

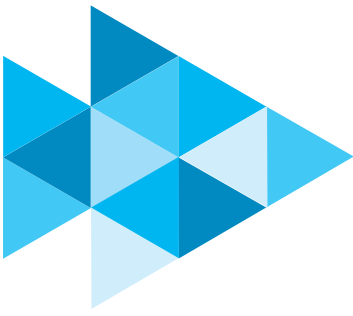
TIP SHEET.

Psychological first aid for coping with natural disasters like bushfires.

The ongoing bushfire national emergency that has threatened so many communities across Australia in recent weeks has been and will continue to be highly distressing. Many people feel helpless and sad in the face of so much loss and devastation. There is a lot that family, friends, volunteers and community members can do to help those affected over and above donating money and time to rebuild.

This is some general advice based on psychological first aid principles from the Australian Psychological Society to help people to look after themselves in the days and weeks after the disaster:

- Recognise that you have been through a traumatic experience and give yourself permission to experience a reaction to it. Don't be angry with yourself for being upset. It is a normal response to highly abnormal circumstances.
- There is no right or wrong way to feel.
- Think about quarantining yourself from media coverage including social media feeds for blocks of time if it is safe to do so and you are not monitoring safety conditions.
- Remind yourself that you can and are coping. You have personal resources and support you can access.
- Spend time with people who are predictable, familiar and respectful. Don't "bottle up" your feelings and if it feels safe to do so, share your experiences with people you trust when the right moment arises or seek professional support. Don't feel pressured to talk either if you don't want to right now, that is totally OK too.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened. Gradually confronting and processing what has happened can assist in coming to terms with a traumatic experience.
- Try to maintain a normal routine and structure your day. Still allow yourself time to rest if you are feeling tired and try to challenge any feelings of guilt about doing so.
- Self-care such as getting sleep, a healthy diet and regular exercise is important to renew and rebuild resources. Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope as this can impede natural healing processes.
- Make time to practice formal or informal relaxation techniques that work for you. This will help your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- Don't make any major decisions or big life changes right now.
- Try not to unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places and try to ask for support from people who care about you and whom you trust. Social support is enormously helpful in times of crisis. This includes letting your friends and family know what you need. Help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or want a chance to talk or just be with someone.
- If your recent experience stirs up other memories or feelings from a past stressful occurrence, or even childhood trauma, try not to let the memories all blur together. Keep the experiences separate and deal with them separately.



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- Remind yourself that things will get better, and you do have the ability to get through this. Give yourself time to adjust. Resilience is the norm for most people, but it can take a while to bounce back. You are human and you are meant to have a reaction to traumatic events which is unique to you.

Common reactions to an extraordinary situation can be severe and are usually at their worst in the first week or so after the event. In most cases, they start to fade over a month. If your day-to-day functioning is seriously affected for more than one month after the event, it's important to discuss it with a GP or mental health professional. These reactions include:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling numb and detached
- Inability to focus
- Inability to plan ahead
- Constant tearfulness
- Flashbacks, intrusive memories or bad dreams related to the bushfires
- Sleep disturbances
- Constant questioning – “What if I had done x, y or z, instead?”
- ‘Replaying’ the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again.

Mental health resources:

- For crisis mental health support, contact the **Mental Health Triage Service on 13 14 65**. The service is available 24 /7.
- For free online and phone counselling support (24 / 7), contact **Regional Access counselling service on 1300 032 186**. It is available for anyone who lives or works in regional, rural or remote South Australia (e.g. outside of the Adelaide metropolitan region) and you do not need a referral.
- The Counselling service is free (local call charges may apply).
- Talk to your **GP** or access your employer's **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**.
- **Lifeline 24/7 access 131114**.
- **Beyond Blue or Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467** or on-line chat <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/national-help-lines-and-websites>
- **Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800**

To all emergency services personnel and volunteers, these are times of high and chronic stress and fatigue which will continue for some time to come. Please reach out if you are struggling. providing support, understanding, and help.