

How does the lived experience of older people influence  
their preparedness for emergency events?

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of being prepared, for older people, with regard to emergency events. Anecdotally, older people are considered to be vulnerable to emergency events. However, little research has been undertaken to explore what influences their preparedness. Drivers for the study included the paucity of research in this area; an ageing world population; and changing world risk profiles, including forecasts of more severe natural hazard emergency events.

The study took a qualitative approach, using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology informed by Max van Manen's life world existentialism. Eleven people – eight women and three men - aged 65 years or over took part in semi structured in depth interviews. All participants resided in their own homes (eight on their own, three with their spouse), in the greater Adelaide area, and were in receipt of low-level in-home care, for example assistance with shopping or housework. The interviews explored the variety of emergency events experienced during the participants' lives; how those events may have changed them; the meaning drawn from the events; and the subsequent influence of their experiences on the way they prepare, or perhaps choose not to prepare, for emergency events.

It may seem intuitive to assume that prior exposure to an emergency event makes survivors more vigilant and encourages preparedness for future events. However, the literature review and data analysis showed this assumption to be simplistic. Prior exposure may lead to complacency purely because the event was survived. Results also showed that those events that one would assume might encourage future preparedness do not necessarily do so; whereas other life experiences (often not classified as emergency events by the participant) shaped preparedness behaviour.

Data analysis followed a combination of van Manen's thematic and existential approaches. Three themes were interpreted – *understanding my world*, *shrinking my world* and *acceptance of my world*. For the older people who took part in this study, being prepared for an emergency is not a one-off tangible activity – it is a process and a feeling of comfort and security in their world. The process is something that

has been built upon over many years, and therefore 'being prepared for an emergency event', as a specific activity, is not necessarily something that worries or concerns them. Mental strength and ability to cope is seen by the participants as being of great importance, helping to build the feeling of comfort and security.

Significantly, this research has highlighted the extent to which the emergency management sector's understanding of older people is taken for granted. By understanding what influences older people living in the community to prepare, and what preparedness means to them, how best to assist them in their preparedness planning can be established; rather than making assumptions about what this target group wants or needs.



## DECLARATION

'I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.'

Signed:

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