

**MEDIA RELEASE**  
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## **Psychological preparedness can save lives during bushfires**

Being psychologically prepared, as well as having other emergency household preparedness strategies in place, is vitally important to any bushfire preparedness plan, according to the Australian Psychological Society (APS).

“The advice for people in fire risk situations tends to focus on practical preparation such as how to secure our homes and property and working out fire fighting or evacuation plans, all of which are highly desirable,” says APS President, Professor Bob Montgomery.

“But the repeated experience has been that many people will do few or even none of those practical preparations, until it is almost too late. We have a good understanding of the psychological barrier to that practical preparation,” said Professor Montgomery.

“To undertake those preparations is to admit to yourself that you are at risk and for many people that is too anxiety-provoking. So they stick to the anti-anxiety belief most of us learned in childhood: bad things do happen, but to someone else. When disaster does strike, these people are ill-prepared and more at risk of panic and then doing something that increases their risks.”

Preparing for the possibility of fire, hearing warnings of risk days, dealing with the reality of a disaster, and picking up the pieces afterwards, are all stressful situations. People will cope with that stress and those situations better if they take some steps to manage their inevitable anxiety at each point.

With many Victorians still facing significant fire threats, the APS has drawn together some helpful psychological preparedness advice for coping with yourself and others in the event of the threat of a bushfire or any natural disaster. This advice can be readily obtained from the APS website at [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

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*The APS is the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 16,500 members. The APS is committed to advancing psychology as a discipline and profession. It spreads the message that psychologists make a difference to peoples' lives, through improving psychological knowledge and community wellbeing.*

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## Steps towards psychological preparedness

“**Psychological** preparedness involves being able to **anticipate** how you are going to be feeling, thinking, and behaving in a very stressful situation, being able to **identify** specific emotions and faulty thinking, and knowing in advance how to **manage** how you and others may be feeling and responding to a very serious and possibly imminent threat”, says Professor Bob Montgomery, President of the APS.

A simple way to think about this psychological advice is to focus on **AIMing** for **psychological** as well as emergency household preparedness. ‘**A I M**’ captures the three things you need to focus on most to be psychologically prepared: **anticipate, identify, and manage**.

Feelings to **anticipate** and address include feeling stressed, panicky, and apprehensive and the anxiety and fear that often accompanies the threat and uncertainty of a bushfire. Anxiety can be very uncomfortable and paralyzing, and can stop people doing what they need to be doing by way of emergency preparations. So anticipating that you might be feeling anxious, and knowing what to do to manage those feelings, can play an important role in keeping focused on emergency preparations.

Behaviours to **anticipate** form the plan of action you will take when a fire threatens. Whether you have decided to stay and defend your property or leave in good time, your plan must be detailed and rehearsed, and any equipment you need must be readily available. An evacuation bag containing the documents and mementos you would most want to not lose is a good idea.

The next step is to **identify** what you might be feeling, so knowing what an emotion like anxiety feels like is important (e.g., ‘butterflies’ in the stomach, or a dry mouth, or difficulty breathing, or sweating which is not due to the weather). People can also learn to recognise the sort of thinking that might go along with emotions like anxiety. Recognising, for example, that we are imagining the worst possible outcomes, or catastrophising, when what is needed is to stay as cool, calm, and as collected as possible to enable a continued focus on the emergency preparations and plan.

The next step in **psychological** preparedness is to **manage** the feelings you are having in response to the current threat. This is about learning effective strategies like relaxing your body, breathing in a regular and calming way, behaving in a focused and purposeful way, and doing those practical tasks that need attending to. By being able to anticipate and manage your own psychological response to an emergency, that is, what is taking place in your **internal** environment, you are in a much better position to manage what is happening in the **external** environment around you, and to take those actions which are critical to your family’s well being and safety.

For more detailed suggestions for becoming psychologically prepared for bushfires or any possible disasters a brochure developed by the APS is available at:

<http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/Bushfires-brochure.pdf>