

PREPAREDNESS: FACING FUTURE DISASTERS

Booklet produced for the Victorian Bushfire Support and Training for Affected Schools Project

May 2010
D1.1

This project was funded by the Australian Government.

AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

THE AUTHOR

Professor Beverley Raphael is an internationally recognised expert in mental health aspects of terrorism and disasters and has long-term involvement and experience in research and management in the areas of trauma, grief and disasters. More specifically, her work has covered trauma, loss and other adversities as they affect children and young people, their needs and their families' needs, including school-based research, surveys and programs. She has extensive experience in service provision and policy development in mental health. Professor Raphael also chairs the National Mental Health Disaster Response Committee and Taskforce.

She is currently Professor of Psychological Medicine at the Australian National University and Professor of Population Mental Health & Disaster at the University of Western Sydney. She has chaired the National Prevention, Promotion and Early Intervention Working Party and has written numerous reports relevant to the prevention and management of trauma, loss and grief as they affect children, adolescents and families. In 1984, Professor Raphael was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her work in mental health and in 2008 the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrists awarded her the College Medal of Honour – its most prestigious award for distinguished and meritorious service.

ACATLGN is a national collaboration to provide expertise, evidence-based resources and linkages to support children and their families through the trauma and grief associated with natural disasters and other adversities. It offers key resources to help school communities, families and others involved in the care of children and adolescents.

This project was funded by the Australian Government.

Introduction

This document outlines ways you can prepare for a bushfire, and why preparation is important. Preparedness strategies can be practical or psychosocial. Practical and psychosocial strategies work best together, helping you to think about ways to get yourself ready for a fire. This process can increase your confidence and ability in dealing with a fire and help minimise the psychological impact of a fire. The High Five Model of Psychosocial Preparedness is: know your risks, connect with others, identify your strengths, learn about actions to take in an emergency, and look after your life. These strategies encourage you to be informed, stay in touch, reflect on your coping skills and keep living a normal life as key elements in being psychologically prepared for a fire. Being psychologically prepared helps protect you against the mental health impact of a fire.

Strategies to deal with disasters

Strategies to deal with disasters have four main components. Preparedness is one of these four strategies. These are relevant across a wide range of disasters, but are discussed here for their relevance for bushfires.

Prevention strategies

Prevention strategies are actions to prevent the disaster from occurring well before an actual disaster happens. Examples of bushfire prevention strategies include ensuring 50 metre bush-free zones around buildings and making access routes to your property large enough for fire trucks.

Prevention, preparedness, response and recovery strategies are different ways people can deal with the threat and actual event of a bushfire. This document focuses on preparedness strategies.

Preparedness strategies

Preparedness strategies are advance planning of what to do when the disaster actually occurs, such as knowing how to relocate to fire-safe areas in the community and having a bushfire survival kit. It includes understanding the threat, knowing the risk you are facing and being ready to deal with fears and decisions.

Preparedness strategies are advance planning of your response if a fire occurs: where you will go, what you will do, how you will keep contact with family and friends. Being psychologically prepared not only helps you deal with a fire more effectively: it can also lessen the mental health impacts.

Response strategies

Response strategies refer primarily to the actions taken to deal with the disaster at the time of the emergency, particularly the actions of emergency services such as fire, ambulance and police. Response also involves people's own reactions and actions, and strategies to assist people at this time.

Recovery strategies

Recovery strategies address the process of dealing with the experience psychologically and physically, as well as the practical consequences of safety and shelter.

Preparedness: practical and psychosocial

Preparedness strategies aim to lessen the impact and the risk of severe effects on people and communities. Practical preparedness and psychosocial preparedness are both essential components of being prepared to deal with any future threat. They are integral at an individual and community level. Both require anticipation of the threat and effective strategies to mitigate it.

Preparedness strategies may be practical or psychosocial, and these work together to help you gain confidence that you can deal with a future threat.

The High Five model for psychosocial preparedness

The High Five Strategies

1. Know about the risks
2. Connect with others
3. Identify your strengths
4. Learn about actions to take in an emergency
5. Look after your life



This model is based on five key strategies for psychosocial aspects of preparedness that aim to assist children, adolescents and adults in dealing with threat and disaster. It is based on knowledge from scientific research and experience concerning actions and behaviours that help people to manage their fears, to make decisions and to protect themselves or others. Research also indicates that preparedness strategies are not only likely to help people deal with a specific threat more effectively, but may also help to lessen the mental health impacts.

Practical preparedness strategies

These strategies are provided by government and emergency agencies and local community leaders.

Gather facts and information about the threat

- What communication systems you can access and trust to provide accurate and up-to-date knowledge
- How likely the threat is and how severe it is likely to be
- What can be done to lessen the severity of the impact on people and property
- What the role of government agencies, emergency services and others will be, and how they will deal with the threat and those affected
- How warning systems operate – what they are, what the different levels of warning mean and what you need to do in response

Plan to deal with the threat

Develop a family plan

Agree to an up-to-date family plan that has been discussed by your family including what you would do in case of an emergency, how you would escape and protect yourselves, where you would meet up if you were separated, and how you would keep in touch. You may also include linkages to neighbours or others close by.

Prepare an emergency backpack

Prepare a bag or backpack of important resources that you would have ready to take with you in the event of having to escape or evacuate. This might include a contact list of family and significant others, a torch, battery-operated radio and spare batteries, water, food, warm or protective clothing, and essentials such as medication and related resources.

Know the emergency plan of your organisation

It is important to be aware of the emergency plan of your school or workplace. This will provide information on what you would do in the event of an emergency, who would be in charge, and what actions are necessary for safety. Most schools and organisations have up-to-date plans to deal with disasters or other emergencies.

Find out about disaster planning in your community

Local communities are usually actively involved in disaster planning and dealing with matters that happen in the community. It is useful to know about these plans: they may contain important information such as identified places of greater safety in the event of a fire.

Participate in exercises with emergency services

Exercises which test protective strategies are helpful, if you have the opportunity to be involved in these. For example, schools are very good at moving groups of students – from class, or for short events. How would this apply for an evacuation? How would you protect yourself if you had to stay where you were? How would parents be contacted before, during and after an emergency? Practise is very important, and testing plans is reassuring to everyone.

Practical Preparedness Strategies

- Accessing critical information about warnings and actions to take
- How and when would you evacuate, and where would you go
- How to look after yourself, your family, and others
- Where help will be available

Psychosocial preparedness strategies

The High Five model

This model is based on five key strategies for psychosocial aspects of preparedness. Each of these strategies enhances competence, confidence, and capacity to manage a disaster threat and to respond more effectively should it occur. These strategies may also help to protect mental health and wellbeing in the face of any stressful experience, and other life stressors. Taken together these five strategies help towards a successful outcome – a 'high five' outcome or achievement.

The High Five Model for psychosocial Preparedness is a strategy to help prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

These strategies can be adapted for different age groups. They are the basis for helping children, young people and adults to deal with the psychosocial aspects of threatened and actual challenges and disasters.

Psychosocial strategies aim to minimise mental health impacts and enhance outcomes for people experiencing a disaster such as the Victorian Bushfires (2009). These strategies help to deal with trauma and grief about what has occurred through mobilising strengths, and confronting fears about the disaster, bit by bit.

The High Five Strategies

1. Know about the risks
2. Connect with others
3. Identify your strengths
4. Learn about actions to take in an emergency
5. Look after your life



1. Know the risks

Learning about possible threats and knowing how to protect yourself from them helps to deal more effectively with disaster should it occur. [Know, gather information, communicate, ask questions and get answers.](#)

Know about fires

Know what can help you or others to prepare; know actions for protecting yourself and others as best you can; listen; learn more; keep updating; keep an open mind so as to assess the threat or incident and make decisions based on what you know, think and decide.

Knowing about the risks and what you can do helps deal more effectively with a fire should it occur.

Know about preparation

Know what to do, what you can do and what others do.

2. Connect with others

Strengthen connections with family, colleagues, friends, students, teachers, other members of the school community and workmates. This can provide mutual support and sharing of information and actions. This connectedness can help to protect from adverse mental health effects, as well as assisting actions to deal with the threat.

Connecting with people can assist in dealing with the threat and also protect from adverse mental health effects.

Connecting with others provides opportunities to:

- Plan together, prepare and practise
- Share prior experience about what worked, solve problems, communicate, learn from others
- Support one another – through any tough times
- Identify *buddies* – connect with others like you, with shared experience and understanding. Identify *buddies* or peers and explore what you can do together.
- Identify a *back-up person* - identify and connect with someone more experienced, or in a different position from you, someone who can help you or who you can turn to for help, advice or support.

Connectedness helps adults, children and families to get through tough times, particularly in disasters. People do not feel alone if they have connections with family, and have kept in touch with a buddy and a back-up. Keeping connections and connectedness alive means keeping in touch, doing things together, sharing thoughts and feelings, and knowing you can turn to others for help and they can turn to you. Keeping connected also means you know how to get in touch with one another during or after an emergency or if either of you is in need.

3. Identify your strengths

Viewing and identifying strengths and effective coping strategies is part of gathering resources that can help you deal with threat or disaster more effectively. Coping, thinking and feeling strategies can provide options to protect yourself and others and can achieve more positive outcomes.

Identifying your strengths raises awareness of your own 'tools' or resources which you and your family can use. They can be coping strategies like breaking a challenge into manageable chunks, thinking strategies like reframing a threat as a challenge you can deal with, or feeling strategies such as ways to manage fear.

Knowing and identifying your own strengths is important. These 'tools' are resources that you, and those close to you, can use to help recognise and prepare for threatening circumstances such as bushfires, and to deal with them effectively should they occur. They can constitute part of your preparedness tool kit or resource bag in the psychological sense. Writing down your strengths may also help as a reminder.

AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

Coping strategies

These may be coping mechanisms that have proven effective in the past. Problem solving actions are likely to be adaptable to different circumstances:

- Checking information and checking with others
- Doing things bit by bit in manageable chunks and breaking a challenge or problem into what can be done now and what later
- Checking your 'gut instinct'
- Getting on with other things and putting a problem on hold and coming back to it later, depending on the emergency or priorities at the time

Thinking strategies

- Try to define the issue as a challenge that you can deal with, rather than a threat
- Focus on positive aspects
- Remember and find your fighting spirit. How have you used the will not to give in to get through difficulties in the past?
- Plan ways you can make both yourself and others safe, devise quick short-term strategies to stay safe while you work out what to do next, and strategies to help you get through the worst
- Weigh up pros and cons to help problem-solve
- Anticipate and practise thinking through the range of options in your mind, testing them in your thinking, and keeping them in mind for future use, while keeping your thinking open for other options if need be.

Feeling strategies

- *Tune in* - be aware or tune in to your various feeling states. This helps in a number of ways, particularly in terms of how they arise and how they may influence your actions.
- *Remember your courage* - courage has been part of your response throughout - remember and own your courage.
- *Manage your fear* - fear is a normal reaction to threat. It is associated with heightened arousal and a fight/flight response by the body to help deal with what is happening. If you have been through a disaster like the bushfires you may be much more sensitive to threat, particularly if it is in any way a reminder (eg the smell of smoke). Fear management strategies aim to manage anxiety and assist decision making.

Review your coping, thinking and feeling strategies, and identify them for your psychological tool-kit of resources for preparedness and response.

Fear management strategies

- Deal with fear a bit at a time
- Take three-five long slow breaths in and out
- Focus on calm, positive feelings or memories (identify these ahead of time)
- Recognise the energy generated by your fears. Think through positive actions that you could take that would assist preparedness and response, take these in your mind and practise these alongside calming thoughts and actions.
- Recognise anger, helplessness and other negative feelings. Develop positive memories, thoughts and feelings.
- Plan effective actions and practise them in your mind and carry out calming actions including slow breathing. Actions towards protection can lessen helplessness and increase confidence that you could act for safety and protection if the threat is realised.

4. Learn about what to do in an emergency

Work out what to do that will help survival and safety, what to do to protect yourself, family and friends, and practise these actions, including those in your organisation's emergency plan and family plan. This will help you through a fire.

Psychological survival skills and practical actions work best together.

There is strong scientific evidence that being able to **actively prepare, protect, respond to and help others** is helpful psychologically. This gives us confidence and a sense of efficacy. Practical actions like those in the Practical Preparedness Strategies section above can be part of this. Disaster and preparedness exercises with practise can assist. Even actions such as making a list, forming an emergency plan, having a 'go-bag' of resources are helpful.

Useful action strategies

- Know your organisation's disaster plan.
- Know your family plan for emergencies.
- Get together a pack you could take if you were called upon to evacuate, including contact details and other emergency needs.
- Identify shelter and safe places and practise actions you may need to take. Practise can help you and your body get to know what is needed.
- Practise tasks may have to be done 'bit by bit', in do-able stages. Work out which actions are critical and which can be achieved, and which are priorities. This is important in building good psychological and physical survival skills.
- Get together with buddies to work out how you would tackle challenges for preparation and response. Work out what your priorities are, how you could do things together to deal with different aspects of threat. Rehearsing and practising actions can all lead to individual and group confidence and effectiveness.

5. Look after your life

'Look after your life' means not letting the disaster experience, or preparations for a further disaster threat, take over your life. It means not letting yourself be excessively preoccupied with it. Commitment to keeping to your goals in life, school, work, family and future, and to the regular activities of family and school life is a vital aspect of your ongoing well-being. This means keeping your life and experience on track despite these old or new challenges.

Disasters have a major impact on the lives of all those who have experienced them: adults, adolescents, children. They may bring sadness, painful memories, grief, fears, psychological trauma and other consequences. Long term problems can occur, particularly if there has been loss of loved ones, friends or other losses, damage to property and dislocation into transitional living arrangements or loss of work and way of life.

Plan for and prepare should another disaster occur but don't let the disaster take over your own life. The regular ritual and patterns of everyday family life provide strong frameworks to see you through.

Many factors challenge the process of recovery, including dealing with the everyday problems of life, coping with reminders of the fire, dealing with the disruptions and disappointments of the post-disaster period, and preparation for the threat of further disaster seasons. Disaster experience can dominate your life. The challenge is to look after your life, look after your health and wellbeing (such as sleep, exercise, nutrition), and deal with the problems that interfere with it. Plan for and prepare should another disaster occur but don't let the disaster take over your own life, or the lives of those you love.

Build and keep a set of practical strategies to hold onto your life and go forward with it, disaster experience and all. There is scientific evidence that the regular ritual and

Seek help if problems are blocking you from the life you want to live.

AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

patterns of everyday family life, practical activities, regular things you do, school and school time, work and work time, provide strong frameworks to see you through the difficulties. Make sure that if you need help you get it – your family doctor, your mental health service and others can assist.

Making plans to continue and own your own life and to not let the disaster take it away, or the threat and preparation dominate, are critical strategies. Living your life with family and significant others and enjoying relevant positive activities, as well as responsibilities, with practical and manageable focus, will help you to gain mastery over threat. Again coping actions to achieve this are critical.

Ways to keep living your life

- Keep to regular activities of family life such as making time each day for the family to sit down together for a meal, discussion, planning; continuing activities for family preparedness and response; participating in the practical tasks of rebuilding
- Make sure you look after your needs for affection, nurturing and time out for yourself
- Plan pleasant future-orientated activities together with family, friends, school mates, work-mates
- Plan practical activities with shared goals to deal with recovery and other needs for your community and yourself
- Continue or renew school activities and focus on learning and educational goals to normalise these aspects of life again
- Continue or renew work activities with a focus on development of skills and roles.

Above all, seek help if problems are blocking you from the life you want to live.

Practical commitment to everyday activities and challenges helps to 'normalise' life even though life is inevitably different after such experiences. Your experience in the disaster is now part of your life, but keeping a focus on valuing your life with all its components and experience prevents you from becoming a 'victim'. This mobilisation of your courage is a practical strategy that enables you, with these other strategies, to prepare for future threat, to deal with what has happened and to take life forward with you and your loved ones.

Summary

Preparedness strategies are one of four components of dealing with fires. Preparedness can be practical or psychosocial, and the two work best together. The High Five Model for Psychosocial Preparedness is a strategy to help prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. The lessons learnt can also be more broadly useful for learning to deal with general life stresses.

AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

Additional resources

The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network and the Australian Psychological Society.

The brochure 'Preparing Children for the Threat of Bushfire' describes the AIM strategy:

- Anticipate, anticipate anxiety and concerns
- Identify: distressing thoughts and feelings
- Manage responses to cope

This brochure provides ways of assisting parents and carers to help children manage their fears and to have a greater sense of being in control in threatening bushfire situations.

http://www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au/uploads/Preparing_children_for_the_threat_of_bushfire_ACATLGN_APS.pdf

OR

<http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/Preparing-children-for-threat-bushfires.pdf>

Red Cross

"Emergency REDiPlan – Four steps to prepare your household" prepared by the Australian Red Cross
http://www.redcross.org.au/ourservices_acrossaustralia_emergencyservices_prepare.htm

"Get Ready! Emergency REDiPlan" workbook for children prepared by the Australian Red Cross
http://www.redcross.org.au/ourservices_acrossaustralia_disasteremergencyservices_resources-for-children.htm

"Ready Set Action" Magazine published by the Australian Red Cross
http://www.redcross.org.au/library_publications_ready-set-action.htm

Victorian resources

Victorian Government, through its Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – DEECD
Victoria has a Fire Ready Strategy: Prepare; Act; Survive
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires>
See also the Department of Human Services
<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/home>

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development – Victoria
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/>

Country Fire Authority
<http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/index.htm>

Programs through schools dealing with preparedness for natural disasters such as floods and cyclones.