

Toughness and Survival



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I envision that should I ever be buried in an avalanche my partner will locate me quickly, put together his shovel and dig like a maniac. He will be anaerobic, spittle drooling from his mouth, sweat burning his eyes and he'll be puffing like a locomotive. His heart rate will be maxxed, his face red and ears ringing. I know this because I carefully chose my backcountry partners. They will give 110% of themselves to save me if I'm buried. They are mentally, emotionally and physically tough.

Though it's often missed and rarely talked about, toughness fits into the survival equation. No one wants to be weak, but when the chips are down partners who are tough, coupled with victims who are resilient, sometimes tip the balance to survival. Imagine survival as an old-fashioned tip scale with an equal amount of hundreds of pounds on each side representing your life's work. Your survival is in the balance and the mere weight of a penny on one side of the scale can be enough to tip it in your favor. Competent, strong, tough partners can be that penny when luck alone is not enough.

I was recently reminded how toughness fits into the survival equation.

On Jan 17th six snowmobilers from North Dakota went riding outside Cooke City. They were familiar with the terrain and everyone carried rescue gear. They split up. Four were at the bottom of a bowl and the other two were out of their view on the ridge at the top of the bowl. One rider throttled up the slope, triggering an avalanche behind him as he ascended. Unbelievably, at the exact moment the slope started to break apart and avalanche another rider at the top launched over the ridgeline and landed on the breaking slab. This was a million to one odds of bad luck. He was caught and completely buried in an avalanche he did not trigger and did not know about until he landed in it. His partners had no formal rescue training but were well read and had practiced on their own. They all stayed on scene, one person doing the beacon search while the others put shovels and probes together. They located the victim under four feet of snow and dug like mad men. When they reached him they cut his helmet off because their frozen fingers couldn't unbuckle his chin strap. One of them had taken a CPR course years earlier during a Lamaze class he did with his wife. He remembered enough. The victim was dead, not breathing and pulseless. The Lamaze guy began thumping hard on the victim's chest, much to the horror of his friends, but it worked. After pumping for two minutes the victim started breathing on his own. A few minutes later his eyes opened and his first words were, "What took you so bleeping long!" He rode back to town on his own. After a rest and a celebratory night of drinking the victim was out again the next day, although his chest was mighty sore.

Interviewing the witness, having him recount in a very matter-of-fact manner the process they followed to dig out their friend, their coolness under pressure and the attitude of the victim, was a breath of fresh air in a world where excuses to NOT do something, to go get help and wait for orders seems to rule the day. His partners were solid and the victim was composed. I'd ride with these guys any day. They are tough and solution oriented.

Another example of admirable toughness occurred on January 1 in an avalanche that resulted in a fatality in the northern Gallatin Range. A young man was upside down, head buried, but one arm free. An avalanche had swept him and another rider off their machines and buried them both. He was 19, untrained and suddenly being tested beyond anything he could have imagined. He uncovered his head with his free arm, got his pack off to get his shovel and dug himself out. Looking downhill, he saw the debris and knew his partner was buried and in serious trouble. To reiterate, he's been in a large slide, buried, banged up, freed himself and barely survived. He could have crumbled under the stress, retreated into his own world to take care of himself and wait for help. But he did not. He carried on, did a beacon search, probed and struck his partner's boot, then dug four feet down and along the length of his body to free the man, his best friend's father. He rolled him over and began CPR alone for at least 20 minutes. It did not work, but this young man's toughness and fortitude saved his own life and gave his friend's father the best chance he had.

People tend to rely on specific rescue techniques in an emergency: beacons with multiple burial options, strategic shoveling and precise probing regimes, all important skills for anyone going in the backcountry. But when push comes to shove, give me a fit, motivated, clear thinking partner over someone who knows the latest probing technique but freaks out under pressure. A partner needs to get the job done no matter how bad the adversity they are facing. A partner will take personal risks, not leave to get help, and work like a maniac to tip the scales a penny's worth in my favor. A partner will be mentally and physically tough and I will be forever grateful.