



**Australian Red Cross**  
THE POWER OF HUMANITY

# Psychological preparedness for disasters



**CRISIS CARE COMMITMENT**

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### **Disclaimer:**

**The Red Cross Emergency REDiPlan project provides people with general information to help them prepare for an emergency. The information is designed to assist people prepare for emergencies but necessarily contains only information of a general nature that may not be appropriate in all circumstances. Before taking any action you should independently consider whether that action is appropriate in the light of your own circumstances.**





# Psychological preparedness for disasters

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# Introduction

Disasters are unpredictable, destructive events that can impact in a range of ways, disrupting lives and communities. Some natural hazards tend to be seasonal, such as cyclones and bushfires. Some disasters, such as flooding and severe storms, can occur at anytime. Others occur without warning, such as earthquakes and some technological disasters.

At the start of these so-called 'seasons', or with the issuing of an emergency watch or warning<sup>1</sup>, we often automatically begin practical preparations for the oncoming emergency. More and more people realise the importance of also preparing **ourselves** for how we might feel in an emergency.

Being psychologically prepared goes hand-in-hand with being practically prepared for emergency situations.

The advice in this booklet, prepared with assistance from the Australian Psychological Society, is based on research and considerable practical experience in emergency situations. It provides tips on how to anticipate, identify and manage how you might feel before and during an emergency.

Being psychologically prepared really works. You'll **feel** more confident and **be** more prepared as you face an emergency.

1 For further information on emergency watches and warnings, visit [www.bom.gov.au](http://www.bom.gov.au)



## Before the emergency

At the start of these periods with a higher risk of natural hazards, also known as 'seasons', there is often a heightened awareness of the changing conditions, with many media campaigns reminding us to 'be prepared' for emergencies, such as cyclones or bushfires.

For many people, the approach of these 'seasons' and the appearance of warning messages, reminders, and household preparedness material, can trigger anxiety and concern. For example, as the wet season approaches in the north, or high summer in the south and the west, the weather itself can raise anxiety. Increased humidity and anticipation of changing

weather can add to an underlying concern about the possibility of a cyclone, while hot, dry and windy days can build anxiety about bushfires.

Most people will experience some anxiety, stress and alarm in an emergency situation – this is natural. Strong emotional responses to risk and danger are normal and even helpful for what could be a potentially life-threatening situation.

**At the beginning of the season or in the event of an emergency alert, it is also important to think about 'psychological' preparedness.**



## AIM for psychological preparedness

An important part of emergency preparedness is being able to **anticipate, identify and manage** (AIM) beforehand how you and your family members are likely to feel, think, and respond to this challenging and stressful situation.

<b>Anticipate</b>	<b>Identify</b>	<b>Manage</b>
What you might need	Specific feelings	Feelings
How you might feel	Unhelpful thinking	Thoughts
What you might be thinking	Matters needing attention	Behaviours



## Anticipate

### What you might need

Anticipate what you will need to prepare your home and yourself for an emergency. The Red Cross *Emergency REDiPlan: Four steps to prepare your household* booklet provides practical advice on how to prepare for emergencies. The State Emergency Service (SES) in your state or territory will also have specific information about cyclones, severe storms, and tsunamis, while local fire services will have information about how to prepare for bushfires.

Engaging in simple practical preparedness tasks will help to give you a sense of confidence and control. For each household, and for each emergency, circumstances will be somewhat different. Anticipating how you might feel or what thoughts you might have in a situation,

such as a severe cyclone or flood warning, is reasonably easy and very helpful. **Try putting yourself in the situation** where specific things are happening and then imagine sounds and smells, light flashes and darkness, possible feelings and thoughts.

For storms and cyclones, how might you feel or what thoughts might you have if:

- the power and phone lines go out
- falling tree branches or flash flooding cuts off access to your home
- the house shakes from the wind or thunder
- windows rattle or break
- flying debris bangs up against your house
- your home is damaged
- you don't know where family members might be?

For bushfires, how might you feel or what thoughts might you have if:

- the heat becomes extreme
- the sky turns black
- flames become visible
- thick smoke reduces visibility, making your eyes water and affecting your breathing
- the smell of burning bush penetrates the house
- the power and phone lines go out
- the house shakes from the wind
- windows break
- the roaring sound of the wind or fire won't stop
- your home is under ember attack, or spot fires occur in your garden or yard
- you don't know where family members are?

These are some of the things that may happen during an emergency. Try to imagine yourself in this situation and how you might experience and respond to what is happening around you. Talk to your family about how they might react to such a situation as well. Remember that children may have little or no experience with an emergency situation and their reactions may be unfamiliar and new to them.

## How you might feel

Important **feelings** that you need to **anticipate** are anxiety and fear, as well as general stress and uncertainty, and possibly helplessness. An emergency warning is a very real, serious and

threatening emergency situation. If there is no warning, as often is the case with many emergencies, the uncertainty can provoke anxiety. You may feel quite anxious without recognising this emotion and its symptoms, or realising how this anxiety may influence your thoughts and behaviours.

Anxiety is also pretty uncomfortable and may stop you from carrying out emergency preparations.

## What you might be thinking

How will you make sense of the situation? What questions will you ask yourself?

- How long is this going to last for?
- Will we be alright? Is everyone safe? What's coming next?
- Have I taken care of all of the things I should have attended to?
- Is our house going to be affected?
- Are the emergency services 'on the job'?

What is very stressful in a chaotic and potentially life-threatening situation is not knowing what is going to happen next. This is another instance where being psychologically prepared really helps – to monitor and manage your own, and your family's, understanding your own and your family's reactions in this very challenging situation. You can be the constant and familiar, predictable and dependable element in this situation. You can be and appear prepared.



## Identify

### Feelings

It's important to **anticipate** that you are likely to experience some anxiety and other emotions and symptoms associated with stressful situations. You need to be able to **identify** these feelings and you need to know what to do to **manage** them. Anxiety can be experienced in a variety of ways, but might include an upset stomach, irritability, headaches, shortness of breath and tightness in the chest.

For children this might include anxious behaviours, such as excessive clinging.

Anxiety won't just 'go away'. It's there to help you realise that this is an emergency situation and that you must be alert and mindful about what is happening around you. But it can sometimes **get in the way** and even overwhelm, and you need to be

able to effectively manage **your response** to this emergency situation.

It is also very helpful for those around you to see that you are managing both the situation and your own response in a confident and focused way. This is particularly important for children, who are far more likely to become distressed when the adults they are with are stressed and overwhelmed.

### Unhelpful thinking

Threatening situations influence our **thinking** as well as our feelings, and of course these are inter-related. Quite often we are lulled into a false sense of security and think things like:

- We had a close call last year, so we're not due for another flood for a while.
- Every year we have cyclone warnings, but they never turn into anything bad.



- A natural disaster is an awesome act of God or nature – there’s really nothing we can do about it.
- I’m not going to think about it and get overly concerned – the threat of natural disasters is just a part of living in Australia.

Another common ‘trap’ is thinking that because scientists can precisely locate and monitor natural hazards, such as a cyclone or storm, that we have adequate technological control over its impacts and consequences.

Each of these examples reflects a particular kind of ‘protective’ thinking which offers some false reassurance, but can hinder effective preparedness. Cyclones, storms, bushfires, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and human-caused disasters are unpredictable events that can occur at any time, no matter what

may (or may not) have happened recently or in previous years.

### **Matters needing attention**

**Not thinking** about a threatening possibility, or denying the need to undertake emergency preparedness activities, **ultimately makes us more anxious and far less practically and psychologically prepared**, in the event of a watch or warning situation.

Anticipating the thoughts that we might have (as well as how we might feel), when we come across seasonal reminders at the beginning of the season or during an emergency watch or warning, ‘inoculates’ us against unhelpful thinking and inaction, and helps us to be more realistic, focused, and adequately prepared during a very real emergency situation.



# Manage

## Feelings, thoughts and behaviours

People generally know their own body best and what they can do to reduce anxiety, stress or fear. Use familiar techniques to help manage your feelings. Other things you or your family can do include:

- Be practically prepared and have a plan to reduce anxiety and stress, e.g. what will you do if you lose power?
- Practise calming techniques, e.g. deep, relaxed breathing.
- During the emergency, if you are physically active and it is safe to do so, check the house for damage and make sure you take breaks, and eat and drink regularly.
- Concentrate on practical tasks and remember to just focus on the immediate situation – try not to think about the worst outcome.
- Monitor your radio or appropriate websites (if power is available) for the latest information, or keep in touch with people you know who have access to the latest information.
- Keep up-to-date with alerts using the DisasterWatch Phone application, [www.em.gov.au](http://www.em.gov.au).
- Be mindful that social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook can be good sources of current information, but they can also be sources of inaccurate information, which may cause stress. Monitor sites from reputable sources, such as police or emergency services agencies.
- Don't take any risks – you cannot afford to get hurt.
- Comfort and keep children near and try not to show your fear or distress. Listen to their concerns and correct any thoughts or ideas that might be exaggerated or inaccurate.

## More information and support services

If you do experience an emergency and you find yourself emotionally affected by the experience, seek assistance. It might be as simple as talking it over with a family member, friend, or someone you feel you can trust. Despite a frightening experience, most people will recover well. Both Red Cross and the Australian Psychology Society have practical advisory information on coping with the aftermath of emergencies. If the feelings don't subside, then it is best to seek professional assistance.

**Being 'psychologically prepared' goes hand-in-hand with being 'practically prepared' for emergency situations.**

Being cooler, calmer and more collected is a substantial aid to family members and others who may not be as well prepared psychologically for what is happening.

AIMing for psychological preparedness helps to ensure general preparedness. It also enhances your ability to cope with your own responses, and those of others, as well as with the event itself.

For further information on practical preparedness information, contact Red Cross in your state or visit [www.redcross.org.au](http://www.redcross.org.au).

For further information on psychological preparedness information, contact the Australian Psychology Society on 03 8662 3300, email [contactus@psychology.org.au](mailto:contactus@psychology.org.au), or visit [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au).

For further information on floods, cyclones, storms, and tsunamis, visit the Bureau of Meteorology website [www.bom.gov.au](http://www.bom.gov.au) or your state SES. For information on earthquakes, visit the Geoscience Australia website, [www.ga.gov.au](http://www.ga.gov.au). For information on bushfires, visit your local fire service website in your state or territory.



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