



Coping with anxiety as the bushfire season approaches

Bushfires are a perennial feature of the Australian climate, but that doesn't make them any less anxiety provoking.

As fire season approaches, people who have experienced a bushfire firsthand may experience apprehension, anxiety and distress, driven both by reminders of past horror and fear of future danger. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional challenges that affect individuals and families differently, especially depending on where they live.

However, we can help ourselves by mentally preparing for the coming summer. Just as the fire authorities warn us in the lead up to bushfire season to prepare our homes and our bushfire plans in order to reduce the physical risks from fires, now is the time to prepare ourselves psychologically so that we can help minimise adverse effects on our wellbeing.

Here are four simple but effective ways to help deal with anxiety:

- 1. Nurture your relationships with family and friends.** We know that social support helps us cope in the lead up to or after potentially stressful or traumatic life events. Strong and dependable relationships help us get through the ups and downs of life and are important for building our resilience, coping with anxiety, and for dealing with difficult times. So spend time with the people you care about.
- 2. Strengthen community relationships.** The coming months are an ideal time to focus on community activities (virtual, or in-person where possible) - opportunities for people to come together and strengthen or build relationships. Sports games, barbecues, trivia nights and markets are good examples that help encourage communication and support, and help to prevent rifts occurring within the community. Get involved in, or help organise, an event in your community.
- 3. Look after yourself.** Mental wellbeing and physical health are closely linked. Looking after one will help the other. So get plenty of rest, eat a healthy, balanced diet, and exercise regularly. Learn a simple relaxation strategy such as meditation, controlled breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation and make it part of your daily routine. Seeing images in the media about the bushfires can trigger strong emotions, so limit how much media you take in.
- 4. Minimise other stressful life events.** It's important to reduce the stress in our lives wherever possible to shore up our mental wellbeing. People who have experienced bushfires before may be dealing with a range of difficulties as part of the disaster's aftermath - so some stress may be unavoidable, but anything you can do to reduce stress through the bushfire season will help. Now is probably not the best time to be making major life changes, or taking on new challenges.



By using these strategies, you will be able to better cope with the anxiety of the impending bushfire season and the memories of past experiences that may be triggered.

Fortunately, most people living in fire-prone communities will cope well during this difficult period with the help of family and friends. Some, however, will have more difficulty, and it is important to ask for a bit of extra help if required. Seeing your GP is a good place to start.

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