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Mental health advice for people affected by bushfire

Beyond Blue has developed new online information about mental health and bushfires in response to the bushfire crisis.

The [Bushfires and mental health](#) web page, on the Beyond Blue website, contains practical advice about dealing with the emotional impact of bushfire, information about the signs and symptoms of emotional distress, tips for supporting children and young people, and links to useful resources.

“Right now, many people need the basics – shelter, food, water, fuel, cash – and physical safety. Others may be returning to their affected communities. These are stressful times and it’s important we’re aware of how these things can affect our mental health, both in the immediate and longer term,” **Beyond Blue CEO Georgie Harman** said.

“Often, signs of trauma and distress can take months and years to emerge but it’s never too early to get informed about the difference between a normal and common reaction to disaster, and symptoms that indicate a need for additional professional support.”

Ms Harman said Australians were known for their resilience and coming together in a crisis. Many will gradually rebuild their lives and restore their sense of wellbeing.

“Community, mateship and humour are very much part of our national character and these will be tremendous strengths as we support each other through these difficult times,” Ms Harman said.

“It’s very normal to struggle with difficult thoughts and feelings during and after a disaster like this, and these feelings can be intense and confusing.

“These feelings can be at their most severe in the first week after a traumatic event but, in most cases, fade over a month.”

Common reactions to disasters include:

- Feeling overwhelmed, numb or detached
- Constant tearfulness and intrusive memories
- Irritability, difficulty sleeping or dreaming about the event
- Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- Constantly questioning the actions they took during the disaster

Ms Harman said people who experienced these common reactions **for more than one month** should talk to a GP or mental health professional.

“The mental health impacts of bushfires can emerge within weeks, months or years. Knowing the signs and not ignoring them, and seeking support early is an important step towards managing these issues,” Ms Harman said.

Beyond a common reaction, symptoms that suggest the need for professional support include:

- Avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where you're unable to carry out day-to-day tasks

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- Frequently being easily startled e.g. jumping when a door slams and then taking a long time to calm down
- Feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason
- Thoughts of ending your life or self-harm
- Panic attack symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness and dizziness

“The bushfires burning across Australia have claimed lives, decimated wildlife, destroyed property and led to lost livelihoods so it is an incredibly challenging time for individuals, families and communities,” Ms Harman said.

“We’re all different, and we all react in different ways to trauma: there’s no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to respond, so don’t tell yourself or others what you or they should be thinking, feeling or doing. If we come together and support one another, and make sure people have access to support when they need it, we can recover.”

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO COPE WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF BUSHFIRES

Beyond Blue’s [looking after yourself after a disaster](#) fact sheet provides practical tips on how to deal with the emotional impact of a natural disaster, such as:

- Spend time with people who care
- Know that recovery times will differ for everyone
- Find out about the impact of trauma and what to expect
- Try to keep a routine and return to normal activities as soon as possible
- Talk about your feelings or what happened when you’re ready
- Do things that help you relax
- Set realistic goals
- Review and reward your progress, even small steps
- Talk about the ups and downs of recovery

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT THE BUSHFIRES

- Children’s reactions to trauma may include withdrawal from family, friends and activities, physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches, worries about future events, or trouble concentrating or sleeping
- Tell your child these feelings are normal in the circumstances
- Take their concerns and feelings seriously
- Encourage them to speak about their feelings and listen to what they say
- Try to return to regular routines as soon as possible
- Allow children to play and enjoy recreational activities

If bushfire coverage is upsetting a child, visit Beyond Blue's [How to talk to children about major news coverage](#) web page.

Mental health professionals are available at the Beyond Blue Support Service via phone 24/7 on 1300 22 4636 or via www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support for online chat (3PM – 12AM AEST or email responses within 24 hours).

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