

Desensitisation

Once you have heard a number of similar warning messages, you may begin to feel that nothing is really going to happen. The messages can be repetitive, and it may happen that the threat of the disaster becomes just that, a threat. The disaster may miss or simply just doesn't happen.

*“Just another one of those warning messages.
It'll be OK...nothing will happen,
nothing happened the last time”*

What happens:

You may then stop listening and attending to the warnings because you become 'desensitised', that is, you cannot maintain constant 'emergency status', and the anxiety which accompanies each message may result in some 'switching off'.

What to do:

Watch out for this, as you may miss critical new information and start behaving as though things are really 'back to normal'.

False Sense of Security

It is also possible and indeed common for people to experience a false sense of security in the face of disaster warnings. This is another and understandable response to worry. One way in which this false sense of security could occur is to think that modern technology, 'the government', and SES would not allow such an event to happen.

*“We don't have to worry about a thing, the house
is as safe as a bank and these days they can
tell exactly what it's doing and where it's going to hit”*

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 disaster. This is reassuring but is as dangerous as it is false. Location on a map has nothing to do with technological control over the event and often little to do with accurate prediction.

What to do:

Always treat the actual danger as very real, and we can then reduce the risk to our family and ourselves.

Worry Triggered by Actual Natural Disaster Preparations

Once people start preparing for a natural disaster, they often experience sudden feelings of worry and helplessness. It is when you are buying batteries for your radio or cleaning up the yard that the reality and possible consequences of the natural disaster really 'hit' you.

"I've got the batteries and some extra food, but it's all getting too much so that will have to do"

What happens:

The worry that can come with the (understanding) that the disaster could happen often stops people from doing what they should be doing. As a result, people may be unaware that they haven't completed preparations for the natural disaster.

What to do:

Go ahead with your preparations knowing that it is usual for people to feel this worry and occasional panic. It's not pleasant, but you can deal with it.

Suggestibility

When people are frightened and worried, it is easy to become overwhelmed and confused, and do whatever someone else is doing, without thinking about it.

"Did you hear about the disaster headed our way? I'm really worried 'cause there's so much to do and I don't know where to start...what are you going to do?"

What happens:

Uncertainty, along with a sense of urgency that 'something' must be done can also lead to a blind following of another's anxious behaviour. However, if you are coping well, chances are that those around you will follow your good example.

What to do:

Don't be afraid to take charge if that is what you should do. It is important that you know what should be done, as well as behaving in a cool, collected way.

Understanding and Dealing with Feelings

This booklet will help you to recognise and deal with understandable feelings of fear, anxiety and helplessness, and how these feelings can negatively affect our behaviours and cause us to act poorly in the face of disaster. You can learn to more effectively cope with these emotions and the emotional reactions of others. This is a matter of being able to recognise some signs of distress, being able to identify poorly adjusted or unsuitable behaviours, and being psychologically as well as materially prepared. If you can anticipate and identify these reactions in yourself and others, you will be in a good position to cope with the situation both internally and externally. Some of the normal responses to stress and 'psychological traps' people often fall into are provided on the following pages. If you can anticipate and recognise them, you can reduce their effect.

Anxiety and Defence

It is quite natural to feel alarmed and worried in the event of an emergency or disaster situation. This worry is normal and helps you to cope with emergency situations. Sometimes, however, worry can stop you from listening and attending to important information and taking necessary safety measures. It is important to be aware of this 'defence mechanism' and the tendency to ignore or minimise the serious nature of such an event.

Strategies for Preparing for an Emergency or Disaster Situation

It is useful to have thought beforehand about how you, your family, friends, and neighbours will react during an emergency or disaster event. Discuss with your family, or people you live with, what to do if you are in different places when a warning comes. If you live alone talk about what you might do or what you might be worried about with a neighbour. For some of you it may be difficult to ask for help from, or even discuss, with neighbours or friends, but you will feel better if you do. This can really help your peace of mind and will help your neighbours if they know you are planning to look after your own response and preparations in general.

Re-read the 'psychological traps' described previously and identify those that you and your family are prone to. Support each other. If you know what each of your family members are at risk to then you can support them. Write a plan of action for what you will do when you are faced with a disaster or disaster warning situation.

Expect to feel worried or anxious. Remember, these feelings are nothing more than normal reactions to stress and that they are not harmful or dangerous. Remind yourself of the following simple strategies to reduce tension:

- ☞ Don't add to your fear with frightening thoughts about what might happen
- ☞ Don't image the worst happening, think of the best possible outcome.
- ☞ Remind yourself of what helps you relax and do it

If you are feeling quite anxious or worried, talk your way through the statements on the following page. They may help you manage these normal but difficult feelings.

Human Response to Stressful Events

Why it is useful to understand the way people cope and react to events that are stressful to them

The Importance of Coping

It is natural to feel alarmed and anxious (worried) in stressful or threatening situations. This is called “arousal” and it is your body’s way of preparing you to meet the challenge of the situation or to escape from it.

Because we all cope with threatening situations in different ways and the thought of the possibility of a threat, like a natural disaster can be stressful in itself, it is important for people to be able to recognise, understand and cope with their own particular emotional responses to emergency situations.

People Cope and Respond Differently

People differ in their response to stressful events such as a disaster warning (for example, a cyclone alert). You may not be very worried or concerned by disaster warning situations but other family members, friends or neighbours may be. If they have been through a disaster event before, this experience may have made them quite at risk to feeling anxious (worried) and frightened in a situation of disaster threat and uncertainty.

It is therefore useful to know something about the way people respond to stressful events and to be able to provide some comfort, a ‘cool’ head and some practical advice and support to others.

Suggestion:

Once you’ve got your emotional responses to a manageable level, it’s time to focus on the necessary practical preparations. Focus on what has to be done. Re-read your local disaster emergency guide – maybe you need to ask for some help to understand the emergency guide and what needs to be done – maybe you could ring the local council?

Emotional Management:

Keep practising your stress management, breathe calmly and think clearly

Action Checklist:

Check your own list or tick the following as you complete the relevant tasks. Have you:

- Tidied the yard
- Cleaned the gutter
- Secured the house
- Trimmed the trees
- Brought groceries
- Got batteries for the radio
- Checked torches and brought candles
- Filled the gas bottle
- Checked the neighbour

Can you think of any other tasks?

Write them on your list for ticking when you’ve done them

Glossary of Terms used in this Guide

- Brainstorm** where people get together and spontaneously suggest ideas and strategies in a group situation, in which all ideas are tabled and then reviewed
- Coping** refers to the thoughts and behaviours individuals employ in stressful circumstance.
- Desensitisation** is the process of reducing sensitivity and increasing the inability to respond to changes in your environment.
- Facilitator** A person (or persons) responsible for the delivery of the program
- Fear** is an immediate alarm reaction to dangerous or life threatening emergencies (the fight or flight response). Fear is a present orientated mood state.
- Gambler's Fallacy** Someone who risks loss or injury based on false beliefs and/or on incorrect assumptions
- Household Preparedness** refers to those preparations people make in readiness for a disaster situation (for example, tidying the yard, buying in batteries and food supplies etc).
- Natural Disaster** a disaster caused by nature, like a cyclone, bushfire, flood, drought, earthquake, frost, tornado or long periods of extreme temperatures
- Psychological Preparedness** aspects of human behaviour and experience which occur within the individual or between people such as thinking or feeling, anticipating or remembering, managing one's own feelings or helping to calm another person's fears or concerns.
- Psychological Preparedness** refers to the effort individuals make to manage the naturally occurring fear and anxiety that accompanies disaster warnings and disaster situations.

Cyclone Categories



Category 1 under 125 kmh Minimal house damage



Category 2 125 – 170 kmh Minor house damage



Category 3 170 – 225 kmh Some roof and structural damage



Category 4 225 – 280 kmh Significant roof loss and structural damage



Category 5 over 280 kmh Extremely dangerous, widespread destruction

3 Coping if feelings start to overwhelm or the warning event is becoming more of a threat

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

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- SES (State Emergency Service)
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- Cairns City Council
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- Housing Queensland
- Q-Build
- Centrelink

Checking how you Coped and what Worked

If people are in control they will feel better able to deal with the event...even if it eventuates into a disaster.

“The best way to help others around you is to help yourself and set a good example”

Go over the coping strategies and identify what worked for you during the event. Was it managing feelings, like using breathing exercises, or was it managing terrible thoughts, or was it a combination of both that helped the most.

Use the following checklist to find out which of the techniques you used (if at all).

Did you:	Yes	No
Identify psychological arousal?	⑨	⑨
Practice breathing?	⑨	⑨
Use tension reduction exercises?	⑨	⑨
Identify psychological traps?	⑨	⑨
Make more helpful statements to yourself?	⑨	⑨
Attend to emergency service information?	⑨	⑨