

CFS FACT SHEET

No: 3.1

Date: 19/09/2016

PREPARING YOURSELF FOR BUSHFIRES

Emotional and Physical Preparation

Preparing yourself and your property to survive a bushfire requires thought and planning. With a written and practised Bushfire Survival Plan and a well-maintained home there is a much better chance of surviving a bushfire. Your Bushfire Survival Plan also needs to consider how you and your family will be affected – both physically and emotionally.

Emotional preparation is just as important as physical preparation

Preparing yourself psychologically or emotionally to cope with a bushfire is as important as the preparation of your home and surroundings.

Although every individual will cope differently with a frightening event, there are strategies that can be used to better prepare so that you can resist the natural reaction to panic. Being psychologically prepared may also help you to adjust better following the event, and reduce the psychological distress and longer-term mental health consequences that may be caused by a bushfire.

It is essential to think beforehand about how you, your family and neighbours will react during a bushfire threat. You can develop a plan for preparing, psychologically and physically, by talking with your family and neighbours and people whom have experienced a bushfire.

Developing a **Bushfire Survival Plan** will help you to make the important decision of whether you want to stay and actively defend your home or leave early. Both options involve **difficult choices** that you need to think through depending on your circumstances and the predicted fire conditions.

Before deciding whether to stay and defend or leave early.

Before making your decision, gain an understanding of fire behaviour, Fire Danger Ratings, their implications, what to expect, and how fires have behaved in your district on previous occasions. Identify what will be needed and prepare your home.

Think about what you might feel and what you are willing to deal with. Think about other fearful situations you have been through and how you managed. During a bushfire you need to be focused on the immediate problem, not trying to do everything at once.

Practising the actions in your Bushfire Survival Plan will prepare you to be able to respond automatically and appropriately during a bushfire threat.

Choosing to leave early

Leaving your home, not knowing if it will be intact when you return, is a difficult and emotional decision to make.

You will need to consider:

- when to leave
- what route you will take
- your trigger to leave
- who you need to tell
- where you will go
- where your children will be
- how you will get there
- what to do if they are at school
- what you will take
- what to do about your pets
- how long you will be away
- how to know when to come back.
- alternative routes
- how long will it take to travel safely to your place of safety

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Choosing to stay and defend

If you intend to stay and defend your property, you need to be physically and emotionally able to do this. You will need to be alert, have a plan, and be prepared to act independently.

Remember that on days where the Fire Danger Rating is predicted to be 'Extreme' or 'Catastrophic' it is advisable to leave your property. This is because generally buildings are unable to provide protection under these anticipated fire conditions. Further information on the Fire Danger Rating is available in a separate factsheet on the CFS website www.cfs.sa.gov.au.

You will need to consider:

- where you and other members of your family will be
- who will look after your pets/animals
- what you will do if you have elderly family or young children
- how you will protect your property
- how you will protect yourself
- how you will know what is going on during the fire
- what you will do if your children are at school when the fire starts
- what you will do to patrol your property after the fire front has passed
- what is specific to your situation.

Regardless of whether you choose to stay and defend or leave early, a well-prepared property and a considered Bushfire Survival Plan will increase your chances of survival.

A Bushfire Survival Plan needs to be flexible and work in varying situations. Changing plans at the last minute can lead to rash decisions and place your life at risk. Don't abandon your plan at the critical moment.

The stress of a bushfire

In developing your Bushfire Survival Plan, it is important to understand that the threat of a bushfire places people on **high alert**. Although being on alert allows us to respond rapidly to urgent situations, it can cause **stress** if it continues for an extended period.

The impact of a bushfire can be stressful, defending your home can be a long and exhausting process, and smoke and radiant heat can be hazardous to health.

How we respond to the initial threat and manage the stress will be different for each of us. Recognising the signs of stress, and understanding how you can manage these responses and your emotions will assist in your decision-making and bushfire preparation.

Prior Preparation helps Prevent Panic (PPPP)

(adapted from notes prepared by psychologist Joanne Hamilton, 2008.)

To understand how to manage emotions in times of stress, you first need to understand how the brain functions. The human brain is constantly assessing information from the environment. All information passes through the brain, asking the question, 'Do I need to pay attention to this; is this important to me?'

Information that is of high threat will pass very quickly to trigger the 'fight or flight' response – the response that prepares us to cope with information in our environment. Bushfires are clearly too dangerous for us to fight so our instant response is to flee. We often don't feel this until the fire is close and then the flee response is often fatal as it takes us directly into the fire. **We feel first and think second.**

Information that is not threatening nor requires instant attention will pass through to the higher parts of our brain for more rational judgment and reasoning. By practicing your Bushfire Survival Plan you get a chance to check what works and assist in overcoming the instinctual responses.

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Practice makes perfect

Learning a new skill requires practice before we are truly competent. Think of when you first learnt to drive a car. The actions and coordination involved required conscious attention (for example, changing gears, checking mirrors, watching our speed) until we became competent and did not need to think about the mechanics of driving. Our attention could then fully focus on the external conditions of traffic and the road.

The same principles apply to your Bushfire Survival Plan.

The four Ps – Prior Preparation helps Prevent Panic – mean that if you practise your plan it will become automatic and will not require conscious attention. Your attention can be devoted to immediate problem-solving.

Under high stress we may revert back to previous habits – that’s why our plan must be written down and include checklists to prompt us.

Everyone’s circumstances are different. It is important to develop and follow a plan that suits your family, takes into consideration everyone’s physical and emotional health, and will give you the best chances for survival.

Controlling your thinking and feeling

By changing the **meaning** of what we perceive we also alter how we **feel** about it. The things we tell ourselves affect the way we feel in stressful situations.

Example of a response to a bushfire	
Situation causing stress	Bushfire
Self-talk and thoughts	Thinking of what might happen, not what needs to be done
Feelings about situation	Panic and fear
Alternative self-talk	Focus on the big picture and concentrate on practical, achievable tasks: follow your Bushfire Survival Plan
Feelings you now have	Bring down your heightened state of alert; control emotions and fears; feel calmer

Recognising normal responses to a threatening situation

It is normal to have the symptoms or thoughts below in response to a bushfire:

Physical symptoms	Stressful thoughts	Stress actions	Manage your feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortness of breath • Dizziness • Feel sick • Flushes • Irregular heartbeat • Numbness and tingling • Rise in blood pressure • Tense muscles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can't cope • We're going to be hurt • This is awful • The whole town will be burnt down • We'll all die. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freeze or do nothing • Panic • Heightened vigilance and nervous activity – alert. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breathing and self-talk • Focusing on what needs to be done • Keeping to your plan • Focusing on reducing the tension • Checking on family/neighbours • Listening to emergency service advice on the radio.

(Adapted from Reser, JP, and Morrissey, S 2000, Awareness Endurance and Recovery Trainer's Manual, James Cook University, Brisbane.)

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Working through a threatening situation

Prepare:

Preparing for anxiety and worry

- Notice what is happening to your body
- Think about what you can do. Breathe calmly and relax
- Think positively
- Think rationally
- Think well of yourself and your capabilities
- You can do this; you can handle this

Survival Techniques and Tools:

- Get the facts.
- Make a list of what to do.
- Pay attention to Bushfire Watch and Act & Emergency Warning messages.
- Implement your Bushfire Survival Plan.

Act:

Coping when feelings start to build

Your muscles begin to feel tight	It's time to relax – breathe
Your anxiety is a signal for what you need to do	You can meet this challenge
You don't have to be totally calm to be okay	Breathe slowly
Think about what you have to do	Take one step at a time
Stop worrying thoughts	Stay in control

Survival Techniques and Tools:

- Focus on what has to be done in your Bushfire Survival Plan.
- Put your radio on and have spare batteries handy.
- Have emergency numbers handy.
- Have your survival kit ready.

Survive:

If feelings start to overwhelm: stop, assess risks, talk, do

Your fear is rising	It's okay, stay with it
Keep as calm as possible	You can handle this
It's okay to be afraid	Stay with it, it's natural to feel this way
Concentrate on what you need to do	Focus on the situation
Bring the tension down a little	Breathe slowly and calmly

Survival Techniques and Tools:

- You cannot control the event but you can control your thoughts and feelings.
- Stay with your Bushfire Survival Plan.

Physical preparation

You don't have to be an Olympian to defend your family and home during a bushfire but you must check that you are physically able to do what is needed. Practise your Bushfire Survival Plan and check whether you:

- can lift items such as hoses, knapsack sprayers and furniture that may have to be moved
- can get up into the roof space to check for embers
- can patrol inside and outside for long periods.

If you have concerns after you have made your assessment, consider whether you could modify your plan to enable you to cope. Many people, for example, half fill their knapsack sprayer with water or they stand it on a bench when filling it to avoid having to pick it up off the floor.

A good general check is to go for a brisk 30-minute walk. If you are unable to walk briskly for that length of time you should reconsider your plan to stay and defend your property.

If you or a member of your family has a temporary condition such as a broken arm during the fire season, consider how that might affect your Bushfire Survival Plan.

Your lack of confidence to cope physically will diminish your ability to cope emotionally during a bushfire.

Be prepared emotionally and physically.

Know and practise your Bushfire Survival Plan so that you and your family can follow it, even when under stress.