

Australian Bushfires

Tips on coping with deceased animals

Information on emotional reactions to deceased animals following the bushfires

As part of your work in the aftermath of a disaster, one of the activities you may be tasked with is finding and burying or disposing of the remains of pets, livestock and/or wildlife. This may be as part of your work as a volunteer, government employee, deployed member of the Defence Force or reserves, or as a farmer or local resident, where the livestock may be your own or someone you know.

Undertaking these tasks may arouse strong feelings of horror, repulsion, sadness, hopelessness, guilt or anger. You may also have trouble sleeping or feel emotionally numb. You may also experience feelings of grief, for example, related to the magnitude of the loss, or if the animals are livestock and a critical part of your livelihood even use 'graveyard humour' to make the suffering and death seem less terrible. These are also normal responses. Even if you've worked in disaster environments before you may react differently than you have in the past.

These reactions are normal and a part of being human. It's important to remember that different people will have different ways of reacting and coping with being exposed to the remains of animals. 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 some strategies that you can use when tasked with these activities following the bushfires. Although these tips cannot make a challenging task easy, they may 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.** With your involvement in the safe and respectful disposal of the remains of animals, you are working towards the recovery efforts and helping to prevent disease.
- **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. Ensure you are familiar with the government guidelines on disposal of dead animals and are complying with these to ensure you are minimising health and disease contamination risks to yourself and others. Guidelines can be found on the Department of Primary Industries websites in each state or by contacting your local council.
- **Limit your exposure** to the remains as much as possible.

What you can do (continued)

- **Limit the exposure of others** by using covers and barriers whenever possible. Limiting the exposure of others also extends to not sharing graphic images online and/or by social media.
- **While on the job wear and use the appropriate protective equipment** to reduce your risk of disease and maintain hygiene.
- **Fragrances used to mask odours may trigger later memories**, so it's better to breathe through your mouth and avoid these.
- **Talking with others while working and during down time** helps prevent getting lost in your own thoughts or emotions. Sharing your emotional reactions with loved ones is helpful, but may be very difficult to do.
- **Look after yourself** by getting plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep), regular exercise, and by eating regular, well-balanced meals. Physical and mental health are closely linked, so taking care of one will help the other.
- **Don't feel guilty** about having to emotionally distance yourself from the task. It's okay to be detached and remain task focused.
- **Strange dreams or nightmares, feeling tense, or having intrusive memories are common** during or shortly after stressful work with animal remains.
- **Do not dwell on memories of the details.** You should let your supervisor or someone know if an aspect of your work is particularly difficult or stressful for you.
- **If you are engaged in this activity as part of a work team make time for the team get together for mutual support and encouragement.** Some people find talking with trained counsellors helpful but others do not. Participation in group counselling should be voluntary. If you are a farmer or local resident doing this on your own make sure that you seek support from family and friends to talk about how you are feeling.

To seek immediate 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.

For immediate assistance call Lifeline on 13 11 14

Australian Psychological Society

Find a psychologist service
1800 333 497

Beyond Blue

1300 224 636

Adapted with permission from the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress.