



Australian Red Cross
THE POWER OF HUMANITY

REDiPlan preparedness program

Teachers notes

November 2012

CRISIS CARE COMMITMENT

These resources are part of Australian Red Cross's non-hazard-specific REDiPlan program and complement Red Cross's 'Emergency REDiPlan Get Ready!' activity book designed to assist children to prepare for emergencies. REDiPlan resources are available at www.redcross.org.au.

This resource has been endorsed by:



PREPAREDNESS Teachers notes

Psychological preparedness

Disasters are unpredictable, often destructive events that can disrupt lives and communities. Some natural hazards tend to be seasonal, for example cyclones or bushfires, while others, such as flooding or severe storms, can occur at anytime. Other disasters occur without warning, such as earthquakes and some technological disasters.

At the start of these so-called 'seasons', or the issuing of an emergency 'watch' or warning, we often automatically undertake practical preparations for the oncoming emergency. More and more people also realise the importance of preparing ourselves for how we might feel before and during an emergency.

Being 'psychologically prepared' goes hand-in-hand with being 'practically prepared' for emergency situations.

For many people, the approach of these 'seasons', or the appearance of warning messages, reminders and household preparedness material, can trigger anxiety and concern. As the wet season begins in the north or high summer approaches in the south and the west, the weather itself can raise anxiety. The humidity and prolonged anticipation of changing weather can add to underlying concerns about the possibility of a cyclone. Hot, dry, windy days can build anxiety about bushfires. Most people will experience some anxiety, stress and alarm in an emergency situation. This is natural. Strong emotional responses to risk and danger are normal, and indeed helpful, for what could be a potentially life-threatening situation.

At the beginning of the season, or in the event of an emergency alert, it is important to think about psychological preparedness.

AIM for psychological preparedness

An important part of emergency preparedness is being able to **anticipate, identify and manage** beforehand how you and your family are likely to feel, think and respond to this challenging and stressful situation.

| Anticipate | Identify | Manage |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| What you will need | Specific feelings | Feelings |
| How you might feel | Unhelpful thinking | Thoughts |
| What you might be thinking | Matters needing attention | Behaviours |

PREPAREDNESS Teachers notes

Psychological preparedness

Anticipate

What you will need:

Anticipate what you will need to prepare your home and yourself for an emergency. Engaging in some simple practical preparedness tasks will help to give you a sense of confidence and control. Circumstances may differ for each household and for each emergency.

How you might feel:

Important feelings that you need to anticipate are anxiety and fear, as well as general stress and uncertainty, and possibly helplessness.

Anticipating how you might feel or what thoughts you might have in a situation, such as a severe cyclone or flood warning, can be very helpful. Try to imagine yourself in an emergency and how you might experience and respond to what is happening around you. Talk to your family about how they might react to emergency situations too.

You may feel quite anxious without even recognising this emotion and its effects, or realising how this anxiety may be influencing your thoughts and behaviour. Anxiety can also be uncomfortable and may stop you from doing what you need to prepare for an emergency.

What you might be thinking:

How will you make sense of the situation? What questions will you ask yourself?

What can be very stressful in a chaotic and potentially life-threatening situation is not knowing what is going to happen next. This is another instance where being psychologically prepared really does help.

PREPAREDNESS Teachers notes

Psychological preparedness

Identify

Specific feelings:

During an emergency you will experience a range of feelings. You need to be able to identify these feelings and know what to do to manage them. Anxiety can be experienced in a variety of ways, but may include an upset stomach, irritability, headaches, shortness of breath and/or tightness in the chest. Children may also experience anxious behaviours, such as excessive clinging.

Anxiety is a natural feeling to have. It's there to help you realise that this is an emergency situation and that you must be alert and mindful about what is happening around you. But it can sometimes get in the way and even overwhelm, and you need to be able to effectively manage your response to this emergency situation.

Unhelpful thinking

Threatening situations can influence our thoughts as well as our feelings and, of course, are inter-related. A common 'trap' is thinking that because scientists can precisely locate and monitor natural hazards, such as a cyclone or storm, we have adequate technological control over their impacts and consequences.

Cyclones, storms, bushfires, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, and human-caused disasters are unpredictable events that can occur at any time, regardless of what has happened recently or in previous years.

Matters needing attention

Anticipating the thoughts that might go through our head (as well as how we might feel) in an emergency situation can 'inoculate' us against unhelpful thoughts and inaction, and help us be more realistic, focused, and adequately prepared during a real emergency situation.

PREPAREDNESS Teachers notes

Impact of emergencies

Manage

Feelings, thoughts and behaviours

People generally know their own body best and often know what to do to reduce anxiety, stress or fear. Use familiar techniques to help manage your feelings.

Other things you and your family can do:

- Be prepared and have a plan to reduce anxiety and stress. For example, what will you do if you lose power in your house?
- Practise calming techniques, such as deep, relaxed breathing.
- During the emergency, if you are physically able and it is safe to do so, check the house for damage.
- Make sure you take breaks and eat and drink regularly.
- Concentrate on practical tasks and remember to focus on the immediate situation. Try not to think about the worst-case scenario.

Monitor your radio or appropriate websites (if power is available) for the latest information, or keep in touch with people you know who have access to the latest information.

For further information on psychological preparedness, contact the Australian Psychological Society on 03 8662 3300, email contactus@psychology.org.au or visit www.psychology.org.au.

Physical and psychological reactions to an emergency

Throughout the lessons there are references to the impact of emergencies and how emergencies will affect people in different ways at different times. Below is a brief description of the differing physical and emotional reactions associated with traumatic events. It may be worth having a discussion with your class about some of these.

After an emergency

People may have strong emotional or physical reactions following an experience of a traumatic event. These reactions generally subside and are part of the natural healing process. For some though, these reactions and feelings may last longer and may be more severe. This could be due to several factors such as the nature of the traumatic event, the level of available support, previous and current life stress, personality, and coping resources.

For most people, with understanding and support from family and friends, the emotional and physical impacts of a distressing event are usually resolved more rapidly.

Below is a list of some common reactions and feelings associated with a traumatic event.

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Impact of emergencies

Physical

- Excessive alertness, on the look-out for signs of danger
- Loss of appetite
- Easily startled
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Disturbed sleep
- General aches and pains.

Cognitive (thinking)

- Intrusive thoughts and memories of the event
- Visual images of the event
- Nightmares
- Poor concentration and memory
- Disorientation and confusion.

Behavioural

- Avoidance of places or activities that are reminders of the event
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Loss of interest in normal activities.

Emotional

- Fear
- Numbness and detachment
- Depression
- Guilt
- Anger and irritability
- Anxiety and panic
- Tearful.

Download the Red Cross Emergency REDiPlan 'Coping with a major personal crisis' booklet to learn more about common physical and psychological reactions to an emergency, www.redcross.org.au/files/Emergency_services_coping_with_a_major_personal_crisis_booklet.pdf.

PREPAREDNESS Teachers notes

Helping others

Ideas for guided discussion

How you can help

- Listen
- Be with them, so they are not alone
- Be honest
- Stay calm
- Respect their thoughts and feelings – don't judge them
- Respect their privacy
- Suggest where they might get help
- Keep an eye on them over a period of time
- Make sure they are safe from harm

Suggest activities they enjoy (e.g. sport, films or listening to music).

What skills do you need?

Visit Reach Out for a range of active listening, communication and guiding skills

<http://au.reachout.com/find/articles/listening-and-being-open-minded>

Where can you go for extra advice?

- Parents, older siblings or other family members
- Friends
- Teachers
- Clergy
- Coach or other mentor
- School counsellor
- Youth worker
- Community health centre
- After the emergency www.redcross.org.au/aftertheemergency
- Reach Out <http://au.reachout.com/find/getting-help/who-can-help-you>
- Headspace www.headspace.org.au/
- Youth beyondblue www.youthbeyondblue.com

Kids Helpline www.kidshelp.com.au

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Helping others

How do you know when to tell someone else?

- When you can't keep them safe
- When you're unsure if they're safe

When, after some time, your loved one is not improving or getting better



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National Office
155 Pelham Street
VIC 3053
Tel 03 9345 1800
Fax 03 9348 2513
www.redcross.org.au

ACT

Cnr Hindmarsh Drive
and Palmer Street
Garran ACT 2605
Tel 02 6234 7600
Fax 02 6234 7650

NSW

Level 4, 464 Kent St
Sydney NSW 2000
Tel 02 9229 4111
Fax 02 9229 4244

NT

Cnr Lambell Terrace and
Schultze Street
Larrakeyah NT 0820
Tel 08 8924 3900
Fax 08 8924 3909

QLD

49 Park Road
Milton QLD 4064
Tel 07 3367 7222
Fax 07 3367 7444

SA

207-217 Wakefield Street
Adelaide SA 5000
Tel 08 8100 4500
Fax 08 8100 4501

TAS

40 Melville Street
Hobart TAS 7000
Tel 03 6235 6077
Fax 03 6231 1250

VIC

23-47 Villiers Street
North Melbourne VIC 3051
Tel 03 8327 7700
Fax 03 8327 7711

WA

110 Goderich Street
East Perth WA 6004
Tel 08 9225 8888
Fax 08 9325 5112