

The First Hour: Assess

If you haven't already worked through the safety decision, stop here and go to What to Do Right Now first. Nothing below matters until that's settled.

Why this hour is about finding out, not fixing

It's tempting to start solving problems the moment you're safe. Resist that for the first hour. Every decision that follows, how much water you actually have, whether anyone needs medical attention, whether you're staying or going, depends on information you don't have yet. Spend this hour finding it out, in this order.

Check every household member

Visible injury, bleeding, ability to walk and respond. This isn't a full medical exam, it's a fast pass to find out who needs attention first. If more than one person is hurt, don't treat the first person you reach, sort by severity so the worst injuries get help first. See Understanding START Triage for the five-question sequence that does this in about 30 seconds per person.

Check for secondary hazards

The smell of gas, visible structural damage, downed power lines, or signs of looting or unrest nearby. Any of these can mean the safety decision you already made needs revisiting, a room that was safe a minute ago isn't automatically still safe once you notice a gas smell, a new crack in the wall, or activity outside that wasn't there before. See Making it safe for what to actually do if it's people, not a structural or utility hazard, that's the concern.

Account for pets

A missing or panicked animal is far easier to find and calm in the first hour than a day later, once it's had time to bolt further or hide deeper.

Send one message, not a call

A text to your household's out-of-area contact often gets through when a voice call can't, because it needs a fraction of the bandwidth and queues for delivery instead of simply failing when towers are saturated. See Family Communication Plan if that contact isn't decided yet, that's worth fixing today, not during the next event.

Turn on a radio

A battery or hand-crank radio, tuned to a local station or NOAA weather radio, for official information rather than guesswork or whatever's circulating on social media.

Next: Stabilize

Once you know what you're dealing with, move to Part 2: The First 3 Hours.

The First 3 Hours: Stabilize

This is the rule-of-threes shelter threshold: exposure becomes a real risk past roughly three hours without real shelter in a harsh environment. By this point, shelter and immediate safety need to be actually secured, not just assumed to still be holding from an hour ago.

Confirm your shelter is real, not provisional

If you sealed a room against smoke or a chemical release per the steps in Making It Safe, remember that only holds for about 2–3 hours before outside air seeps back in. Re-evaluate now rather than assuming it's still working; conditions and your own plan can both have changed since the first assessment.

Treat injuries beyond the initial check

The first hour was about finding out who's hurt. This is about actually cleaning and dressing wounds properly, not just noting them. See First Aid Basics for wound care, bleeding control, and when an injury needs more than a bandage.

Get warm if the temperature is working against you

Cold is its own hazard on the same clock as everything else here. If heat is out and it's cold enough to matter, picking and sealing one room and layering correctly isn't a Tier-2 problem, it's a today problem. See Staying Warm Without Power.

Confirm you actually have water and food on hand

Not a general sense that you probably have enough, an actual count, against the next three days specifically. This is also the point to make sure anything perishable gets eaten first rather than left to spoil unnoticed; see Food Safety After a Power Outage for the safe eating order if the power's out.

Confirm medication supply

For anyone on a regular prescription, check that what's on hand actually covers the near term, not just that a bottle exists somewhere in the house.

If this is already resolving

Not every event needs the full sequence below. If things are genuinely wrapping up already, roads clear, power's back, the immediate danger has passed, you can go straight to Recovery instead of working through the rest of this timeline. Most events don't resolve this fast, but some do.

Next: Take Inventory

Once shelter and injuries are handled, move to Part 3: The First 24 Hours.

The First 24 Hours: Take Inventory

By now there's enough calm to actually look at what you have, rather than what you assumed going in. This is the shift from reacting to operating.

Walk the house and count what's actually there

Water, food, first aid, documents, power. Not a mental estimate, an actual walkthrough. The Household Preparedness Assessment is built for exactly this: a fill-in-by-hand worksheet that turns “we're probably fine” into real numbers.

Check on nearby family

In person if it's close and safe to do, or by the same text-first method as Part 1, per your Family Communication Plan. If your household comes first, this is where that ordering hands off to the people you'd check on next.

If there's property damage, document before any cleanup begins

Photos and video now are the evidence a claim depends on later, and once cleanup starts that evidence is gone. If you're returning to a structure that's been damaged, the order matters as much as the documentation itself: exterior checks, gas and electrical hazards, and structural red flags all come before you're inside taking pictures. See [Safely Re-Entering a Damaged Home](#) for that walkthrough in full.

Stand up sanitation now if the toilet isn't reliable

Waiting until it becomes urgent means solving it under worse conditions, with less patience, possibly at night. See [Bathroom & Hygiene Without Running Water](#) for the actual setup: a two-bucket system, hand hygiene, sponge bathing, and laundry by hand.

Make a first honest guess at duration

Is this resolving in the next few days, or could it run longer? You don't need to be right, you need a working assumption the next stage can plan around. You'll get another, better chance to answer this at the 3-day mark.

Next: Settle In

Once the household is actually inventoried, move to Part 4: The First 3 Days.

The First 3 Days: Settle In

This is the rule-of-threes water threshold: by roughly 72 hours, “we’ll figure out water” has to stop being an acceptable answer. By the 3-day mark, you should be executing a plan, not still reacting to the event.

A real rationing plan is active

Not just stored supplies sitting there, an actual known daily draw. Most households have never actually calculated what they need beyond the bare 1 gallon/person/day floor, and that floor assumes no laundry and no toilet flushing. See the Storing Water Correctly guide’s water-budget breakdown for what your specific household, especially if anyone’s pregnant, nursing, sick, or doing hard physical work, actually needs.

FIFO rotation tracking has started

On whatever you’re drawing down, so you’re not discovering three weeks in that half the stock quietly expired before you got to it.

Communication check-ins are scheduled, not ad hoc

With your out-of-area contact and nearby family, on an actual cadence rather than whenever someone happens to think of it.

If anyone is sick, isolation is actually in place

Not just discussed as a good idea. See Isolating a Sick Household Member for the actual setup: a dedicated space, dedicated dishes and towels, and a cleaning routine, since disease spreading through the whole household is a bigger risk at this point than almost anything else.

Reassess duration

Are utilities, roads, or outside help starting to return? This answer shapes the decision at the 14-day mark more than anything else that's happened so far.

If this is already resolving

Same branch as Part 2: if things are genuinely wrapping up, skip ahead to Recovery rather than working through the rest of this timeline for its own sake.

Next: the 14-day decision point

Once a real plan is actually running, move to Part 5: Extend or Stand Down.

The First 14 Days: Extend or Stand Down

The Manual's Tier 1 is built to cover roughly this window, hours to 14 days. By the end of it, you should know which path you're on, deliberately, not by a slow drift in either direction.

If things are resolving: begin recovery

Re-entry safety and insurance documentation come before cleanup. This is exactly what Recovery covers, along with a closing step worth doing even if everything's genuinely fine now: re-running the household assessment once more.

If it's continuing: transition deliberately into Tier 2

This isn't just "keep doing Tier 1 longer." It's a real shift: from a stored buffer to an indefinite water plan (filtration and sourcing, not just what's left in the barrels), from a temporary sanitation setup to a sustained one, and from rationing what you had to producing and sourcing more. Part 6: Running the Extended Plan covers what that shift actually looks like day to day; each manual chapter's own Tier 2 section covers the specifics for that category.

Either way, redo the full assessment

Two weeks is long enough for the real situation, what you actually have left, what's changed, what you learned the hard way, to have moved from whatever you assumed on day one. Don't carry that first assumption forward unexamined.

Recovery isn't only reachable from here

Standing down doesn't only happen at the 14-day mark. If things resolved earlier, Part 2 or Part 4 already pointed you to Recovery directly. This page is where the decision becomes explicit if it hasn't already been made.

Running the Extended Plan

Part 5 asked you to decide, deliberately, whether you're continuing past the 14-day mark. If you are, this is what continuing actually looks like day to day, not just "Tier 1, but longer."

The real signal you've crossed into Tier 2

Not a date on a calendar. The stored buffer, the water, the food, the fuel you had set aside for exactly this, is genuinely gone or close to it, and there's no return-to-normal timeline in sight. That's the moment rationing what you had stops being the plan and producing or sourcing more becomes the plan instead.

A weekly rhythm, not a daily scramble

Tier 1 ran on hour-by-hour and day-by-day checkpoints because the situation itself was changing that fast. Tier 2 is slower, and treating it like an ongoing emergency, reacting fresh every single day, burns people out faster than the actual workload requires. What worked in the acute phase (constant reassessment) becomes a liability here; what you need instead is a routine that repeats.

Give water sourcing and treatment, cooking from bulk stores, sanitation upkeep, fuel or power management, and a security check each a standing slot in the week, the same way a household would schedule chores in any long-running homestead operation, rather than deciding fresh each day whether they're getting done. A simple structure that holds up in practice: a fixed morning task block, an afternoon block, and an evening block, with three genuinely non-negotiable tasks identified for the day rather than an open-ended list that never actually finishes.

What a week actually looks like

Time block	Task	Notes
Morning	Water run (2x/week)	Source and haul more if the stored supply is running low; treat before it's used
Morning	Cooking prep from bulk stores (daily)	Batch what you can; fewer fire/stove cycles beats cooking fresh every meal
Midday	Sanitation check (daily)	Toilet cover material, hand-washing station restocked
Afternoon	Dishes, batched (1–2x/day)	Not after every meal; batching cuts total water use
Afternoon	Laundry (1x/week)	Pick a fixed day; check the line if weather's turning
Evening	Fuel/power check (2x/week)	Fuel level, battery charge, generator run-time logged
Evening	Security check (daily)	Doors and windows secured, a walk of the property; see Security & Self-Defense
Evening	Trash/waste sort (daily)	Wet waste separated from dry as it's generated, not after

None of this has to happen at exactly these times or frequencies, what matters is that each task has a fixed slot at all, so it’s a scheduled habit rather than a daily negotiation.

Labor allocation across categories

A fixed number of people now has to cover water, food, sanitation, security, and everything else, indefinitely, not for a single acute stretch. Assign standing responsibility for each category to a specific person or pair rather than handling whichever task feels most urgent that day; ad hoc assignment is what leads to some categories being neglected for days at a time while others get redundant attention.

Decision fatigue is a real cost, not a mood

Extended, uncertain situations measurably degrade decision-making, not because anyone’s weak-willed, but because the same open questions get re-litigated every day: what to eat, what to fix first, whether it’s safe to go outside. The most effective, low-cost way to reduce that load is the same one the Manual’s own Mental Health chapter already names for the household’s psychological state: a predictable routine, decided once and then simply followed, rather than re-decided daily. Set the weekly rhythm above, and treat sticking to it, not re-optimizing it, as the actual goal for the first few weeks of Tier 2.

Sleep debt compounds the same problem directly: it's its own measurable cause of worse decisions, not just tiredness. If someone needs to be awake overnight, see the Physical Readiness skill guide's watch-rotation and napping section, decided once in advance, the same way the weekly rhythm above is.

A reassessment cadence of its own

Part 5 gave you 24-hour, 3-day, and 14-day checkpoints, tight enough for an acute event. Tier 2 needs a slower one, weekly or monthly, specifically so the transition into Tier 3 doesn't happen by drift. Pick a day (tie it to something memorable, the same way the Manual's own FIFO rotation habit is tied to the twice-yearly clock change) and actually ask, out loud, whether this still looks like "extended" or whether it's become "indefinite."

If this is resolving

Not every extended situation stays extended. If things are genuinely wrapping up, go to Recovery instead of continuing through the rest of this sequence.

Next: Sustaining Indefinitely

If the weekly reassessment above keeps coming back "this isn't ending soon," move to Part 7: Sustaining Indefinitely.

Sources

- Homestead weekly-chore and daily-routine structuring, including the "three must-do goals" time-management technique: Grow Where You Sow; Off Gridy
- Disruption of routine as a driver of psychological distress in extended crises, and disaster fatigue: Resilience.org; PEASI

Sustaining Indefinitely

Tier 2 was still fundamentally a response to a disruption, extended, but with an edge somewhere out there. Tier 3 is different: the household is no longer waiting for anything to come back online. It’s operating.

The real signal you’ve crossed into Tier 3

Not a length of time, a shift in posture. You’ve stopped waiting for external recovery and started building toward a genuinely self-sufficient standing operation, the level the Manual’s own Tier 3 sections and the addenda’s Stage 3 content assume a household has actually reached. If Tier 2’s question was “how do we keep going until this ends,” Tier 3’s question is “how do we keep going, period.”

A seasonal rhythm replaces the weekly one

The weekly structure from Part 6 doesn’t disappear, it keeps running underneath, water still gets sourced and dishes still get washed on the same rhythm as before. What’s new at Tier 3 is a much larger cycle sitting on top of that weekly one, and it’s this larger cycle that now governs what matters most:

Season	Primary focus	Where the how-to lives
Spring	Planting and irrigation setup	Water & Food addendum, Stage 3
Summer	Growing-season upkeep and watering	Water & Food addendum, Stage 3
Fall	Harvest and preservation	Water & Food addendum, Stage 3
Ahead of winter	Fuel-gathering and equipment maintenance	Energy & Heat addendum, Stage 3

Missing a seasonal window (planting late, not curing enough firewood before the first hard freeze) isn’t a one-day setback the way missing a Tier 1 task was; it can cost you the rest of the year. The how-to for each of these belongs to the categories that already own it, this page names the rhythm, the addenda linked above cover the actual technique.

Pacing over an undefined horizon

Tier 1 could be run as a sprint because it had a rough end point. Tier 3 explicitly doesn't, and pacing yourself as if it does is a fast route to burnout. Sustained-operations research from contexts that share this exact problem, no fixed end date, real physical labor, is consistent on the core point even though it's drawn from a different setting than a household emergency: performance holds up when real rest is actually protected (something in the range of 7 to 9 hours of sleep where at all possible, short deliberate naps when it isn't), not when everyone just pushes through on willpower. Treat rest as part of the operating plan, not as the thing that gets cut first when the task list is long.

Cross-training against a single point of failure

At Tier 1 and even Tier 2, a household can often absorb one person being unavailable for a few days. At Tier 3, if the only person who knows how to treat water safely, run the wood stove, manage the garden, or stand a security watch is hurt or sick, the whole operation is exposed, not just delayed. Deliberately cross-train a second person on every task that only one person currently owns. This is the same logic the Manual's own Tier 4 sections apply at community scale, applied one level earlier, inside the household itself.

If this is resolving

Sustained operation isn't the only path from here either. If things genuinely resolve at this stage, go to Recovery.

Next: Operating as a Community

Once the household itself is stable at this level, the next real lever isn't more household self-sufficiency, it's extending outward. See Part 8: Operating as a Community.

Sources

- Seasonal cycle and category-specific Stage 3 skill depth: this site's own Water & Food addendum and Energy & Heat addendum
- Sustained-operations rest and fatigue-management guidance (adapted from a military/expeditionary context, the closest available literature on pacing indefinite physical operations): Human Performance Resource Center (HPRC)

- Cross-training against single-point-of-failure risk in a self-sufficient household: The Homesteading Hippy

Operating as a Community

Everything through Part 7 was about the household. Tier 4 is the point where a stable household has real capacity to spend on something beyond itself, and where the “nice neighborhood” a household lives in stops being incidental and starts being an actual asset.

The real signal you’re ready to extend outward

Not a fixed point either, a real one: the household’s own Tier 3 operation is stable enough that time and attention spent on a neighbor’s situation doesn’t come directly out of your own household’s safety margin. Reaching outward before that’s true doesn’t help anyone; it just spreads a household’s own fragility around instead of fixing it.

Who to approach first

The same trust-building order Part 1 already established for your immediate family network, out-of-area contact first, nearby relatives next, applies one ring further out here. Start with the people you already have some real relationship with, not a cold approach to the whole block at once. The Finding Your Local Prep Community guide covers the actual organizations this scales into, Map Your Neighborhood, CERT, and others, real and joinable rather than a vague “build a network” gesture.

The actual cadence of coordination once a group exists

Small, consistent commitments sustain a mutual-aid group far better than large, irregular ones. A short weekly check-in that fits naturally into people’s existing schedules works better in practice than an occasional big meeting that’s easy to skip. Keep a simple, current roster of who can do what, the skills-and-resources list the Manual’s own Tier 4 sections already call for, and actually use it when something specific comes up, not just maintain it as a document nobody opens.

Rotating watch follows the same pattern

Guard duty is a real, specific case of everything above, not a separate problem. The same roster this page already asks you to keep, and the same “small consistent commitments” logic, applies directly to standing watch: a written rotation across multiple households, not one family carrying it alone. The Security & Shelter chapter’s own Tier 4 section covers the actual watch-schedule and shared-observation-post mechanics; the Security & Shelter addendum is where to actually build the underlying skill if it isn’t there yet. Neither is something this page repeats, both are worth reading before a group’s first real rotation, not after.

Sustaining it without burning out the people who show up

The most consistent failure mode for mutual-aid and community-response groups isn’t lack of goodwill, it’s a small number of people carrying the load until they quietly stop. Share responsibility deliberately rather than letting it concentrate on whoever’s most available; make it normal to say capacity is low for a while without that being treated as letting the group down; and measure success by whether the group is still meeting in a year, not by how large it gets in the first month.

If this resolves

Community-level operation isn’t the end of the line either, if your own household’s situation genuinely resolves at this stage, go to Recovery.

Sources

- Mutual aid operational cadence, small consistent commitments, and volunteer-burnout prevention through shared leadership: Mutual Aid Disaster Relief; Shareable
- Real, joinable community organizations: this site’s own Finding Your Local Prep Community guide

Recovery

Recovery only applies if there's actually a return to something like normal, and that can happen at very different points for very different events. A power outage might resolve in an afternoon; a regional disaster might not reach this chapter for months. This page is reachable from wherever your own situation actually resolves, not fixed at the end of a fourteen-day countdown.

Re-entry safety comes before anything else

If a structure was damaged, physical safety and evidence come before cleanup, in that order. The full walkthrough, exterior checks first, gas and electrical hazards, structural red flags, then a room-by-room order once it's actually safe to go in, is covered in [Safely Re-Entering a Damaged Home](#). Photograph and document everything before you touch it; that evidence is what the next step depends on.

Then the claims process

Insurance, FEMA assistance if you still need it, and contractor vetting, in the order that actually protects you, is covered in [Filing Claims After a Disaster](#). Don't sign anything with a contractor who showed up uninvited before you've read that guide's fraud-pattern section.

Recovery is a new beginning, not just an ending

Closing the loop on one event is only half of what this stage is for. The other half is feeding what you just learned back into the Prepare side of this site: what actually ran out first, what you wished you'd set up in advance, what surprised you about how your household actually behaves under stress. Re-run the Household Preparedness Assessment one more time, not to confirm you're back to where you started, but to update it. The household that comes out the other side of a real event isn't the same one that went in, and the plan should reflect that rather than reset to an unchanged baseline.

Sources

- Re-entry safety and claims process: full citations on Safely Re-Entering a Damaged Home and Filing Claims After a Disaster