

Psychological preparedness can save your life

When your home or community is threatened by a bushfire it can be terrifying. People who haven't experienced it before can underestimate how stressful it can be. Most people are not able to think as clearly as usual when they are under severe stress, and this can affect their decisions and reactions. You might already know that about yourself, and have noticed it in others.

Research shows that you are more likely to stick with a household plan if you have also prepared psychologically for a bushfire. Being able to manage your emotions in an emergency (that is, being psychologically prepared), can save your life and potentially the lives of others.

How to prepare psychologically: a 3 step process

Once the household emergency plan has been set and you've prepared emergency kits, planned your evacuation strategy, and practised your plan, it is then time to prepare psychologically.

1 **ANTICIPATE** that the situation will be stressful

How do you think you will react to the stress? How do you usually react to highly stressful situations? 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.

How you feel in highly stressful situations is strongly affected by the way you cope with the physical signs of anxiety and the thoughts running through your head. Our physical and emotional responses in dangerous situations are referred to as "fight or flight". That is, you either fight for your life, or run for your life.

2 **IDENTIFY** your typical physical and emotional responses, and any frightening thoughts that might be adding to your fear

In highly stressful situations, the body usually shows signs of anxiety, such as a racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness and sweating. Where do you expect you will notice it most when you are experiencing a serious threat?

What are some typical thoughts that you might be having that could be making things harder?

Typical thoughts and emotions might be:

- *I can't cope;*
- *I'm so scared;*
- *We're going to die;*
- *This is awful;*
- *I don't know what to do;*
- *We're going to lose everything;*
- *I can't bear it;*
- *I wish this wasn't happening;*
- *I can't deal with it.*

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!

3 **MANAGE** your feelings and thoughts with simple breathing and self-talk

We can find ways to MANAGE any changes to our body, mind and thoughts through some simple breathing and self-talk strategies. These strategies can help you to feeling more in control, and better able to make decisions about how to stay safe.

Slowing down your breathing can help calm down your body's fear response. Focus on your out breath and extend it for as long as is comfortable for you. It is best to breathe through your nose if you can. Then let the in breath come in of its own accord. It will happen! It happens all the time without us thinking about it.

Replace anxious thoughts and images with more helpful ones, those that will support you more at this time. While concentrating on breathing out slowly, say to yourself things like 'relax', or 'stay calm', or 'It's OK, I'm managing OK'. 'I can handle this', 'focus on what has to be done' or 'no need to panic'. 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.

