

Safety actions for the fire season

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Jamie

Welcome everybody and thanks for the opportunity. I want to look at a plan to leave and a plan if you find yourself that you can't leave.

There are so many variables when talking about this - whether you live in a small community with high bushfire risk, if you live in an isolated property. I want to talk about principles. Everyone's plan is going to be a little bit different. I am giving some considerations of what goes into your plan.

I want to use some of the things I've been using when training firefighters in decision making in bushfire situations. Because when it all boils down we're dealing with a decision making exercise. You're going to be making a whole lot of different decisions. And I want to try and make sure that you make good decisions while under pressure and stress you can make decisions quickly. I am going to talk a little bit about that and what affects decision making and how that connects with the context of developing your plan.

I want to look at human factors because that's probably going to be the key to it. The best laid plans never survive the first bullet. So we're trying to take some of the consideration of human factors into our planning. I want to look to realistic response actions. And I look at some of the agency plans. I know that's not the best option but let's be realistic. Will I get that messaging? Well maybe you won't. I just wish we could give you an exact perfect "Do this and that will happen" but it's just not going to. If we're relying on technology experience has shown us that's probably going to let us down when we need it most. If we know that we can problem solve it.

When Steve was talking before about plan A B C D that's a better problem solving. If we can realize what some of these things we need to problem solve before that will speed up our decision making process.

I want to look at contingency plans and trigger points. Where trigger decision points speed up your decision making. For individuals the process we are trying you to think about will provide these decision slides in the decision making in a real situation. What Gary Klein framed up as recognition primed decision making.

I'm going to talk more broadly on the principles. Because everyone's going to have to apply the thinking to their own situation. Steve highlighted really well all the things you need to take into consideration for your situation. Not everyone has a plan. I'm looking at the survey results - 58% have a written plan. I know that in every incident control centre around the state there's a township protection plan for every town in Victoria. There have also been incident management teams where I've never seen that plan pulled out and enacted.

So writing a plan is part of the process. The other part is the practising bit. Some studies have shown that just thinking you've got a plan you've solved the problem "I'll pull that out when I need it" It just doesn't work like that. Getting it written and then that practising and revising it. And it's not going to be a simple document in the planning process but you want to end up with what Steve says - a very simple thing at the end.

I want to talk about different days. A lot of the plans we do are based on high end events - the Black Saturdays the Black Summers, those bad days. Hopefully you've left if you can. As Steve says it's not quite that easy. We'd like to think it's easy but if you own a business do you just shut down the business? Particularly if there's a fire in your area. A lot of things to consider.

I want to think about the surprise events if you like. A little bit like the Little River fire situation a number of years ago. Now the forecast was for an FFDI of 32. It wasn't setting off any major flags with the bulk of people. For us down along the coast it was just a nice beach day. The day started off fairly benign, but the temperature got up a bit higher into the high 30s and the wind got a bit stronger. Those are the sort of days when the family are out doing things. We've got to consider the family doesn't always just hang around a little family unit. The teenager off doing something. One member might be in town. How does everyone get back together? What's the trigger? What's the plan to get back together? And particularly on those days that aren't the really bad days but the ones that come up and surprise us. I haven't got an answer for you, that's the discussion you have with your family. Where do you meet? How do you communicate if communication networks don't work?

Those days you've left early and that's good. But what if something comes up and you find yourself that you can't leave the area? Thinking about the leaving plan takes a lot of consideration. Start to think about a plan if we actually can't do that. In that first few hours of the chaos things will start to roll. In the first hour or so of any disaster it's the actions of local responders and the local community that will have the greatest impact on future outcomes.

That's great. If you live in a local small community find out how many members of the fire brigade there are and how many vehicles they've got. And look at how many police are in the area. You might want to take into account your forest fire management firefighters in the area and tally up that number and then divide that into the number of people in your community. And then if you're in a holiday centre like Anglesey where your community goes from 3,000 people to 25,000 people in the summer.

The first priority with your planning is you and your family. That's the obvious first step. If that's starting to look good then if you can, check in on your neighbours. The third part is if you find yourself stuck in the community maybe you can help out there. We are expecting members of the public to be making decisions in the same environment as firefighters without any training and experience in that environment. It's time critical. It may be high risk. So it's going to be this decision making and making good decisions.

Before I put the next slide up I've got to put a bit of context around these human factors and emotion fear systems and things like that. In 2021 there was a fantastic BRI webinar on emotional preparedness with Dr Jim McLennan, Dr. Rob Gordon and Dr Danielle Clode. I reckon that's really well worth going back to have a bit of a look at.

I first want to mention some simplistic terms. These are very complex systems. I want to give some context and try to break this down into very a simplistic two dimensional model. The conscious and

the subconscious systems, the cognitive and the emotion fear systems and how they work together. Please go and find out more information. There's some really good information on this. But I just want to break this down into something fairly simplistic. The cognitive system - the facts, organization, and content. That's probably where we're operating sitting here watching this tonight. There's no emotion involved, we're giving you information, facts and you're going "Oh yeah that's interesting." That's not putting in a little bit of emotion and importance. And you're allowed to filter. You can filter that and get to take on board what you wish. It's the rational part of our mindset.

I like this frame of a language of below the waterline. Under pressure and stress below the waterline is the emotion fear system. As we can see when we overlay on an iceberg (90% of the iceberg is underwater). So this is if you like below the waterline. As Plato said emotion overrides rational thought. Although we know all these practical things we're actually not going to be operating at that part of the mind without some training. The little icons you see there the cheese represents our basic motivations in life. The heart and the teardrop - love, death, grief, frustration, and anger emotions. The hand is five senses. The spider represents our fears which is a very powerful system. And the shame one goes back to our earliest deepest memories. Most of us can remember way back to if we've been embarrassed or shamed or something like that. They sit there forever.

I like to look at it as emotional is the chemical glue to get long term memories. They're connected to the cognitive system. That allows us to put things into context. Fear is a very powerful emotion. As we said emotion overrides rational thought. I have been a surfer and I know cognitively the facts and stuff. I know the chance of me being eaten by a shark is something like 5 million to one. I know that that's unlikely. But if I'm out in the water and it's half light and I'm by myself and it's a bit gloomy and a lump of kelp touches my leg the first thought in my mind although the chance of that being a shark is 5 million to one it's a survival thing. It's this fight, flight, or freeze. This button gets pushed and that spurs the body into action into that survival mode and then the cognitive function is always a little bit slower. That catches up. It's only a bit of kelp. So it goes.

Emotions are really really powerful for our memories when there's emotion attached. I want you to start to think back to an animal you've hit in your car more than 10 years ago. If I then asked you that animal you hit where were you and what time of day it was. And then we can start drilling down and who was with you and all that sort of stuff. And you can get a lot of detail into that. If you've killed a pet dog or what there'll be some emotion attached to it and we can flick you quickly. And what you were doing two Wednesdays ago at 4 o'clock I've got no idea because there wasn't much emotion attached to it.

I'll look at this when we start to look at our community safety stuff. We set up a lot of PowerPoint slides and blah blah blah and talking this cognitive stuff. So cognitive we know what to do. But then we hit reality and unfortunately we can't plan for every event that we're going to experience. So this is really down and brief. I'm going to link this back into our decision making which again is two dimensional. So at the very top of the decision making you see gather information, perception. That's our situation awareness cycle. Gathering situation of what we can see and what is communicated to us. This is where we get a bit of a problem here as we can't see the whole situation and communication is typically going to be pretty ordinary. So that's one of our greatest sources of information.

We always start with a perception and our perception changes as we gather more information. And we're trying to do that - to try and recognize the problem, a change, or an opportunity we start spinning in this wheel. What affects our ability to recognize what we're dealing with comes down to

experience and training and a whole other lot of factors. And we can get stuck in that bit of trying to gather information. Once we start to realize what we're dealing with we look in this option development I call it the time wedge. This is when you're looking at your options. What are we going to do? So there's always been this thought - how do we move through this decision cycle? Gary Klein in *Sources of power* and a lot of other work being done in this area started to look at how do experienced people move through this time wedge quickly? Klein studied firefighters working in those high risk environments.

He called this recognition primed decision making where they came up with a situation that they've identified, they looked for cues in the environment they let you recognize some patterns that activate some of your options you move through that time wedge to a decision point. Gather information. Did it work? Did it not? And so it goes. Pattern matching is very intuitive and the mental simulation is a deliberative process. But how do we get those experience slides if you haven't got that relevant experience. I'm a firefighter of 40 years. I've got a lot of fire slides. But how do you get that if you haven't got that experience? How do you get this emotional glue that helps you get those long term memories that you pull up subconsciously in heat?

One of the way is storytelling. And you're listening to a story like Steve's story and putting himself in those shoes. That's what the brain will pull up under pressure and stress. I've heard something before. They tried that. Did it work? And you just keep going in this cycle. And that's really simplistic. I want to drill this out a little bit. But I want to talk about decision making. The biggest killer to our decision making is going to be stress. Stress destroys decision making. I want to start to think about when we start to get into our planning. Consider the human factors. there's a lot of biases going on. I remember in Danielle Clode's 2021 presentation she talked about if you ask people how they drive 75% rate themselves as above average drivers.

What will come into play? How do you handle stress? What are your stress reaction? Do you get tunnel vision? Under pressure and stress are you going to be actually able to read your plan? So plan for stress. And it might be putting in some trigger points. It's one of the things we ask firefighters to do with their teammates "These are my stress reactions. Under stress this is how I do. Under stress to get me out of that say this and that will cut me out." There's a really good way of putting this. When we get that really stressful situation (it was in the book *Learning When It Matters Most*). We get pushed to that primal fight, flight or fear space in our brains. And that's totally natural. And they call it going to the basement. You get there that "Oh my God. I just don't know what my next step is." And that's okay.

What they're saying is once you get that first "Oh s..t. Oh here we go" moment is to develop yourself a trigger script. And what we mean by that is Okay. It may be a big breath. A couple of breaths. It may be a trigger point that you've got established with your family. When you see this when you're in the basement say, and use the person's name, it's a bit of a cut through. "Jamie you're in the basement!" Right. And then what they say is once you get there then you go into some of the planning stuff. Some of what you've gone through and you've practised in your plan. And that kick starts decision making. You start to catch a gear if you like. You're going "Right. I've got to do this and then I've got to do that."

I think Rob Gordon put it best - when you start to activate that part of your creative thinking brain you can then start problem solving a little bit more. So you've got to work yourself if you like out of the basement. So plan for that. And that contingency planning. Look where your plan will fail. Get the kids involved. "Okay this was our plan. Where is this going to go wrong?" You lose your car keys. What's Plan B? All those little bits of things. The fact of going through those scenarios in your

mind before means that under pressure and stress they will become a slide that'll come up and help your decision making.

That's one of the keys - developing those slides. Ask yourself where this plan could fail. Solve that. Involve the family and children. My experience is working with grade five and six and teenagers is they are very capable. Involve them and give them a job. They are more than capable. My experience has been too with some of those kids. If you can give them knowledge they will get that in and they will probably be calmer in some ways than you may be. And the first thing is to practise it. How long is it going to take you to park a car? How long does it take you to drive to here? How long does it take you to go to the place that you're going to go to?

When you're considering where you're going to go to. I saw in some of the questions before about neighbourhood safer places and if they're not available. Go back to some of the principles we teach firefighters. At the end of the day these plans should be about not dying. I'm sorry to be a bit blunt. And it's pretty basic. But this is going to be the worst day of your life. This is going to be horrific and it's about not dying. We train firefighters a safe area is four times the flame height. Or put a physical barrier between you and the radiant heat load to protect you. It's not perfect. It's not great. But talk about where to apply those principles in your plan. "If we can't get to there where will be a low fuel area that we can go to? Where will be this?" Plan A B C D and it could go further.

The advantage of setting what we call these trigger points is it's a decision made and you agree on it. If we don't make it here by then we do Plan B. If this doesn't happen by such and such we do this. And everyone is aware of what it means. So when we hit that trigger this is the action that we put into it. So a trigger point has a couple of things to it. What is the trigger that determines the action? What is the action? Who does the action? And is it communicated to everybody? Do that, it's an important part.