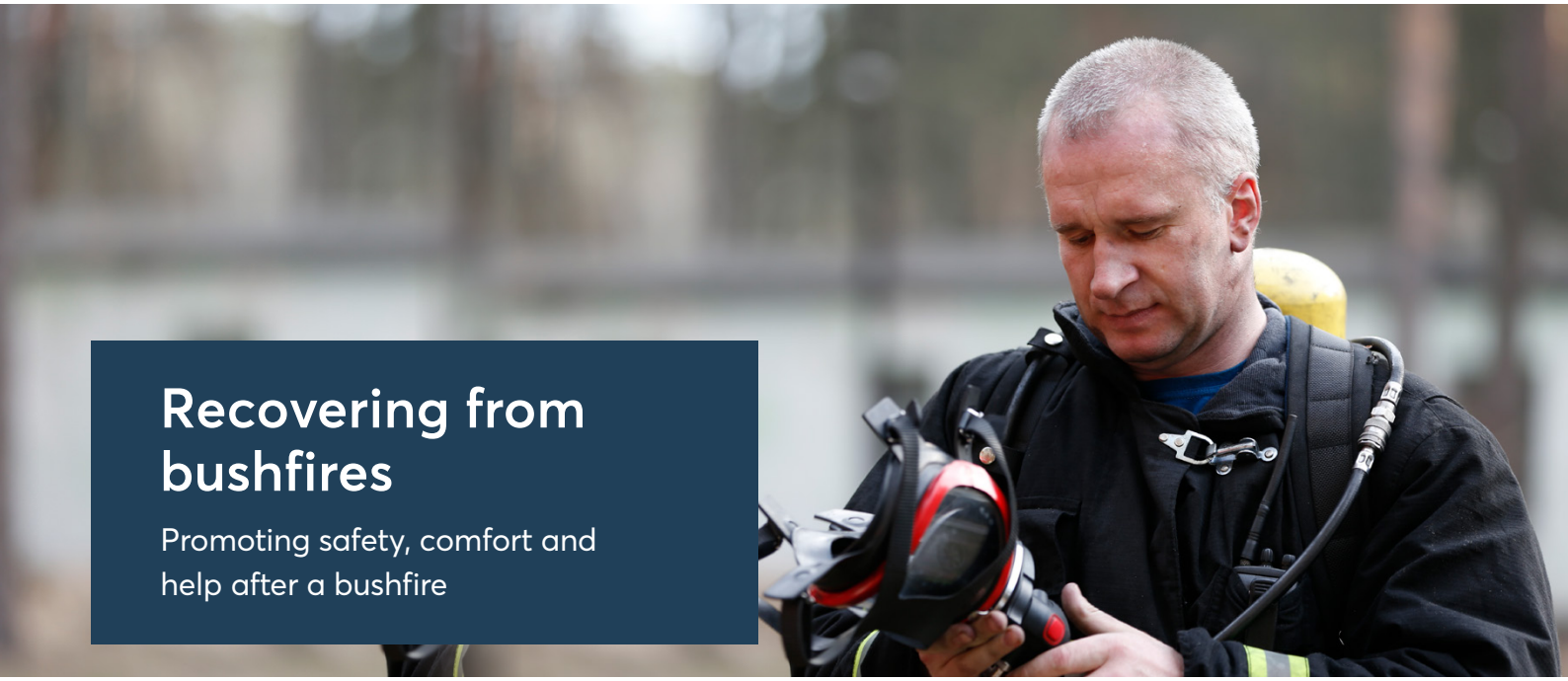

Recovering from bushfires

Promoting safety, comfort and help after a bushfire

Experiencing a bushfire is highly distressing for many people in disaster affected communities but there is a lot that family, friends, volunteers and community members can do to help those affected. This information sheet will outline some useful skills that will help with disaster recovery.

Helpful thinking

Following the bushfires, many people's way of thinking about the world and themselves may have shifted to have a very negative focus. They might now see the world as dangerous and unpredictable, and be thinking things like, "Things will never be right again", or, "No-one can keep me safe".

These thoughts are very understandable given personal experience of the fires, but they can also cause intense helplessness, sadness, fear or anger. Thoughts have a direct impact on how people feel, and when negative thoughts become habitual, they can increase feelings of being overwhelmed and make it harder to deal with the situation. Then, they become unhelpful.

Tackling unhelpful thinking

A useful skill to learn is to notice if you are thinking in an unhelpful way, and try to find more helpful thoughts that make it easier to manage.

Catching yourself thinking unhelpful thoughts can be tricky. Often negative thinking becomes automatic, and we don't notice what we're saying to ourselves, but just know we feel bad. Noticing that you are feeling worried might come first. Then, ask yourself what you might have been thinking. Perhaps it was something like, "This wind is like the winds during the fires and if we have more fires this year, I won't be able to cope", or, "Everything is ruined – I'll never get things sorted out".

The next step is to come up with an alternative and more helpful thought, which should give rise to more positive feelings like being in control and feeling more hopeful. Try, "I've coped with a lot already and discovered strengths I didn't realise I had", or, "This is hard work and will take a while, but I've started – just keep chipping away".

Of course, as with most things, with practice you will get better at noticing unhelpful thoughts and focusing on helpful alternatives with practice. And the good thing about negative thinking? There are always plenty of opportunities to practice! If you're finding getting started difficult, it may be helpful to seek assistance from a psychologist.

Problem solving

Following a bushfire disaster, people experience some common and often distressing reactions. These can include strong feelings of helplessness, grief or anger, difficulty sleeping, or unhelpful behaviours like drinking more alcohol or arguing with people more than usual. Other problems may include how to clean up their house block or difficulty supervising children adequately in a new or altered environment. Working on some basic coping skills can enhance recovery and help tackle stressful issues such as these. One very useful skill is problem solving.

Four steps to problem solving

1. Identify the problem

First, try to identify what the problem really is. Is this your problem, or does it belong with someone else? Is this a problem you can do something about? If not, try to put it aside and choose one that you can do something about. And if you're feeling overloaded with all sorts of unfinished tasks, give yourself permission to let some problems wait until later.

2. Assess the problem

If the problem is big, break it into manageable parts. For example, if you're needing to clean up your block, perhaps you can break it down into house site, shedding, and the rest of your property. Then decide what you're aiming for based on the priorities, like 'The site needs to be safe', or 'We have to see what we can salvage so we know what else we need to buy', or 'We need a break before we get on with cleaning from this mess'.

3. Brainstorm solutions

Next, think up as many ways of achieving your goals as you can. For example, hiring temporary fencing to keep children out of the rubble, organising a working bee, accessing a government-funded service, or going away for a short break. Write down as many creative ideas as possible – a range of ideas can help at this stage!

4. Adopt a solution

The final step is to sort through the options with those close to you, or perhaps with a case manager, and choose several that best meet your goals. These may be based either on the priority of the goal or the ease with which it can be achieved. Then work out what you need to do to give them a go. Also, don't forget that help is available from counsellors and others at the recovery centres.

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 bushfire disaster. Friends may have died, or moved away. People may feel too busy sorting things out, 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. Making contact over the phone with friends who no longer live nearby may suit you. Perhaps you could make a time to catch up with a friend who is a good listener.

Even though you might be feeling exhausted, giving social and practical support to your friends and neighbours might help you to feel you have a sense of purpose, and increase your motivation and energy.

Existing community support groups are useful to make social connections with others. Often, community recovery groups and activities are established after a disaster to help bring people together. The networks we have within our communities, and our relationships with people create a sense of belonging and identity which help with recovery.

Taking time for pleasurable activities

Months after the fires, many people are feeling exhausted and stressed, and they know that their daily struggle isn't going to be over any time soon. Disasters often disrupt routines or activities that have given people a sense of control and pleasure in the past, and people often don't make as much time as they used to for fun things. These recreational activities might have been sport, clubs or classes, walks or bike rides, visits to a favourite cafe, board games with the family, or regular get togethers with friends.

Sometimes the disruption to recreation activities comes about

because the places where they were held have been destroyed or damaged by the fires, or because club members have died or moved away. For some people, the grief and shock of the devastation of the fires, and the overwhelming task of recovery and rebuilding may have led them to withdraw from the activities or feel guilty about things that used to give them pleasure.

Doing what you enjoy is good for you

Engaging in activities that are enjoyable is a very important way of gaining a sense of control, balance, meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, one of the most successful ways of improving people's mood, giving them a 'lift', and restoring a sense of control, is to increase their activity and increase the number of positive events into their routine. When life is unbalanced by a disaster, finding a new balance between work, getting life back on track and pleasure is very important.

Pleasurable activities are essential for our health, and provide opportunities to connect with other people. Reintroducing pleasurable activities following the chaos that results after a bushfire is important, as it provides evidence that life is not entirely negative. So, take some time out from the endless paperwork and the huge job that has already gone on for months and likely still lies ahead, and give yourself permission to do some of the things you enjoyed in the past – watching a DVD, having a day at the football, going out for a night with friends, playing a game of scrabble, or simply tucked up with a good book.

Planning ahead so that you've got things to look forward to is useful, as is making sure that some of the pleasurable activities involve enjoying your social connections with others. This is a great combination. Sometimes it can be easier to talk and share with people when you are busy doing something together.

As you start picking up some of the activities you used to enjoy before the fires, you may find that you're not enjoying them as much as you used to. This is very normal, and not a reason to give up. Sometimes after very traumatic experiences people's ability to enjoy themselves is diminished for the present. It can and will come back, and one important way in which you can help is by doing things that give you a break from the everyday stress of cleaning up, rebuilding and recovery, but which also help to rebuild some normal routines and a sense of wellbeing. And when you 'down tools' for a while and take time out for a bit of fun, you will probably pick up again when you're a little more rested, and you may even find that you make quicker progress with all of those jobs.

If some of your core values have changed due to the bushfires, you may find that your choice of what's pleasurable has also changed. For example, in the past you may have enjoyed a big night out at the pub with friends, but since the bushfire you may feel that is a waste of time, and that you'd prefer to catch up with friends one-on-one or by inviting several friends to your home for an easy meal or barbeque.

General tips to help you recover from a bushfire

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and give yourself permission to experience some reaction to it. Don't be angry with yourself for being upset.
- Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.
- Remind yourself that you can and are coping.
- Spend time with people who are predictable, familiar and respectful.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened. Gradually confronting what has happened can assist in coming to terms with a traumatic experience.
- Don't 'bottle up' your feelings – share your experiences with people you trust when opportunities arise. But don't feel pressured if you don't want to talk now – this is also OK.
- Find other ways as well to express your feelings (e.g., through a diary or art work).
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Structure your day and try to have a balance between being busy and productive and allow yourself time to reflect and process your feelings and thoughts.
- Allow yourself time to rest if you are feeling tired. Regular exercise is also important.
- Make time to practise relaxation. You can use a formal technique such as progressive muscle relaxation, or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music. This will help your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- Avoid making any major decisions or big life changes.
- Make sure you do not unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and whom you trust. Social support is enormously helpful in times of crisis.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs. 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 unrelated stressful occurrence, or even childhood trauma, try not to let the memories all blur together. Keep the experiences separate and deal with them separately.
- Keep reminding yourself that things will get better, and you do have the ability to manage.
- Give yourself time to adjust. Resilience is the norm, but it can take a while to bounce back.

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 are often triggered by reminders of the bushfires, or appear when dealing with everyday stresses. For some people, their emotional distress can lead to having a short fuse which can result in increased conflicts with family and friends. This increased tension can affect their mood, impact their health, and disrupt their ability to make decisions and get things done.

It is important to understand that distressing reactions are a normal part of recovery. Finding safe ways of expressing feelings is a key 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 location of 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 in the stomach, have a tightness in their chest, or get headaches.

2. Name the emotion that is causing the distress

Once you can 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'... or 'I'm feeling angry' ... or I'm feeling sad'.

3. Understand and anticipate triggers for distress

You can also try to work out what sets off your distress. Some triggers might be reminders of the fires, like noises, extremely hot and windy days, places, images or seeing certain people. Some things might seem to have nothing to do with the fires, but they set you off, like the car not starting, or children arguing. Often situations that make you feel out of control or overwhelmed can trigger your emotions. The better you get at understanding what triggers your distress, the better placed you are to develop a plan for how to manage it.

4. Managing the distress

As you become more aware of the bodily signs of distress and the associated emotions, as well as the situations that trigger them, 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')
- Having 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 will start to feel that you have more control over your stress reactions, and realise that they don't need to have such a disruptive impact on your life.

Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you or your family are experiencing as a result of a bushfire is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians during disasters. Visit www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters

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