

Information for first responders on emotional reactions to human bodies following bushfires

In your work responding to emergencies and disasters, you may see, smell, and handle the remains of individuals.

Working with or around them may arouse strong feelings of pity, horror, repulsion, disgust, and anger, or guilt for not helping enough. These reactions are normal and a part of being human. You may feel emotionally numb, or you may even use 'graveyard humour' to make the suffering and death seem less terrible. These are also normal responses. Strong emotions or reactions may be most painful when a victim reminds you of someone you love, or of yourself. Even if you've worked in disaster environments before you may react differently than you have in the past.

What you can do

Here are lessons learned by other people who have worked with bodies in disaster environments. Although these tips cannot make a horrible event easy, they will help you continue to work, and to live with your experiences and memories without being haunted by them:

- **Remember the larger purpose of your work.** By recovering bodies for identification and respectful burial you are showing care, giving hope, and preventing disease for the living.
- **Seek information about job requirements and the experience of others.** It may be difficult to prepare yourself mentally for what you will see and do.
- **While on the job wear protective gloves and coveralls,** to reduce your risk of disease and maintain hygiene.
- **Talking with others while working and during down time is very important.** This helps prevent getting lost in your own thoughts or emotions.
- **Take frequent breaks, drink plenty of fluids and eat balanced meals.** Rest when not working.
- **Help others in distress by being a good listener.** Don't mistake expression of feelings for weakness. Remind others that strong emotions are normal and honourable.
- **Humour is a good stress release.** However, remember not to be disrespectful toward the remains.
- **Limit your exposure to bodies as much as possible.**
- **Limit the exposure of others,** also, by using covers, body bags, and barriers whenever possible.
- **Fragrances used to mask odours may trigger later memories,** so it's better to breathe through your mouth and void these.



What you can do (continued)

- **Be compassionate, but avoid focusing on any individual victim** - especially those you may identify with.
- **Do not focus on personal effects** more than necessary as this can be particularly distressing. • Remind yourself that bodies are not people anymore— just the remains.
- **Be respectful of local cultures and religious beliefs** that may be very different from your own.
- **Do not dwell on memories of the details.** You should let your supervisor know if an aspect of your work is particularly difficult or stressful for you.
- **Afterwards, do not feel guilty about having distanced yourself** mentally from the tragic deaths of individuals.
- **Have your team get together for mutual support and encouragement.** Some people find de-briefings with trained counsellors helpful but others do not. Participation should be voluntary.
- **Strange dreams or nightmares, feeling tense, or having intrusive memories are common** during or shortly after stressful work with human remains.
- **Sharing your emotional reactions with loved ones is often helpful,** but may be very difficult to do.

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