Bushfire Trauma Preparation and Recovery
Who has experienced a potentially traumatic event?

- 75% of Australians
- 68% of 16 year olds
- 10-15% Experienced a natural disaster
Impacts of disaster

- Generates high emotions (fear, sadness, anger)
- Often shatters (or challenges) basic assumptions about the world, other people, ourselves; the old “rules” no longer apply
- Often subsequent stressors (e.g., financial, rebuilding, legal, climate, possible recurrence)

- Recovery is a long process with fluctuations
- May result in a range of individual, group/family, community effects
Normal individual reactions

• **Feelings:** Fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt, anger
• **Physical:** Tense, jumpy, sleep, appetite, pain
• **Behaviour:** Withdrawal, substance use, risks
• **Thoughts:** Memories, worry, concentration, decision-making

• Impact on social and occupational functioning
Impacts 3-4 years post-fires

Mental Health Disorders

- 26% High-Impact Communities
- 17% Medium-Impact Communities
- 12% Low-Impact Communities

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Anxiety
- Depression
- High Alcohol Use
Other impacts

- Parenting was compromised
  - Low tolerance/frustration
  - Not having time (or not being present)
  - Not having the answers
  - Not able to make it better
- Experiencing other major life stressors contributed to mental health impacts of fires

- Anger – can be both a motivator and a barrier to recovery, and tends to be influenced by the social context and service provider response
- Gendered experience of violence post-disaster
- Involvement in local community groups associated with more positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes
Interpersonal impacts

• Strained relationships
• One family member’s distress will impact on everybody in the family
• Distress impedes communication with others
• Trying to cope with distress can make people irritable and lash out at those who are trying to help

• **BUT the level of social support is the biggest predictor for recovery**
Prevalence of PTSD


• Emergency workers have higher rates of psychological distress and PTSD than the general population
  • General population – 4.4% (Australia)
  • Fire and Rescue – 9%
  • Ambulance Personnel – 8%
  • Police Officers – 11%
  • SES – 6%

• 21% of emergency service workers have high psychological distress, compared to 8% in general community
  • 9% of ES have very high psychological distress
  • ES employees and volunteers have higher rates of suicidal thoughts (5% & 6%) than general population (2%).
Levels of intervention post-disaster

Level 3: Specialist mental health providers
(reserved for low prevalence, serious conditions)

Level 2: Primary care providers
(for medium prevalence, moderate severity)

Level 1: Self-care and community support
(for high prevalence, low severity)
Chaos  
Hyperactivity  
Intense emotions  
Focus on safety  
0-3 month

Uncertainty  
Focus on recovery and rebuilding  
3-6 months

Anxiety/distress vs calmness/control  
Recovery/rebuilding continues  
6-12 months

Journey to new normal  
Emotional ups and downs  
Beyond 12 months

Recovery journey  
Natural recovery  
Level 1  
Level 2  
Level 3  
Mental health disorders emerge

Chaos  
Hyperactivity  
Intense emotions  
Focus on safety  
0-3 month

Uncertainty  
Focus on recovery and rebuilding  
3-6 months

Anxiety/distress vs calmness/control  
Recovery/rebuilding continues  
6-12 months

Journey to new normal  
Emotional ups and downs  
Beyond 12 months

Social support  
Natural recovery  
Level 1  
Level 2  
Level 3  
Mental health disorders emerge
Can we prevent problems?

• Limited evidence on prevention and early intervention strategies

• BUT developing mentally healthy communities and workplaces, improving mental health literacy and promoting individual resilience are strategies endorsed by experts.
Phoenix Australia resources

- Resources for health practitioners, emergency services workers and first responders and community members
- [www.phoenixaustralia.org](http://www.phoenixaustralia.org)

Australian bushfires mental health resources

The Australian bushfires have caused emotional distress among thousands of people who were impacted directly or indirectly. Here are some resources to help navigate these distressing and Code Blue-like times.

**Tips for leaders**

Managing a workplace or organisation impacted by disaster

Disasters that impact the workplace, whether natural or human-made, may create an unusual set of challenges for leaders and managers. Your team of staff and volunteers may experience emotional...
Bushfire Recovery Project
Trauma-related training for emergency service and general practice staff
Project overview

- As part of the Australian Government’s Mental Health Supports for Bushfire Affected Australians package, Phoenix Australia will deliver training to frontline workers to help them better support community members and their colleagues.
- This project aims to work with Emergency Services personnel and General Practice staff to enhance their ability to:
  - Support community members recovery from bushfires
  - Promote their own resilience and psychological recovery from the bushfires
  - Support the resilience and wellbeing of their teams and organisations
Key training programs for the Emergency Services sector

1. **Psychological First Aid (PFA)** training programs to managers and supervisors of frontline emergency personnel

2. **Trauma Informed Care (TIC)** resources and training for emergency service workers and volunteers
To register your interest for the training:

www.phoenixaustralia.org/resources/bushfire-recovery