

Dr Rob Gordon — Emotional Preparedness for Bushfire Emergency Recovery Victoria,
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Anyone who's been through a fire knows just how overwhelming it is, how stimulating it is, how unpredictable it is — how you move into this state of being in the very moment, and how, if you're not careful, the adrenaline pumping means you become very highly aroused.

And in that state people don't make good decisions. They find it very hard to think.

And when we're in that state, **if we're not very well rehearsed** — so that we've enacted our fire plans so often, started our pump, done all the right things so often that we can do them with our eyes closed, in all our gear, and in our sleep if you like, without even any thinking — if we can't do that, **we're liable to dither, rush from one thing to another, and not get anything done.** And not be able to think about what to do next because you're thinking of three things at once. This is the unorganised but highly aroused mind.

And so, what goes with that is anxiety, fear, anger — a whole lot of emotions start tumbling around. And if we're not careful, people start to yell at each other and swear at each other, because the other person doesn't understand what's being said and doesn't pick it up immediately — even though of course the person who's doing the talking is yelling and swearing and using what we call telegraphic sentences, without all the words. People listen, don't get it. All of these things create this sort of chaotic world, and it's all coming from the emotion of the arousal.

So, I think it's important in any planning we do to factor in — if you like — the **emotional or psychological preparedness.** That I'm prepared to deal with my own mental state, and the mental state of others.

There are a few very simple things. Whether it be emotion or a realistic sense of danger, we're going to be in this state of arousal. If our arousal gets too high, it won't help us. **We've got to keep it high enough for us to be empowered and strong** and courageous, and focused and ready to act — **but not so high that we start dithering and being confused** and running around doing silly things. And so, one of the first things to do is to have a sense of how highly aroused I am, and to keep it in hand. I think we can do that particularly for each other when we work together with that assumption.

We can keep our arousal in check by talking calmly and rationally and completing our sentences. Trying not to swear, trying not to yell. If there is an emergency, we can make very strong statements. Try not to run everywhere. I used to work at the children's hospital. When I first went there, I saw people running around the corridor and I imagined all sorts of terrible things going on. And after I'd been there for a while I realised — in a place like that, the only people that run are people who are late for a meeting with their boss.

The people that are going to save somebody's life walk quickly and calmly, because they know when they get there, they've got to be very clear and, on the ball, using all their skills. And you're not going to be able to do that if you run wildly and run into people and take the wrong turn. So, it's that old thing of more haste, less speed. Keep the arousal in check so that it helps us do what we need to do and doesn't get too high.

We can do that by the tone of voice as I mentioned, and try to just keep breathing calmly. **Keep eating, drinking and resting** — because if we don't, that adrenaline state is going to keep us going well into becoming seriously dehydrated, suddenly finding we've got very low blood sugar because we haven't eaten anything for a long time, and feeling totally exhausted and liable to collapse. The high arousal shuts down the feedback system. So, we've got to make a decision: as long as it's safe to do so, I'll rest every half an hour for a couple of minutes, I'll have a drink, I'll have

something to eat. And I'll do that regularly, and I won't depend on my appetite or how I feel about myself — because I won't know.

And we do that for each other. We portray to each other a positive emotional stance. We exhibit confidence to each other — particularly to children. "It'll be right, we'll get through this, let's do what mum and dad say and we'll be okay." **We don't have to share our fears with our children.** We share with them the determination to get through it.

And I think what's really important is to recognise when we start to get panicky and frightened. Sometimes that might show up first as anger — I get angry because people don't instantly understand. **Anger is driven by fear. Use it as a signal.** If the fear is getting too great, realise I'm panicking — and that's not a help.

And the best way out of that is, first of all, just start to breathe slowly. Ground yourself in the present reality. Look around you. Find something to do. Focus on the physical situation immediately in front of you. If you've got nothing to do, find something to do. The children are panicking — give them a task. Hold the cat. Find this. Do that. Watch out for this.

All of this creates containment for our emotions.

But our mind is our most precious resource in an emergency. Keeping it clear, keeping it in that optimal state of arousal.