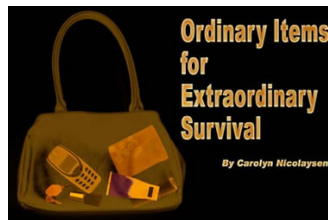


EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS



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A few years ago, my niece and her husband went for a mountain drive on a winter's day. Their car broke down on a remote snow-covered road, and it was two days until they were found. Under this scenario, the ordinary things they found in their car became things of extraordinary value.

Sometimes it's the everyday things that save lives or help us avoid tragedy during a crisis. Whether stranded in the snow, by a heat wave, power outage, hurricane, or by the simple cancellation of our return flight from abroad — we need to take a new look at the items we commonly have in our possession for their possible value in our emergency.

As an example, let's talk about some items we could use if we were stuck like my niece on a cold winter's day. The first thing to do is to assess the items you have in your possession that will help in your battle to survive. Search the trunk, your purse, luggage, pockets, under the hood, storage compartments and even the parts of the car itself, for things that will help.

Let's begin by emptying pockets, purses, backpacks, briefcases. Have we got a cell phone that works? Do we know our true location? Have we got a map? Can we see a populated area from where we are? Is there any traffic in the area that can be seen or heard? If we can answer "Yes" to any of these questions, help may be not far away. If "No" to all these questions, then you may need to prepare for a long wait.

Lipstick

Great for writing a message on the window of a car if you are leaving the car. However, leaving the car is not a good idea *unless* you know exactly where you are going and are sure of the walking distance, or the car is in danger because of a gas leak.

Because of the wax and oils in lipstick, it is also good to help start a fire. Just rub some on a flammable material, and light.

Petroleum Jelly

Often used as a lip balm, and can be used to start a fire. Rub on another flammable material and light it with a match or the car's cigarette lighter. It can also be rubbed on the door gaskets to help stop drafts.

Mirror

A great signaling device. Not only your makeup mirror but also the rear-view or side mirrors on your car. Rip one off and use it to signal when you hear aircraft (obviously, you need direct sunlight in this situation). If you are leaving your car, take a mirror with you.

Hard Candy, Gum and Mints

These should be grouped together and used sparingly, especially if you have no other food. All of these will help to keep you feeling hydrated as they encourage production of saliva. I read a few years ago about an elderly woman whose car went off an embankment and was unnoticed for several days. She stayed hydrated by sucking on a button. Gum can also be chewed and use to attach a Mylar blanket to the top of the car as a signal, or to the inside of a door to cut down drafts.

Keys

Keys can be used to pry bark from a tree to start a fire, cut the upholstery on your car seats if you don't have a knife (see below), and to carve a mark on a tree to mark your path as a guide to return to your car. Everyone in our family carries a small Swiss knife on our key chains. Just remember to remove the knife before you fly, or TSA will confiscate it.

Checks

Checks, store receipts, gas station receipts and all the other miscellaneous papers we carry around are great to crumple up to start a fire. Make sure you apply the lipstick or petroleum jelly to crumpled paper and it will burn longer, giving you time to add other kindling to get a real fire going. See the Boy Scout Handbook for more fire starting ideas.

Feminine Products

These are a great item to add to that small fire you have started. Remember adding the lipstick and petroleum jelly will increase the time they will burn. Feminine pads can be burned, but are also valuable first aid compresses for an injury.

Other Fire Starters

If you happen to have these items, they are also great to help start a fire: cotton balls, cotton swabs, paper towels, newspapers, cardboard.

Pencils, Rulers, Wooden Toys, and Everything Wooden

These make great kindling once you have a small fire started. Search outside the vehicle too for dry wood scraps and any flammable material that can be used to build a fire.

Hair Spray and Perfume

Both of these products contain alcohol and will aid in fueling a small fire.

Prescription Glasses

Do you remember as a kid starting a leaf on fire with a magnifying glass? Prescription eye glasses will accomplish the same thing.

Credit Cards

These make great ice scrapers. Be sure to wear gloves or a plastic bag on your hands to minimize getting wet.

Purse

If you are caught without a hat, find something else to wear on your head. Even your purse — really. Forty to fifty percent of your body heat is lost through your uncovered head. Keep it covered in cold weather survival situations. If you are in your car and your feet are cold, slip them into your purse or tote bag. It will help to contain and maintain the temperature, and after a few minutes the temperature inside the bag will increase. You may feel silly but you will stay warmer.

This can be a great “game” if you have kids with you — who can look the silliest. If you have a very brightly colored purse and no other materials to do the job, hang your purse on the radio antenna or door handle or place in the rear window. Bright colors can be seen for long distances by rescuers. Backpacks also work great!

Now for the car ...

Floor Mats

Floor mats are great insulators. You can wear a floor mat under your clothing for added warmth. Prop it against the bottom of a door to help eliminate drafts. Put it under you if you need to change a tire. Remember, we want to avoid getting wet at all costs to survive a winter emergency. You can also use a floor mat under your tires to create traction, if being stuck is the cause of your problem.

Wheel Covers

A “hub cap,” or wheel cover as they are called now, can be an important tool. Use it as a shovel to make a path for a car that is stuck, clear the snow from behind the exhaust pipe, or to build a snow cave. Use it as a fire ring to hold a small fire. Wash it out well with some snow and use it to melt snow to drink. If your engine runs, you will want to run your car for ten minutes every hour to warm up the car. Fill a hub cap with snow and place on the engine as you run your car. It will melt and heat the snow. Be careful when removing it as it will be hot. Remember you have four of these!

Sun Visors

These are great for use as a signaling device but also as a scraper to remove the snow from your car. Removing the snow from your car will make it more visible to rescuers, even if you have a white car. Remove the snow regularly, because the car will reflect search lights and snow on the car may look like just more snow.

CDs and DVDs

Take them out of the players and use them to signal, like a mirror. They also make great reflectors if you are pulled to the side of the road and want to be seen by oncoming traffic.

Seats

Upholstery foam can be used as an insulator. Use your knife or key to cut a hole in the seat and remove what is needed.

Oil, Antifreeze and Gasoline

If you have engine oil in the trunk, be prepared to help search aircraft find you. Place some oil in one of your hub caps. Use a small amount of gasoline and ignite. The smoke will be seen for miles.

To remove gasoline from your tank, tie a rag to a coat hanger or dip stick and carefully lower into the gas tank. Even the small amount of gasoline on the sides of the pipe will be enough to ignite and help start a fire. Naturally, you will want to use all these materials away from your car.

The coolant in your radiator cannot, repeat, CANNOT, be used for drinking. Antifreeze will kill you! Antifreeze is ethylene glycol. If you have a jug of 100% antifreeze, it can be a fuel for a signal fire; it has a much higher flash point than gasoline, and a much lower flash point (minimum ignition temperature) than engine oil.

The Horn

Don't forget your best signaling device. The universal signal for help is a long blast either from a whistle, horn or as a last resort, your voice. Sound it long, follow by a short pause and then another long blast, and then a third.

Newspapers and Magazines

These are not only great for fuel, but also for insulation. When my children were young I was asked to train as a counselor for girls' camp. At the time this involved a two-day hike and night in the great outdoors. Boy, did we pick the wrong week. As we got our little two-man tents up, down came the rain and up came the wind — and then there was lightning and thunder. It was a really frightening night.

As we lay awake in our tent watching it sway, we got little sleep. When we ventured out in the morning, we discovered some of the women had taken refuge in a car. They froze — while we were nice and warm. The difference? We were on the ground, and they were in a car with the cold winds blowing not only around them but also under them.

I learned the lesson. When you are in a car, you need to keep in as much heat as possible and prevent cold air from coming in. That means insulating the floor. Newspapers and magazines are a great insulator. Layer them on the floor and then cover with any extra clothing, rags or blankets. Search out all the empty backpacks, clothing, or paper grocery bags you may have in the car.

Umbrellas

Most of us have an umbrella in the trunk. If not, get one. If you are stranded in your car, it is important to keep a window open slightly, especially when the engine is running. This window should always be one that is downwind. This may not always be possible because during a storm the winds may be blowing. If this is the case, open the window slightly, slip the handle of the umbrella out the window, and open the umbrella. Pull the umbrella tightly against the car and close the window. The small space that remains will support the umbrella and will also provide air circulation. The umbrella will prevent cold gusts and snow from being blown into the car while allowing air to circulate, thus preventing carbon monoxide poisoning. Try to choose a window that is upwind from the path of the exhaust when the engine is running.

Umbrellas can also be used to shield a fire from wind gusts until it can become established.

When building a snow cave or other shelter, an umbrella can be used to “seal” the doorway. In the case of a leaky roof in your snow cave, an umbrella opened inside may protect you from getting wet. Again, don't leave the shelter of your car if it is possible to stay safely there. If you do leave, leave a message on

the car with your location or direction of travel. But generally, do as Scouts do. They are taught to hug a tree if they become lost. The same wisdom applies here — stay in your car or you may not be found by your rescuers.

Luggage

What's in the luggage? If you have been headed out on vacation, you will have luggage in the trunk. Carefully plan what you will need to retrieve from that luggage so you only have to leave the vehicle once to fetch it.

Hard-sided luggage can be used to provide shelter or a windbreak. Soft-sided luggage can be placed on the floor to provide insulation.

Food and Drink

Food and drinks should all be brought into the passenger space because they will be valuable and needed. In the trunk, drinks may freeze.

Clothing

Clothing should be a top priority, but only the right clothing. Any sweater, long-sleeve shirt, long pants, coats, scarves and mittens are absolute necessities. Remember you will remain warmer in loose fitting layers because the air trapped between layers will warm up and thus keep you warmer.

In addition to these items, be sure to get all the socks. If your socks become wet, they should be changed immediately. Socks should also be layered for warmth and they make great mittens. You may feel you won't need all that clothing and couldn't possibly wear it all, but it can be used as a blanket, pillow, or to place on the floor over the newspaper you have put down to provide more insulation from drafts. Try rolling some clothing and placing it at the base of the windshield and rear window to cut down drafts.

Summary

My niece and her husband were found safe and in time. It was a humbling experience for the whole family, but a close call.

The first step if stranded in snow on a lonely road is to assess what things are available, then to plan for ways to protect ourselves and family from the elements, provide something to drink and eat if possible, clothe ourselves to stay dry and warm, maintain clean air to breathe, find a way to signal our location to searchers, and never to go anywhere without leaving a message for rescuers with details of our plan. Better yet, stay put until help arrives.

Hopefully, we are working to be prepared for emergencies. Prepared in our homes, prepared in our cars, prepared at work, and while traveling by air. But there are lots of exceptions when all our best plans and intentions are out of reach, or when we may have trusted our safety to others. In such situations, we have to look around us at what is available, and apply those things to solving our situation.

Remember the adventure series "MacGyver"? There was no situation he could not resolve with the ordinary stuff at hand.