

# Australian Bushfires

## Practitioner Guide

### Guide for GPs supporting bushfire-affected Australians

#### Useful facts to know

- Disaster can induce a range of strong emotions, for example, fear, anger, anxiety, guilt, grief.
- Patients may present with somatic complaints rather than saying they have been traumatised.
- Some people will be severely affected even if they weren't directly involved in the bushfires or recovery.
- GPs are usually the first point of call for those who need help, in the immediate aftermath and in the months and years that follow.
- Five recovery principles are endorsed by expert consensus: **1) Ensure safety and that people's basic needs are being met; 2) Promote calmness; 3) Connect to social supports; 4) Build self-efficacy and empowerment; and 5) Instill hopefulness.**

#### Providing support during the event and in the first days and weeks following the event

##### Helpful

- **Help people meet basic needs** for food and shelter (Safety)
- **Encourage them to talk** if they wish to do so (Calming)
- **Give self-care advice** as outlined on the accompanying patient tip sheet (Calming)  
[Recovering from the Bushfires: A Self-Help Guide.](#)
- Encourage patients to **limit their exposure to media** coverage of the bushfire once the threat has passed (Calming)
- **Help people contact friends or loved ones** and encourage families to stay together (Connect)
- **Give practical suggestions** that encourage people towards helping themselves and meeting their own needs. **Encourage them to seek help** at any time in the future if they need it. (Self-efficacy)
- **Provide accurate information** about the disaster and the relief efforts. **Direct people to locations of available government and non-government services** (Hopefulness)

##### Unhelpful

- **Force people to talk** about the trauma if they don't want to
- **Give simple reassurances** like 'everything will be ok' or 'at least you survived'
- Tell people what you think they should be feeling, thinking or doing now or how they should have acted earlier
- Make promises that may not be kept
- Criticise existing services or relief activities

## Medium to long term support

To identify early indicators of mental health concerns, routinely ask patients about their:

- **sleep and nightmares**
- **drug and alcohol use** (screening tool: [AUDIT](#))
- **anger and aggression** (screening tool: [DAR5](#))
- **social isolation.**

### Key things to focus on in the weeks, months and years post-bushfires

- If a patient's distress continues beyond 2-3 weeks, they may benefit from referral for mental health support. Depression, anxiety, PTSD and substance use disorders are the most common posttraumatic mental health disorders, and early identification and treatment are important for recovery.
- Mental health concerns can arise months or even years after the trauma, so ongoing monitoring is recommended.
- Antidepressant medication, for example, SSRIs, should be considered as first-line medication treatment for depression, anxiety and PTSD if there are appropriate clinical indications and the patient is accepting of this option.

## Resources

### Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health

[www.phoenixaustralia.org/recovery/effects-of-trauma](http://www.phoenixaustralia.org/recovery/effects-of-trauma)

### Better Health Channel

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/trauma-reaction-and-recovery](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/trauma-reaction-and-recovery)

### Australian Psychological Society

[www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)