, nappies and period products. Seeds. Firewood. Wool and thread. And, inevitably, toilet roll, which has somehow become humanity's emergency currency.

Skills are the best currency of all

They can't be stolen, they don't go off, and they grow when you share them. Think about what you could offer. Cooking. Baking. Childminding. First aid. Fixing things. Sewing. Gardening. Haircuts. Music. Storytelling. And don't underestimate the quieter ones: organising, listening, calming people down. In a crisis, the person who can make everyone a cup of tea and say *it's going to be OK* is worth their weight in gold.

Doing it fairly

Be clear about what's being swapped. Be generous, because in a community what goes around comes around. Look after the people who have nothing to swap, because a good community never makes anyone earn their dinner. And never swap medicines.

Start Now, While It's Fun

You don't have to wait for a crisis to start any of this. The best time is now, when it's just lovely rather than necessary.

Swap shops for clothes, toys and books. Children's clothes swaps are an absolute godsend for parents of children who grow three sizes overnight.

Skill swaps at the local hall. Everyone writes down one thing they could teach and one thing they'd love to learn. You'll be amazed who knows what.

Time banks, where everyone's hour is worth exactly the same. An hour of your gardening buys an hour of someone else's help with your paperwork. Every person valued equally. What a lovely idea.

Community fridges and pantries, where people leave what they don't need and take what they do. Many community centres and places of worship already run them.

The local tab. Before cards, lots of corner shops kept a book of what each family owed, paid at the end of the week. It only works where people know and trust each other. Which is exactly why building that trust now matters so much.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Fear makes us grab and hoard. It whispers that there isn't enough to go round and we'd better look after ourselves first. But every story of people getting through hard times says the opposite. The communities that came through best were the ones that shared. That swapped. That kept a tab at the corner shop and trusted each other to pay it.

Generosity is the opposite of fear. And honestly, it's a much nicer way to live.

For the Children

Money worries can make children anxious if they pick up that we're stressed, so keep it simple and positive.

For little ones, cash is actually a brilliant learning opportunity. Let them help count the coins in the tin. Play shops. So many children today have hardly ever held real money, and being able to count change is a genuinely useful skill.

For older kids and teenagers, talk about skills and swapping. Ask them: *What could you offer the street?* You might be surprised. Teenagers are often brilliant at things we forget to value. Entertaining little ones. Running errands. Teaching a game. Fixing whatever's wrong with your phone in eleven seconds flat. A teenager who discovers that their community genuinely values them gains something much more precious than pocket money. They gain a sense that they matter.

And if money is worrying you, it's OK to be honest with older children at their level. *Things are a bit tight at the moment, so we're being careful, but we'll always have what we need.* Then make sure that's true by leaning on your community. Accepting help isn't failing. It's how communities have always worked.

CHAPTER 8

Staying in Touch Without the Internet



Ask anyone over sixty how they arranged to meet their friends as a teenager, and you'll get the same answer. *We said we'd meet by the clock at seven, and we turned up.*

No messages. No live location. No *running 5 mins late x*. No seventeen voice notes. And somehow, astonishingly, it worked.

This chapter might feel strange to younger readers and wonderfully familiar to older ones. Because we've only been glued to our phones for a tiny slice of human history. People managed perfectly well before. We can again.

Why It Breaks So Easily

In a long power cut or a cyber attack, communication can fail in a few ways at once. Phone masts run on backup batteries that might only last a few hours. Many home phones now plug into the broadband router, so they stop working when the power goes too. (If you or someone you love relies on a landline, especially for a care alarm, ask your provider about a battery backup.) Networks jam when everyone tries to call at once. And apps can go down even when the signal's fine.

So the answer isn't one perfect backup. It's a few simple ones.

The Radio Is Your Lifeline

If you buy one thing after reading this chapter, make it a radio that works without mains power or the internet. Wind up, battery, solar, or all three. Surprisingly few households have one.

Find out which stations in your area carry emergency information. In most countries, that's the national public broadcaster or a local station. Write the frequencies on a label and stick it to the radio. Listen to the news on the hour, then turn it off to save the batteries and your nerves. And remember your car radio works too, as long as you're not running the engine in a closed garage.

Many countries also have emergency alert systems that send a loud alarm and message to phones in an area where there's danger. If yours does, please don't switch those alerts off. Yes, even though the test one went off in the middle of a meeting and you nearly fell off your chair.

The Paper Address Book

Can I ask you to try something?

Put this book down for a second and, without looking at your phone, write down the phone numbers of five people you love.

How did you get on? Most of us genuinely can't do it. We've handed all of that over to our phones. Which means if the phone dies, all those numbers die with it.

So here's the simplest, cheapest and probably most important step in this whole chapter: **write the important numbers and addresses down on paper.** Family, close friends, neighbours, school, doctor, pharmacy, work, vet, your power cut line and your emergency number. Keep one copy in the emergency box, one in your bag or wallet, and one in each child's school bag.

Write down actual addresses too, not just names. And buy a paper map of your area. Our grandparents used them every day, and they never run out of battery or tell you to make a U turn in the middle of a field.

Agree Where You'll Meet

This was in Chapter 4, but it's so important it's worth saying again.

If the phones go down and you're apart, everyone needs to know where to go and when. One meeting place near home. One further away in case you can't get home. And a time. *If we can't reach each other, we meet at Grandma's at six. If someone's not there, we go back at nine the next morning.*

That's exactly how the world worked before mobile phones. And it's surprisingly reliable.

Texts, Not Calls

If your phone's working but patchy, send a text rather than ringing. Texts use far less of the network and often get through when calls won't. They also wait and send as soon as you get a bar of signal. Keep them short and useful: *All safe at home. Water on. Going to Grandma's at 6.* And set up a proper family group text, not just an app group, so one message reaches everyone.

Walkie Talkies

For chatting across a street, a village or a farm, simple walkie talkies are brilliant. In many countries you can buy basic licence free ones that run on batteries and work over a few hundred metres in town, more in open countryside. (Check what's allowed where you live.)

They're perfect for keeping in touch with an older neighbour a few doors down, coordinating a street, or keeping tabs on older kids playing out nearby. Agree a channel with your neighbours and test them every now and then. Kids love them, which means they actually get used and the batteries actually get checked. Just be prepared for an awful lot of *come in, Mum, over.*

In many countries there are also licensed amateur radio enthusiasts who volunteer to help with emergency communications when normal networks fail. If you know a radio enthusiast, they're a wonderful person to have in your community.

Bring Back the Noticeboard

Before the internet, every community had places where news was shared. The post office window. The noticeboard outside the place of worship. The pub. The shop counter. The school gates.

In a long disruption, these come back to life. Agree with your community where your **information point** will be: somewhere central and sheltered that lots of people pass. Put up the latest official news, with the

time and date. Where to get water, food and medicine. Who needs help, and who can offer it. Lost pets. Messages for people trying to find each other. And always take down old notices, so nobody acts on stale news.

Green and Red Cards

This is one of my favourite ideas in the whole book, and it's so simple.

Give every house on your street two cards. **Green: we're OK. Red: please knock, we need help.** Each morning, people pop the right one in their front window. Someone walks the street once or twice a day and knocks on any red window, or any house with no card at all.

Nobody gets forgotten. It takes ten minutes. And making the cards and dropping them through the doors is a lovely excuse to meet your neighbours.

Runners and Messengers

In wartime, messages were carried around towns and villages on bikes and on foot, often by young people. In a modern disruption, the same thing would happen. A teenager on a bike can get round a neighbourhood faster than almost anything else. If your community organises itself, think about a rota of runners. It gives young people something meaningful to do, and it keeps everyone connected.

Rumours: The Other Emergency

In any crisis, rumours spread like wildfire. Some are innocent. Some are planted on purpose by people who want us frightened and divided. So before you believe something, and especially before you pass it on, ask yourself:

1. **Where did this actually come from?** Official news? Or *someone said*?
2. **Is it making my heart race?** Fake news is designed to make us scared or angry. If you feel that rush, slow down.
3. **Is it telling me to do something urgent?** Rush to the shops, move my money? Be suspicious.
4. **Can I check it?** The radio, the noticeboard, someone sensible you trust?

If in doubt, don't pass it on. Being the calm voice on your street who says *let's wait for the news on the hour* is a quiet kind of heroism.

Write Letters

This one's not strictly an emergency tip, but it's too lovely to leave out. Write letters. To grandparents, old friends, your children. Postal services run on vans, sorting offices and real people, and they're remarkably resilient. In a long disruption, the post might be one of the most reliable ways to reach people further away. And in normal times, a handwritten letter is one of the kindest gifts there is. Nobody ever framed an email.

Your Steps from This Chapter

- Get a wind up or battery radio, and write your local frequencies on it.
- Write a paper address book, and make copies for your bag and the kids' bags.
- Agree your family meeting places and times.
- Ask about a battery backup if you rely on a landline.
- Make green and red cards for your street.
- Find out where your community noticeboard is, or could be.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Fear loves isolation. It grows best in the dark, at 2am, scrolling on our own. Connection is what shrinks it. A knock on the door. A letter on the mat. A chat over the garden fence.

Long before phones, people lived through terrifying times and stayed connected with nothing more than their voices, their feet and a bit of paper. So whatever happens to the internet, remember this: the most powerful way to stay in touch has never needed a signal. It just needs us to reach out.

For the Children

Our kids have never known a world without instant messaging. For them, not being able to reach a friend can feel genuinely frightening, and for teen-

agers it can feel like their entire social world has vanished. Please take that seriously. It's real to them.

A few things that really help:

- Make sure they know your phone number, and one other trusted grown up's, **off by heart**. Practise it like a song, or turn it into a silly rhyme.
- Put a card in their school bag with key numbers, their address and the family meeting place.
- Walk the route to the meeting place with them.
- Let them make the green and red window cards.
- Give older kids a walkie talkie for playing out. It feels like an adventure and it gives you peace of mind.

And encourage pen pals. A child who writes letters to a cousin or a grandparent is learning a skill that works whatever happens to the internet, and there's real magic in a letter landing on the doormat with your name on it.

CHAPTER 9

Health, First Aid and Each Other



As we said at the start, this book isn't medical advice. Think of this chapter as the sensible, practical things families have always relied on, with pointers to the people who really know.

And let's start with something reassuring.

Hospitals Are Tougher Than You Think

Hospitals are built for emergencies. They have backup generators, paper systems and staff trained to keep going under enormous pressure. When the UK's health service was hit by a huge cyber attack in 2017, hospitals carried on looking after patients, often with pen and paper. It was hard, and things took longer, but the care didn't stop. Hospitals around the world have done the same through storms, blackouts and pandemics. If you're seriously ill or injured, emergency care will be there for you.

Where a long disruption makes life tricky is the everyday stuff. Booking a doctor's appointment online. Ordering repeat prescriptions through an app. Medicine deliveries. So that's what we plan around.

The Most Important List You'll Ever Write

If anyone at home takes regular medication, please do this today.

Write it down. For each person: the name of every medicine, the strength and dose, when it's taken and what it's for. Any allergies. Your doctor and pharmacy, with phone numbers. Keep a copy in the emergency box, in your grab bag and in your bag or wallet. If you ever needed help from

someone who couldn't see your records, that list could save hours, and possibly much more.

Don't let it run low. Try never to get down to your last few days before reordering. And **talk to your doctor or pharmacist** about your own situation, because they can tell you what's safe and sensible for your particular medicines. Never stockpile beyond what you're prescribed, never share prescription medicines, and never buy them from dodgy websites with too many exclamation marks.

Know how to store it. Some medicines, like insulin, need to be kept cool. Ask your pharmacist now what you'd do in a power cut.

Don't forget the little things. Spare glasses. Contact lens solution. Hearing aid batteries. Inhalers. Anything that needs charging. And if anyone relies on medical equipment at home, tell your energy company and talk to your healthcare team about a power cut plan.

A few basics in the first aid box. Painkillers (in children's versions if you've got little ones), antihistamines, rehydration sachets. Always follow the label, especially for children.

Getting Help When the Internet's Down

Your emergency number (Chapter 4), your non emergency medical line if your country has one, and your pharmacist are your three lifelines. There's space to write them all in the appendix.

Your pharmacist, by the way, is one of the most underused treasures we have. They can help with so much, and in some places can give you an emergency supply of regular medicine. Get to know yours now.

Please Learn First Aid

If every adult and every teenager reading this did just one thing, I'd want it to be this.

In any emergency, the first person there is almost never a paramedic. It's a mum, a dad, a neighbour, a passer by. What that person does in the first few minutes can be the difference between life and death.

Red Cross and Red Crescent societies run first aid courses all over the world, and in many countries St John Ambulance does too. Many are short, and some are free. Look for ones especially for parents of babies and young children. You'll learn how to do CPR and use a defibrillator, put someone in the recovery position, help someone who's choking, stop bad bleeding, treat burns, and spot a heart attack, a stroke and hypothermia.

And go and find your nearest public defibrillator this week. They're often on the wall of a community building, a shop or a station. Knowing where it is might matter one day.

Your First Aid Kit

Buy a good ready made one, or build your own. Plasters, dressings, bandages, tape, gloves, scissors, tweezers, antiseptic wipes, a thermometer, burn gel, rehydration sachets, a foil blanket and a little paper first aid guide. Check it twice a year with the rest of your emergency box, and remove the plasters with cartoon characters that your children have been raiding for non existent injuries.

Keeping Everyone Well

In a disruption, the biggest health risks usually aren't dramatic. They're the cold, the heat, not drinking enough, and tummy bugs.

- **Keep hands clean.** Soap and water when you can, sanitiser when you can't. After the loo and before food, every time.
- **Keep food safe.** If in doubt, throw it out. A hungry day beats a week of food poisoning.
- **Drink enough,** especially children and older people.
- **Stay warm, or stay cool** (Chapter 5). Watch for hypothermia: shivering, confusion, slurred speech, drowsiness. In older people, the shivering might not happen at all.
- **Brush your teeth.** Toothache in a crisis is truly miserable.
- **Rest.** Stress is exhausting. Sleep when you can.

Caring for the People Who Need It Most

Every community has people who'll need a bit of extra help when things go wrong. Older people living alone. Disabled people. People living with long term illness or dementia, and the people who care for them. New parents. People who don't speak the local language well. People without a home.

This is where community really comes into its own, because the first people to reach them won't be the professionals. It'll be their neighbours. Know who they are, gently and respectfully. Check on them every day if things are disrupted. Make sure they've got water, food, warmth, light and their medicines. Invite them into your warm room if they're on their own and cold. And help them sign up for any extra support schemes with their energy and water companies now, before they need it.

If you're a carer, make a plan for what happens if you get ill or can't reach the person you look after. Who could step in? Write down everything they'd need to know. You carry so much. Let someone help you carry this.

When the People You Love Live Far Away

So many of us have parents, grandparents or children who live miles away, sometimes in another country entirely. In a disruption, not being able to reach them can be one of the hardest things of all.

The answer is to plan together now, while you can still talk easily. Make sure they have their own emergency box, a medicines list and a radio. Help them sign up for any extra support available where they live. Find out who their nearest neighbours are, and swap numbers with them on paper, so there's someone close by who could knock on the door if you couldn't get through. Agree what you'll each do if phones are down: *If we can't speak, I'll trust that your neighbour is checking on you, and you'll trust that I'm OK. As soon as the lines are back, we'll call each other.*

It won't stop you worrying completely. Of course it won't. But knowing there's a plan, and someone nearby looking out for them, takes away so much of the helplessness. And helplessness is the thing that really eats away at us.

Pregnancy and New Babies

If you're pregnant, keep your maternity notes and your midwife's or doctor's number close, know how to get to the hospital without a sat nav, and have a backup plan for getting there. If you've got a new baby, keep extra nappies, wipes and ready to feed formula if you use it. And if you're breastfeeding, that's one supply that won't be disrupted, which is a quietly wonderful thing. Eat, drink, rest, and ask for help.

Don't Forget the Animals

Pets are family, and for lots of people, especially those living alone, they're the most important relationship in their lives. They need a plan too.

Keep at least a week of pet food in the cupboard and include them in your water sums. Keep any pet medication and the vet's number with your lists. Bring older or smaller animals into your warm room. Have a carrier and a lead with your grab bag in case you need to leave. Keep their routine as normal as possible, because animals feel our stress just like children do. And agree with a friend or neighbour who'd look after them if you were taken ill.

If you keep hens, horses or livestock, think about feed and water if deliveries stop, and how you'd manage without electric fences or automatic water. Local farmers will be miles ahead of anyone on this. Ask them.

Your Steps from This Chapter

- Write a medicines list for everyone in your home.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about your repeat prescriptions.
- Book a first aid course, and take a teenager with you.
- Find your nearest defibrillator.
- Check or build your first aid kit.
- Help one person you know sign up for extra support with their utilities.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Looking after our health, and each other's, is one of the most hopeful things we can do. Every first aid course, every medicines list, every knock on an

older neighbour's door is a quiet way of saying *we're not going to let fear decide what happens to us*.

And here's the thing. Learning first aid doesn't make you more frightened. It makes you braver. You stop being the person who freezes and start being the person who helps. That's not a life lived in fear. That's a life lived with your sleeves rolled up.

For the Children

Children can, and really should, learn first aid. Many Red Cross societies have free resources for young people, and lots of schools now teach basic life saving skills. Even little ones can learn how to call the emergency number, what to say, and their own address. Practise it as a game: *Pretend Grandpa has fallen over and won't wake up. What do you do?*

Teach older children the recovery position and CPR. Knowing they could help in an emergency gives young people real confidence. It's a skill for life.

Keep children's medicines in the first aid box in the right strengths, with the measuring spoons or syringes.

And when children are poorly during a disruption, give them the full comfort treatment. Favourite blanket. Stories. Cuddles. A poorly child is a frightened child, and they need to know that however strange the world feels, someone's looking after them.

CHAPTER 10

Children and Teenagers



If you're a parent, a grandparent, a carer, a teacher, or anyone who loves a child, this is probably the chapter you came for. Because whatever's happening in the world, the first thought in your head is *what about the kids?*

So here's the one thing to hold onto above everything else.

Children don't remember the crisis. They remember how it felt.

People who were children during the Second World War often talk, decades later, not about the bombs but about the singing in the shelters, the kindness of neighbours, and the treat their mum somehow managed to find. Children who lived through the pandemic lockdowns remember the walks and the baking, as well as the loneliness. The events matter less than the feeling we wrap around them.

That's a big responsibility. It's also an enormous source of hope. Because the feeling is something we can shape.

Children get through hard times well when four things are in place. They feel safe with the grown ups around them. They have a routine. They have plenty of play. And they have something useful to do. Get those four right and you've given them the best protection there is.

Start with You

There's a reason they tell you on planes to put your own oxygen mask on first. Children read our nervous systems like little radar dishes. They notice the tightness in our voice, the way we keep checking our phones, the conversation that suddenly stops when they walk in. (They also notice when we've eaten the last biscuit, but that's another book.)

You can't fake calm for long, and you don't need to. What you can do is look after yourself, so you've got something steady to give them. Chapter 11 is all about that, so please read it as part of this one.

And it's completely fine for children to see you a bit worried or sad, as long as they also see you cope. *I'm feeling a bit wobbly about the news today, so I'm going to have a cuppa and go for a walk. Want to come?* That teaches them something precious: big feelings are normal, and you can get through them.

Talking About War and Scary News

Our kids will hear about war. We can't stop that, and trying too hard to hide it can make it scarier, because their imaginations fill in the gaps. What we can do is be the person they trust to tell them the truth.

Find out what they already know. *What have you heard about what's going on in the world? How does it make you feel?* Then really listen. Sometimes they're worried about something completely different from what you expected.

Be honest, at their level. A six year old doesn't need a lecture on international relations. Short, simple and true is best. *Some countries are fighting, and that's very sad. Lots of people are working hard to stop it and keep everyone safe.*

Don't promise what you can't promise. It's so tempting to say *nothing bad will ever happen to us*. But kids are clever, and if something does happen, that promise breaks their trust. So promise what you *can*: *Whatever happens, we'll be together, we'll look after you, and we've got a plan.*

Look for the helpers. Fred Rogers, the much loved American children's TV presenter, often said that when he saw scary things on the news as a boy, his mother told him to look for the helpers, because you'll always find people helping. It works beautifully. Point out the firefighters, the nurses, the volunteers, the neighbours. It shows children the world is full of good people.

Turn the news off. Don't leave rolling news on when the kids are about. Check it yourself, then switch it off. With older kids, talk about where they get their news and how to spot nonsense.

Keep the door open. Children rarely ask everything at once. The big questions arrive at bedtime, in the car, or while you're elbow deep in the washing up. *That's a really good question. I'm so glad you asked me.*

Let them play it out. Little ones often work through scary things by playing them. They might play at power cuts or hospitals or even war. That's healthy. Join in gently if they want you to, and let the story end well.

Routine Is a Superpower

If there's one thing that makes children feel safe when the world feels wobbly, it's routine. A predictable shape to the day tells their brain the world still makes sense.

So keep as much of normal life as you can. Same wake up and bedtimes. Get dressed. Meals at the usual times, at the table if you can. And keep bedtime exactly the same: wash, story, song, cuddle, light.

For younger children, make a simple **picture timetable** of the day. Breakfast, play, learning, lunch, outside, quiet time, tea, bath, story, bed. Let them tick each one off. It costs nothing and it's hugely reassuring.

Play Isn't Optional

Play is how children make sense of the world and let go of stress. In a crisis it's not a luxury. It's medicine. And the best play has never needed the internet.

Babies and toddlers: peekaboo, singing, bubbles, stacking cups, wooden spoons and saucepans (apologies to your ears), water play in a bowl, books, lots of cuddles.

Primary age: dens, dressing up, board games, card games, puzzles, drawing, building bricks, putting on a show, treasure hunts, kicking a ball, hopscotch, baking, making cards for neighbours.

Tweens: trickier card and board games, learning to knit, building things, writing comics, cooking whole meals, organising games for the little ones.

Teenagers: music, sport, cooking, chess, reading, a practical skill, time with friends face to face, real responsibility, and some privacy.

And outdoor play every single day if it's safe. Fresh air, daylight, running about, getting muddy. It burns off anxious energy and helps everyone sleep. Wherever you live, there's a patch of green somewhere near you.

Keep Learning Going

If schools close for a while, children can lose their sense of normal really quickly. But learning doesn't need a laptop. Read every day, anything at all. Write every day: a diary, letters, stories. Do maths in real life: counting the cupboard, measuring flour, counting change. And learn from what's happening: where does our water come from? How did people live before the internet? Get them to interview a grandparent about their childhood. That one's pure gold, and the grandparent will love it too.

If you can, team up with other families. One parent does maths in the morning, another does art in the afternoon. Communities all over the world did exactly that in wartime, and it works beautifully.

Give Them a Job

This might be the most powerful tool of all. When children feel helpless, they feel anxious. When they feel useful, they feel brave.

Little ones can be torch keeper, sock sorter or chief hugger. Primary age children can be water monitor, cupboard counter or games organiser. Older children can cook, help with younger siblings, run messages or read to an older neighbour. And teenagers deserve proper responsibility: helping run something in the community, looking after the little ones on the street, being the family first aider.

One of the most moving things about the Second World War is how many teenagers became messengers and helpers. They were trusted, and they rose to it. Our teenagers get written off as glued to their phones. Give them something real to do and so many of them will astonish you.

Teenagers Need Their Own Bit

In some ways, teenagers find a disruption harder than little ones. Their whole social world lives on their phones. Their independence matters enormously. They understand more of the news, so they can worry more. And they might hide it all behind eye rolls and slammed doors.

Take the loss of contact with their friends seriously: *I know it's really hard not being able to talk to your mates.* Help them see friends face to face. Give them real information and real responsibility. Give them space. Talk side by side rather than face to face, while you're walking or cooking or driving, because that's often when they open up. And keep a gentle eye out for signs they're struggling: pulling away, not sleeping, anger, or giving up things they used to love.

Children Who Need a Bit of Extra Support

Families with autistic children, children with ADHD, sensory differences, anxiety, learning disabilities or other additional needs often face particular challenges when everything changes. Change is hard for so many of our children, and a crisis is all change.

I wrote in *Not My Problem* about how so much of the world was built around a narrow idea of normal. A crisis tends to make that even more obvious. So if your child struggles more than others when things change, please remember: your child isn't the problem. The plan just needs to stretch to fit them.

- **Prepare them gently, in advance.** Talk about power cuts and the emergency box as just another thing that sometimes happens. A simple picture story can help so much. *Sometimes the lights go off. When that happens, we get the torches from the blue box. We sit together in the living room. The lights come back on later.*
- **Practise.** Have a planned power cut evening when everything's calm. Lights off, torches on, picnic tea. Fun, predictable and short. Then it's familiar if it ever happens for real.

- **Pack their sensory supports.** Ear defenders, fidget toys, a weighted blanket, sunglasses, chewy things, favourite textures. A crisis can be loud and chaotic.
- **Keep their safe foods.** If your child eats a limited range of foods, make sure the cupboard is full of the ones they'll reliably eat. This is not the time for anything new.
- **Use picture timetables and now and next boards.** They matter even more when routines go out the window.
- **Make a calm space.** A corner, a tent, a den where they can retreat when it all gets too much.
- **Be kind to yourself.** Parenting a child with extra needs through a disruption is exhausting. Ask for help. Accept help. You're doing an extraordinary job.

And if your child struggles with school or doesn't always attend, you may already have more experience of home learning and alternative routines than most families. That's a real strength. Share it.

Children with Two Homes

Lots of children split their time between two homes. A disruption can make that much harder, especially if phones and transport aren't working.

If that's your family, it's worth talking with the children's other parent now, while things are calm. Where will the kids stay if something happens during a handover? How will you get messages to each other? Does each home have the medicines list, the important numbers and the comfort toys? Do the children know both parents are working together to keep them safe?

Whatever your relationship with your children's other parent, a crisis is the time to put everything else aside. Kids need to know the grown ups are on the same team.

And if a parent works away or lives in another country, help the children stay connected in ways that don't need the internet. Letters. Photos. A special object to hold. A shared ritual, like both looking at the moon at bedtime, knowing the other person is looking at it too.

Signs a Child Is Struggling

Every child is different, but signs they might be finding things hard include being extra clingy, going back to younger behaviour like bedwetting, sleep problems or nightmares, tummy aches and headaches, tantrums, going quiet and losing interest in things, or asking the same questions over and over.

Most of these are completely normal reactions to stress, and they ease with time, routine and reassurance. Give extra cuddles, extra time and extra patience. If they go on for a long time or get worse, talk to your doctor or the school. In the UK, Childline (0800 1111) is there for children themselves. **Wherever you live, look up your local children's helpline** and write it in your address book.

Rituals of Hope

Little rituals remind children that there's still so much good in the world.

- **Three good things.** At tea or bedtime, everyone shares three good things from the day, however small. *We found a ladybird. Mum made pancakes. I won at snap.*
- **A kindness every day.** A card for a neighbour, helping a brother or sister, sharing a toy.
- **A family song** you sing in the car, at bedtime or in the dark.
- **A hope jar.** Everyone writes or draws something they're looking forward to, and you read them together on a special night.

The Questions Children Ask

Children ask the questions grown ups are too polite to say out loud. Here are some, with gentle ways you might answer. Use your own words, and pitch it to your child.

"Is there going to be a war?" *Some countries are fighting, and some grown ups are worried it could get bigger. Lots of people are working really hard to stop that. We don't know everything that's going to happen, but we do know our family has a plan and we'll look after you.*

"Will bombs fall on our house?" *That's a really scary thought, and I'm so glad you told me. It's very, very unlikely. There are lots of people whose whole job is keeping us safe. If anything ever changed, we'd know what to do, and we'd do it together.*

"What's a cyber attack?" *It's when people try to break the computers that help run things, like shops or the internet. It's a bit like someone pulling a plug out. Things stop working for a while, but clever people fix them, and we've got our torches and games and food while we wait.*

"Why are we keeping water in the cupboard?" *Same reason we keep plasters in the first aid box. We hope we never need them, but if we do, we're ready. Lots of families all over the world do it. It's just being sensible.*

"What if something happens when I'm at school?" *Your teachers know exactly what to do, and they'll look after you until one of us comes to get you. Remember our meeting place and the numbers on your card. Nobody will ever forget you.*

"What if something happens to you?" This is the one that takes your breath away. Keep it simple and steady. *I'm going to do everything I can to stay safe and well. And there are so many people who love you and would look after you.* Then name those people, so your child can picture them.

"Why do people fight?" *Sometimes leaders want things that aren't theirs, or they can't agree, and they choose fighting instead of talking. It's wrong, and lots of people are trying to stop it. In our family, we try to sort things out by talking and listening, even when we're cross.*

"Can we help?" Always say yes. Make cards for neighbours. Take a tin to the food bank. Help an older neighbour. Put a drawing in the window. Helping turns worry into action, and that's a lesson for life.

And if you don't know the answer, that's absolutely fine. *That's a really good question and I don't know. Shall we think about it together?* Children don't need us to know everything. They need us to be honest, present and on their side.

A Letter to Teenagers

This bit is for you, if you're a teenager reading this. Or for a grown up to pass on to one.

The news can feel like a lot right now. War. Hackers. The climate. Prices going up. It can feel like the grown ups have made a bit of a mess of things and handed it to you. And honestly? You're allowed to feel angry about that, or scared, or just tired of it all.

But here's something worth believing. Your generation is far stronger than people give you credit for. You've already been through more than most of us had at your age. A pandemic that took away school, friends and normal life. A world that changes faster every year. And you adapted to all of it.

If something does go wrong, the people around you are going to need exactly what you've got. Energy. Common sense. Kindness. Being good with the little ones. Knowing how things work. Being able to make people laugh.

So here's the ask. Learn first aid. Learn to cook a few proper meals (beans on toast counts, but stretch yourself). Know your family's plan and your meeting place. Write your best friends' numbers down on paper. Yes, on paper. Get to know the people on your street, especially the older ones. They've got stories you won't believe.

And if the phones go down and you can't message your friends, that's going to feel rubbish. It's OK to say so. Then go and knock on their door. That's what everyone did before phones, and it worked.

Most of all, look after your mind. If you're worried, talk to someone. A parent, a teacher, a friend, or a helpline. You don't have to carry it on your own.

You matter so much more than you know. And whatever happens, you won't be facing it alone.

Living, Not Just Surviving

If there's one thing we should want our children to inherit from us, it isn't fear. Children who grow up in a house full of fear learn that the world is frightening and they're too small to cope with it. Children who grow up in a house full of calm, love and a bit of sensible preparation learn something

very different. They learn that the world can be hard, but they're capable, they're loved and they're never on their own.

Every generation of children has grown up with something scary in the background. The ones who did best were the ones whose grown ups kept the joy going. The singing. The dens. The bedtime stories. The terrible jokes. So let's not hand our fear down to our children. Let's hand them our courage instead.

A Little Note to Read Aloud

Here's something you could read to your child. Change any words you like.

Sometimes the world feels big and a bit scary. Sometimes grown ups talk about things on the news that are hard to understand. If you ever feel worried, that's OK. Lots of people feel worried sometimes, even grown ups. You can always tell us how you feel, and you can always ask us anything.

Our family has a plan. We've got torches and water and food and games, and we know what to do if the lights go off or the phones stop working. We've got neighbours who care about us, and we care about them. And there are firefighters and nurses and lots and lots of helpers everywhere, working hard to keep everyone safe.

Whatever happens, we'll be together, and we'll look after you. You are loved more than all the stars in the sky. And you are braver than you know.

CHAPTER 11

Looking After Your Mind



The things that help a stressed team through a tough few months at work are exactly the same things that help a family through a hard winter. Our minds aren't separate from getting through a crisis. They're right at the centre of it. Scare lives in the mind. So does prepare.

If You're Worried, Nothing Is Wrong with You

If you've felt anxious watching the news lately, please hear this: there is nothing wrong with you. Your brain is doing exactly what it was built to do, scanning for danger and trying to keep you safe.

The trouble is, our brains were designed for a world where danger was right in front of us. A predator. A storm. A suspicious looking berry. Not a world where a phone delivers every frightening thing happening on the planet straight into our hands, all day and all night. So lots of us walk around with a low hum of worry that never quite switches off. It gets into our sleep, our patience, our tummies, our relationships.

Lots of people cope by simply not thinking about it. That's completely understandable. But avoiding the worry tends to keep it alive, because it never gets dealt with. It just goes underground and pops up at 3am. What actually helps is taking small, real steps. And you're already doing that, just by reading this.

The Circle of Control

This is one of the most useful tools there is. Grab a piece of paper and draw a big circle.

Outside the circle, write the things you can't control. What world leaders do. Whether there's a war. Whether there's a cyber attack. What other people buy at the supermarket. The weather. Whether your teenager will ever voluntarily empty the dishwasher.

Inside the circle, write the things you can. Whether you've got water stored. Whether you know your neighbours. How much news you watch. How you talk to your kids. Whether you learn first aid. How kind you are to yourself today. Whether you go for a walk. Who you call.

Look how much is inside your circle! That's where your energy goes. And every time you catch yourself spiralling about something outside it, gently bring yourself back in. *I can't control that. What can I do right now?*

Your News Diet

Think of news like food. A little, from good sources, at sensible times, is nourishing. A constant drip of junk makes you feel awful.

Pick a couple of trusted sources. Pick your times, maybe morning and early evening, and never first thing when you wake up or last thing before bed. Turn off news notifications on your phone (honestly, do it today; it's life changing). And notice how you feel. If the news leaves you feeling helpless, step away and do something from inside your circle.

And remember what news actually is. It's the unusual, the dramatic and the frightening. Nobody runs a headline saying *Millions of people had a perfectly nice day and helped each other out*. But they did. Every single day, there are millions of quiet kindnesses that never get reported.

Breathing: Your Free Reset Button

When panic starts rising, your breath is the fastest way to calm your body down. Breathe in slowly through your nose for four. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for six or seven. Do it five times. That long out breath tells your nervous system it's safe to settle.

Another lovely one, for grown ups and kids alike, is **five, four, three, two, one**. Notice five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can

hear, two you can smell and one you can taste. It pulls your mind out of the scary future and back into right now, where, actually, you're OK.

A Five Minute Calm Down for the Whole Family

When everyone's wound up, whether it's the news, a power cut or just one of those days, try this together. It takes five minutes and needs nothing at all.

1. **Stop.** Everyone sits down wherever they are. Phones down.
2. **Breathe together.** Five slow breaths. Little ones can pretend to smell a flower and blow out a candle.
3. **Notice.** Take turns to name one thing you can see, one thing you can hear and one thing you can feel.
4. **Name it.** Each person says one word for how they're feeling. No fixing, no judging. *Worried. Tired. Grumpy. Hungry.* (Hungry counts.)
5. **One good thing.** Each person shares one good thing, however small.
6. **A hug or a squeeze,** for anyone who wants one.

It sounds simple, and it is. But it tells everyone's nervous system that they're safe, their feelings are allowed, and they're not on their own.

The Things Our Grandparents Just Knew

So much of good mental health isn't complicated at all. It's what our grandparents did without ever calling it wellbeing.

Sleep. Regular bedtimes. A dark, cool room. In a power cut, you might even sleep better without the screens.

Move. Walk every day. Dig the garden. Dance in the kitchen like nobody's watching (they probably are; dance anyway). Moving your body burns off stress like nothing else.

Eat regularly. Skipping meals makes anxiety worse. And have a cup of tea, or whatever your comforting drink is. The ritual itself is calming.

Get outside. Look at the sea, the hills, the trees, the sky. Wherever you are, find your patch of green and go and stand in it.

Use your hands. Knitting, baking, gardening, mending, colouring, playing music. Absorbing, repetitive things calm the mind in a way scrolling never will. It's no coincidence that wartime generations knitted constantly.

Sing. Singing together makes people feel connected and hopeful. It's one of the oldest medicines humans have. You don't have to be good. The shower counts.

Connection Is the Medicine

If there's one thing worth shouting from the rooftops, it's this: **loneliness is one of the biggest threats to our wellbeing, and it's one we can actually do something about.**

In a disruption, people can become isolated so quickly. The phone stops working, the internet goes down, everyone stays indoors. And isolation feeds worry and low mood.

So make connection a daily habit. Talk to someone face to face every day. Knock on a door. Join something, or start something. If you live alone, make a pact now with a neighbour or two to check on each other. And do something kind for someone else, because helping others is one of the most reliable ways there is to lift your own mood. It reminds you that you're not powerless.

Purpose

Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist who survived the Nazi concentration camps, wrote about how people found the strength to keep going through meaning and purpose. Something to do. Someone to live for.

In a crisis, purpose can be really simple. Looking after your children. Checking on the older neighbour down the road. Running the soup kitchen. Teaching the kids next door to read. Keeping everyone's spirits up with terrible jokes. All of that is purpose.

So ask yourself: *What could I offer?* The answer might surprise you.

Faith, Quiet and Gratitude

For many people, faith is a huge source of strength in hard times. Places of worship of every kind have always been at the heart of communities in a crisis, offering comfort, warm spaces and company. If faith is part of your life, lean into it.

If it isn't, there are other ways to find that steadiness. Quiet time. A walk. A journal. And a simple gratitude habit: writing down three things you're thankful for each evening. It sounds small, but over time it genuinely trains your brain to notice the good stuff as well as the scary stuff.

Be Kind to Yourself

In a crisis, you won't be perfect. You'll snap at the kids. You'll forget things. You'll cry in the bathroom. You'll eat the emergency chocolate on day one and then feel guilty about it on day two. All of that is completely fine. You're a human being in a hard situation.

Talk to yourself the way you'd talk to a friend you love. *You're doing really well. This is hard. You're allowed to rest.* Being kind to yourself isn't soft. It's one of the strongest things you can do.

For the Helpers: Please Don't Burn Out

In every crisis, there are people who step up. The ones who organise the street, run the soup kitchen, check on everyone and keep everyone going. If you're reading this book, that person might well be you.

Thank you. Truly. And here's something worth remembering: **you can't pour from an empty cup.**

Burnout is real, and it often hits the most caring people first. Exhaustion that sleep doesn't fix. Snappiness. Feeling numb. Losing your sense of humour. Feeling like nothing you do is ever enough.

So share the load, because no one person should be doing everything. Take proper breaks and put them on the rota. Eat and drink, because helpers are famous for feeding everyone but themselves. Find one person you can be completely honest with about how you're really feeling. Say no sometimes, so you can still say yes next week. And watch out for each other. If you see a

fellow helper running on empty, send them home with a flask of tea and strict instructions to put their feet up.

The most useful helper isn't the one who does the most in the first week. It's the one who's still going, steadily and kindly, in week six.

When It's More Than Worry

Sometimes anxiety or low mood becomes more than everyday worry. If you're struggling to cope, not sleeping for days, having panic attacks or feeling hopeless, please reach out. You don't have to carry it alone.

- **Talk to your doctor.**
- **Call a helpline.** In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans are there any time, day or night, on **116 123**, for free. Most countries have a similar free, confidential line. **Look up yours now** and write it in your paper address book.
- **Mental health charities** in your country will have lots of information and support.
- If you or someone else is in immediate danger, **call your emergency number.**

You'll be glad you wrote them down.

Your Steps from This Chapter

- Draw your circle of control and stick it on the fridge.
- Turn off news notifications today.
- Practise the breathing twice a day for a week.
- Do one thing with your hands this week that you enjoy.
- Choose one person you'll check on, and one person who'll check on you.
- Look up your local helpline and write it down.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Your mind is the most important bit of kit you own. More important than the torch, the water or the radio. Look after it the way you'd look after any-

thing precious: rest it, feed it good things, give it fresh air and good company, and be gentle with it when it's struggling.

Fear will come and go. That's normal. What matters is that it doesn't get to run the show. So feel it when it comes, breathe through it, do the next sensible thing, and then go and do something that makes you smile.

For the Children

Children can learn every one of these tools, and they often take to them better than we do.

- Teach breathing as a game. *Smell the flower* (breathe in), *blow out the candle* (breathe out). Or blow bubbles really, really slowly.
- Make a **worry box**. Kids write or draw their worries and post them in, and you look at them together at a set time each day. It helps contain the worry and shows them it can be dealt with.
- Play **five, four, three, two, one** on walks.
- Draw a children's circle of control: *things I can't change* and *things I can do*.
- Make a **calm down kit**: a soft toy, a squishy ball, a favourite book, a photo of someone they love.
- Name feelings together. *It sounds like you're feeling scared. That makes sense. Shall we have a cuddle?*

And show them how it's done. When your kids see you take three deep breaths, go for a walk when you're stressed, or say *I'm feeling a bit worried, so I'm going to talk to a friend about it*, they learn that big feelings are survivable. That might be the most important lesson in this whole book.

CHAPTER 12

Community: The Street, the Neighbourhood, the Hall



This chapter comes after the practical ones on purpose, because honestly, it might be the most important one in the whole book.

Water, food, torches and cash will get you through three days. Community will get you through anything.

The Real Weak Spot

Here's a number that stopped me in my tracks. In England, only 38% of people feel that most people in their neighbourhood can be trusted. For young adults, it's only about a quarter. I'd bet the picture isn't wildly different in a lot of countries.

That should worry us more than any cyber attack. Because in disasters all over the world, the people who get through best aren't the ones with the biggest stockpile. They're the ones with the strongest relationships. Places where people know each other recover faster and lose fewer people. Again and again, that's what happens.

And here's the most hopeful thing in this whole book: **we know how to fix this, and it isn't hard.** It starts with saying hello.

How It Used to Be

Our grandparents' communities weren't perfect. They could be nosy, narrow and a bit judgemental. (Somebody always knew exactly what you'd bought at the shop.) But they had something we've lost: a web of everyday connections. You knew the postman, the shopkeeper, the families on your

street. You bumped into each other all the time. When something went wrong, everyone knew within the hour, and someone turned up with a casserole.

In wartime, that web became a lifeline. Wardens knew every household on their patch and who might need help. Volunteers ran canteens. Neighbours shared shelters, childcare and whatever food they had.

And remember 2020? All over the world, people who'd hardly said two words to their neighbours suddenly started doing their shopping and leaving soup on their doorsteps. The instinct's still there. It just needs a reason, and someone to go first.

Start with Your Street

You don't need to save the world. You just need to know about twenty households. That's roughly a street, a block of flats, or a little cluster of homes in the countryside. That's your team.

Say hello. Honestly, that's step one. Learn names. Smile. Stop for a chat. Take in a parcel. It feels tiny. It's the foundation of everything.

Find an excuse to get together. A cuppa and cake on the pavement. A festive drink. A plant swap. People are far more willing than you'd think. Everyone's just waiting for someone else to go first. Be that someone.

Swap numbers, on paper. Pass round a sheet at the get together. Name, house, phone number, and a tick box for *happy to be contacted in an emergency*. A group chat is lovely day to day (and a reliable source of photos of lost cats), but if the internet goes, you'll want the paper list.

Ask two gentle questions, only of people happy to answer. *Is there anything that would make an emergency extra hard for you?* Living alone, mobility, medical equipment, a new baby, no car. And *is there anything you could offer?* A skill, a tool, a big pan, a spare room, some time. You'll be amazed what you find out. The retired nurse. The young lad who's an electrician. The couple with a wood burner and a log pile. That's your street's **skills and needs map**, and it's worth more than any stockpile.

Make a simple street plan. One side of paper. Who checks on whom. Where you'll meet if the phones are down. The green and red window cards. Pop a copy through every door. Done.

Your First Street Get Together, Step by Step

If organising something feels daunting, here's exactly how to do it.

1. **Pick a date** about three weeks away. A weekend afternoon works for most people. Have a rain plan, wherever you live.
2. **Find one ally.** One neighbour who thinks it's a good idea. Two of you feels like a movement. One feels like a bother.
3. **Write a short, warm invitation** and pop it through every door. Something like: *Hello neighbours! We're having a cuppa and cake on the pavement outside number 14 on Sunday from 2pm. Bring a mug and a chair if you can. Children, dogs and grandparents all welcome. Come for five minutes or stay all afternoon. (your names) x*
4. **Keep it simple.** Drinks, a few cakes or snacks. No speeches. Nobody wants a speech.
5. **Have the paper and pen on the table** for names and numbers. Mention it casually. It's not a census.
6. **Introduce people.** Walk newcomers over to others. Keep an eye out for anyone standing on their own.
7. **Mention the street plan lightly.** *We thought it might be nice to have a list of numbers in case of power cuts or anything like that. Would you be up for it?*
8. **Follow up.** Copy the list for everyone who signed up, drop a thank you note through the doors and suggest the next one.

That's it. You'll have done more for your street than any stockpile ever could. And you'll probably have made a few friends.

A Heart for the Neighbourhood

In any longer disruption, communities naturally gather around a hub. Historically, that's been the community hall, the place of worship, the school,

the sports club, the library. Many of these buildings have been the beating heart of their neighbourhoods for generations.

A good hub in a crisis can be so many things. Somewhere warm (or cool) for people who can't manage at home. The noticeboard and someone with a radio. Food. A water collection point. Somewhere to charge phones if there's a generator. Tea and company. And a place to match people who need help with people who can give it.

If you're involved with a hall, a place of worship, a club or a school, it's worth chatting now about what you could offer in an emergency. Who holds the keys? Is there a backup heat source? Could you get a generator or solar panels one day? Your local council is often a good place to start that conversation.

The Community Kitchen

This might be the loveliest idea in the whole book, and it's as old as humanity.

When fuel, power or food are short, cooking one big pot for thirty people makes so much more sense than thirty people each cooking a little meal. In wartime Britain, the government set up community restaurants all over the country serving cheap, hot meals to anyone who needed one. Communities all over the world have done versions of the same thing for centuries.

You don't need a government. You need a big pan, something to heat it on, a few volunteers and a rota. Soup. Stew. Curry. Rice. People bring what they can, a few carrots, a tin of tomatoes, a bag of lentils, and everyone eats. People who have nothing to bring still eat. That's the deal.

And the magic of a community kitchen isn't just the food. It's that everybody comes. The lonely widower. The young mum with a toddler on her hip. The teenagers. The family who've just moved here and don't know a soul. All sitting at long tables, sharing a bowl of soup. That's how strangers become neighbours. Just make sure someone knows the food hygiene rules.

Sharing the Childcare

If schools close and parents still need to work or help out, a childcare swap can be a lifeline. A few families take turns. One house does Monday morning, another does Monday afternoon. Kids get company and play, parents get a breather, and everyone shares the load. Just agree the basics first: allergies, emergency numbers and house rules (including the big question of how much screen time, if there are any screens).

If You Live on Your Own, or You're Getting Older

So much of this book talks about families and kids, and nobody should feel left out.

If you live alone, a disruption can feel especially frightening. There's nobody to turn to in the dark and say *what do we do?* Nobody to share the worry with. And if the phone stops working, the silence can feel enormous.

So please, more than anyone, make your connections now. Pick one or two neighbours and agree to look out for each other. Swap numbers on paper. Give someone you trust a spare key. Tell them where your medicines list is. Put your name on your street's list, and use the green and red window cards, because they were made for exactly this.

If you're older, you have something many younger people don't: experience. You may remember power cuts, snowed in winters, making do and getting by. You know how to cook from scratch, mend things and fill an evening without a screen. Your community needs that more than you might realise. Please don't be shy about offering it, whether that's teaching a young parent to bake bread or telling the kids next door what life was like before the internet. (They won't believe you. Tell them anyway.)

And please accept help when it's offered. That can be hard, especially for a generation brought up to stand on their own two feet. But letting someone check on you isn't weakness. It's a gift to them too.

Keep a radio by your chair, a torch by your bed and one by the stairs, your phone charged and a power bank topped up. And if you rely on a care alarm or a landline, ask your provider about a battery backup.

You are not on your own. Not if we do this right.

Nobody Left Behind

A community is only as strong as the way it treats the people who need it most. So when you make your plans, include older people living alone, disabled people, people with dementia and their carers, families with babies, people who don't speak the local language well, people without a home, people who've just moved in, and people who couldn't afford to prepare.

The UK government's own advice suggests giving spare supplies to households who can't prepare, and helping people print and copy their important documents. That's a lovely idea anywhere in the world. Being ready isn't just about our own four walls. Those of us who can do a bit more, should, so that nobody gets left behind.

And plan for the people who've never quite fitted the world's idea of normal: the neurodivergent neighbour who finds noise and change overwhelming, the person who struggles with crowds, the one who needs things explained a different way. They're not a problem to be managed. They're part of the team, and often they'll notice things everyone else misses.

Join Something

If you'd like to go further, there are wonderful organisations already doing this work who'd love to have you. The Red Cross or Red Crescent. First aid organisations. Search and rescue teams. Lifeboat crews. Community groups, scouts and guides, youth clubs. Food banks. Your local place of worship. Your local council.

You don't have to wait for a crisis. Every one of them makes life better right now.

Ten Things You Could Organise This Year

1. A street tea party
2. A skill swap evening at the local hall
3. A first aid course for the street or the school parents
4. A seed and plant swap
5. A community *power cut night*: lights off, torches, games, soup and a sing song

6. A walking group
7. A repair café where people fix things for each other
8. An afternoon where grandparents teach the kids the old skills
9. A community choir (tuneless singing positively encouraged)
10. A get together where you go through this book together

When It Really Matters

Remember Thursday in the imagined week back in Chapter 3? The water went off, the neighbours wandered out onto the pavement, someone boiled water for tea, someone brought biscuits, and for the first time in years the whole street was chatting.

That moment isn't a fantasy. It happens in disruptions all over the world. During the blackout in Spain and Portugal in 2025, people played music and shared food in the streets. After floods and storms everywhere, communities have turned out with sandbags, spare beds and casseroles. In the pandemic, it was mutual aid.

Crisis does something strange and beautiful to people. It strips away the things that divide us and leaves the things that connect us. It would be so much better to find that without the crisis. But either way, it's in us. It always has been.

Living, Not Just Surviving

The best cure for fear is other people. On our own, everything feels bigger and darker. Together, round a table, on a pavement, in a community hall, it shrinks back down to its proper size.

Our grandparents knew that. It's why they had street parties in the middle of hard times. It's why they sang. It's why they kept their doors open. So knock on the door. Organise the tea party. Make the soup. Not because the world is ending, but because life is for living, and it's so much better lived together.

For the Children

Children are natural community builders. They don't care about house prices or politics. They just want to play.

- **Let them lead.** Kids playing out on the street is often how grown ups end up meeting.
- **Make cards and drawings for neighbours,** especially older people on their own. A child's drawing through the letterbox can make someone's whole week.
- **Get them involved in street events.** Bunting, cake stalls, games for the little ones, a talent show.
- **Teach them who the safe grown ups are** on your street.
- **Give them a role in the plan.** Junior messengers. Window card checkers, with a grown up. Helpers at the community kitchen.
- **Connect the generations.** Some of the most magical friendships are between children and older neighbours. Older people have time, stories and skills. Children have energy and joy. And both are lonelier than they should be. Put them together.

A child who grows up knowing their street is full of people who care about them grows up feeling safe in the world. And that, more than anything, is what we're building.

CHAPTER 13

The Skills Our Grandparents Had



Think about what our grandparents' generation could do without a second thought. Turn a collar on a shirt so it lasted another five years. Light a fire with one match. Read the weather in the sky. Feed a family from what looked like an empty cupboard. Add up a shopping bill in their heads faster than the till. Fix pretty much anything with a bit of string and a strongly worded sentence.

Those skills weren't special. They were just normal. And in two or three generations, most of us have let them slip away, because we haven't needed them. These days, if something breaks, we watch a video about it. If the video won't load, we're stuck.

This chapter isn't about turning you into a homesteader overnight. It's an invitation. Pick up one or two old skills and enjoy them. Because even if we never need them in a crisis, learning them is one of the most grounding, satisfying, joyful things you can do.

Know Your Own House

Before anything else, every grown up in your home, and the older kids, should know how to do these. They take ten minutes to learn and could save you from a real disaster.

- **Turn the water off at the main stopcock or shut off valve.** It's often under the kitchen sink, but not always. Find it, check it turns, and label it.
- **Turn the gas off** at the meter, if you have gas. And know what to do if you smell gas: no switches, no flames, open the windows, get out, and

call your gas emergency line. Look up that number now and write it down.

- **Find the fuse box or breaker panel,** and know how to switch the power off and reset a tripped switch.
- **Open the garage door or electric gates by hand.**
- **Reset the boiler or heating** when the power comes back.

Write it all on a card and keep it with your emergency box.

Make Do and Mend

In the Second World War, clothes were rationed in Britain and the government put out a famous booklet called *Make Do and Mend*. It taught people to repair, alter and reuse everything. It came from necessity, but honestly, it's also the most sustainable approach to clothes anyone's ever come up with.

A few basics cover most things. Sewing on a button: five minutes to learn, a lifetime of use, and the end of that safety pin you've had in your cardigan since 2019. Stitching up a seam that's come undone. Darning a sock, which is strangely peaceful. Patching jeans, which is actually fashionable now. Taking up a hem for a child who's shot up overnight.

Keep a little sewing kit: needles, a few colours of thread, safety pins, small sharp scissors, spare buttons and some scraps of fabric.

Knitting and Crochet

Wartime generations knitted constantly. Socks for the troops, jumpers for the kids, blankets for families who'd lost everything. Knitting does two jobs at once. It makes warm things, and it calms an anxious mind. That rhythm of the needles is almost meditative, and plenty of research now backs up what our grandmothers just knew.

If you've never knitted, start with a simple scarf. It'll be wonky. Wear it with pride. Library books and older relatives make perfect teachers, and knitting groups are some of the friendliest places on earth.

Washing Without a Machine

If the power or water's off for a while, laundry becomes a real thing, especially with kids, who seem to produce dirty washing at a rate that defies physics.

Wash only what you have to. Our grandparents wore clothes a few times before washing them, and aired them in between. Change underwear and socks every day, everything else less often. Hand wash in a bucket or the bath with a little soap. Wring it out properly (two people twisting a sheet from each end is a great workout and a decent comedy routine). And dry outside whenever you can, even in winter, because the wind does wonders.

Fire: Light It, Tend It, Respect It

If you've got a properly fitted wood burner or fireplace, knowing how to light and look after it is a precious skill.

1. Make sure the chimney's been swept in the last year and there's a working carbon monoxide alarm in the room.
2. Open the air vents.
3. Twist a few sheets of newspaper or use natural firelighters at the bottom.
4. Lay small, dry kindling on top, criss cross or like a little tepee.
5. Light the paper in a few places.
6. When the kindling's burning well, add a couple of small dry logs. Don't smother it.
7. Build up to bigger logs, and turn the vents down a little once it's going.

Only ever burn dry, seasoned wood, and keep a fireguard in front of an open fire if you've got children or pets.

Finding Your Way Without a Sat Nav

Most of us navigate entirely by phone now. If the signal went, lots of people would struggle to get to a town ten miles away. Some of us struggle to get out of a car park.

Buy a paper road map of your area, and a proper walking map if you head into the countryside. Learn to read it, which makes a lovely family pro-

ject. Get a cheap compass and learn the basics. Know which way north is from your front door. And next time you go somewhere new, try it without the sat nav. You might get a bit lost. That's half the fun.

Bikes and Boots

If fuel ever got scarce, bikes and feet would become how we get about, just like our grandparents did. Learn to fix a puncture, pump up tyres and oil a chain. Many towns have community bike workshops where volunteers will happily teach you. And look after your walking boots. Comfy, waterproof boots are worth their weight in gold.

A Bit of DIY

You don't need to be a builder. But it's worth being able to use a hammer, screwdriver and saw safely, put up a shelf (one that stays up), fix a dripping tap, board up a broken window and clear a blocked drain. Keep a basic toolbox, a roll of strong tape, cable ties, rope and some plastic sheeting. You'll be amazed how often they come in handy. And leave anything to do with gas, mains electricity or structural work to the professionals.

Knots

Nobody expects a book about being prepared to have a section on knots. But a few good knots solve so many problems: tying down a tarpaulin, putting up a washing line, rigging a shelter, securing the camping stove box to the car roof so it doesn't end up in a hedge. A reef knot, a bowline and a clove hitch will get you a long way. Every sailor and scout knows them, and kids absolutely love learning them.

Saving Seeds

Before garden centres, every gardener saved seeds from their best plants for next year. Beans, peas, tomatoes and lots of herbs are easy. Dry them, pop them in labelled paper envelopes, keep them somewhere cool and dry, and you've got next year's crop for free. Many communities hold seed swaps in the spring, and they're lovely.

If you've got the space and the enthusiasm, a few hens give you eggs, eat your scraps and are surprisingly good company. They're also surprisingly good escape artists. Do your homework first, especially about foxes and local rules.

Sums and Handwriting

It sounds silly, but in a world without calculators, being able to add up a bill, work out change or halve a recipe in your head is genuinely useful. Practise with the kids using card games, shopping and baking. And handwriting matters again too: notes for neighbours, signs for the noticeboard, letters to family. Keep notebooks, pens and pencils in the emergency box.

Reading the Sky

Our ancestors could read the weather in the clouds and the wind. *Red sky at night, shepherd's delight* isn't just a saying; there's real science behind it. Learning a little about clouds and wind is fascinating. And learning to find north by the stars on a clear night is one of the most magical things you can do with a child, especially during a power cut, when the stars suddenly come out in their thousands.

Stories, Songs and Making Our Own Fun

Perhaps the most precious skill of all is one that doesn't even feel like a skill. Our grandparents could fill a whole evening with nothing but stories, songs, cards and conversation. So many families had someone who could play an instrument, and someone else who could tell a tale or recite a poem by heart.

There's much more on this in the next chapter. For now, just ask yourself: *Could I tell a story? Do I know all the words to any songs? Could I teach someone a card game?* If not, start learning. It's the most enjoyable preparation you'll ever do.

Who's Going to Teach You?

The best teachers of all these skills are sitting in our communities right now, often lonely and overlooked. Our older people. The grandad who'd love to

show a teenager how to sharpen a saw. The great aunt who could teach the whole street to darn. The retired farmer who knows more about growing than any book.

Ask them. Invite them. Value them. It might be the kindest thing you do all year, and you'll both get so much out of it.

And there's your local library, repair cafés, community workshops, adult education classes, scouts and guides, allotment and gardening groups and knitting circles. So many people out there are just waiting to share what they know.

Living, Not Just Surviving

There's a special kind of confidence that comes from being able to do things with your own two hands. When you know you can bake bread, mend a jumper, light a fire or find your way home without a phone, the world feels less frightening. Not because it's any safer, but because you're more capable.

Our grandparents had that confidence in bucketloads. It's how they faced so much with such straight backs. Every old skill you learn is one less thing for fear to hold over you.

For the Children

Children adore learning old skills, especially from grandparents and older neighbours. It makes them feel capable and grown up, and it connects them to the past in a way no history lesson can.

- Teach them to sew on a button, and to tie their laces properly (you'd be surprised).
- Let them learn knots and practise on absolutely everything, including, inevitably, the dog's lead.
- Hand them a map and let them lead a walk.
- Take them to a repair café or a bike workshop.
- Teach them to knit or crochet. Boys as much as girls.
- Grow seeds together and save some for next year.

- Show them where the stopcock and fuse box are when they're old enough.
- Set up a grandparent interview. *What did you do before there was TV? How did you do the washing? What games did you play?*

A child who can sew, cook, read a map, tie a knot and help light a fire safely is a child who'll never feel completely helpless, whatever the world throws at them.

CHAPTER 14

Joy, Fun and Making Life Bearable



The Danes have a word, *hygge*, and the Norwegians have *kos*. Lots of cultures have their own version. It means warmth, cosiness, togetherness and contentment. Lanterns, blankets, hot drinks, good company, simple food, and that lovely feeling of being tucked up safe while the cold and dark carry on outside.

In the long Scandinavian winters, it isn't an indulgence. It's how people stay sane.

And that's what this chapter's all about. Whatever's happening in the world, we can create little pockets of warmth and joy inside our homes and communities. And those pockets matter so much more than we think.

Why Joy Matters

People who can still find moments of laughter and play in hard times are more resilient. They think more clearly, work together better and bounce back faster. Joy isn't the opposite of taking things seriously. It's the fuel that keeps us going.

Children especially need it. A child who laughs every day is a child whose stress system gets a chance to reset.

So please, never feel guilty for having fun in hard times. It's not frivolous. It's survival. Doctor's orders. (Well, not actually a doctor. But it should be.)

A Pack of Cards

A pack of cards is the best value thing you'll ever put in your emergency box. A pound or two, and endless hours of fun for every age.

Snap and Pairs for the little ones. Go Fish and Old Maid for young children. Crazy Eights for the whole family. Rummy and Whist for older ones. Cribbage, beloved of grandads the world over. Newmarket with buttons for counters. And Patience for a bit of quiet time on your own.

Keep a little book of the rules in the box too, because you won't be able to look them up, and every family has at least one person who will invent rules to win.

Games, Puzzles and the Ones That Need Nothing at All

A good family board game can fill a whole evening (and occasionally end a friendship, but that's part of the charm). A big jigsaw on the kitchen table becomes something everyone dips in and out of all week. Chess, draughts and dominoes never go out of fashion.

And then there are the games that need absolutely nothing. I Spy. Twenty Questions. Charades. *I went to market and I bought...* Consequences on folded paper. Hangman. Noughts and crosses. Hide and seek by torchlight, if you're brave.

Stories

Before radio and TV and the internet, stories were how people got through long dark evenings. Every culture in the world has its own treasure chest of tales: myths, legends, folk stories, fairy tales, full of magic and giants and talking animals and clever heroes.

Anyone can tell a story. Start with what you know: fairy tales, family stories, the funny things that happened when you were little. Children are endlessly fascinated by *when you were little* stories, especially the ones where you got into trouble. Then try making one up together. One person starts, the next adds a sentence, and round it goes. It always ends somewhere ridiculous, usually involving a dragon and somebody's teacher.

And **reading aloud** is one of the most beautiful things a family can do, at any age. Even teenagers, who would never admit it, often love being read to. Pick a big gripping book and read a chapter every night by torchlight.

Music

Music is medicine. It always has been.

In many cultures there's a tradition of an evening where everyone brings something. A song, a poem, a story, a tune, a joke, a dance. Nobody has to be good. Everybody has to join in. Some people call it a kitchen party. Some call it a sing song. Whatever you call it, it's perfect for a long, dark disruption.

Hold one on your street, in a community hall, or just round your own kitchen table. Get out the guitar, the recorder, the ukulele, the spoons, the saucepan drum. Sing the songs everyone knows. Teach the kids the old songs. Let the older folk learn the kids' songs. And laugh at all the wrong notes, because there will be many.

If you play an instrument, keep it tuned and keep spare strings. You might just become the most popular person in the neighbourhood.

Making Things

Making things with your hands is calming and satisfying, and a disruption is the perfect time for the projects we never get round to. Knitting and sewing. Drawing and painting. Paper chains, origami and bunting. Models made from cardboard boxes. Cards and little gifts for neighbours. A scrapbook of this strange time.

Keep a craft box: paper, card, glue, scissors, tape, pens, crayons, string, wool and a bag of odds and ends. Glitter is optional and entirely at your own risk.

Get Outside

Whatever the season, getting outside lifts everyone. Walks, rock pooling, den building, bird watching, collecting shells or conkers, kicking a ball, stargazing on dark nights, snowmen when it snows. Wherever you are, there's sky, and birds, and weather.

Make the Ordinary Special

Some of the loveliest things are the smallest. A picnic on the living room floor by lantern light. A tea party with the best cups. Pancakes on the camp-

ing stove outside. Hot chocolate at bedtime. A pyjama day. A treasure hunt round the house with clues.

In hard times, little rituals give the week a shape and something to look forward to. *Friday's games night. Sunday's special dinner, even if the special dinner is beans on toast with a candle stuck in it. Wednesday's story night.* Little anchors in the week.

Celebrate Anyway

Birthdays, festivals, holidays, whatever your family celebrates. Whatever's going on in the world, celebrate them. Make a cake, even a tiny one. Make decorations out of paper. Sing. Children need to know that the good things in life haven't been cancelled. Some of the most treasured memories of wartime children are of celebrations that were simple but full of love. An orange. A hand knitted jumper. Songs with the neighbours.

How to Run a Family Power Cut Night

Here's an idea worth trying in every home: a monthly **power cut night**. Pick an evening when nobody's rushing anywhere.

1. **Build it up.** Tell everyone a few days before. Let the kids help plan it. Half the fun is the anticipation.
2. **Get the kit out together.** Torches, lanterns, the radio, blankets, cushions, a pack of cards and a board game or two. This is secretly a brilliant way to check your emergency box actually works.
3. **Lights off at a set time.** Make a ceremony of it. Count down from ten and flick the switch together. Dramatic music optional.
4. **Make tea without the kitchen.** Sandwiches and a picnic on the floor, or a camping stove supper outside if it's dry. Hot chocolate from a flask afterwards.
5. **Listen to the radio for a bit.** Let the kids find a station, just so everyone knows how it works.
6. **Play.** Cards, board games, shadow puppets, charades, a made up story where everyone adds a sentence.

7. **Build a den** in your warm room and read a chapter of a book by torchlight.
8. **Bed by torchlight.** Everyone takes their own torch up. Little ones will think this is the most exciting thing that's ever happened.
9. **Talk about it the next day.** What did everyone love? What was missing from the box? What would you do differently?

No pressure, no perfection. Just a cosy night together that also happens to make your family more ready for anything. It might easily become one of your favourite nights of the month.

Bring It Back Now

Here's the real hope for this chapter. That you don't wait for a crisis to do any of this.

What if you had a screen free evening every week? Cards, stories, music, a jigsaw, a walk. What if your street had a sing song once a season? What if you taught your kids three card games and five songs this winter?

Because if the worst never happens, and let's hope with all our hearts it doesn't, you'll still have gained something beautiful from getting ready for it.

Living, Not Just Surviving

This is where the whole heart of this book comes together. We have always lived with fear. And every generation before us found ways to live joyfully anyway. They danced. They sang. They played cards by candlelight and told stories round the fire. They didn't wait for the world to be safe before they let themselves be happy.

So please, don't wait either. Don't save the good stuff for when the news calms down, because the news never really calms down. Play the game tonight. Sing the song. Have the picnic on the living room floor. Your life is happening right now, and it deserves to be enjoyed.

For the Children

This whole chapter is really for the children. But here are a few extra ideas to keep in your back pocket.

- **A boredom jar.** Kids write ideas for things to do on lolly sticks, and when boredom strikes, they pull one out. No complaining allowed once it's pulled.
- **A family newspaper,** written and drawn by the kids. Headlines, weather, interviews with the neighbours, a puzzle page, a scandalous gossip column about the cat.
- **Put on a show.** A play, a puppet show, a concert, a magic show.
- **A time capsule** about this strange time, to open in ten years.
- **A new skill every week.** A card trick, a knot, a song, a recipe.
- **Let them plan a family fun night.** Kids love being in charge, and their ideas are often brilliant (and occasionally involve everyone wearing hats).

And above all, laugh with them. Be silly. Pull faces by torchlight. Tell terrible jokes. A child who sees their grown ups laughing in the dark learns that whatever happens, life can still be good.

CHAPTER 15

Your Prepare, Not Scare Plan



If you've skipped straight here, welcome! That's exactly what this chapter is for. And if you've read the whole book, thank you. Here's everything pulled together into one simple, gentle plan.

The golden rule is this: **little by little.** Please don't rush out and spend a fortune. Please don't panic buy. Check what you've already got, make a list of what's missing, and add a few things each time you do your normal shop. Slow and steady. That's how prepare beats scare.

This Weekend: The Free and Nearly Free Bits

Every one of these costs nothing, or next to nothing, and they make the biggest difference of all.

1. **Have the family chat.** Over tea (and possibly cake), agree your meeting places, who collects the kids, who checks on whom and where the emergency box will live. (Chapter 4)
2. **Look up your local numbers.** Your emergency number, your non emergency medical line, your power cut line, your gas emergency line, your local crisis helpline and children's helpline. Write them all on paper. (Chapters 4, 9 and 11)
3. **Write your paper address book.** Family, friends, neighbours, school, doctor, pharmacy, vet, energy and water. Copies for your bag and the kids' bags. (Chapter 8)
4. **Fill some water.** Clean bottles, filled from the tap and labelled with the date. Even six litres is a start. (Chapter 5)

5. **Round up your torches.** Find every torch in the house. Check they work. Put them all in one place. Marvel at how many dead batteries you own.
6. **Find your stopcock and fuse box,** and show everyone where they are. (Chapter 13)
7. **Write your medicines list** for everyone who takes regular medication. (Chapter 9)
8. **Look up your government's preparedness advice** and any extra support your energy and water companies offer. (Chapter 4)
9. **Say hello to one neighbour** you don't really know. (Chapter 12)
10. **Teach your kids your phone number off by heart.** (Chapter 8)

If you only ever do these ten things, you'll have done so much. Put the kettle on. You've earned it.

This Month: Your Emergency Box

Over the next few weeks, build your box a bit at a time with your normal shopping. This is a sensible order:

1. **A radio** that works without mains power or the internet
2. **Water,** building up to three litres per person per day for three days
3. **No cook food** your family actually likes
4. **Batteries** for the torches and radio
5. **A charged power bank**
6. **Some cash** in small notes and coins
7. **A first aid kit**
8. **A tin opener** that doesn't need electricity
9. **Hand sanitiser, wet wipes, bin bags and loo roll**
10. **Copies of important documents** in a waterproof folder

Plus baby things, pet food and medication if you need them. And a pack of cards. Always a pack of cards.

The Next Few Months: Comfort and Confidence

Once the basics are sorted, add the things that make it all a bit more comfortable and help you keep going for longer. A camping stove and spare gas, for outside only. A battery carbon monoxide alarm. Extra blankets for your warm room. Head torches and a lantern. Water purification tablets. A bigger cupboard of food. A pair of walkie talkies to share with a neighbour. A grab bag for each person and a comfort bag for each little one. A sewing kit, a toolbox, rope and tape. A paper map. A few seeds and pots. Board games, books and a craft box.

This Year: Skills and Community

This is where the real strength lives.

- **Learn first aid,** and take someone with you.
- **Learn one old skill.** Bread, knitting, mending, map reading, fixing a puncture.
- **Grow something.** Herbs on the windowsill, potatoes in a bag, a community garden plot.
- **Get your street together** and make your plan, your skills and needs map and your window cards. (Chapter 12)
- **Have a chat with your local hall, place of worship or council** about a warm space and an emergency plan.
- **Join something.** The Red Cross or Red Crescent, a first aid group, a choir, a repair café, a gardening club.
- **Hold a power cut night** with your family. Then make it a habit. (Chapter 14)

Keep It Ticking Over

Getting ready isn't a one off job. It's a gentle habit. Twice a year, go through your box. Swap out old water and food, test the torches and radio, change the batteries, charge the power bank, update your address book and medicines list, and refresh the kids' comfort bags. Attach it to something you already do twice a year, like the clocks changing or a family birthday, so you

don't forget. Every time you use something from the cupboard, pop it on the shopping list. And keep talking to your family, your neighbours and your community.

If Money Is Tight

If you're reading this and thinking *I just can't afford any of this*, please don't feel guilty or left behind. Do what works for your circumstances.

The most valuable things in this whole book are free. Conversations. Paper lists. Knowing your neighbours. Learning skills. Filling bottles from the tap. Finding your stopcock. Writing down your medicines. Lots of the rest can be found second hand, borrowed or swapped. Charity shops often have torches, blankets, board games and camping kit. Ask whether your local food bank, community pantry or council has any help available. And lean on your community. That's exactly what it's there for.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Once you've done the things in this plan, there's one more thing to do. Let it go.

Put the box in the cupboard, stick the plan on the fridge, and stop worrying about it. That's the deal. You do the sensible things so you can stop carrying the fear around with you. Check the box twice a year, and the rest of the time, live. Go to the beach. Have friends round. Book the holiday. Plant the garden. Eat the emergency chocolate and replace it. That's what all of this is for.

For the Children: Their Very Own Plan

Give each child their own little plan, pitched just right for their age. Write it together, decorate it, and keep it in their room or school bag. It might say:

- *My name and address is...*
- *My grown up's phone number is...*
- *If the lights go out, I get my torch from...*
- *If I can't find my family, I go to...*

- *My job in an emergency is...*
- *Things that make me feel better are...*
- *People who keep me safe are...*

A child who's written their own plan feels in control. And a child who feels in control feels safe.

BONUS CHAPTER

At Work: Looking After Each Other on the Job



Workplaces are one of the most overlooked parts of being ready.

Think about it. Most of us spend most of our waking hours at work. If something happens on a Tuesday morning, a huge number of us won't be at home with our emergency box. We'll be at our desks, on the shop floor, in the van, on a ward, in a classroom. Our children will be at school. Our older parents might be on their own.

So this chapter is for anyone who works, and especially for anyone who leads people, looks after people or has any say in how their workplace runs.

What It Feels Like at Work When Things Go Wrong

Picture it. The systems go down. Emails stop. Phones are patchy. Nobody quite knows what's happening. Some people are worried about getting home. Some are frantic about their kids at school. Some are carrying on as if nothing's happened, because the spreadsheet won't finish itself. And someone, somewhere, is quietly having a panic attack in the toilets.

The teams that cope well in moments like that aren't the ones with the fanciest plans. They're the ones where people trust each other, where someone calm takes the lead, and where everyone knows it's OK to say *I'm not alright.*

If You Lead a Team

You don't need to be an emergency planner. But there are some simple things you can do now that make an enormous difference.

Talk about it. Not in a scary way. Just a short, calm conversation in a team meeting. *If our systems went down, or the power went, what would we do?* You'll be amazed how many people have quietly been worrying about exactly that.

Have a paper plan. Most workplace plans live on the very systems that might go down. (Storing the IT failure plan on the IT system is a classic.) Print the important bits. Who's in charge. How you'll contact people. Where you'll meet. Who gets sent home first and why.

Know your people's pressures. Who has young children at school? Who cares for an older parent? Who relies on medication? Who has a long journey home? Who's neurodivergent and might find sudden change and noise particularly hard? You don't need the details. You just need to know enough to be kind and fair when it matters.

Let people go home. In a real disruption, the most compassionate thing you can usually do is let people get to their families, especially those with children or caring responsibilities. Work out now how you'd decide that fairly.

Keep a small kit at work. A torch, a radio, a first aid kit, some water and snacks, and a paper list of everyone's emergency contacts kept securely. Nothing fancy.

Look after the ones who stay. If your work keeps running in a crisis, and lots of essential work will, the people who stay need looking after too. Breaks. Food. Rest. And someone checking in on how they're really doing.

If You're Part of a Team

You don't need to be in charge to make a difference.

- Keep a few things in your work bag or drawer: a phone charger, a small torch, a snack, a bottle of water, any medication you'd need if you couldn't get home that night, and a paper card with your family's numbers and meeting place.
- Know how you'd get home without a car or public transport. Could you walk it? Who could you share a lift with?

- Agree with your family what happens if you're at work when something goes wrong. Who collects the kids? Who checks on Grandma?
- Look out for the colleague who seems to be struggling. Often the person who most needs a cup of tea and a kind word is the one saying they're fine.

Psychological Safety Matters Even More in a Crisis

Psychological safety means feeling you can speak up, ask a question or admit you're struggling without being judged. In normal times, it's the foundation of a healthy workplace. In a crisis, it's the difference between a team that pulls together and one that falls apart.

If people feel safe to say *I'm frightened about my kids* or *I don't know what to do*, problems get solved faster and nobody suffers in silence. If they don't, people bottle it up, make mistakes and burn out.

So if you lead people, go first. Say it out loud. *Honestly, I'm a bit rattled by all this too. Let's work out what we can do together.* That one sentence can change the whole mood of a room.

After It's Over

When things get back to normal, don't just carry on as if nothing happened. Take a moment as a team. What went well? What would we do differently? Who needs a bit of extra support now? Some people feel the effects of a stressful event days or even weeks later. Keep checking in.

And say thank you. Properly. To the people who kept things going, the people who looked after others, and the people who just about held it together. They all deserve it. Cake helps.

Small Businesses and the Self Employed

If you run a small business or work for yourself, a disruption can hit hard. Think now about what you'd do if you couldn't take card payments for a few days, if your online systems went down, or if you couldn't get supplies. Keep paper copies of your key customer and supplier contacts. Know how you'd let customers know what's happening. And remember that in a crisis,

the local businesses that look after their community are the ones their community never forgets.

Living, Not Just Surviving

Workplaces can become anxious places when the world feels uncertain. But the best teams don't pretend everything's fine, and they don't spread panic either. They look after each other, plan sensibly, and then get on with doing good work together.

That's what every workplace deserves. Not fear. Not denial. Just people looking out for people, and getting on with living. Prepare, not scare, at work too.

A Letter of Hope

Dear reader,

If you've made it this far, thank you. Not just for reading, but for caring enough about the people you love to think about these things. It isn't easy to look at hard possibilities with your eyes open. You did it anyway. That takes courage.

Let me leave you with the thought that's been running through every page of this book.

We have always lived with fear.

Every generation, everywhere in the world, has had its moment of thinking *this is it*. Wars, bombs, pandemics, crashes, empty shelves. And now this.

And every single time, people found a way through.

That isn't luck. That's people. People who got scared, did a few sensible things, looked after each other and then got on with living.

Because here's the truth at the heart of this whole book. **A life lived in fear is no life at all.**

Fear will always find something to whisper about. If it's not war, it'll be money, or health, or the weather, or the kids. If we wait for the world to be completely safe before we let ourselves live, we'll be waiting forever. And we'll miss it all. The sunsets. The birthday cakes. The cuddles on the sofa. The cup of tea with a neighbour on the pavement.

So that's what this book has really been about. Not stockpiling. Not doomsday. Getting ready, so you can put the fear down. A few bottles of water, a torch, some numbers on paper, a plan on the fridge, a neighbour you trust. Then close the cupboard door and go and live your life.

Prepare, not scare.

Being ready is an act of love. When you fill a bottle of water, you're saying to your children *I've thought about you, and you'll be OK*. When you

knock on a neighbour's door, you're saying *you're not alone*. When you teach a child to sew on a button or sing an old song, you're saying *you're capable, and you belong to something bigger than yourself*.

And it's an act of peace, too. A country full of people who are calm, connected and ready is very hard to frighten. Anyone who uses fear and rumour as a weapon is relying on us being anxious, isolated and divided. Every street party, every community kitchen and every calm conversation with a child is a quiet way of saying *no, you don't get to take our lives from us*.

If the worst never comes, and let's hope with all our hearts it doesn't, this book will still have given you something. A slightly fuller cupboard. A few more friends on your street. A family evening by lantern light that your children talk about for years. A skill you didn't have before. And a little less fear, with a lot more life.

And if hard times do come, please remember this. You're not helpless. You've got a plan. You've got your people. You've got your community. You've got the courage of everyone who came before you. And you've got something no cyber attack can ever switch off: the ability to look after each other.

Our grandparents called it pulling together. Every language in the world has its own word for it. Whatever we call it, it means the same thing. Whatever happens, we'll face it together. And in the meantime, we'll live.

So put the kettle on. Give the people you love a big hug. Knock on a neighbour's door. And go and live your life. Fully. Joyfully. Without fear.

With love and hope

Appendix: Checklists, Numbers and Templates

Everything practical from the book in one place, ready to copy, print and stick on the fridge.

Your Local Numbers

Fill these in for wherever you live. Search online for each one now, while you can, and write them down on paper.

What	Examples	Your number
Emergency services	999 (UK), 112 (EU and many mobiles), 911 (USA, Canada), 000 (Australia)	
Non emergency medical help	111 (UK)	
Power cut line	105 (UK)	
Gas emergency	Your gas company's emergency line	
Water company	Your supplier's emergency line	
Mental health crisis line	116 123 Samaritans (UK and Ireland)	
Children's helpline	0800 1111 Childline (UK)	
Doctor		
Pharmacy		
School		
Vet		

The Emergency Box (Three Days)

- ☐ Bottled water: 3 litres per person per day, for 3 days
- ☐ No cook, no fridge food your family eats, for 3 days
- ☐ Manual tin opener
- ☐ Torch for each person, plus spare batteries
- ☐ Battery, wind up or solar radio, with local frequencies written on it
- ☐ Charged power bank
- ☐ Cash in coins and small notes
- ☐ Copies of important documents in a waterproof folder
- ☐ Paper list of phone numbers and addresses
- ☐ Written list of medicines and doses for each person
- ☐ Essential medication and medical supplies
- ☐ First aid kit
- ☐ Blankets, sleeping bags and warm clothing
- ☐ Hand sanitiser, wet wipes, toilet roll, strong bin bags
- ☐ Toothbrushes, toothpaste, period products
- ☐ Baby supplies: ready to feed formula, nappies, wipes
- ☐ Pet food and water
- ☐ Pack of cards, a book, pens and paper
- ☐ Comfort bag for each young child

The Grab Bag (One per Person)

- ☐ Copies of key documents
- ☐ Medication for a few days
- ☐ Phone charger and small power bank
- ☐ Spare glasses
- ☐ Some cash
- ☐ Torch
- ☐ Change of clothes and a warm layer
- ☐ Water bottle and snacks
- ☐ Paper list of key numbers

☐ Comfort item for children

Comfort and Confidence (Build Over Time)

☐ Camping stove and spare gas (outdoor use only)
☐ Battery carbon monoxide alarm
☐ Head torches and a lantern
☐ Water purification tablets
☐ Water butt
☐ A cupboard of food for one to two weeks
☐ Walkie talkies
☐ Sewing kit, toolbox, rope, tape, cable ties, plastic sheeting
☐ Paper road map and compass
☐ Seeds and pots
☐ Board games, jigsaws, craft box, books
☐ Bike puncture repair kit and pump

Our Family Chat: Questions to Talk Through

Put the kettle on, get everyone round the table, and work through these together.

- If the power went off tonight, what would we do first?
- Where's our emergency box, and what's missing from it?
- If the phones stopped working and we were all in different places, where would we meet?
- Who would collect the children from school?
- Which neighbours or relatives would we check on?
- What's everyone's job? (Torch keeper, water monitor, games organiser, neighbour checker...)
- What would we do with the pets?
- What are three games we'd play by torchlight?
- What would help each of us feel calm if we were worried?

That last question is the best one. You might be surprised by the answers.

Our Family Plan

- **Meeting place near home:** .....
- **Meeting place further away:** .....
- **Check in time if separated:** .....
- **Who collects the children:** .....
- **Who checks on whom:** .....
- **Where the emergency box lives:** .....
- **Where the stopcock, gas meter and fuse box are:** .....
- **Pets plan:** .....

Our Street Plan

Copy this out, fill it in with your neighbours, and pop a copy through every door.

- **Our street:** .....
- **Organisers:** .....
- **If the phones are down, we meet at:** .....
- **Our information point (noticeboard):** .....
- **Our walkie talkie channel:** .....
- **Who checks on whom:** .....
- **People who might need extra help (with their permission):** .....
- **Skills on our street:** .....
- **Useful things on our street (camping stove, generator, big pan, wood burner, ladder):** .....
- **Window cards:** green means *we're OK*, red means *please knock*. No card means someone will knock to check.

Three Days of Meals with No Cooking

Day one. Breakfast: oats soaked overnight in long life milk, with tinned peaches. Lunch: crackers with tinned fish or peanut butter, and an apple. Dinner: bean salad from tinned beans, tinned sweetcorn, oil and vinegar,

with crispbread. Pudding: tinned rice pudding. Treat: a square of chocolate each.

Day two. Breakfast: crispbread with jam or honey, and a handful of nuts. Lunch: tinned soup eaten cold (honestly, it's better than it sounds) with bread. Dinner: tinned chicken or chickpeas with mayonnaise from a sealed jar, in wraps or on crackers, plus tinned carrots. Pudding: tinned fruit with custard from a carton.

Day three. Breakfast: cereal bars and dried fruit. Lunch: tinned meat or a bean salad with oatcakes. Dinner: tuna or salmon with crackers, tinned potatoes and tinned peas. Pudding: biscuits, and hot chocolate if you've got a flask of hot water. Celebration: you made it through three days.

Three Camping Stove Suppers (Outside Only)

- **One pot pasta.** Pasta, a tin of chopped tomatoes, a tin of tuna or beans, a stock cube and some dried herbs, all cooked together in one pan.
- **Cupboard soup.** Whatever vegetables you've got, a tin of beans or some lentils and a stock cube, simmered together. Serve with flatbreads.
- **Breakfast for dinner.** Beans, tinned sausages or eggs if you have them, and fried bread. Children consider this the height of luxury.

Being Ready Through the Seasons

Colder months. Storms and power cuts are often more likely. Make sure you've got plenty of blankets, warm layers, hats and gloves. Check the batteries in your torches and carbon monoxide alarm. Get the chimney swept if you've got a fire. Keep a blanket, a torch, water and snacks in the car. Keep an eye on older neighbours when it turns cold.

Warmer months. Heatwaves are becoming more common, so think about keeping cool as well as warm. Plenty of water, shady spots, and checking on older people and babies who struggle in the heat. It's also the perfect time for practising: a camping stove supper in the garden, a family power cut night, a walk with a paper map.

Spring and autumn. Lovely times to plant seeds, start a windowsill garden or put your name down for a community garden plot. And a perfect time for your twice yearly emergency box check.

Safety Rules to Remember

- Never use a barbecue, camping stove, patio heater or generator indoors or in an attached garage.
- Use torches rather than candles wherever you can.
- Boil water at a rolling boil for at least one minute if it may be unsafe.
- Keep the fridge and freezer closed in a power cut.
- If you smell gas, don't use switches or flames. Get out and call your gas emergency line.
- Never eat wild plants or mushrooms unless you're completely sure what they are.
- If someone contacts you in a crisis asking for money or details in a hurry, it's almost certainly a scam.

Twice a Year Check

☐ Rotate water and food, check dates
☐ Test torches, radio and carbon monoxide alarm
☐ Replace batteries and recharge power banks
☐ Update the address book, medicines list and local numbers
☐ Refresh the children's comfort bags
☐ Check the grab bags still fit the season
☐ Talk through the family plan again
☐ Replace the emergency chocolate (we both know what happened to it)

Sources

Facts and figures in this book were checked in October 2026. Things change, so please check your own government's latest advice too.

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