



NATURAL DISASTER AND MAJOR WEATHER EVENTS

NATURAL DISASTER AND MAJOR WEATHER EVENTS PREPARING PSYCHOLOGICALLY FOR EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

In the lead up to extreme weather events including floods, bushfires and cyclones, repeated reporting in the media and warnings about how best to prepare your property and family in an emergency situation may affect people psychologically.

These repeated risk messages and frightening images may leave people feeling anxious, helpless or confused.

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.

Your local Council and emergency services have pamphlets and brochures to help you get physically prepared to protect lives, homes and property in an emergency situation. A well practiced household emergency plan will provide a greater sense of being in control in an emergency situation.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) recommends you AIM for being psychologically prepared in steps:

Step 1

ANTICIPATE

that the situation will be stressful

- To begin preparing yourself, try to anticipate what your likely response to the highly stressful situation will be.
- 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 manage them better when they happen.

Step 2

IDENTIFY

your bodily changes related to anxiety and any frightening thoughts that are adding to the fear

- Notice what is happening to your body and the changes that tell you when you're feeling anxious
- Try to focus in on the frightening thoughts you may be having that are adding to the fear. Are your thoughts helping you or making things harder?
- 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!

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.

Find out more



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Step 3

MANAGE

your responses using controlled breathing and self-talk

1. Slowing down your breathing to help calm your body's anxiety reaction.
2. Ensure you keep hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids.
3. Replacing frightening thoughts with more helpful ones.
 - 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.
 - 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.

Anxiety and worry are triggered by the preparations for the natural disaster

Feeling that everything is completely uncontrollable

Blindly following others

What to do

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.

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.

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.

The disaster feels 'unreal'

Warnings lose their impact

False sense of security

What to do

You need to keep telling yourself that what is happening is very real and requires sensible behaviour on your part.

Watch out for this, as you may miss critical new information and start behaving as though things are back to normal.

Always treat the actual danger as very real so that you can respond realistically and responsibly, minimising the risk to your family and yourself.

Being psychologically prepared also includes having realistic expectations that an emergency situation such as a bushfire 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 service.

Prepare your property and family in an emergency situation may affect people psychologically.

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