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# Learning lessons to shape future responses

Why do we seem reluctant to learn lessons and apply them – particularly when responding to crisis, emergency and disaster? **Jeannie Barr** explores

**A**s resilience professionals, members of the Emergency Planning Society (EPS) are regularly at the centre of responding to major incidents that they have often planned and exercised for, usually based on learning from other similar incidents.

Throughout the incidents, emergency planners continue to gather data and learning, and apply it to an evolving response. Why is it that such valuable lessons are often not considered or applied further down the line? Is it because change and changing the way we do things, especially during a crisis, is frightening or a hard habit to break? Are cultures too ingrained and embedded within organisations to allow for meaningful change?

Learning from major incidents should be embedded into everything we do so that it is transformed into day-to-day practice and becomes part of our muscle memory of preparing to respond to recover. Once this learning is identified, how is it shared and what do we do to ensure it is understood, accepted and embedded?

## Lost learning

This year's EPS annual conference looked at what becomes of the 'lost' learning and why we struggle to transform lessons identified into learning. It examined three key words – acceptance, change and transformation – exploring how crises could be a chance to improve and develop.

It's an important time to be considering these questions. The UK Government recently closed its consultation on the development of the National Resilience Strategy Call for Evidence. The EPS consulted its members on this and provided a detailed response. It focused heavily on the combined learning and expertise that are available across the resilience profession and why considering those lessons is vital when shaping the new strategy.

“Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning.”

Professor Albert Einstein



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The EPS calls on the government to utilise the expertise of its membership to co-develop frameworks and benchmarking tools to reflect the reality that organisations find themselves in and that are fit for purpose.

It also highlighted the well documented failure to learn from past incidents and raised concerns that the section of the proposed strategy covering prevention, mitigation and recovery does not make explicit reference to learning.

The EPS suggests that this is an oversight and that having a consistent, legislated and national approach would be a significant development in bringing about the culture change required to make learning lessons more commonplace.

Lessons from Covid will be significant in everything we do going forward. They include: The concept that self-care is not self-indulgence; more people are recognising it's acceptable to tell someone if they are struggling and to

seek help; loneliness can damage health more than suspected previously; and that family and relationships matter.

Covid-19 demonstrated that response plans must be flexible and scalable. No incident will ever follow the same pattern and it is impossible to predict exactly what will occur or who it will affect.

Covid should teach us never to underestimate or forget the huge cost – emotionally, physically, mentally and financially – during and following an emergency and that learning lessons requires changes, not only to processes and procedures, but to individuals' behaviour and attitudes.

■ Visit [the-eps.org](http://the-eps.org) for more information

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