



Course Learning Outcomes for Unit VI

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Discuss various views of the media in regards to panic.
2. List and describe definitions of panic.
3. Describe panic and controlled behavior at specified fire incidents.
4. Discuss the role of information in controlling panic.

Reading Assignment

Fahy, R. F., Proulx, G., & Aiman, L. (2009) 'Panic' and human behaviour in fire (NRCC-51384). Retrieved <http://tkolb.net/FireReports/PanicInFire09.pdf>

Unit Lesson

What is "panic?" Opinions may vary greatly. The American Heritage College Dictionary defines panic as a sudden overpowering terror, often affecting many people at once. Surely you can think of situations where you have heard of people panicking; maybe the World Trade Center Terrorist attack comes to mind? But in any of the situations you have thought of, think of the situation again and ask yourself were people really panicking, or did adrenaline kick in to create the natural "fight or flight" response. If you have been involved in an emergency situation yourself, did you panic? What about the perceptions of others? Did they think you were panicking? To accomplish the objectives for this unit, you will examine the views of the media in regards to panic, describe definitions of panic, describe panic and controlled behavior at specified fire incidents, discuss the role of information in controlling behavior, and discuss the role of information in controlling panic.

There exists a misunderstood concept of "panic behavior," so it is important to understand the concept of panic. The factors involving panic and situations that can cause panic should also be identified and understood. Many authors have discussed panic behavior, but among fire fighters, many suggest it is a myth that is used to blame a tragic outcome on the occupants. Upon closer examination, however, the building design or even its management may actually be the ones at fault.

Panic and the idea that it is the cause of tragedies is further propagated by the media. The media appears to love the word "panic." There have been some infamous newspaper headlines in which panic is used about historical fires such as the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire and a Kentucky night club fire. It appears the word panic or the discussion of it gains the media much attention. However, the panic behavior appears to be less present than the media suggests. Researchers who studied the Coconut Grove Nightclub Fire and the Iroquois Theatre found that previous conclusions that panic caused more deaths were not accurate. They found that the victims' behavior and actions were not the major contributor to the many deaths. Years of studies have found that non-adaptive and irrational behaviors do not occur frequently during fires, but that in most situations, helpfulness and cooperation occur among the occupants/victims. In the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire, the customers did a good job following the instructions from the staff. It was stated that panic behavior was observed only as smoke and flames overtook people.

When defining panic, there may be several definitions that exist. One researcher includes another concept that is related using the term "psychological crowd" (Le Bon, 1896). He refers to this as a group of people who have given up their individual personality to share the same motivations and thoughts as the crowd (1896). These thoughts may be from the most inferior thinking person, therefore the whole crowd may easily endorse inferior type thinking and behavior. Another researcher refers to panic as "reaction involving terror, confusion, and irrational behavior" before a threatening situation (Goldenson, 1984). Panic may also be used to describe a person's own state of heightened anxiety, but the actions they take may be logical and appropriate. This

leads to the important concept of anxiety. This is an emotion related to panic. It is similar to fear, but when anxiety takes place, the actual threat is not clearly identified. Some people may confuse flight behavior with panic. This should not be confused because in some cases, flight may be the appropriate response. One study found that the “fight or flight” response is more common with men than women. Also, men might be likely to engage in firefighting or investigate the matter, while women are more likely to alert others (Taylor, 2000). Can you see where men might perceive women as panicking as they tried to inform others of danger? Can you see where women might perceive men as panicking as they examine the best escape routes during a fire?

Management should view building occupants as allies during a fire, and not just a mass of people who need to be controlled. Withholding information to prevent people from knowing there is an emergency can be detrimental. The same can go for using codes that only staff or employees recognize. After the event is over, it is a good practice to debrief the occupants about what happened. The objective should be that the occupants understand the situation and are better prepared if another event occurs.

So, once again, think about the above mentioned definition of panic and ask yourself these questions. Is panic the cause of death in tragic situations, or does panic help you respond appropriately to a dangerous situation? It is an interesting question to ponder.

References

- Goldsenson, R. M. (1984). *Longman dictionary of psychology and psychiatry*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Le Bon, G. (1896). *The crowd: A study of the popular mind*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Co. Retrieved from <http://etext.virginia.edu>
- Taylor, S. E. (2000). Biobehavioral responses to stress in female: Tend-and-befriend, not fight-or-flight. *Psychological Review*, 107(3). Pp. 411-429.

Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

If you chose to create a blog in Unit III, take the time now to update it. Based on what you have learned during this unit, discuss whether panic really contributes to an increase in fatalities during a fire. Discuss the psychological and sociological issues that contribute to crowd reactions in a fire. Do you think it would benefit your career to take courses in psychology or sociology? Why, or why not? If you choose, email your instructor, reminding them of your blog site address and let them know you have updated your blog.

Non-graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.