Signaling and Rescue: How to Get Found When You're Lost or Trapped

In a rescue scenario, your only job is to make yourself findable — everything else, including moving toward safety yourself, is secondary to that objective.

Introduction

The instinct when lost or trapped is to move. To do something. To find your own way out. This instinct kills people. Moving through unfamiliar terrain while disoriented expands the search area, depletes your energy, and takes you away from your last known position — the place rescuers will start looking.

The discipline of signaling and rescue is about suppressing that instinct and replacing it with a systematic approach: stop, think, signal, and wait. Every tool in your PREPORA kit that can create a signal — the whistle, the flashlight, the emergency blanket, the mirror surface — gives you a different channel to reach rescuers. This guide teaches you how to use them.

The STOP Principle

STOP is the foundational framework of every search-and-rescue protocol. Apply it the moment you realise you are lost or in a situation requiring rescue.

Stop. Cease moving immediately. Sit down. Take a breath. Moving while disoriented deepens the problem.

Think. What do you know? When did you last know exactly where you were? What landmarks are visible? What direction did you come from? How long have you been moving since your last known position?

Observe. Look and listen. Can you hear water, roads, voices, or aircraft? Can you see a landmark you recognise? Can you see a clearing, ridge, or elevated point that would increase your visibility to searchers?

Plan. Based on what you know: will you stay or move to a nearby position of better visibility? What signals can you deploy right now? What signals require preparation? Who knows where you are, and when will they raise an alarm?

The STOP principle takes under five minutes but converts panic-driven random movement into a structured, effective response.

Audio Signals

Sound carries efficiently over distance in wilderness and built-up environments alike, particularly at night when air is still.

Three short blasts on any audible device is the universal distress signal. Three is the number — not two, not four. Three blasts, pause, three blasts, repeated at regular intervals.

Your PREPORA Emergency Whistle 3-in-1 produces 120 dB — loud enough to be heard at distance even in wind. This is significantly louder and more energy-efficient than shouting. A fit adult can shout for perhaps 20 minutes before their voice gives out; they can blow a whistle intermittently for days.

Technique:

- Three sharp blasts, not one long continuous blow
- Pause 30–60 seconds between sets to listen for a response
- Cup the whistle loosely in your hand to avoid muffling the sound
- Blow into wind rather than away from it when possible

Voice signals: If using your voice, the internationally recognised distress call is "HELP" (English), repeated in groups of three. In practice, any repeated distinctive sound pattern distinguishes a distress signal from background noise.

Visual Signals

Visual signals work across larger distances than audio in daylight and are particularly effective for aircraft.

Mirror and reflective surfaces: A polished metal surface reflecting direct sunlight can be seen from aircraft at distances exceeding 10 km. Your PREPORA emergency blankets (mylar reflective foil) and the glossy surfaces of your survival case can function as improvised heliographs. Angle the reflective surface to catch direct sunlight and sweep it across the horizon in the direction of any aircraft or distant observer. The flashing light pattern is unmistakable from distance.

Signal fire (smoke by day, flame by night): A fire is one of the most powerful long-range visual signals available. Use your PREPORA magnesium fire starter and fire-starting tinder tube to establish a base fire, then modify the signal for conditions:

- **Daytime (smoke signal):** Add green leaves, rubber, or any damp material to the fire to produce thick white or dark smoke visible against contrasting sky and terrain.
- **Night-time (flame signal):** A bright fire is visible from aircraft at night; keep the fire going with dry, fast-burning fuel.
- Build your signal fire in a clearing or elevated position, not under dense tree cover.

Ground-to-air patterns: If you have time and materials (branches, stones, coloured gear, disturbed snow or sand), create large geometric patterns in a visible clearing. Standard international ground-to-air signals:

- **V** — I need assistance
- **X** — I need medical assistance
- **Arrow (→)** — I am travelling in this direction
- Size matters: aim for at least 3 metres per symbol. Use materials that contrast with the ground — dark material on light ground or vice versa.

Bright clothing and gear: Your PREPORA raincoat (poncho) and emergency blanket can be spread on the ground or hung visibly in trees as colour signals. Any bright, unnatural colour against natural background draws attention from the air.

Electronic Signals

Mobile phone — always try first. Call 112 (EU single emergency number, works on all networks including foreign SIM cards and with no SIM). In many countries, 112 connects even without signal on your registered network — the phone uses any available network in range. Send a text if the call fails — texts require less bandwidth and may go through when voice calls cannot. If connected, do not hang up and do not move away from the spot where you got through.

Your PREPORA rechargeable flashlight has a strobe mode specifically designed for signaling. At night, point the strobe toward any visible light source (a town, a moving vehicle, an aircraft) and activate it. Consistent machine-gun strobe from a fixed point is immediately recognisable as a distress signal to trained observers.

Personal Locator Beacon (PLB): A PLB is a registered emergency device that transmits your GPS coordinates directly to international rescue coordination centres via satellite — no phone signal required. If you regularly travel in remote areas, a PLB is the most reliable electronic signaling device available. Your PREPORA kit supports this with battery-powered devices and communications tools, but a PLB is a supplementary purchase for high-risk travel.

Staying Put vs. Moving

This is the most contested decision in rescue scenarios. The guidance is clear:

Stay put if:

- Someone knows your planned location or route
- You are injured or mobility-impaired
- The terrain ahead is unknown or dangerous
- You are not certain of a safe route to shelter or help
- Rescuers will be looking for you within 24 hours

Move if:

- You are in immediate life-threatening danger at your current position (rising water, approaching fire, structural collapse)
- You have a known, confirmed safe route to an established shelter or help
- No one knows your location and no rescue is likely without you self-extracting

If you move, do three things: mark your last known position clearly (PREPORA sticky notes, torn clothing, stone cairn), move toward the highest ground or the most visible location, and leave a clear directional indicator (arrow made from branches or stones) showing your direction of travel.

Key Takeaways

- STOP (Stop, Think, Observe, Plan) is the first and most important response to being lost — resisting the urge to move immediately is a learnable discipline.
- Three blasts on your PREPORA 120 dB whistle is the universal distress signal; use it before your voice, and it will outlast your voice by hours.
- Your PREPORA emergency blanket functions as a long-range mirror signal — a reflected sunflash from mylar can be seen from aircraft at 10+ km.
- Stay at your last known position unless you are in immediate danger — searchers begin at your last known location, and moving away from it expands the search area and delays your rescue.

> ***Getting found is a skill — and like all skills, knowing it before you need it is what makes it work when it counts.***

Part of the PREPORA Survival Guide series. Download the full guide at prepora-gear.com/guides.