I’m going to be frightened out of my wits

Insights on psychological preparedness from the Sampson Flat Fire

Danielle Every, Larissa Clarkson, Amy Reynolds, Chris Bearman, Peta O’Donohue
CQUuniversity & SA CFS
Surveyed 193 residents affected by the fire

75% (145) reported feeling PHYSICALLY Prepared

Only 56% (108) felt EMOTIONALLY Prepared
Being overcome by high arousal led to...

- Not able to manage anxiety and feeling out of control
  - A last minute change in plan, particularly leaving late
  - Unsafe driving - speeding
  - Forgetting important items (e.g. medication)
  - Not acting until too late
  - Ignoring the threat (e.g. sleeping)
  - Doing unrelated tasks that take up precious time
Window of Affective Tolerance

HYPER-AROUSAL
panic, impulsivity, survival responses – fight, flight, hypervigilance, anger, agitation, freeze

OPTIMUM AROUSAL
feelings and responses are manageable and do not prevent thinking

HYPO-AROUSAL
numbness, submission, desensitization, poor self-care or boundaries, shut down

From Joyce, P and Sills, C 2014 | Based on Siegal 1999
Out of your wits: The effects of stressful events on the brain

- Frontal cortex
- Amygdala protected
- Brain stem

Your frontal cortex is disengaged from your amygdala
Mentally

PREPARE. ACT. SURVIVE.
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<th>Included an assessment question/s on psych prep</th>
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PREPARING YOUR MIND FOR BUSHFIRES
Psychological Preparedness

The capacity to inhibit an automatic response that does not work, and to choose an innovative one that does.
What does psychological preparedness include?

**ANTICIPATE:** Expecting the brain’s and body’s response in an emergency (and knowing these are normal)

**IDENTIFY:** An awareness that this response is occurring

**MANAGE:** Strategies for switching mind sets and re-establishing the brain loop

*Reser & Morrissey, 2009*
Increasing psychological preparedness

- Previous experience in bushfires
- Understanding bushfire risk and bushfire safety
- Preparedness groups
- Gender: men more likely to feel emotionally prepared
Physical and psychological preparedness

• ‘Doing something’ increases psychological preparedness for those who leave
  • For those who leave, even cleaning their gutters increased emotional preparedness

• High level preparations increases psychological preparedness for those who stay
  • Those who stay are more likely to feel emotionally prepared, and those who stay with significant high level preparations are most likely to be emotionally prepared
Challenge 1: What’s our role?

- What’s our role:
  - “Our focus has to be what they’re going to do when the smoke and flames are there” being clear on the difference between preparing for an event and for recovery
  - “We mustn’t pretend to be psychologists” Managing expectations and responsibility
  - ”Because we can’t prepare them” Language ‘awareness’ versus ‘preparedness’
Challenge: How do we do it?

• How do we do it: “It's not like it's a tick and flick”
  • Observability, measurability and techniques
Some ways to do it

- Awareness, Endurance, Recovery (Morrissey & Reser) – a 6 hour community leader course/printed guide
  - A modified trial in Cairns pre and post Cyclone Justin using just a booklet
  - Increased physical preparedness and confidence
  - Increased ability to anticipate and identify feelings
  - Did not effect personal control and managing feelings

- Red Cross “Psychological Preparedness for Disasters” based on AIM

- Firey Women and some Community Fire Safe Groups, SA CFS
Challenge 3: Vulnerability

- “Everyone’s got a different bucket” Applying it across vulnerability differences
- Lower psychological (and physical) preparedness
  - Moderate to high chronic anxiety
  - Avoidant coping styles
  - Prior traumatic disaster experience

=> the self-instruction guide did not increase preparedness and may heighten anxiety

- Other vulnerable community members?
A tentative framework

• Collaborating with psychologists

• Include it as an assessment question/s that are concrete rather than abstract (e.g. *How would you rate your ability to make decisions under the stress of defending your property from a bush fire for several hours?*)
Next Steps

• Further research
  • What do people understand by ‘mental fitness’ - i.e. what language might work?
  • Evaluating existing materials - what is working already?
  • Psych preparedness for vulnerable persons - how can we tailor messages?
  • Psychological preparedness and gender - how can we speak to men and women
LETS CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION ABOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPAREDNESS