Bushfires | Recovery

Useful skills for disaster recovery

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Managing emotional distress

Even after the danger of the bushfires has long passed, people can experience upsetting reactions, and these can go on for weeks, months or years. The distress can involve physical reactions, like a rapidly beating heart and sweating palms, and emotional reactions like feeling teary or anxious. These reactions often follow reminders of the bushfires, or come up in response to stresses in daily life. For some people, this emotional distress can lead to problems in relationships with family and friends which can affect mood, impact on health, and disrupt the ability to make decisions and get things done.

It is important to understand that distressing reactions are a normal part of recovery, and finding safe ways of expressing feelings is an important part of healing. Learning how to identify, understand, anticipate and manage these reactions so they don't feel so huge, uncontrollable and unpredictable is something everyone can do.

FOUR STEPS TO MANAGING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

1. **Identify the distress in your body**
   It can be helpful to identify where in your body you feel things when you are distressed. Perhaps you clench your jaw or tense your shoulders when you're angry. Perhaps you blush, sweat or get butterflies in your stomach when you're anxious. Some people feel sick, or get headaches.

2. **Name the type of distress**
   Once you are able to identify where distress is located in your body, it can be useful to name the type of distress this signals--e.g., 'I'm feeling anxious'.

3. **Anticipate triggers for distress**
   You can also try to work out what sets off your distress. Some triggers might be particular reminders of the fires, like noises, places or people you see. Some things might seem to have nothing to do with the fires but they set you off anyway, like the car not starting, or children arguing. The better you get at working out what triggers your distress, the better placed you are to plan how to manage it.

4. **Managing the distress**
   As you become more aware of the bodily signs of distress and the associated feelings, as well as the situations that trigger distress, you can start to practice skills to help manage the distress. These might include:
   - Learning how to relax your body, especially the parts that tense up under stress
   - Learning some breathing techniques to calm yourself down
   - Using calming self talk (e.g., 'This might be tough but I will get through it')
   - If possible, have a friend with you for support before, during and/or after the stressful situation

It takes practice to learn these skills, but every time you try them, you will get a bit better at calming yourself down. Importantly, you start to see that you have more control than perhaps you realised over your reactions to stress, so they don't need to have such a disruptive impact on your life.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit **psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/**