



A Self-help Recovery Guide for those affected by bushfires

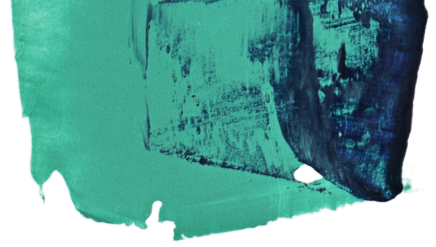
What you need to know

- **People can have many different kinds of reactions following a disaster.** You might feel physically unwell or have trouble sleeping or experience nightmares. It is very common to experience strong feelings such as fear, sadness, guilt, sorrow, anger or grief.
- **These reactions can be distressing, but they are normal** and important ways for our body and brain to let us know that we have to take care of ourselves whilst we recover from the stressful experience.
- **These reactions may take a few weeks to subside.** Using the coping skills that have helped you through stressful experiences in the past and seeking support from others, including friends and family, will help you recover from these early stress reactions.
- **Stress reactions vary amongst individuals.** While one individual may experience the bushfire as mildly traumatic, others may find it severely traumatic. The severity of the trauma experienced varies across individuals and is influenced by what happened to them, the support they received, other stresses in their life, and their coping resources.
- **Recovery after trauma doesn't mean forgetting your experience** or feeling no emotional pain when remembering it. Recovery means becoming less distressed and having more confidence in your ability to cope as time goes on.

What you can do now

Even if you don't feel like it, try to do some of the things suggested below. They might help you to come to terms with the traumatic event you experienced and reduce some of the distress associated with it.

- **Recognise that you have been through an extremely stressful event** and that you will most likely have an emotional reaction to it. Give yourself permission to feel upset, but also remember your strengths – even though it's tough, you can deal with it.
- **Look after yourself by getting plenty of rest** (even if you can't sleep), exercising regularly, and eating regular, well-balanced meals. Physical and mental health are closely linked, so taking care of one will help the other.
- **Cut back on tea, coffee, chocolate, soft drinks and cigarettes.** Your body is already 'hyped up' enough, and these substances will only add to this. Try to avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope, as they can lead to more problems in the long term.
- **Make time for relaxation** – whether it's listening to music, taking a bath – whatever works for you. It might be helpful to learn a relaxation technique like meditation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises.



What you can do now (continued)

- **Structure your days and try to schedule at least one enjoyable activity each day.** Try making a timetable for each day, including some exercise, some work, and some relaxation.
- **Resume your normal routine as soon as possible,** but take it easy. Don't throw yourself into activities or work in an attempt to avoid painful thoughts or memories about the trauma. Tackle the things that need to be done a bit at a time, and count each success.
- **Try not to bottle up your feelings or block them out.** Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are unpleasant, but they will decrease with time.
- **Avoid making non-urgent major life decisions in the days and weeks after the traumatic event.** On the other hand, make as many smaller, daily decisions as possible, such as what you will eat or what film you'd like to see. This can help you to feel more in control of your life.
- **Spend time with people you care about,** even if you don't want to talk about your experience. Sometimes you will want to be alone, and that's OK too, but try not to become too isolated.
- **Talk about your feelings to other people who will understand,** if you feel able to do so. Talking things through is part of the natural healing process and will help you to process what has happened. As you start to feel better, you may even wish to provide support to others who have been through similar situations.
- **Write about your feelings if you feel unable to talk to others about them.**
- **Stay informed through media and other information sources, but don't overdo it.** Try to avoid repeated viewing of disaster or trauma scenes.
- **Give yourself time to re-evaluate.** A traumatic event can affect the way you see the world, your life, your goals, and your relationships. Again, talking this through with others might help.

If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties or irritability persist for more than two weeks after your return home, you should talk to your GP. For immediate assistance and/or 24-hour counselling and referrals, see details on the right.

Useful services and resources

Lifeline - for immediate assistance
13 11 14

Australian Psychological Society - find a psychologist
1800 333 497

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636