

Cognitive, emotional and personal consequences of a natural disaster, and the impact of evacuation

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"Disaster management must take into account that those who had to run for their lives have much stronger experiences which will affect their inner lives for a very long time," says Igor Knez, Professor of Psychology at University of Gävle.

Researchers have studied how 601 individuals living close to the area in Västmanland County that was affected by the largest forest fire in [modern times](#) in Sweden in 2014 experienced the natural disaster.

The surprising results show that there is a significant difference between the experiences of those who had to run for their lives and those living in the area but who did not have to evacuate. This second group did not have first-hand experiences of the fire but were informed by the media.

"To provide help, we need to take greater account of the most vulnerable group's strong psychological experiences. Those who had to run for their lives were more affected psychologically and were haunted more often by their memories. For a long time, this will affect their inner world," Igor Knez says.

Flashbulb memories with exceptionally vivid "snapshots"

The researchers discovered that survivors developed so-called "flashbulb memories," a phenomenon that has been observed in survivors of other [disasters](#) like 9/11 or Estonia. A flashbulb [memory](#) generates a very detailed and exceptionally vivid "snapshot" of the event.

"Detailed memories, in which you see, hear and smell the fire, become more emotional and affect the individual's existence; you change and start to see yourself and the world in a different light after such an experience."

"It isn't over just because you survive"

Igor Knez claims that [disaster management](#) must take into consideration that these individuals need to be offered therapeutic conversations maybe for months or for even longer periods of time. According to Knez, their findings indicate that all victims of disasters,

[natural disasters](#), war etcetera should routinely be offered such help and society needs to stay prepared for their needs.

"Climate changes mean that natural disaster will become more frequent, and forest fires are becoming increasingly common here. Possibly, there will be refugees running from natural disaster within our country."

"We need to take this seriously; the fact that they survive isn't enough. It isn't over, our results make that clear," Igor Knez says.

More information: Igor Knez et al. I can still see, hear and smell the fire: Cognitive, emotional and personal consequences of a natural disaster, and the impact of evacuation, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101554](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101554)

Provided by University of Gävle

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