

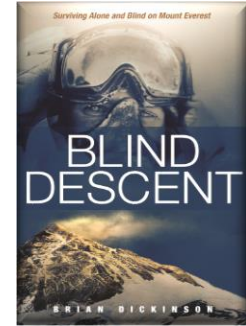
# Surviving the Elements

## Advice from Brian Dickinson, author of *Blind Descent*

Survival is a basic instinct we all possess but fortunately rarely use. Like with any unused trait or skill, it will diminish over time if not practiced. As a US Navy air rescue swimmer (AIRR), I went through months of survival training, including land, water, and SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) training.

There is a lot more involved in becoming proficient in the areas of survival (jungle, mountain, arctic, desert, and sea) so this is merely a high-level overview to get you started\*. I've created five areas of focus to help you prepare, respond, and recover in survival situations.

\*Look to your local guiding service or search-and-rescue department for more in-depth, hands-on training.



**Preparation**—You can't prepare for every situation Mother Nature will throw your way, but there are plenty of things within your control to focus on prior to an adventure. Examples of things out of your control are the weather, terrain conditions, and your health. There's no excuse for inadequate preparation for what's within your control, including that which is physical, nutritional, mental, and **spiritual**. Before a climb I mentally prepare by going through the route and agenda so that I have a solid mental picture of the trip before I ever set foot on a plane. I train physically hard to gain peak performance and fill my body with healthy foods, which helps tailor my mental ability to power through when I don't feel like going anymore and gives my body the nutrients it needs to keep pushing. **My final preparation is with family and friends to ensure everything is taken care of prior to departure.**

**Risk Calculation**—In any situation you'll face risk, whether great or small. It's imperative to calculate your approach or avoidance of the risk based on the information you have at the time. You can't always predict the outcome, but you can make an educated decision based on the data at hand. In climbing you have to assess the climbing conditions, objective hazards, the weather, your team's capabilities, and your own abilities. The end result may not be what you had planned, but your flexibility to adjust to change may save yours and others' lives.

**Response**—When a life-threatening situation presents itself, your initial response may be what saves your life. In AIRR school we learned how panic kills, so the best thing to do is to calm down and assess the situation. Based on your initial assessment, you can then start developing a plan of survival. Each condition is unique and must be dealt with according to the information and resources available.

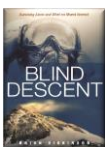
**Mental Toughness**—I include mental toughness on its own since it's a trait that many don't recognize. Your mind is the most important tool in any survival situation. It's what you'll use to assess the danger, solutions, and resources, and it will motivate you and others to continue living. In a survival situation it's vital to stay positive, have hope, and never lose your will to survive.

**Recovery**—Once you've survived an impossible scenario and you're back to the real world, it's hard to return to normalcy. Others won't understand what you've been through, and you may suffer from survivor's guilt. It will take you months or years to truly process what you've been through. The key is to talk with others so you can share your experiences and emotions.

The best advice any guide can give a climber is to avoid dangerous scenarios. Whether these scenarios are avalanches, poor weather, or problematic team members, it's important to identify and avoid hazards rather than putting yourself and others at risk.

There's no shame in surviving!

Brian Dickinson



Order your copy of *Blind Descent*, Brian's survival story of being alone and blind at 29,000 Ft! Available where books are sold. Also available in eBook format.