

AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

Preparing for Bushfire Season



Three steps to emotionally prepare for the bushfire season

A bushfire can be a terrifying situation. Preparing yourself emotionally to cope with a bushfire is as important as preparing your home.

Research shows that you are more likely to stick with a bushfire survival plan if you are also psychologically prepared. Remember, being able to manage your emotions in an emergency can save lives.

1. Expect the situation to be stressful

- a. It's normal to experience strong emotions, especially if you have had a traumatic experience in the past.
- b. Prepare yourself for the potential to feel afraid:
 - notice what happens to your body when you're afraid, for example, your breathing may become rapid, or you may get sweaty palms
 - focus on your strengths and capabilities: say to yourself, 'I can handle this'.
 - think about what you can do to reduce your body's fear response, for example, focus on breathing calmly

2. Think beforehand about how you may react

- a. Everyone responds to threat and manages their stress differently. Knowing how you typically respond to stress will help you to prepare and make clear decisions.
- b. Avoid unhelpful psychological traps such as:
 - anxiety and worry that increases as you prepare for a bushfire
 - feeling that you have no control whatsoever
 - blindly following others
 - having a false sense of security.



3. Prepare a plan to help you manage your feelings and thoughts

- a. Having a survival plan will help you feel in control and decide whether you want to stay and actively defend your home or leave early. Talk with family, neighbours and people who have experienced a bushfire to help you develop your plan. If you choose to stay and defend your property, you need to be physically and emotionally able to do this.
- b. Practise psychological coping strategies such as controlled breathing, grounding exercises, and positive self-talk every day so that they become second nature. Find simple instructions for managing your emotions on this web page, www.phoenixaustralia.org/recovery-online/managing-emotions.
- c. To help resist the natural urge to panic, implement your planned strategies:
 - breathe calmly and use positive self-talk to help you cope
 - focus on what needs to be done - keep to your plan
 - check in on family and neighbours, especially any that are isolated or vulnerable in some way
 - listen to emergency service advice on the radio.
- d. If you start to feel overwhelmed by your feelings:
 - acknowledge that it's natural to feel this way
 - use breathing exercises to reduce your tension
 - use grounding strategies
 - keep as calm as possible and remind yourself: 'I can handle this'
 - concentrate on what you need to do - focus on the situation at hand.

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