

Human Behaviour in Emergencies



Unless you are a member of the emergency services nobody goes to work each day expecting to get involved in an emergency situation. People's reactions to emergencies can often depend on conditioning and training. Evidence shows that the majority of people react responsibly to the information they are given.

They usually check for an immediate sign of danger and look to familiar people for guidance i.e. your Warden Team. Sometimes, however, the information is misleading or inaccurate. Information about an emergency should be clear and concise and provided by somebody known and trusted or in an appropriate official position.

Gaining an understanding of how people react to emergencies and the signs to look out for, will help aid your control of the situation. Your reactions to a situation can greatly influence others. When people are confronted by an emergency and given no information or clear direction, they can quickly revert to panic.



People react to danger by doing the best they can for themselves and those with them. They may even make mistakes from lack of knowledge or confusion. Panic will most likely occur when there is lack of leadership, insufficient information or there is an immediate perceived threat of death or serious injury. In addition they may feel trapped or feel their means of escape is blocked. Good emergency management training and ensuring adequate people are nominated to deal with workplace emergencies will help limit people panicking.

Situational Awareness:

Knowing the alarm tones or warning devices and where your nearest EXIT is, should be a habit everyone adopts regardless of your location. All occupants and visitors regardless of their abilities have an obligation to take responsibility for their own safety. Ignoring directions, alarms or warning systems can have a flow on effect and influence others to do the same.

Each time you board a commercial aircraft the flight crew will always point out the safety features of the aircraft and all EXITS. They also indicate that you should look towards the crew for direction in the event of an emergency. Without this basic instruction it is unlikely people travelling in an aircraft would know what action to take or when to take it. This is also extended into every workplace in Australia.

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Occupants attending Commercial Buildings, Shopping Centres, Movie Theatres, Restaurants, Stadiums or a Night Club generally have an expectation that if an emergency presents itself someone will tell them what to do and this needs to be done before the emergency services attend.

It becomes increasingly difficult to take control of a situation if people panic. Some situations can occur without prior warning or activation of installed alarm systems.

Below are 3 typical human behaviours that may be exhibited during an emergency:

	Reaction	How to Combat this Reaction
Flight	Running from a situation with no direction	Someone in Flight Mode should be pointed towards the nearest clear EXIT giving them the direction they need
Fight	Becoming aggressive towards others because an EXIT is blocked or they can't move freely	Reason with the person from a safe distance. Do not get close where they may harm you or others. Explain what you want them to do.
Fright	Stunned or petrified with fear unable to move.	They may need a comforting voice for guidance or to be physically moved if in immediate danger but don't put yourself at risk.



During news events you will often see people displaying these reactions. An eyewitness will often describe how they felt or what their reaction to the emergency was and will often fall into the category of fight, flight or fright.

A new problem now exists with the ease of accessibility to being able to film events live. People take additional risks by moving closer to a situation to film events and put their own safety at risk.