

WILL THEY

ESCAPE?



**WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT TEAMWORK
WATCHING OVER 1,500 ESCAPE ROOMS**

DANIEL HUIET

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INTRODUCTION

You can hear the police sirens screaming from outside the building, as the hairs on the back of your neck stand straight up. You are so focused on your task at hand, you don't even feel or notice the sweat beads slowly rolling down your face. Every team member in the group of accomplices plays a specific role in this mission, and team members are currently scattered around the room working diligently. Your job is to open the safe and get the loot. The vault is now directly in front of you. The moment you've been preparing for is finally here. All that needs to be done is to insert the four combinations of numbers to crack and open the safe, and a lifetime of ease, bliss, and vacation is yours. Behind you an accomplice shouts out the combinations and instructions to the safe. "Turn the dial counterclockwise four times landing on 72, now clockwise three times stopping on 84, counterclockwise again two times reaching 53, now for the final spin, turn the dial clockwise stopping on 87." You follow the instructions to a tee, knowing you are almost in the safe, moments away from victory, moments away from riches. Boom! A loud noise echoes down the hallway! A smashing of the front doors' downstairs and a rush of footsteps can be heard racing towards your location. The law enforcement has entered the building. They'll be at your position in less than a minute. You don't have much time but not much is

needed. A simple turn of the lever will open the safe, changing your life forever. The time has come to finish the job. With your right hand you turn the lever towards the left, but nothing happens. Trying not to panic, you attempt the lever again. Nothing. Frantically you grab the safe combination from your fellow accomplice. Counter-clockwise 72, clockwise 84, counter-clockwise 53, counter-clockwise 87. At that point, the door busts open and the SWAT team bursts into the room, guns drawn. "Hands up, don't move!" they yell. Your arms are now handcuffed behind your back as a law enforcement agent escorts you to their van. You and your team are going to jail for a long time.

What happened? Prior to the heist, the team spends weeks going over the details. The who, what, where, when, why, and how were all covered in great length. Each team member knew his or her roles and what was expected of him or her. In the hustle of the moment one simple mistake was made: an error that would forever alter all of the team members' lives. The last turn of the dial was supposed to be counterclockwise not clockwise. This small miscommunication resulted in the team of bank robbers, including you, being thrown in prison for a long time. Everyone was just moments from a successful robbery but will now spend the next several years staring at those cold rods of steel in their jail cell. Of course, this story didn't happen at a real bank; it occurred at my escape room in Beavercreek, Ohio. However, the end result is what

happens in several of the escape rooms I've watched over the course of three years at the business a partner and I own, called Great Escape Game: one small miscommunication costs the success of the team.



CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS AN ESCAPE ROOM?

“Fear not the unknown. It is a sea of possibilities.”

—TOM ALTHOUSE—

The first question people always ask is “What is an escape room?” An escape room is a themed space at an actual physical location where you must solve puzzles, crack codes, and find hidden objects to achieve a set goal. The overall task for each room is completely different and based on the theme of the room. For example, in Great Escape’s Bank Vault room, you must collect all the loot and escape before getting arrested. In our Western Saloon room, you need to find the deed to the saloon and get out of town before the prospector and his men get back. Each of the rooms is also decorated to coincide with the theme. Our Egyptian Tomb room has hieroglyphics on every wall, a gold painted ceiling, huge columns, an eight-foot statue, and the sarcophagus of the pharaoh in the room. I even flew to Egypt to make sure the details in the room were perfect. The idea is to make you truly feel as though you

are in the scenario that the room is portraying. At Great Escape, every single puzzle, clue, poster, prop, and object is related to the specific theme of the room. If you are playing Great Escape's Virus Outbreak room, you will encounter science and medical-related puzzles and clues that you would easily find in an actual medical laboratory.

The idea of an escape room might sound intimidating, but I promise it's more fun than it is nerve-racking. You won't need any prior knowledge going into any of our rooms. The unique aspect of playing an escape room, especially one of ours, is that it takes all kinds of people to complete the game. Within each room there are different puzzles and clues that require various parts of the brain to solve. When a group of individuals enters a room, puzzles that are easy for one person may be difficult for another, and vice versa. This experience is true even for me. When I play an escape room, my mind works in a very specific way that is great at solving certain things and not so good at others. This is accurate with regard to nearly everyone who comes to Great Escape.

Each of our rooms holds up to eight individuals and is perfect for small or large groups. You work as a team to escape the room while the clock is ticking down from 60 minutes. Escape rooms are great for groups of friends, families, birthday parties, and work events. Escape rooms are something that almost all ages can enjoy. It's a social thing to do on any night of the week that is fun for all ages. You have one goal at Great Escape: escape the room in

under one hour, which, I'll refer to at times as "winning"; "losing" will refer to failing to escape the room in one hour. The best part of the escape room is everyone must put their phones away and interact with each other in person. While these challenges are a lot of fun, they can add a lot of pressure as well.



OBSERVATION 1

Experience something new often. You might have a little fun in the process.

CHAPTER TWO

HOW THE MIND WORKS WHEN THERE IS PRESSURE IN A SITUATION

“Pressure busts pipes, but pressure makes diamonds.”

—EARL BOYKINS—

Escape rooms can be stressful situations. Before you enter an escape room you have no clue what the inside of the room looks like, how the puzzles are setup, or how much detail the room has. The puzzles and clues are a complete mystery, and nothing can prepare you for the pressure you will feel once that timer starts. Although the difficulty of the room is defined before you enter, a sense of anticipation can sometimes overwhelm you. I know from personal experience there are times where my heart starts to race prior to entering an unknown adventure such as an escape room. This excitement and energy can be a wonderful feeling to have; however, too much exhilaration and anxiety can cause your brain to nearly shut down and almost stop responding to the challenge at hand. This shutting down of the brain happens to me, teenagers, adults, men, women,

people who want to win, and—as you’ll read later in this chapter—even doctors.

A prime example of buckling under pressure occurred one day when two groups from the same organization arrived to play escape rooms. One of the groups was set to play the Bank Vault, and the group I was monitoring had selected the Virus Outbreak. Both the groups were to start at the same time, and a little bit of competitive smack talking between both sides was present in the lobby. We put the Bank Vault group in first, and then I escorted my group into the Virus Outbreak. Game flow was somewhat slow with my group, which was struggling early on. This didn’t set up the group members mentally for a strong finish, and halfway through the game I noticed a lady trying to force open a red medical bag that was in the room. I got on the microphone and told her she didn’t need to pry anything open, at which point she set the red bag down. A minute later she was trying to force the red bag open again. I got on the microphone and asked her to please stop and reminded her that nothing in the room needed to be pried open. After my prompt, she set the red bag down for a second time. A seemingly brief moment passed by and for the third time she had the red bag in her hand trying to pry it open! I couldn’t believe it. Just minutes prior to this third attempt, I had clearly told her twice over the speaker in the room to stop trying to pry open the bag, not to mention that prior to the game starting, I had covered the rules of no prying or forcing things open. Yet, she was attempting to

pull this bag apart again. I once again picked up the microphone and told her to stop. She was not listening to me and kept pulling apart the red bag. Finally, the zipper holding the contents inside gave way and revealed the medical vials that would be used for the next task.

Why didn't she listen to me? I was practically yelling at her to stop, but she didn't pay any attention to my warnings. The group ended up losing badly and afterwards I got a chance to speak with the woman about her actions in the Outbreak room. She didn't seem to have any remorse and told me "she had to win." She spent more time trying to find shortcuts than actually playing the game. Ultimately, that type of thinking cost the group the win. In this case, she couldn't take the pressure and burst like a pipe that had been frozen.

The Virus Outbreak is one of Great Escape's hardest escape rooms to solve. It involves a wide variety of puzzles and tasks that require multiple thinking patterns from the active participants, making it one of the hardest experiences for players to attempt with only two people. The Virus Outbreak also offers one of its hardest puzzles Great Escape has which can be found towards the end of the experience. When you get to this puzzle, you typically have around 10 minutes left to solve and finish the final Virus Outbreak game. Sounds like plenty of time, right? It should be; however, this last task of the room is a complex three-part puzzle. Once you understand what you are looking for, the first two parts are straight forward, and

most groups get past those two parts of the puzzle within five minutes. It's the last part of that game that requires some complex thinking. You might be thinking to yourself, "So what? All escape rooms require some level of complex thinking," and you'd be right; however, the timing of when you arrive to this difficult challenge is what shuts down the minds of even some of the best escape room artists.

Everyone in the group knows the end is near. Humans only have a limited amount of willpower, and as participants get tripped up throughout the experience, this willpower and ability to focus breaks down. This puts an additional level of stress on people that is almost indescribable yet painfully obvious to observe when watching an escape room from the game master's perspective.

In a memorable example, I watched a group of players playing their first escape room. Within that group there were a variety of skill sets and professions, one of which was a medical doctor. The game doesn't require previous medical knowledge, but if you have it, then you will be a lot better suited to beat the difficult puzzle at the end. The group was doing well and was working on the last puzzle with about five minutes to go. The last step was too complicated for the group, and it had medical-related clues; so, group members called the doctor over to see if he could finish it. Once the doctor got the puzzle sheet in his hand, someone in the group yelled, "Less than five minutes!" On a side note, yelling the time left in your game before you die of a deadly virus usually adds more stress to the

individuals playing the game, and, in general, does not help. Anyway, the puzzle has to do with blood types and the third portion of the three-part game is written in a way that isn't straight-forward. You must look at it from a bird's-eye view to understand what it is saying. Players almost always read it on the surface and don't try to figure out what it's really asking you to solve due to the rushed nature of when they arrive to it. On top of that, the puzzle is in a wall cabinet, and for the only time in the game, everyone is huddled around one spot unable to see what the people in front can see. This puts even more stress on the person, or two, that are trying to figure out the last part of the puzzle. The doctor was not immune to this stress.

Even though he had five minutes left in the game, his brain shut down. The habits his brain had formed might have been useful for surgery or other crucial skills in the medical field, but it wasn't programmed for this kind of challenge. It was a stressful time and all eyes were on him. This was uncharted territory for the doctor, and the clock was ticking. Five, four, three, two, one. Time's up! The group had failed. I walked into the room where everyone was laughing over their failed attempt to escape. Everyone, that is, except for the doctor who just stood there staring at the piece of paper in his hands. I took a couple of moments to explain how to find the last number they needed. Everyone gave their best "ah-ha" out loud, and the doctor shook his head, acknowledging he now understood how to get there. He was so disappointed in himself. I'm sure he'd

been in more stressful situations than an escape room and that he had performed his job to the best degree possible; however, this was a different kind of stress. The brain develops automatic responses to habits it has created during a lifetime, and his brain had never experienced this before. In the last five minutes of the game his mind shut down and knowing the exact time in which failure would occur, he couldn't recover from it. Even the best among us can suffer from a small amount of pressure. Once again, the pipe had burst.



OBSERVATION 2

Understand how you function under pressure so that you'll be prepared for it in the future. You can't be successful if you can't handle pressure.

CHAPTER THREE

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY; THINK YOUR WAY TO SUCCESS OR TO FAILURE

*“Whether you think you can, or you think you
can’t, you’re right.”*

—HENRY FORD—

Often in our escape games there are two or more groups of people that don't know each other in one room. This happens because each room holds up to eight individuals, and on busy nights, two separate groups that want to play at the same time could potentially be sharing a room. These mixed teams have a similar win/lose ratio when compared to rooms where everyone knows each other. However, one thing that has stuck out to me when it comes to combined teams. Those who go into the rooms with a negative mindset about having strangers join their group will lose more often than they will win. The teams that welcome strangers into their now shared experience will win more times than lose.

I remember one group of adults—with members probably in their thirties—that was waiting in the lobby for their game to start. We told the group members that two other people who had previously reserved spots would be joining them to play the Outbreak room. One of the women in the group was very irritated by the fact that there were going to be other people trying to find the virus antidote with them. She proclaimed to anyone that would listen to her that she didn't want to play with anyone outside of her group. We'll call her Ms. Stranger Danger. I tried to explain the potential benefits of having more people in the room, but Ms. Stranger Danger wasn't buying any of it. The two remaining players showed up shortly after this discussion, and everyone was ready to begin. If there are strangers playing a room together, I make them introduce themselves before taking them inside their escape room. I also explain that escape rooms are won by excellent communication, and it's vital to the success of the group if everyone connects well amongst each other. The players in each group introduced themselves, I went over the rules to the game, and then I put them in the room.

Game play progressed at a normal rate, and everyone was chipping in. I did start to notice that the woman who initially didn't want anyone else in the room with her group, Ms. Stranger Danger, wasn't talking with the stranger couple her group had just met 15 minutes prior. On two occasions, this apparent, or maybe subconscious,