Why you should prepare your mind for an emergency

How you react to stress during and after an emergency can have a huge impact on how you cope and subsequently recover

I want you to stop reading this for a second and think of an emergency you've been through.

It can be as big as a bushfire or as personal as a home accident, or it might be something you've witnessed first-hand, or something upsetting you've seen a lot of on the news.

Did you find yourself responding in a certain way? Did you notice how your body and mind reacted?

You may have noticed tangible signs of stress like rapid heartbeat and breathing, irritability and restlessness, an inability to focus or communicate, short-term memory loss or a churning stomach.

Under severe stress our heartrate goes up. If it goes above 175 beats per minute (a common occurrence in emergencies) our brain is likely to go into shutdown mode. When this happens, our brain actually changes and we aren't able to think as clearly. This affects our decisions and reactions.

This happens more often than you think. As a result, people do irrational things like evacuate with clothes for a holiday they are taking the following week, but forget anything of actual importance to them, and conversely some people have risked their lives to save items, like their wallet in a house fire.

What about after the event?

Did you find that your routine had changed, that you'd lost or gained weight, that your sleep patterns were disrupted, or that you withdrew socially or experienced conflict in your relationships? These are some of the long-term effects of stress that people experience after an emergency.

The cost of post-traumatic stress can be huge. It has been linked to family violence and breakdown, spiralling debt and unemployment, and even suicide.

The good news is there are steps you can take to keep your stress levels down and be a better decision-maker in an emergency.

How to prepare your mind for an emergency:
1. It's important to expect you might get stressed, identify how you and the people you care about respond to stressful situations, and practice calming techniques like positive self-talk or controlled breathing.
2. Set up good habits now, so you can better handle stressful situations should they arise. Doing things like exercising, connecting with family and friends, having hobbies, meditating, and reading are great ways to manage your stress.
3. Knowing what emergencies could affect you, and considering how you would respond, can make all the difference when seconds count. You can get information on what could happen in your area from emergency services, your council, and people who live in your community. Check whether there are any emergency plans in your area, particularly in your workplace, school, child care or aged care facilities.
4. Have a written emergency plan in case you forget your plan or aren't thinking clearly in an emergency. Download the free *Get Prepared* app, co-created by Australian Red Cross and general insurer IAG, and get prepared for an emergency today.

To learn more, visit www.redcross.org.au/prepare