



## Preparing for bushfires

How to prepare psychologically for a bushfire

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. This information sheet outlines four steps to help you become psychologically prepared.

### How to prepare psychologically: A four-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. Research shows that you are more likely to stick with a household plan if you are able to manage your emotions in an emergency (that is, being psychologically prepared). Being psychologically prepared can save your life and potentially the lives of others. In addition to the information below, you can find more information on how to be psychologically prepared for a natural disaster on the [APS website \(https://bit.ly/2WnDsgg\)](https://bit.ly/2WnDsgg).

#### 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.

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. If you understand your usual reactions you can learn ways to manage them better when they happen.

## 2. IDENTIFY your typical physical and emotional responses

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 feel more in control, and better able to make decisions about how to stay safe.

Slowing down your breathing can also 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.

## 4. ENGAGE meaningfully with at least one trusted person

During periods of high stress it is extremely important for your mental health that you feel connected to a significant other to share your feelings and thoughts, and access and provide support. Seek out someone you trust who you can share your experiences with.

### Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you or your family are experiencing is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.




There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to [findapsychologist.org.au](http://findapsychologist.org.au) or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians during disasters. Visit [www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters](http://www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters)

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