

**Division 17: Professional Practice**  
**Disaster Preparedness: time for an international approach?**

Whatever the cause, we all know that climate-related disasters are on the increase both in terms of frequency and severity. After landfall, Hurricane Harvey adversely affected approximately 30% of the USA city of Houston (where a number of our colleagues, including our Division President: James Bray, reside), with an estimated 80% of properties designated un-insured and a projected damage bill of \$180billion.



Hurricane Irma, which recently decimated a number of Caribbean Islands and some of Florida, was recorded as the most powerful storm on record, “beyond a Category 5”, affecting ~37 million people. This was rapidly superseded by Hurricane Maria, causing extreme devastation in Puerto Rico. At the same time, devastating floods have hit Bangladesh and India (killing an estimated 2,000 people) and numerous other adverse weather events have occurred. In addition, the disastrous earthquakes in Mexico have brought scenes of

indescribable horror to our TV and computer screens (for those of us fortunate enough not to be adversely affected), whilst also portraying acts of heroism, courage and humanity in many responses made.



The weather experts indicate that the climate-related events referred to above are attributable to a rise in sea temperatures, suggesting that the phenomenon is likely to be global. It is therefore probable that cyclone seasons in the southern hemisphere will also be increasingly severe, as they have been during the last decade in Australia with both Cyclone Yasi in 2011 and severe tropical Cyclone Debbie in 2017. There have also been consequential disastrous flood events, for example in Queensland (2010-2011) with 35 confirmed dead and an estimated \$2.38 billion in damage and in the Northern Rivers of NSW in April, 2017 which, whilst part of a long history of flooding in the region, was this time designated “different”.

The Australia Bureau of Meteorology has warned that the nation must prepare for a bad fire season during the southern summer ahead, given that records indicated the driest winter on record - with large parts of the south eastern and western coastal regions now designated as at “severe fire risk”. Given the recent memories of Australian Black Saturday in 2009, it is crucial that preparations are made for this possibility. Similar fire events have also been seen recently in numerous places in the recent northern hemisphere summer including in California, Canada, Portugal and southern Europe, to name a few.

In Australia, as elsewhere, it has always been a characteristic of rural life that the unpredictability of “drought, fire and flood” is an inherent challenge to those who live there. 30% of the Australian population live in regional, rural and remote areas with an estimated spread across 85-90% of our massive land expanse. The vast majority of the population live in the coast-hugging areas of the east and south east of the country and particularly in the large cities of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The probability therefore of these events adversely and unfairly impacting on our minority rural population is high, and is complicated and doubled by the fact that many rural people depend upon the environment for their homes and livelihood. This is true in many regions of the world, where responses to unique environmental pressures of those who live rurally need to be found.

The resilience of rural populations in facing these events has always been admired and remarked upon – indeed it is seen as characteristic of rural populations, both in Australia and elsewhere. With the increasing severity and frequency of these events, however, it is clear both for rural and metropolitan populations around the world, that we must be “disaster ready” to assist in facing these unpredictable events. We all, as psychologists must be prepared to help, both during the crises caused by these adverse events and in the aftermath.

**How ready are we as psychologists to respond to these emergencies?** The Division of Professional Practice is planning to compile the most up-to-date and evidence-based resources to enable us as mental health professionals to be “across” best practice strategies, in advance of such potential events. Each and every one of us needs to think clearly about what part we might play as professionals in each of our countries to contributing to and being part of a local, state or national multi-disciplinary disaster intervention effort, guided by clear evidence-based protocols. The resources below provide a starting point. Please provide us with any further resources you can to ensure we are all prepared to respond as well as possible.

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### **Resources:**

**APA: “Response to Hurricane Harvey”**

- <http://www.apa.org/practice/programs/drn/hurricane-harvey.aspx>

**APS: “When disaster impacts your region”**

- <http://www.psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/>  
(Tip sheets, best practice guidelines, ethical guidelines, etc for preparing for and responding to disasters)

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