

# Learning for the future: the emotional cycle of bushfire

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Learning from previous bushfires can be a painful experience but it can also lead to significant innovation.

Modeling fire behaviour is more advanced than ever, technology has made delivering bushfire warning more efficient, planned burning is now conducted strategically while locally and globally emergency management agencies are more integrated than ever.

However, as bushfires become more complex we need to ask ourselves as a community of emergency management practitioners: how are we preparing ourselves for future bushfires?

We need to recognise that bushfire is a highly emotional context for everyone. While commentators have extensively reported on the emotions of affected communities, there has been less focus on the emotional context of officers who work in incident control and operational firefighting roles who repeatedly find themselves in stressful and dangerous environments every bushfire season.

A recent study conducted by the University of Melbourne and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC has shown that even before flame ignites in the landscape emergency management practitioners will experience anxiety that is particularly acute when severe fire weather conditions are predicted. This is because, cognitively, they relive previous fire events. Despite being well prepared we have seen that when complex and unpredictable fire behaviour arises it constrains and even nullifies the ability of officers to control the resulting fires which causes considerable stress and anxiety.

These emotions continue even after the fire has passed when the damages and losses caused by the fires become apparent. Evidence suggests that many emergency management practitioners experience sadness after severe bushfires and even guilt because they feel responsible for what has occurred.

We need to remember that many of those who plan for and respond to fires are often the first ones to become aware of and even encounter how bad the losses from bushfire can be. We tend to forget that while these people are emergency management practitioners, many of them also live and work close to the communities that are affected by the fire. Sometimes they experience worry while firefighting as they become concerned for their loved ones and property while they try to bring fires under control. We should remember that it is not uncommon for emergency management practitioners—career and volunteer—to have experienced losing their

home, friends, colleagues and even family members while they are on duty serving the community. Over the course of fire season, even when the worst of a bushfire has passed for one community, emergency management practitioners continue to work relentlessly in incident control centres and on fire grounds for weeks and months afterward to bring ongoing fires under control.

While it may seem obvious that emergency management practitioners live through difficult emotional experiences during a bushfire, commentaries have overlooked this and the effect of public inquiries afterward on the emotional wellbeing of our people.

Scapegoating, vilification and blame have been the focus of too many judicial public inquiries, which have had little regard for their feelings about what happened and why. Moreover, we tend to forget that cross-examining emergency management practitioners will often result in them reliving much of the stress that they encountered when responding to the fire event in the first place.

Yet evidence suggests that public inquiry recommendations do enable emergency management practitioners to make changes which they know can help them to plan for and respond to future bushfires. Different aspects of the implementation process seem to help rebuild confidence, trust and happiness among those who faced the bushfires and the Royal Commission. However, this seems to be short-lived as a deeper, more reflective learning prompts some emergency management practitioners to focus on the future where they envisage scenarios that the changes they made in the present may not help them for the bushfires of the future. Hence, the cycle of emotionality continues against the backdrop of planning for and responding to bushfire.

Accordingly, we need to ease the emotional burden on emergency management practitioners. If we accept the fact that Australia is a highly fire-prone landscape then we could conduct public inquiries that deliver learning outcomes that build a continuous improvement culture and ultimately avoid the harmful effects of finger-pointing and blame which have become entrenched in our learning culture. Strategically and operationally, we have come so far in building a safety culture for our people yet so much more can be done to recognise the emotional context of bushfire because ultimately, it affects us all.