



## Preparing for and Coping with the Threat and Experience of Natural Disaster

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### Living with Natural Disasters in Australia

Most people in Australia live in areas of threat from natural disaster, whether it is from cyclones, severe storms, bushfires, floods, droughts, or earthquakes. We are generally aware of emergency procedures relating to being prepared in a practical sense. If we are not, there are pamphlets and brochures available at local council offices, from emergency service providers, through community groups, and as newspaper supplements. These brochures provide helpful information regarding emergency services, community agencies, necessary requirements (such as torches, radios, batteries, water) and helpful advice on how to secure our homes and property.

And yet ...

Little information has been written about how to prepare ourselves psychologically before a natural disaster or how to cope psychologically during or after a natural disaster. While individuals do cope differently with events, there are generally helpful strategies that can be used to prepare ourselves better so that injuries can be avoided and lives may be saved during natural disasters. Being psychologically prepared may also help us to adjust better, following a natural disaster, and reduce the psychological distress and longer-term mental health consequences which may be caused by a natural disaster.

It is very useful to think through beforehand how you, your family and neighbors will react during a disaster situation. While you may be reluctant to ask for help, you can develop a plan for preparing, psychologically and practically, by talking with your family or neighbors.

### Pre-Disaster - The warnings stage

Most natural disaster events are preceded by a series of warnings. Whether the threat is a cyclone, bushfire, flood, or severe storm, there will typically be a series of warnings on television, radio and in newspapers.

#### Warnings are typically accompanied by:

- Information about the nature and likelihood of a disastrous event in the near future.
- A sense of little or no control over an 'Act of God' or 'nature'.
- A high degree of uncertainty as to whether the event will take place.
- A high degree of uncertainty as to where, when and with what impact or force the disaster will occur.

The warnings typically focus on how serious or close the threat is and on basic safety and survival requirements and strategies. For example, there may be repeated reminders about buying batteries for torches and radios, having gas bottles filled, and ensuring an adequate supply of emergency water and food.

#### Disaster warning messages also:

- Expose individuals to repeated warning messages, often in the absence of an actual impact.
- Employ moderate to high-level fear content such as frightening images and sounds.
- Often provide information about the location and intensity of the threat with little or no information about psychological or emotional responses.

Warnings and uncertainty in an emergency situation also affect us psychologically. We may have previously experienced repeated warning messages with no impact or alternatively we may have had at least one, or maybe several traumatic experiences with a natural disaster event. So how are we likely to react? Some common psychological reactions to natural disaster warnings include:

#### Physical symptoms:

- fatigue/exhaustion;
- shortness of breath, dizziness;
- nausea;
- flushes, palpitations;
- numbing and tingling;
- headaches; and
- tense muscles.

#### Some stressful thoughts during the disaster warning period:

- I can't cope;
- this is awful;
- we're going to get hurt; and
- the whole town will be washed away, our house will be burnt down, our community will be devastated.

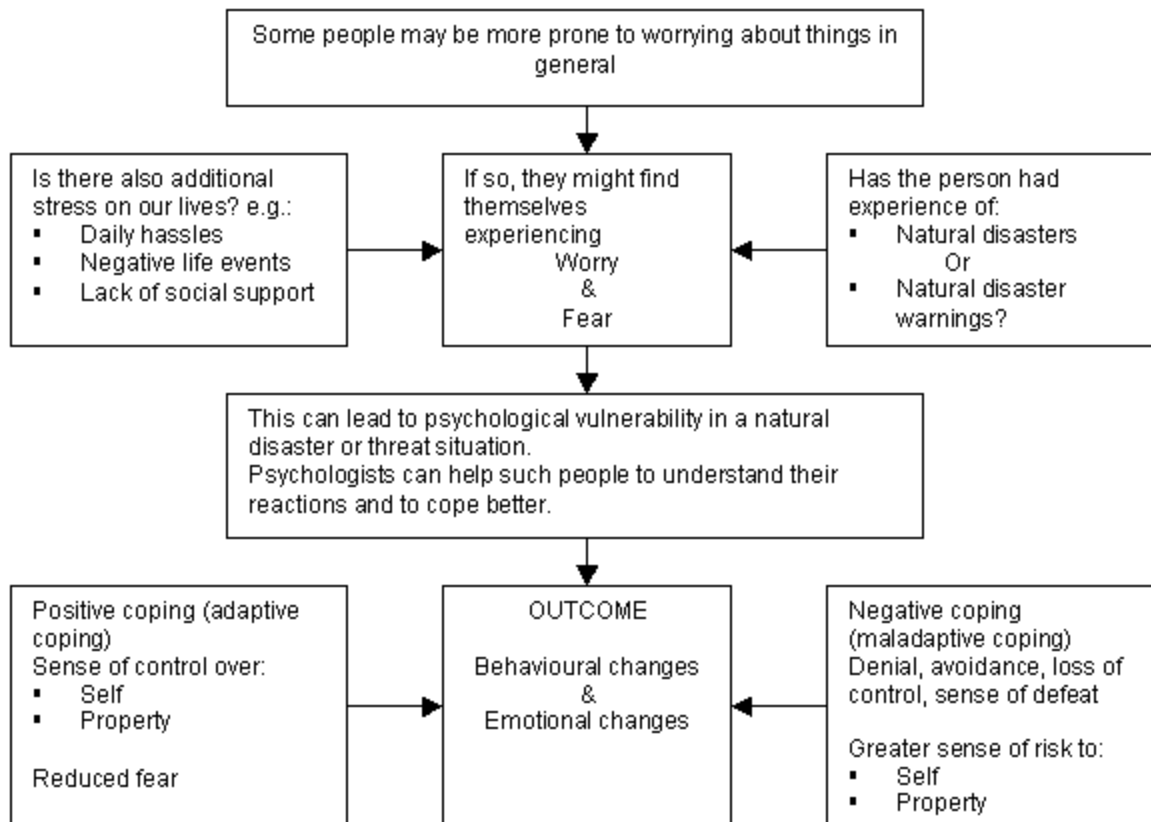
### Some common psychological and emotional responses:

- fear, anxiety;
- worry, sadness;
- Anger.

### Actions in the face of impending disaster:

- freeze or do nothing;
- panic or heightened vigilance/nervous activity.

It is normal to experience worry, anxiety and fear in the face of an impending disaster situation. For some people though this reaction becomes extreme and distressing.



### Common psychological 'traps' or faulty beliefs

#### 'Unreality' of the Event

Unless you have been through a natural disaster, it is difficult to imagine fully what it will be like, and what your own feelings of fear and panic might be. One way in which you might deal with this possible situation is to not deal with it, that is, not to treat the threat or event as real and needing an adaptive (adjusted or changed) response from yourself.

**Anxiety (Worry)  
Triggered by Actual  
Natural Disaster  
Preparations**

**What happens:** This feeling of unreality can interfere with disaster preparation and behavior by leading us to not deal with it in a practical way.

**What to do:** You need to keep telling yourself that what is happening is very real and requires sensible behavior on your part.

Once people start preparing for a natural disaster, they may experience sudden and unexpected feelings of anxiety and helplessness. For example, when you are buying batteries for your radio or cleaning up the yard, the reality and possible consequences of a forthcoming natural disaster may suddenly become more real.

**What happens:** The worry that can accompany the realization that the disaster could happen often stops people from doing what they are doing, so they don't complete preparations for the natural disaster.

**What to do:** Go ahead with your preparations knowing that it is both normal for people to feel this worry and even to experience occasional panic. It's not pleasant, but you can deal with it.

**Confusion of  
Uncontrollable Event  
with Controllable  
Consequences**

Another cause for feelings of worry and helplessness when a natural disaster threatens is the repeated thought that a natural disaster is an awesome and uncontrollable 'Act of God or Nature'.

**What happens:** These feelings of helplessness often cause you to do nothing.

**What to do:** It is important to remind yourself that although you cannot exercise control over the natural disaster, you are not helpless to protect yourself and your family from its consequences. Undertaking all the protective measures contained in your local disaster emergency guides will not only ensure your safety, it will help you to feel more in control and less anxious.

**Warnings can lose  
their impact**

Once you have heard a number of similar warning messages, you may start to expect that nothing serious is going to happen. The messages can be repetitive and it may be that the threat of the disaster becomes just a threat, because the disaster misses your area or simply doesn't happen.

**What happens:** You may then stop attending to the warnings because you become 'desensitized' to them. The anxiety that accompanies each message may result in your 'switching off' when the next one comes.

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

**False Sense of  
Security**

It is also possible and indeed common for people to experience a false sense of security in response to disaster warnings. One common way is to think that modern technology, the government, or the SES would not allow such an event to happen.

**What happens:** We think we are safe because we now live in safer houses and we can very accurately 'track' what is happening with the threatening event, in terms of location, speed and intensity. This is reassuring but is as dangerous as it is false. Location on a map has nothing to do with scientific or technological control over the event and often little to do with accurate prediction.

**What to do:** Always treat the actual danger as very real so that you can respond realistically and responsibly, minimizing the risk to your family and

<b>Gambler's Fallacy</b>	<p>yourself. It is common to reassure yourself with the thought that a disaster is unlikely to hit your community or your house. Or we might take comfort from the thought that the house came through the last disaster OK, or that another disaster event is not yet due.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> Whether a disaster strikes this year does not depend on how long it has been since we last had one. This error in judgement that people make is known as the 'Gambler's Fallacy'. People tend to under-estimate their personal risk and over-estimate their personal control over events, just as a gambler does.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> Trust your disaster warning messages, not your gambling hunches. Do the practical preparations that your local disaster emergency guides recommend.</p>
<b>Suggestibility</b>	<p>When people are frightened and anxious, it is easy to become overwhelmed and confused, and do whatever someone else is doing, without thinking about it.</p> <p><b>What happens:</b> Uncertainty, along with a sense of urgency that something must be done, can lead to blindly following someone else's anxious behaviour. However, if you are coping well, chances are that those around you will follow your good example.</p> <p><b>What to do:</b> 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.</p>

## Coping with a real threat or severe warning

### Breathing and Self-Talk

The way we feel in stressful situations is affected by the way we breathe and the things we tell ourselves.

For example:

- When we are upset, we are often told to "take a few deep breaths". This is not always helpful, instead when we are feeling anxious or frightened, we need to take normal breaths and exhale slowly. Breathing out is associated with relaxation not breathing in. Sometimes people find it helps to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- Remember to slow down your breathing. Often when people are afraid they begin to breathe faster. This is a natural reaction and prepares the body to deal with changes and take physical action. However in a disaster warning situation and in some disaster events (e.g. cyclones and bushfires) there may be no additional physical precautions to take. It may be much more sensible to stay inside your home or somewhere protected and wait for instructions from the emergency services.
- Slowing your breathing down is easy. 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, you can say to yourself 'relax', or 'stay calm', or 'it's OK, I'm managing OK'. These are good words to use because they are already associated with feeling peaceful and at ease.

### Tips to help cope with aroused feelings

Anticipate feeling worried or anxious. Remember that these feelings are a normal response to a possible life-threatening situation. These feelings are not dangerous in themselves but they can be uncomfortable and distressing and can cause further anxiety. They can also get in the way of helpful coping.

- Don't add to your fear with frightening thoughts.
- Don't dwell on bad things that might happen.
- Focus on what needs to be done even if disaster strikes.
- Focus on reducing your tension by relaxing and breathing calmly.
- Check on family and neighbors.
- Listen to emergency service advice on the radio regularly, but not constantly.

Remember we need to be able to draw on our survival resources and our coping ability, and we need to do so as effectively as possible. So it is important not to let unhelpful feelings and thoughts get in the way of careful and well planned actions.

**We should aim to *respond* not simply *react*, and we need to concentrate on staying as *calm* and yet *mindful* as possible, both before and during the emergency situation.**

### Tips to help others to cope with their feelings

- Teach them the simple breathing exercises.
- Be sensitive and supportive to them, rather than judging. They may be feeling scared, anxious, or embarrassed, if they are not coping as well as you.
- Encourage them to take responsibility for a task that needs attending to.
- Encourage them to listen to the emergency advice with you.
- Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling with you.
- Get people involved in occupying their time rather than worrying.

### Your personal disaster preparedness plan

Use this checklist to ensure that you have completed your Personal Disaster Plan:

- Do you have a copy of your local disaster emergency guides?
- Have you read the sections on preparing your house and yard?
- Have you checked on your neighbors or family?
- Have you rehearsed your Anticipate, Identify and Manage plan?
- Have you checked that you are not caught up in any unhelpful thinking?
- Have you begun to practice staying calm with slow, normal breathing

### Anticipate, Identify, and manage your psychological response to a natural disaster situation

<b>1. Preparing for Worry/Anxiety</b>	Notice what is happening to my body..... Think about what I can do Relax and breathe calmly Try not to think the worst..... Think realistically No putting myself down..... I can handle this
	<b>Action</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attend to the warning message and GET THE FACTS</li><li>• Make a list of the practical things that need attention</li></ul>

**2. Coping if feelings start to build**

My muscles are starting to feel tight..... It's time to relax  
My anxiety is a signal for what I need to do..... I can meet this challenge  
I don't have to be totally calm to be OK..... Just breathe slowly  
Think about what I have to do..... Take one step at a time  
No need to add to the fear with worrying thoughts..... Stay relevant

**Action**

- FOCUS ON WHAT HAS TO BE DONE
- Emergency phone numbers
- Emergency radio frequencies
- Check that batteries work for radio
- Check where family members or friends are
- Make sure you have an emergency kit read

**3. Coping if feelings start to overwhelm**

My fear is rising.....That's OK, stay with it  
No need to panic.....I can handle this  
It's OK to be afraid.....Stay with it  
What do I need to do?..... Focus on the present  
Get the tension down a little bit..... Just breathe easily and calmly

**Action**

- Talk to a family member, check on your neighbor. Try not to add to your fears with worrying thoughts.
- Keep your emotions at a manageable level.
- Remind yourself that this is an emergency situation and that it's natural that you're feeling anxious and stressed. You cannot control the event but you can control your own feelings.

**4. Coping when it's all over**

I wasn't perfectly calm but that's OK.....I tried and that's what counts  
It wasn't as bad as I expected.....I'm coping better all the time

**Action**

- Talk with your family or neighbors about the threat, about how prepared you were, about what might have happened had it hit (if it was simply a close call).
- Congratulate yourselves for being better prepared emotionally and practically this time.
- Identify those things that still need attention and make a plan to attend to them as soon as possible.
- Keep up the good work for the remainder of the threat season...WELL DONE.

## Checking how we coped

After the disaster it is helpful to check whether you found being better psychologically prepared helped in identifying and managing your feelings, thoughts and actions.

- Identify emotional responses?
- Practice breathing?
- Use tension reduction exercises?
- Identify psychological traps?
- Use more helpful thoughts?
- Attend to emergency service advice?

## Coping with Losses and Damage - Taking Stock

It is inevitable in disaster prone areas that some loss or damage will occur. Some individuals may be more distressed following a disaster, depending on the impact of the disaster, and their coping resources, skills and support. Take some satisfaction in having come through a very stressful and possibly life-threatening event. Be aware that emotional distress following a disaster can include anger, anxiety, sadness, or grief, and a tendency to unfairly blame people or agencies. If you are finding that you are struggling to cope, then you may benefit from some additional help.

In most areas of Australia ( Its becoming somewhat popular in Sri Lanka ) , psychologists are available to provide a range of post disaster interventions such as supportive counselling, grief counselling and stress management. In some places teams are available to come into disaster prone areas to assist in coping with material damages and emotional distress.

APS Psychologists have at least six years of professional training and education to equip them to provide professional, timely and efficient service to you in the area of managing stress. You can access an APS Psychologist for professional assistance with both minor and major stress-related problems. APS Psychologists are able to provide immediate, short-term stress management strategies and also provide long-term, ongoing support for more complex stress reactions.

This Tip Sheet has attempted to familiarize you with a 'stress inoculation' approach to disaster warnings and disaster situations. These strategies 'inoculate' you against being overly anxious or overwhelmed by your emotional responses, and will help prevent you from being caught up in unhelpful thinking in an emergency situation. Clearly this approach will work better with some disaster events (e.g. cyclone warnings, bushfires), that may be more frequent and to some extent more predictable. However these psychological principles may be of use in other disaster and emergency situations.

Ultimately this psychological information will assist individuals and their communities to more adequately prepare in the face of natural disaster and in so doing reduce the impact of natural disaster.

## Seeking professional assistance

To talk to an APS Psychologist today, ask your GP for a refer to PBP Consultancy or write to [prabu1@pbpconsultancy.com](mailto:prabu1@pbpconsultancy.com) or visit [www.pbpconsultancy.com](http://www.pbpconsultancy.com) T/ 61 41639056