

Coping with the impact of the Victorian bushfires

Bushfires can have a profound impact on people involved, either because they or their loved ones have been directly at risk or because they have witnessed the destruction, death or injuries caused by the fire.

Emergency services personnel, other workers and volunteers may also be affected. They have been working under enormous pressure and have been exposed to death and devastation on a massive scale. A disaster such as the current bushfires can have emotional consequences for anyone nearby who felt threatened or thought that someone close to them may have been killed or injured. The media coverage may also reactivate painful memories of a similar event from the past.

Impact of bushfires

Reactions to disasters such as bushfires can include confusion and disorientation, and strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt and anger. People can also have trouble sleeping and concentrating. Others may have distressing thoughts and images of the event.

For most, these reactions will gradually decrease over time, particularly with the help of family and friends. For some people, these problems can last longer and start interfering with their ability to return to their normal routine. People may be more at risk and may need to be monitored by a health professional if they:

- Lost family and friends in the fire
- Have been seriously injured or have witnessed horrific scenes
- Have developed mental health problems as a result of past traumatic events

What helps immediately following bushfires?

People cope with trauma in different ways. Following an event such as this weekend's fires, it is important to regain a sense of safety and control. People often need to have access to a safe and secure environment, to find out what happened to family and friends and to have access to relevant services. Spending time with family and friends is also critical to the recovery process. Other coping strategies include finding information about the impact of trauma and getting back to daily routines. These include: regular meals, rest and sleep, work, study, relaxation or play. People affected by the fire should also balance the amount of media coverage they watch, listen to or read. While getting information is important, watching or listening to news too frequently can reinforce distress.

The Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder recommend against routine debriefing – being asked to talk about the trauma and the emotions associated with it. This does not mean that people should not talk about what happened, but it is important to make sure that talking about what happened is entirely voluntary. People who want to talk about their experience may be supported in doing so, either with someone they trust or with a health professional. They should only do so when they are ready and can manage their distress.

People who have been through these bushfires need time to manage their distress and cope with what they went through or witnessed. However, those who experience severe distress or who are finding it hard to cope should talk to a health professional – your GP or community health centre is a good place to start.

People should talk to a health professional immediately if they:

- Feel highly anxious or distressed
- Their reactions to the traumatic event are interfering with home, work and relationships
- Are thinking of harming themselves or someone else

Please visit www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au and click on “Mental Health & Well Being Information” for more information.