



A set of tools to work with

EQUANIMITY UNDER PRESSURE

Staying Clear When Everything Feels Impossible

A Systema breathwork field guide for disaster response and high-stress environments

THE WEIGHT OF THE MOMENT

You're in a moment where the scale feels overwhelming. There are too many problems. Too many people who need help. Too much uncertainty. And you're expected to stay functional through it.

That's not weakness. That's the reality of disaster response. And there's a way to work with it.

Equanimity is the ability to remain mentally and emotionally balanced while circumstances around you are unstable. It does not mean being emotionless. It means staying capable of clear perception, sound judgment, and deliberate action while experiencing fear, urgency, fatigue, and uncertainty.

For a responder, this is not optional. It's survival — yours and the people you're helping.

THE STOIC PRINCIPLE: WORK WITH WHAT IS YOURS

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus taught a simple distinction: some things are within your control and others are not.

You cannot control when an aftershock occurs.

You cannot undo the collapse.

You cannot control the condition in which you find someone injured.

You cannot guarantee that every rescue will succeed.

You cannot eliminate uncertainty.

But you can control the following:

You can control your breathing.

You can manage unnecessary muscular tension.

You can control how deliberately you move.

You can listen.

You can communicate clearly.

You can continually assess the environment.

You can support the people working beside you.

You can choose the next useful action.

This is not passive acceptance. It is the conservation of human energy for the things upon which your actions can actually have an effect.

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM UNDER EMERGENCY STRESS

When danger is perceived, your nervous system responds instantly. Breathing becomes shallow or irregular. Muscles tighten. Fine motor control deteriorates. Attention narrows. You may move faster while actually perceiving less.

In rescue work, uncontrolled urgency becomes another hazard. A responder who rushes blindly may miss unstable debris, damaged utilities, or structural changes. Urgency that is not managed becomes a liability.

The first intervention is simple: Breathe. Not because breathing removes the danger — because conscious breathing gives you a point from which you can begin regulating yourself inside the danger.

Breathe. Release unnecessary tension. Observe. Orient. Communicate. Move deliberately. Adapt.

This creates a small but critical separation between stimulus and reaction. Inside that space, judgment becomes possible.

RECOVER QUICKLY AFTER SHOCK

An aftershock can instantly change your psychological state and the state of everyone around you. Fear is appropriate. The ground has moved again. The mistake is expecting yourself not to experience that response.

The realistic goal is recovery. Recognize the reaction. Restore the breath. Release unnecessary tension. Reorient to the environment. Listen to the team. Reassess the hazards. Continue when it is appropriate to continue.

Equanimity is not the absence of disturbance. **It is the ability to return to functional balance after being disturbed.** That ability can be trained — and it can be learned right now.



TWO KINDS OF FEAR

That recovery process gets easier once you understand what you're actually recovering from. Fear shows up in two different forms, and they feed each other.

Physical fear is the body's response — the racing heart, the tight chest, the shaking hands, the shallow breath, the flood of adrenaline when the ground moves or a load shifts unexpectedly. It is a sensation. It is not a thought.

Mental fear is the story running alongside it — what if this collapses further, what if I can't get them out, what if I make it worse, what if I'm not enough for this. It is a thought. It is not a sensation.

Left unchecked, each one amplifies the other. Physical fear gives the mind raw material to spin stories from, and mental fear keeps the body flooded with stress chemistry long after the actual physical trigger has passed. **A responder who is only managing one side will still get pulled under by the other.**

This is exactly why breathwork and sensing-and-relaxing drills matter — they work on the physical side directly, which in turn takes fuel away from the mental spiral. Breathe, scan the body, find the unnecessary tension, release it. That alone quiets a surprising amount of the mental noise, because the mind has less raw signal to build a story on. The two are not separate problems needing two separate solutions; they're one loop, and you can break it from either end, but the body is usually the faster door in.

YOUR STATE AFFECTS EVERYONE

A trapped or injured person may have been beneath debris for hours. They may be frightened, confused, injured, or separated from their family. When a responder reaches them, the responder's psychological state enters that space as well.

A frantic voice communicates danger. Erratic movement communicates uncertainty. A calm voice, controlled breathing, and deliberate movement communicate something very different:

Someone is here.

Someone is thinking.

Someone is working on the problem.

You may not be able to promise an outcome. But you can provide presence. And sometimes that presence is itself part of the rescue.

This applies equally to your team. Teammates who are tired, frightened, or overwhelmed are watching how you manage yourself. **Your calm creates permission for their calm.** Your clarity creates the conditions for clear thinking around you.

WORK WITHIN THE TEAM

Rescue is rarely an individual act. Teams must communicate while tired. Instructions travel through several people. Plans change suddenly. Equipment fails. Conditions shift. Frustration is inevitable.

Notice when your own internal tension begins changing your external behavior. Are you raising your voice? Moving faster because you are anxious? Are you listening, or are you defending a decision because it was yours?

Equanimity allows a team member to receive new information without defending an old decision. That humility matters. **The objective is not to prove who was right. The objective is the rescue.**

FATIGUE IS PART OF THE WORK

After many hours, philosophy becomes physical. Sleep deprivation, hunger, dehydration, muscular fatigue, and emotional exposure accumulate. This is when discipline matters most.

You do not possess unlimited energy. Recognize your condition honestly. Breathe. Reduce unnecessary effort. Use structure and technique rather than brute force. Accept assistance. Rotate responsibilities when possible. Drink. Eat. Rest when operational circumstances permit it. Then return to the work.

The rubble is the work. The fatigue is part of the work. The uncertainty is part of the work. Your responsibility is to meet reality as it exists rather than wasting energy demanding that it be different.



TRAINING THE CAPACITY: SYSTEMA BREATHWORK

Everything above describes what equanimity looks like in the field. This section is about building the raw capacity for it in advance, using breathing methods drawn from Systema. The logic is simple: *if you only ever practice breathing when you're calm, you haven't actually trained anything*. These drills deliberately introduce discomfort, breathlessness, and rising internal alarm in a controlled setting, so the nervous system has already rehearsed staying functional through them before a real emergency asks it to.

Practice these seated or standing in a safe, quiet space — never in water, never while driving or operating machinery, and never immediately before an activity requiring full alertness (breath holds can cause lightheadedness or fainting). Stop any exercise if you feel sharp pain, chest tightness, or persistent dizziness. Build duration and intensity gradually across weeks, not in a single session.

1. Burst Breathing

Inhale through the nose with the lips gently closed, then exhale through the mouth — like a sigh, but faster. The neck stays relaxed throughout; the only thing that changes between inhale and exhale is whether the lips are closed or open. Nothing else in the face, jaw, or throat should tighten. Work in bursts of 15–30 seconds, then return to slow normal breathing for a minute before repeating.

This is the exercise to reach for in the moment itself — especially when lifting something heavy under duress, when fear spikes, when dealing with pain, or when you're maneuvering into an awkward position (squeezing through a gap, working at a bad angle, holding a strained posture to reach someone). Rather than saving it only for training sessions, use it live: when a heavy load, a rush of fear, sharp pain, or an awkward body position is pulling your breath shallow and your body tight, go to the burst breath on purpose.

In training, the goal is to spike the body into an activated, slightly destabilized state and then practice choosing your next breath deliberately instead of letting the panic-like sensation drive you. In the field, it's the same tool used to burn off the edge of a fear, pain, or effort spike as it's happening. Over time this builds familiarity with the physical signature of adrenaline so it stops reading as an emergency in itself.

2. Circular (Continuous) Breathing

Inhale and exhale in one unbroken wave — no pause at the top of the inhale, no pause at the bottom of the exhale — so the breath becomes a single continuous loop rather than a series of discrete cycles. Keep it slow and low in the belly.

This is the opposite pole from burst breathing: instead of spiking arousal, it trains the ability to stay smooth and connected under sustained load. Use it during any held position, isometric tension, or repetitive effort (carrying,

digging, climbing) to keep breath from locking up under strain — a common and costly reflex when the body braces against effort or fear.

3. Breath Holds (Retention)

After a normal exhale, hold the breath and stay physically relaxed — face, shoulders, hands loose — for as long as you can without straining, then breathe in slowly through the nose rather than gasping.

The value is almost entirely in the last 10–15 seconds, when the urge to breathe becomes strong: that's the moment you're training. The skill is noticing the alarm signal, keeping the body soft anyway, and riding it out rather than fighting it. Never push holds to the point of dizziness or spots in your vision, and never do this alone in water or at height.

Combined, these three drills cover the three states you actually meet in the field: the sudden spike (burst breathing), the sustained grind (circular breathing), and the moment of internal alarm when everything in you wants to react before you've thought (breath holds). Practiced regularly, they're not separate from the philosophy above — they're how you put reps into it, so that on the day it matters, staying with your breath under pressure is already familiar territory rather than something you're discovering for the first time.



WATCHING THE MIND

The breath is not the only thing running under pressure. Alongside it, watch what the mind is doing. Under pressure, thought tends to run ahead of the situation — rehearsing worst cases, replaying mistakes, arguing with what's already happened. None of that helps the person in front of you, and all of it drains the same energy the body needs for the work.

One practical counter to this, for those for whom it fits naturally, is prayer — not as ritual, but as a way of directing the mind toward positive possibility instead of worst-case narration. Speaking to God quietly in your own mind, gently and without panic, gives the mind something steady to hold onto instead of spinning through everything that could go wrong. **Prayer keeps a person oriented toward what's still possible, so that when a real opening appears, they're positioned to grab hold of it** rather than being lost in the story their mind was telling. Whatever form this takes for a given person, the underlying practice is the same: notice when the mind has left the present moment, and bring it back toward what's still possible rather than toward what has already gone wrong.

This is not separate from the breathwork — it's the same discipline applied to thought instead of breath. Notice. Return. Stay kind to yourself in the process. A mind at war with itself has less left over for the rescue.



THE NEXT USEFUL THING

In a major disaster, the total scale of suffering can overwhelm an individual responder. There may be hundreds or thousands of problems that one person cannot solve. Equanimity brings your attention back to what is immediately possible.

What requires my attention right now? One unstable piece of debris. One communication. One opening. One injured person. One breath. One decision. One useful action followed by another.

This is where discipline and philosophy meet most clearly. You accept what has already occurred without surrendering to it. You recognize what is outside your control without becoming passive. You conserve your strength for purposeful action. You remain aware of yourself without becoming absorbed in yourself. And you continue working for the people around you.



AWARENESS OF SPACE: THE TRIANGLE OF LIFE

Part of staying clear under pressure is also knowing the environment well enough that your instincts are working with good information. This section is about searching a structure that has already collapsed — not about what to do while the ground is still shaking. For that moment, official guidance (FEMA, the American Red Cross) is drop, cover, and hold on, and that guidance stands.

Once a collapse has already happened, the picture changes, and this is where the "triangle of life" concept earns its place. When heavy structural elements like floors or roofs come down onto furniture, appliances, or other solid objects, the object crushes partially and leaves a void, often triangular, in the space right beside it — **the object holds up part of the load and the gap next to it becomes a survivable pocket**. This is a well-documented pattern in search-and-rescue work. When searching debris, pay particular attention to the space beside sturdy furniture, next to a stairwell, alongside a bathtub, or next to any large object that could have partially resisted a load — these are the places a void, and a survivor, are more likely to be found than in open floor space that had nothing to hold a gap open.

The void-space pattern is real and useful for search. Where it runs into trouble is when it gets repackaged as advice for what to do during shaking — deliberately moving to lie beside a specific object as the building comes down. That's a different moment, with different physics: you're choosing a position blind, under active collapse, with time to move being the scarce resource. That's the piece FEMA and most structural engineers push back on. Post-collapse search is not that moment — the collapse has already resolved, you're reading its aftermath, and the void pattern is simply a fact about how structures fail that a searcher can use.



IN THE FIELD

Breathe.
Observe.
Orient.
Communicate.
Move without unnecessary tension.
Adapt when reality changes.
Protect the team.
Protect the casualty.
Recover when disturbed.
Do the next useful thing.

That is equanimity in action. In earthquake response, it is not a philosophical ideal. **It is a human capability you can practice right now.** And it may be the most useful thing you bring to this work.



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Written from a Systema perspective. The Stoic material above is included for context — the breathwork, the sensing-and-relaxing drills, and the awareness practices are the core of the training; the philosophy is there to frame why they matter.