

# Psychological preparation for natural disasters

## Introduction

Most people in Australia live in areas of threat from natural disaster, whether it be from bushfires, floods, severe storms, droughts, cyclones or earthquakes. Pamphlets and brochures available from local council offices, emergency services and community groups provide helpful information on how to be prepared and what to do in an emergency situation to protect lives, home and property.

As well as information on physical and practical preparation, it is very helpful for people to know how to prepare psychologically before a natural disaster and how to cope emotionally during or after a disaster. Knowing ahead of time how a disaster situation might be experienced can help to decrease people's anxiety levels and overall psychological responses. Being psychologically prepared when a disaster is threatening can help people feel more confident, more in control and better able to make effective emergency plans. It can also help to reduce the psychological distress and longer-term mental health problems that can result from the trauma of being involved in disasters.

Of course, the first and vitally important part of psychological preparation for an emergency situation is to be physically prepared with a practised emergency plan. Making all the necessary physical preparations and having a household emergency plan that is well known and practised by everyone will increase the sense of being in control when the emergency begins.

This Tip Sheet outlines the importance of being psychologically prepared and provides the steps to take for psychological preparation when a natural disaster is threatening.

## The importance of being psychologically prepared

Being directly involved in any potentially life-threatening emergency situation can be genuinely terrifying. People often don't have prior experience of being in natural disasters or knowledge of just how stressful this can be. When people are under severe stress they are usually not able to think as clearly as usual and this can affect decisions and reactions. These are normal, although not always helpful, responses to a possibly life-threatening situation.

When people have a better understanding of their own likely psychological responses in natural disaster warning situations this can help them to feel more in control and better able to cope. Being psychologically prepared can assist people to think more clearly and reduce the risk of serious injury and loss of life or property. Being cooler, calmer and more collected can also be very helpful to family members and others who may not be as well prepared psychologically for what is happening.

Of course, it is unrealistic to think that people can be fully emotionally prepared for such stressful and confronting situations as severe natural disasters. However, being psychologically prepared can help in coping with the stress of the unfolding situation and can help to reduce the distress after the disaster has passed. This does not mean that people can be fully prepared for anything that may happen or that being psychologically prepared means being emotionally 'bullet-proof'.

Being psychologically prepared also includes having realistic expectations that an emergency situation such as a bushfire or cyclone event can very quickly become unmanageable, unpredictable and life-threatening. Being able to anticipate that such a situation could occur can help people to 'let go' when necessary and leave the situation to the expertise of emergency services.

## What does being psychologically prepared involve?

Once the household emergency plan has been set and practised and the necessary physical preparations have been made, we can turn our attention to psychological strategies for managing the stress of a threatening natural disaster.

Psychologists use a term called 'stress inoculation' to assist people to prepare themselves psychologically for emergencies, which in other words means planning to be better protected from stress by working through the likely psychological reactions beforehand and learning strategies to cope. These strategies 'inoculate' people against being overly anxious or overwhelmed by their emotional responses, and will help prevent being caught up in unhelpful thinking in an emergency situation. Obviously this approach will work better with some disaster events that may be more frequent and to some extent more predictable, but the psychological principles can be applied for any emergency.

The way people feel in highly stressful situations is strongly affected by the way they cope with the signs of physical arousal (e.g., racing heart beat, shortness of breath) and the thoughts that they are having (e.g., 'I can't cope'; 'We're going to get badly hurt'). These reactions and thoughts can make people feel anxious, hopeless or even angry, and while these feelings are understandable, they are not very helpful in an emergency situation. Being psychologically prepared means that these natural reactions to stress can be anticipated and managed to help people feel more in control and confident.

There are three main steps to being psychologically prepared for a threatening natural disaster:

1. Anticipate the anxiety and concerns that will arise
2. Identify uncomfortable or distressing thoughts and feelings that may cause further anxiety
3. Manage the responses so that the ability to cope remains as effective as possible.

An easy way to remember the skills involved in being psychologically prepared is to focus on AIMing for psychological as well as emergency household preparedness.

### **AIM: The three steps to being psychologically prepared**

1. **ANTICIPATE** that you will be feeling worried or anxious and remember these are normal, although not always helpful, responses to a possible life-threatening situation
2. **IDENTIFY** what the specific physical feelings associated with anxiety are and whether you are having any frightening thoughts that are adding to the fear
3. **MANAGE** your responses using controlled breathing and self-talk so that you stay as calm as possible and can focus on the practical tasks that need attending to

## **Step 1: Anticipating the psychological reactions leading up to a disaster**

In the lead up to most natural disasters like bushfires, cyclones, floods or severe storms there is usually a series of warnings on radio, television and in newspapers. For example, there may be repeated reminders about buying batteries for torches and radios, having gas bottles filled, ensuring an adequate supply of emergency water and food, removing flammable material from around homes, or securing doors and windows.

Warnings and uncertainty in an emergency situation affect people psychologically. There are often repeated risk messages and frightening images and sounds to ensure people know about the risk. This can leave people feeling anxious, helpless or confused.

### **How to anticipate your reactions**

- To begin preparing yourself for the natural disaster that may be coming, try to anticipate what your likely response to the situation will be.
- Expect that the situation will be highly stressful and think about how you usually react to stress. Although these reactions are very natural they can get in the way of other necessary preparations.
- If you understand your usual reactions you can learn ways to be better prepared to manage them when they happen.

## **Step 2: Identifying the specific feelings and thoughts**

It's important for people to tune into the specific feelings and thoughts they are having in response to a threatening natural disaster, as this will help them to find ways to manage them.

People usually become physically aroused in highly stressful situations. Common physical symptoms include:

- Racing heart and palpitations
- Shortness of breath and dizziness
- Tense muscles
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Nausea
- Numbness or tingling
- Headaches.

When these physical reactions to stress begin, they usually trigger stressful thoughts such as:

- I can't cope
- I'm so afraid
- I'm panicking
- I don't know what to do.

### **How to identify your own feelings and thoughts**

- Notice what is happening to your body and the physical sensations that tell you that you're feeling anxious.
- Try to focus in on the frightening thoughts you may be having that are adding to the fear. What exactly are you saying to yourself? Are your thoughts helping you or making things harder? Check whether you are jumping to conclusions.
- Remind yourself that strong bodily sensations and frightening thoughts are normal reactions to stress but they are not helping you to stay calm and clear-headed. Don't get too critical of yourself though!

## **Step 3: Managing responses to the stress**

In stressful situations, people can feel more in control through two strategies:

1. Slowing down their breathing to help calm the physical arousal symptoms
2. Replacing frightening thoughts with more helpful ones.

### **Learning to breathe and think more calmly**

- To slow your breathing down, take smaller breaths and pause between breaths to space them out. When you have breathed out slowly, hold your breath for a count of three before inhaling your next breath. Sometimes people find it helps to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- While concentrating on breathing out slowly, say to yourself 'Relax', or 'Stay calm', or 'It's OK, I'm managing OK'. These are good words to use because they are associated with feeling relaxed and in control.
- Try not to dwell on the bad things that might happen, but instead tell yourself that the calmer you are, the better you'll be at managing exactly what needs to be done.
- Remember you need to be able to draw on your own strengths and survival resources and your coping ability. It's important not to let unhelpful feelings and thoughts get in the way of careful and well planned actions.
- Remind yourself that this is an emergency situation and that it's natural you are feeling anxious and stressed. You cannot directly control what's happening but you can manage your responses in this emergency and influence the impact on you and your family.

### **Helping others to cope with their feelings**

- Teach others the simple breathing exercises.
- Be sensitive and supportive to them, rather than judging. They may be feeling scared, anxious or embarrassed if they are not coping as well as you.
- Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling with you.
- Assist them to find more helpful thoughts to say to themselves and others
- Get people involved in occupying their time rather than worrying.
- Encourage them to take responsibility for a task that needs attending to.

## Some unhelpful psychological 'traps'

There are a number of common 'traps' that people can fall into in response to a threatening natural disaster. Knowing that these are common reactions may help people to understand and be better prepared if they find themselves feeling this way.

<p><b>Anxiety and worry are triggered by the preparations for the natural disaster</b></p>	<p>Once people start preparing for a natural disaster, they may experience sudden and unexpected feelings of anxiety and helplessness as the reality and possible consequences of a forthcoming natural disaster may suddenly become more real.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> The worry often stops people from doing what they are doing, so they don't complete preparations for the natural disaster.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> Go ahead with your preparations knowing that it is normal for people to feel this worry and even to experience occasional panic. It's not pleasant, but you can deal with it.</p>
<p><b>Feeling that everything is completely uncontrollable</b></p>	<p>Another cause for feelings of worry and helplessness when a natural disaster threatens is the repeated thought that a natural disaster is an awesome and uncontrollable 'Act of God or nature'.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> These feelings of helplessness and futility may cause people to do nothing.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> It is important to remind yourself that although you cannot exercise direct control over the natural disaster, you are not helpless to protect yourself and your family from its consequences. Undertaking all of the protective measures contained in your local disaster emergency guides will not only help make you safe, it will help you to feel more in control and less anxious.</p>
<p><b>Blindly following others</b></p>	<p>When people are frightened and anxious, it is easy to become overwhelmed and confused, and do whatever someone else is doing, without thinking about it.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> Uncertainty, along with a sense of urgency that something must be done, can lead to blindly following someone else's anxious behaviour.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> Don't be afraid to take charge if that is what you feel you should do. It is important, however, that you know what should be done, and that you behave in a calm, collected way.</p>
<p><b>The disaster feels 'unreal'</b></p>	<p>Unless people have been through a natural disaster, it is difficult to imagine fully what it will be like, and what the feelings of fear and panic might be. Some people deal with this situation by making light of the threat or event and treating it as if it isn't real.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> This feeling of unreality can interfere with disaster preparation by interfering with making necessary practical plans.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> You need to keep telling yourself that what is happening is very real and requires sensible behaviour on your part.</p>
<p><b>Warnings lose their impact</b></p>	<p>Once people have heard a number of similar warning messages, they may start to expect that nothing serious is going to happen. The messages can be repetitive and it may be that the threat of the disaster becomes just a threat, because the disaster misses your area or simply doesn't happen.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> The repeated warnings lose their impact and people feel a sense that things are unreal or that the risk isn't as threatening as it really is.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> Watch out for this, as you may miss critical new information and start behaving as though things are back to normal.</p>
<p><b>False sense of security</b></p>	<p>It is also possible and indeed common for people to experience a false sense of security in response to disaster warnings, because they may think that modern technology, the government, or the emergency services would not allow such an event to happen.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> People think they are safe because we now live in safer houses and can very accurately 'track' what is happening with threatening events in terms of location, speed and intensity. This is reassuring but can also be very dangerous. Location on a map has nothing to do with scientific or technological control over the event and often little to do with accurate predictions.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> Always treat the actual danger as very real so that you can respond realistically and responsibly, minimising the risk to your family and yourself.</p>

## After the emergency has passed

### Checking on how you coped

After the disaster or threat has passed it is helpful to check whether identifying and managing your feelings and thoughts helped you feel better psychologically prepared and able to cope.

Were you able to:

- Anticipate how you might react?
- Identify emotional responses?
- Practice breathing more slowly and calmly?
- Use more helpful thoughts?
- Identify any psychological traps?
- Make decisions more easily and effectively attend to the necessary practical tasks?

### Coping with losses and damage

It is inevitable in disaster prone areas that some loss or damage will occur. Many people have strong emotional or physical reactions following a disaster. Emotional distress following a disaster can include anger, anxiety, sadness or grief and a tendency to unfairly blame people or agencies.

The APS Tip Sheet *Understanding and managing psychological trauma* describes some of these symptoms of distress and provides suggestions promoting recovery, such as:

- Trying to maintain a normal routine
- Spending time with people who care about you
- Giving yourself permission to experience some reaction to the distressing experience

## Seeking professional assistance

If you are finding that you are struggling to cope, then you may benefit from some additional help. In most areas of Australia, psychologists are available to provide a range of post-disaster assistance such as supportive counselling, grief counselling and stress management. In some places teams are available to come into disaster prone areas to assist in coping with material damages and emotional distress.

APS psychologists have at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide professional and timely service to you in the area of managing stress. APS psychologists are able to provide immediate, short-term stress management strategies and also provide long-term, ongoing support for more complex stress reactions.

To talk to an APS psychologist, ask your GP for a referral or phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on 1800 333 497. Alternatively, you can locate a psychologist in your area by going to the APS Find a Psychologist website – [www.findapsychologist.org.au](http://www.findapsychologist.org.au).

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