

# Scorching Hot!

*Working together to make our community safer.*

**ARE YOU  
BUSHFIRE  
READY?**

## **Bushfire Articles – THINKING UNDER FIRE**

Imagine your life, your loved ones and your home under threat from bushfire. You can see the fire raging towards you, feel the immense radiant heat, and your eyes and lungs are burning from the smoke. You might be confused, unsure of what to do next, and scrambling to pack some essential belongings, find your terrified pets and get out. But you have left it too late and when you try to leave, the only way out is blocked by a wall of flames.

While this scenario might seem far-fetched, it could very well happen to you.

More than 90 percent of Western Australia is bushfire prone, and not just in regional environments but urban areas as well. Every year an average of 5,500 bushfires burn throughout the State, making it a commonplace reality. Making smart decisions and managing your stress during those circumstances could very well save your life.

Organisational Psychologist and Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research and Innovation at Murdoch University Professor David Morrison, has spent much of his career looking at how people make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. In 2014 he led a project for the then Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre looking at how people perceive and prepare for bushfire events.

“Although there are large individual differences in how people react, many wait to see what happens during a fire. They’ve got a vested interest in their property and don’t want to leave, they think it will never happen to me and she’ll be right,” Professor Morrison said. “Some don’t make the decision to get out until it’s too late. That’s when they get themselves into scary situations because their decision making capabilities are compromised. As we know, this can have tragic consequences.”

Professor Morrison said that when you’re under stress, elevated levels of alertness can lead people to focus on the wrong things and treat different sources of information as equally valid when in fact their usefulness for survival can be very different. “Physiologically your heart speeds up, your mouth will go dry and you’ll start to pump chemicals like cortisol and adrenaline into your blood. These chemicals also impact your mental state. “You’ll feel a great sense of urgency and that heightened level of alertness often causes a narrowing of the focus of attention.” Useful information is often ignored as the urge to do something encourages a premature decision. The dangerous flipside to this equation is that when a decision has been made, the reduced ability to take on board and process any new information means that helpful information is discounted or misunderstood. Professor Morrison said this is the perfect cocktail for making bad decisions. During a bushfire it could cost you your life.

The key, according to Professor Morrison is to prepare, not just your property but emotionally and intellectually as well. He urges everyone to really think about what will happen during a fire, the noise and searing heat, the sheer terror of being in a life or death situation, as well as what you are going to do at every turn. **“Poor preparation leads to poor performance. Have a plan, rehearse it and stick to it because otherwise when you get stressed you’ll make bad decisions,”** he said.

“If you’re well prepared, you can be confident that whatever happens you’ll be able to cope with it much better.” Following checklists and knowing what to do when an alert has been triggered can better inform your decision making. Professor Morrison said these kinds of processes are used in the aircraft industry as well as power production and chemical process plant failure management. The same approach can also help people to take calmer, more logical evidence based actions during a bushfire.

Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) Deputy Commissioner Lloyd Bailey emphasised that understanding the different bushfire Advice, Watch and Act and Emergency warning alerts issued by DFES is also vital. “We do everything we can to combat bushfires, but people also need to recognise their own risk and act accordingly – it’s a shared responsibility.

**“If you see smoke and flames act immediately – don’t wait for a warning, follow your bushfire plan,”** he said.

**GO TO:** [www.emergency.wa.gov.au](http://www.emergency.wa.gov.au) for information on preparing for a Bushfire

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