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## Connection vital for bushfire-affected communities during COVID-19 pandemic

Beyond Blue wants to remind bushfire-affected communities that support is available as they progress their recovery in uncertain times.

**Beyond Blue CEO Georgie Harman** said the coronavirus had created extraordinary circumstances for people impacted by bushfires.

“The coronavirus pandemic has created enormous challenges for everyone in Australia, particularly those affected by last summer’s bushfires,” Ms Harman said.

“These communities find themselves in extraordinary circumstances as they try to move on while following restrictions that are crucial to helping prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“Now, more than ever, Beyond Blue wants those communities to know we are here around the clock to support them through this period of uncertainty.”

**Psychiatrist and Beyond Blue adviser Professor Brett McDermott** said in any disaster recovery, it is tempting for people to throw themselves into the physical rebuild, but it is just as important that we invest in our mental health too.

“We know that coming together physically as a community after a disaster is good for our mental health and wellbeing. At a time when we need to maintain physical distance, let’s make an effort to stay connected in other ways,” Prof McDermott said.

“For those who can, Beyond Blue advises using digital devices to keep in touch with family and friends on a regular basis. Give them a call or use video chat to check in with each other.

“If people have limited or no access to digital devices or the Internet, having a chat with a neighbour over the fence while keeping an appropriate physical distance can be beneficial.

“At this stage of the recovery, there are some common signs to be mindful of that suggest we might benefit from more support.”

These can include:

- Experiencing flashbacks that suddenly feel like the bushfire is happening again. This can manifest as sights, sounds or smells.
- Avoiding places that remind you of the bushfire.
- Feeling numb or detached. You may notice this yourself, or others may bring it to your attention.
- Having negative thoughts such as ‘I’m a failure’, ‘It’s my fault’, ‘People would be better off without me’.
- Using alcohol and sedatives to cope.
- Feeling tired all the time, having trouble sleeping or being frequently sick and run down.

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

Beyond Blue has developed a range of resources for people impacted by the bushfires and COVID-19 outbreak including:

- The [Bushfires and mental health](#) web page that provides practical advice on how to cope with the emotional impact of bushfires, information about the signs and symptoms of emotional distress, tips for supporting children and young people, and links to useful resources.
- A new Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service to support people to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental health and wellbeing at [coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au](https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au) or by calling a free, dedicated counselling line on 1800 512 348.
- A dedicated [Coping with bushfires](#) thread in our online forums providing a safe, understanding place to share how you are feeling and offer support to others.

Beyond Blue's existing support service continues to operate alongside the new Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service. Mental health professionals are available at the Beyond Blue Support Service via phone 24/7 on 1300 22 4636 or via [beyondblue.org.au/get-support](https://beyondblue.org.au/get-support) for online chat (3pm – 12am AEST or email responses within 24 hours).

**ENDS**