Bushfires | Recovery

Useful skills for disaster recovery

Australian Psychological Society

The importance of social connections

One of the best things we can do for ourselves following a traumatic experience is to spend time with people who care about us, and to feel the social support of friends, family and the community. It is not uncommon, though, for people's social support networks to be disrupted following a disaster like the bushfires. Friends may have died, or moved away. People may feel too busy sorting things out to spend time socialising, or the places they used to gather may have been destroyed, or group activities discontinued. Sometimes people avoid others because they don't want to be reminded about the fires, or worry about how someone else is going. And some people just feel too sad and dispirited to bother meeting or talking with others. It all just feels too hard.

Whatever the reasons for a decrease in social contact with others, we know very well that rebuilding social connections after a disaster is incredibly important. People need people. They help give us a sense of belonging, a feeling of being loved and cared for and that we're not alone, and reassurance that our reactions are normal. They can share burdens, provide practical support like helping replant gardens and caring for children. They can provide a sympathetic ear when we need to talk, or sensible advice when we're struggling with a problem. They can show us that we are important to them, too.

Rebuilding connections

Reconnecting can be hard, but worthwhile. Sometimes starting off with a small contact, like having a cup of tea together, is an easier way to begin. Remember to have patience with those with whom you are in contact as they may be as distracted as you. Maybe you need to make contact over the phone with friends who no longer live near. Maybe you could make a time to catch up with a friend who is a good listener. Maybe there's a friend you could organise to go on a bike ride with, or you could ask to help you fix your fence.

And don't forget that social support feels good to give as well – maybe there is a neighbor who needs your help. Other people complete us, and the benefits flow both ways.

You can also use existing community support groups to make social connections with others. Often, community recovery groups and activities are established after a disaster to help bring people together.

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

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