

Getting round to preparing for the big one

Two things strike you about Julie's earthquake stories - her account of not being able to stand up as the earth rocked, and how the survival kit she kept beside the bedroom door was eventually put away somewhere, as the gap between quakes lengthened and memories dimmed.

Julie (I'll use just her first name) and her husband live in the Awatere Valley, near Seddon, more or less in the heart of northern South Island earthquakes that may or may not have culminated at Kaikoura last November.

During one of them, they ran out of the house to the front lawn, and were thrown down. They lay there and listened in awe to the terrible noise - items breaking in the house, falling trees, cliffs above the river crashing into the water. The very ground felt alive.

Their house has so far survived more or less intact, although a few precious things - like Grandma's sugar bowl – have been shattered. Julie assembled a survival kit containing blankets, clothes and a torch and kept it by the bedroom door. But she admits now it's not there anymore.

Which is one of the problems we all face about disaster preparedness: ennui eventually claims our good intentions if we're to ward off permanent paranoia.

You might recall the column I wrote immediately after the Kaikoura quake, relating the total lack of readiness in our household, as we sat up in bed and wondered what to do. In the end, we did nothing and hoped for the best.

That column resonated with Lance Girling-Butcher, who chairs the Positive Ageing Trust, and he and his colleagues are holding a free public forum at the New Plymouth District Council chambers at 10am next Saturday to help people prepare themselves for the big one.

Civil Defence and other organisations will be presenting, as will Peter and Shireen Fish, who survived both big Christchurch earthquakes. I interviewed them for a story that will be in Midweek this week, and you'll be staggered at what they've been through.

Their key message, though, is about being prepared.

In our household, when the 7.8 magnitude Kaikoura quake struck two minutes after midnight on November 14, the first thing we asked ourselves was 'what do we do?' That old saw 'drop, cover and hold' doesn't seem much help when you're in bed.

Modern beds are a lot deeper than those of the past and you can't just crawl under them. Standing under a doorway makes some sense, but that's possibly dangerous if there's flying glass from breaking windows. Getting under a sturdy table is a better bet, provided you've got one.

Then what? If you're still alive, immediate needs will include light (if it's dark), a first aid kit, warm clothing, safe footwear (even gumboots), blankets, means of communication with loved ones, and drinking water. And news – like what's happened, where's it happening, how bad is it, and what are authorities advising?

So what has our household done about all that since November? Quite a bit, actually.

We've sorted out the first aid kit, found a combined torch-radio with a hand crank (we've ordered one which also has a port to plug in mobile phones), assembled tinned and preserved food, selected the dining room table as a suitable first refuge if we keep the blinds down on

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nearby windows, located a safe outdoor place, screwed bookcases to walls, doubled up bluetack on ornaments...and beefed up our insurance.

Which just leaves assembling a survival kit containing warm clothes, blankets and gumboots. The other measure we've yet to take is putting the food and first aid box in the same accessible place as the survival kit-to-be.

It'll happen. Soon. As will advice to keep the car topped up with petrol.

One problem I'm not sure how to address is drinking water. We've got a few containers in the fridge, but they would last only a couple of days. Being ex-caravan dwellers and campers we always had plenty of big water containers, but the problem with having those lying around long term is the water inevitably gunks up with algae and other contaminants.

Of course, all this assumes the emergency will be an earthquake. I have no idea what we would need in the event of Mt Taranaki blowing up. Masks for the dust, I suppose.

But most importantly, our survival kit will need to be kept in a handy place. Like Julie's used to be.