



**william campbell**  
foundation

**Bushfire Support**

# Contents

## **Access EAP**

- Employee Assistance Program Brochure
- After a Traumatic Event Brochure
- Support through a Natural Disaster

## **Tool Kit - Getting through Floods, Drought and Extreme Climate Events**

### **Bush Fire Recovery**

- Helpful Thinking
- Managing Emotional Distress
- Taking time for Pleasurable Activities
- Importance of Social Connections
- Problem Solving
- Helping Children who have been Affected by Bushfires
- Looking after Children who are Anxious about Bushfire Season
- How to Prepare Psychologically: A 3 Step Process

### **Australian Red Cross: Preparing to Return Home**

### **Recovering Together after a Natural Disaster - Fire**

### **Natural Disaster Recovery Story: Birdie and the Fire**

### **Emerging Minds: Traumatic events, the Media and your Child headspace**

- How to Cope with the Stress of Natural Disasters
- Supporting your Child after a Natural Disaster

### **Bush Fire Social Story**

## What happens in counselling?

Our professional counsellor will work with you to assist in managing or resolving any concerns that negatively impact your life. EAP counselling is designed to be short term, solution focussed counselling. If you require further and/or specialised support, referral to other services will be provided. The aim is to discuss your concerns and work out some strategies or options to improve your coping skills.

## Getting the help you need is simple

If you are needing guidance, give AccessEAP a call to find out how we can help. We're available by telephone 24/7 to provide immediate help for urgent matters.



**CALL US**

In Australia call

**1800 81 87 28 or (02) 8247 9191**

In all other countries, please refer to the 'contact us' page on our website.

## For more information

w [accesseap.com.au](http://accesseap.com.au)

e [info@accesseap.com.au](mailto:info@accesseap.com.au)

To access the password protected Client Area of our website for the first time, register yourself with your company email address.



# EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM





## YOUR WELLBEING STARTS HERE

**Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a voluntary, confidential and complimentary counselling service. It is a short-term, solution focused approach to help you enhance your overall wellbeing.**

EAP can assist when personal, family or work related concerns are impacting on your health or quality of life and also when you need guidance on professional or personal goals or effective communication skills. Through professional and experienced counselling sessions, you can achieve your full potential.

This service is completely confidential. Your employer or colleagues will never be informed that you have contacted us; your privacy is guaranteed.

EAP appointments can be made by simply telephoning AccessEAP. Our Client Services Team can arrange face-to-face counselling at a time and location that's convenient to you. Counselling services are also available via telephone and online.

All our counsellors are independent of your organisation and focused on supporting you to address any issues impacting your wellbeing.

## WHEN TO CONTACT US

Many life challenges and changes are best resolved with assistance from an experienced counsellor. You may want to consider seeing an AccessEAP counsellor for the following:

### PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

- Needing support to help achieve your goals
- Missing deadlines
- Involved in conflicts frequently
- Needing new strategies on professional or personal goals

### PERSONAL CHALLENGES

- Distracted by issues at work or at home
- Not feeling your usual self
- Feeling overwhelmed

### Some reasons people contact AccessEAP are;

- Improving relationships/communication with others
- Facing crisis and trauma
- Grief and loss support
- Strategies for handling conflict with colleagues or managers
- Facing alcohol, drug or gambling addictions
- Handling anxiety and stress effectively
- Feeling depressed or down
- Improving work performance
- Assistance with financial and legal distress



**THERE IS NO  
RIGHT OR  
WRONG WAY  
TO FEEL.**

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w [accesseap.com.au](http://accesseap.com.au)

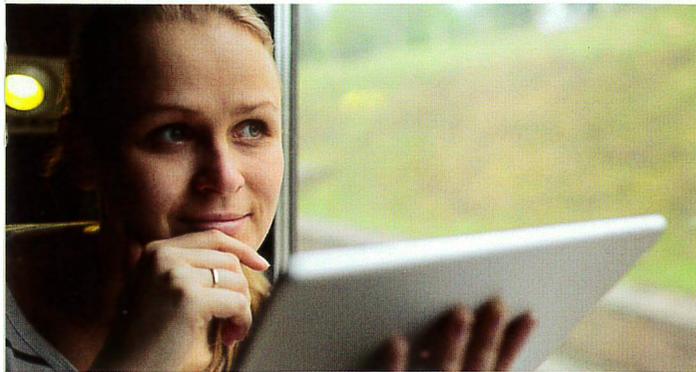
e [info@accesseap.com.au](mailto:info@accesseap.com.au)

To access the password protected Client Area of our website for the first time, register yourself with your company email address.



## AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT





## COPING STRATEGIES

Being involved in a traumatic event can cause distress and unwanted disruption to your life.

After experiencing a traumatic event, it is common to experience a range of intense and sometimes confusing emotions, such as:

- Numbness or emptiness
- Anxiety / fear
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Regret
- Anger
- Relief

These feelings are normal responses to an abnormal event. You may, at some point, wish to speak confidentially with a counsellor who will understand how you are feeling, listen without judgment, offer information, support you and assist you with strategies to cope with the negative impact of the event.

Seeking counselling is not a sign of weakness. Counselling can significantly help the recovery from a traumatic event. There is no right or wrong way to feel.

## SELF-HELP STRATEGIES

Traumatic events impact people in different ways. Having difficulty concentrating, sleeping or experiencing symptoms of anxiety may be common.

### Tips for you

- Acknowledge your feelings and share them with people you trust.
- Keep in regular contact with your friends, family and colleagues.
- Be patient with yourself – give yourself time to process.
- Keep a normal routine as much as possible.
- Physical exercise will help.
- Eat regular, healthy meals.
- Use breathing and relaxation techniques if you feel tense, anxious or have difficulty sleeping.
- Allow yourself some personal space and time to acknowledge that you have been through a difficult time.

### WHAT TO AVOID:

- Overuse of alcohol, coffee and other stimulants
- Working to excess or keeping yourself so busy you have no time to relax
- Withdrawing and isolating yourself from others
- Keeping your feelings bottled up instead of talking about what you are experiencing
- Dwelling on negative thoughts
- Making important life decisions during recovery from a traumatic event.

## SUPPORTING YOUR FAMILY + FRIENDS



**There is no right or wrong way to feel after a traumatic experience so it is important not to tell a person how they should feel. They need to process what happened.**

If your friend or loved one has been involved in a traumatic event, it can have an impact on you too. It is often difficult to know just how you can help but encouraging them to talk and being there to listen without judgement is what they need.

Don't take it personally if they do not wish to talk, but remind them you are there if they change their mind.

Try to give them space and time to recover in their own way.

If they are withdrawing, encourage them to do things with you e.g. a movie or exercise.

Their reactions may be confusing to you; everyone reacts to traumatic events differently. Avoid saying things like, 'It's time to move on' or 'It could have been worse'.

Remind them it can be helpful to speak with a professional counsellor who will understand the nature of their reactions and assist them with their recovery.



## Support through a natural disaster

Australia is no stranger to natural disasters, e.g. bushfires, droughts, cyclones and floods. These events impact entire communities and the disruption to daily life can be significant. People may be forced to evacuate their homes and workplaces, and leave cherished possessions behind as they focus on survival and loved ones. It is common to experience a range of intense emotions following a traumatic event like a natural disaster. The immediate loss of control and threat to personal safety is frightening, can lead to severe and acute shock, distress, and anxiety. People who have faced potential loss, injury, or even death, from natural disasters will experience a range of feelings immediately, weeks and even months later. The memories and associated fear that a similar event will reoccur can be long lasting.

It's common to experience a range of intense and sometimes confusing emotions, such as: numbness/emptiness, anxiety, fear, sadness, guilt, regret, anger or relief.

These emotional responses are normal responses to an abnormal event.

### Self-help strategies

Traumatic events impact on people in different ways. You may experience sleeping difficulties, have difficulty concentrating or experience symptoms of anxiety. Be prepared for some disturbances. It may take a few days for the acute responses to pass.

There are some simple things you can do:

- Prepare yourself to be anxious or scared when you think about what happened.
- Acknowledge your emotions and share them with people you trust.
- Keep in touch with your friends, family and colleagues.
- Be patient with yourself; reassure yourself you can get through this.
- Keep to your normal routines as much as possible.
- Physical exercise is helpful, in addition to eating regular, healthy meals.
- Use deep breathing and relaxation techniques if you feel tense and anxious or to assist with sleep disturbances.
- Allow yourself some personal space and acknowledge that you have been through a difficult time.

### Avoid things that don't help

- Overuse of alcohol, coffee and other stimulants.
- Working to excess or keeping yourself so busy you have no time to relax and do the things you enjoy.
- Withdrawing and isolating yourself from others.
- Keeping your thoughts and feelings bottled up, instead of talking about what you are experiencing.
- Dwelling on negative thoughts.
- Making important life decisions during recovery from a traumatic event.





### Tips for family and friends

- Having your loved one or friend involved in a traumatic event can have an impact on you as well. It is often difficult to know how you can help. You can provide valuable support by just being there to listen with empathy and without judgment.
- Don't take it personally if they don't want to talk. Remind them you are there if they change their mind.
- Try to give them space and time to recover in their own way.
- Their reactions may be confusing to you, understand that it is a difficult time and acute reactions to a traumatic event may be powerful. It is unhelpful at these times to say things like; 'It could have been worse.' or "You are lucky".

You may, at some point following the event, wish to speak confidentially with a counsellor who will understand your emotional response, who will listen without judgment, offer information, and assist you with strategies to minimise the negative impact of the event.

Seeking counselling is not a sign of weakness. Counselling can help significantly in the recovery process following a traumatic event in your life.

Contact **AccessEAP on 1800 818 728** to book an appointment.



# TOOL KIT Getting through floods, drought and extreme climate events

A self-help resource to help families dealing with floods, drought and extreme climate events

## How do floods, drought and extreme climate events impact on rural communities?

Some of the ways floods, drought and extreme climate events can affect rural communities are:

- Financial hardship for farmers and other rural businesses, which may eventually lead to farms being sold and businesses closing
- Family and relationship problems (e.g. arguing, disagreements, lack of communication, physical conflict, relationship breakdown)
- Job pressure and overworking
- People leaving the community due to a lack of opportunities or income (particularly young people)
- Environmental problems, such as loss of vegetation and animals, drying or flooding of rivers, soil erosion and increased risk of bushfires
- Lack of community services, including health care, education, housing and employment organisations
- Higher incidence of physical and mental health problems amongst community members, as well as an increased risk of suicide
- Loss of social networks and a breakdown in community spirit

## How do floods, drought and extreme climate events affect individual wellbeing?

The stress caused by floods, drought and extreme climate events can affect our wellbeing in several ways.

Some common signs of stress may include but are not limited to:



- Physical symptoms (eg headaches, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite)
- Always feeling tired, lacking energy or motivation
- Changes in mood (eg anger, aggression, irritability, worriedness, anxiety and depression)
- Increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs to cope or escape the situation
- Feeling hopeless, worthless or like “life is not worth living”
- Thoughts of suicide or harming yourself

Most people experience some of these emotions at some point in their lives. However, if you are experiencing several at the same time or if they interfere with your ability to carry out daily activities, you should talk to someone you trust (e.g. partner, friend, relative) and seek help from your GP or another health professional.

Ready to help 24/7.

13 11 14

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

 Lifeline

## Strategies to help you manage the stress of floods, drought and extreme climate events.

### 1 Recognise when it's getting too much

Sometimes we're so busy trying to get things done that we might not realise that we need a break. Learning to listen to your body and recognising the signs of stress is the first step in doing something about it. Take notice of any changes in your physical health, your behaviours or your emotions that might indicate that things are getting too much for you. Listen to concerns from loved ones about your wellbeing or behaviour.

Seek help immediately if you have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself.

### 2 Talk about it

Talking calmly and openly to someone you trust about how you're feeling allows you to release negative emotions, helps to relieve tension and puts things in perspective. If you don't feel comfortable talking to someone you know, telephone helplines like Lifeline and online options (e.g. email, online chat, forums) are also available for confidential support and advice.

Remember, during floods, drought and extreme climate events, everyone in the community is likely to be experiencing similar emotions, so talking to family members, friends and neighbours can help everyone to release negative feelings and come up with practical ways of managing their stress and dealing with the situation.



### 3 Explore financial options

Put together an accurate summary of your financial situation – list all the income that you have coming in, and all of the expenses and debts that you have. Then, talk to your bank or financial adviser about options available to you to better manage your finances. There are lots of financial assistance programs available to rural families and businesses during floods, drought and extreme climate events, which may provide some relief. It can also be helpful to get together with family members (including children) to create a family budget you all agree on.

### 4 Visit your GP or health professional

Talk to your GP about your situation and let them know if you've experienced any negative changes in how you feel. Your doctor can provide useful advice on how to manage stress and also give you referrals to other services that might be able to offer you support.

## 5 Helping children and adolescents

Sometimes we don't discuss stressful situations with our children and adolescents because we don't want to worry them. However, usually children and adolescents pick up on when you are stressed and know when things aren't right, particularly if they witness their parents upset or arguing. Not knowing what's going on can make them worry and they may blame themselves for what's happening.

It's important to include children and adolescents in discussions about the situation and involve them in decision-making as much as possible. Help them to understand their responsibilities (e.g. concentrating at school, doing homework, helping at home) and reassure them that, although things are tough, you will get through it together. Talk to them about their feelings and notice any changes in their behaviour or mood that may indicate that they are feeling stressed.

## 6 Take care of yourself

Eat healthily, get at least eight hours of sleep each night and exercise regularly (preferably away from work).

Remember to take time out to relax – read a book, listen to music, watch a movie or try something new, like yoga or meditation. It's also important to do fun activities that you enjoy, both on your own and with family and friends. Spending time with friends and family helps to prevent isolation and loneliness.

Alcohol and drugs weaken your ability to make decisions, often making your problems worse. They can also lead to mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, so it's a good idea to limit your intake.

## 7 Be positive and proactive

Learn about the specific diagnosis and the system of treatment and care that is available. Mental illness is a broad term used to describe many conditions including mood and anxiety disorders, personality disorders and psychotic disorders such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Each condition has specific effects and treatments.

## 8 Seek and accept help from others

Research shows that people with strong connections with family, friends and their community cope best in times of crisis. A strong support network reduces your sense of isolation and gives you people to talk to when things get rough.

It takes strength and courage to ask for and receive help from others, but people are usually more than happy to help! Make a list of where to go for different types of help and advice (e.g. financial assistance, emotional support) and keep it in a handy place.

## 9 Act immediately if you have thoughts of harming yourself or suicide

Ongoing stress due to floods, drought and extreme climate events can cause you to feel hopeless or worthless and may lead to thoughts of suicide or self-harm. All thoughts or talk of suicide should be taken very seriously. If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, seek immediate help by talking to someone you trust, calling a helpline (e.g. Lifeline [13 11 14](tel:131114)) or visiting your GP. In an emergency, call 000.

## Places to go for help now:

- Lifeline 13 11 14 (24hrs) or [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- Drought Assistance Hotline 13 23 16
- Farm Assistance Hotline 1800 050 585
- Rural Financial Counselling Service 1800 686 175
- Murray-Darling Basin Assistance and Referral Line 1800 050 015

If your family is finding it difficult to pay for basic items such as food and petrol, you may be eligible for short term emergency relief assistance (e.g. food or petrol vouchers.) To access this kind of help, talk to your local Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul or Material Aid/Emergency Response Agency.

## Utilise online resources:

Centrelink – [www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au)

Department of Agriculture and Water Resources:  
<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/>

Farmsafe: [www.farmsafe.org.au](http://www.farmsafe.org.au)

National Association for Loss & Grief (NALAG):  
[www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

Rural and remote mental health:  
<https://www.rrmh.com.au/>

For 24 hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14. For more information visit [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

This Tool Kit has been produced by the Lifeline Information Service as a public service. You are welcome to reproduce it without alteration and with acknowledgement of Lifeline.

Last revised September 2019

Ready to help 24/7.  
 13 11 14

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

 Lifeline

# Useful skills for 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 additional intense sadness, fear or anger. Thoughts have a direct impact on how people feel, and when negative thoughts become habits of thought, they can increase distress 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 these thinking habits are 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, 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, you will get better at noticing unhelpful thoughts and focusing on helpful alternatives with practice. And the good thing about habits of thought? There are always plenty of opportunities to practice! If you're finding getting started difficult, it may be helpful to seek assistance from a health professional.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit [psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/](https://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)

# Useful skills for disaster recovery

## 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/](https://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)

# Useful skills for disaster recovery

## Taking time for pleasurable activities

Now, a few months after the fires, many people are feeling tired 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 pleasure and a sense of control 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 not make the time for the things they used to find pleasure in.

### **Doing things you enjoy is good for you**

Doing activities that are enjoyable is very important as a way of gaining a sense of control and purpose in life, and for giving pleasure. 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, create routines, and increase the number of positive events in their lives. When lives are unbalanced by a disaster, finding a new balance between work and pleasure gains importance. Pleasurable activities are important for our health, and for our connections with other people. It is important, too, that people have more positive experiences than negative experiences.

So, take some time out from the endless paperwork and the huge job that lies ahead, and give yourself permission to do some of the things you have enjoyed in the past – watching a DVD, having a day at the football, going out for a night with the girls (or boys), or just playing a game of scrabble. Try to plan ahead so that you've got things to look forward to. Try also to make sure that some of the pleasurable activities also 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.

You may find as you start picking up some of the activities you used to enjoy before the fires, 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.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit [psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/](https://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)

# Useful skills for disaster recovery

## 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/](https://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)

# Useful skills for disaster recovery

## Problem solving

Following disasters like the Adelaide Hills bushfires, people experience some common and often distressing reactions. These can include strong feelings of grief or anger, difficulty sleeping, or unhelpful behaviours like drinking more alcohol or arguing with people more than usual. But working on some basic coping skills can help a lot. For many survivors, these skills will be enough to enhance recovery and help tackle stressful issues. One very useful skills is problem solving.

### Problem Solving

Following the bushfires, people are struggling with a variety of problems, from how to clean up their house block to worrying about arguments with their partner, or struggling to supervise children adequately in a new or altered environment.

### 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, put it aside and choose one that you can do something about. And if you're feeling overloaded with all sorts of not-finished tasks, give yourself permission to let some problems wait till later.

#### 2. Assessing 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, like 'We need the site to be safe', or 'What I can salvage?', or 'I want a break from this mess'.

#### 3. Brainstorming solutions

Next, think up as many ways of achieving your goals as you can e.g., 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. Try writing your ideas down, and come up with lots – a range of ideas can help at this stage!

#### 4. Adopting a solution

The final step is to sort through the options together with those close to you, or perhaps with a case manager, and choose several that best meet your goals. Then think what you need to do to give them a go.

Good luck – and remember that help is available from counsellors and others at the recovery centres.



## *Support through a natural disaster*

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These emotional responses are normal responses to an abnormal event.

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Traumatic events impact on people in different ways. You may experience sleeping difficulties, have difficulty concentrating or experience symptoms of anxiety. Be prepared for some disturbances. It may take a few days for the acute responses to pass.

There are some simple things you can do:

- Prepare yourself to be anxious or scared when you think about what happened.
- Acknowledge your emotions and share them with people you trust.
- Keep in touch with your friends, family and colleagues.
- Be patient with yourself; reassure yourself you can get through this.
- Keep to your normal routines as much as possible.
- Physical exercise is helpful, in addition to eating regular, healthy meals.
- Use deep breathing and relaxation techniques if you feel tense and anxious or to assist with sleep disturbances.
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### **Avoid things that don't help**

- Overuse of alcohol, coffee and other stimulants.
- Working to excess or keeping yourself so busy you have no time to relax and do the things you enjoy.
- Withdrawing and isolating yourself from others.
- Keeping your thoughts and feelings bottled up, instead of talking about what you are experiencing.
- Dwelling on negative thoughts.
- Making important life decisions during recovery from a traumatic event.





### Tips for family and friends

- Having your loved one or friend involved in a traumatic event can have an impact on you as well. It is often difficult to know how you can help. You can provide valuable support by just being there to listen with empathy and without judgment.
- Don't take it personally if they don't want to talk. Remind them you are there if they change their mind.
- Try to give them space and time to recover in their own way.
- Their reactions may be confusing to you, understand that it is a difficult time and acute reactions to a traumatic event may be powerful. It is unhelpful at these times to say things like; 'It could have been worse.' or "You are lucky".

You may, at some point following the event, wish to speak confidentially with a counsellor who will understand your emotional response, who will listen without judgment, offer information, and assist you with strategies to minimise the negative impact of the event.

Seeking counselling is not a sign of weakness. Counselling can help significantly in the recovery process following a traumatic event in your life.

Contact **AccessEAP on 1800 818 728** to book an appointment.



# Helping children who have been affected by bushfires

Many children have been affected directly by recent bushfires, either having lost their homes and properties, or through being evacuated. Other children have experienced the fires indirectly, through hearing about them, or knowing someone who has been affected. These can be distressing experiences for children.



## Information for parents and caregivers

### Impact of trauma on children

People cope with trauma in different ways and there is no one 'standard' pattern of reaction to the stress of traumatic experiences. Children are not always able to express complex feelings in the same direct way that adults do and therefore do not often show the same reactions to stress as adults. It is therefore very important to look out for changes in children's behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or distressed.

Reactions to the trauma of the bushfires may result in changes to children's normal behaviour such as:

- Changes in their play, drawing, dreams or spontaneous conversations
- Regressive behaviour – children behaving younger than they normally do
- Nightmares
- Anxiety about sleeping alone
- Trouble getting to sleep
- Irritability or anger
- Tantrums
- Fussy eating
- Withdrawing
- Wanting to stay close to a parent
- Problems concentrating at school

Children are usually very resilient and for most children these reactions will gradually reduce over time with the support of families.

### How you can help your children recover

After a traumatic event, **children need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after.** Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of affection through cuddles and hugs. Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them. Let them be more dependent on you for a while and try to re-establish daily routines, for example routines around mealtimes, bedtimes or returning to school where possible.

**Find out what your children know** in case they have mistaken ideas or facts about the bushfires, and correct any misconceptions. Keep your responses appropriate to the age of your child and also appropriate to the child's level of understanding and emotional maturity. Young children often need reassurance more than facts.

**Listen to your children's concerns.** Listen closely to what they are asking or saying, and think about whether they are looking for factual information, or if the questions are expressing anxiety about the bushfires. Try to keep your own feelings to yourself when talking about their feelings. Let them know that you understand how they feel.

**Monitor how much your children are being exposed to media stories of the bushfires.** Children can become retraumatized by watching repeated images on the television and it is best to try to shield them from the media.



**Be aware of how you talk.** Adults need to be conscious of the presence of children when discussing the bushfires. It is a good idea not to let children overhear adult conversations about worrying things if they cannot join in at their own age or stage of development.

And most importantly, **look after yourself** as it is likely that you have also experienced the bushfire trauma. When parents are feeling cared for themselves they are better able to respond to the needs of their children.

### Seeking further help

While most children will bounce back after a trauma, some children may show prolonged distress and could benefit from professional assistance. Children who are more at risk of developing more lasting problems are those who have lost family and friends, those who have been seriously injured or witnessed horrific scenes, and those who have developed problems in response to past traumas.

Warning signs of more significant and lasting distress in children include:

- Continual and aggressive emotional outbursts
- Serious problems at school
- Preoccupation with the bushfires
- Intense anxiety or emotional difficulties

A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents or caregivers to understand and deal with the thoughts, feelings and behaviours associated with the trauma of the bushfires. Speak to your GP about a referral to a psychologist or phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on **1800 333 497**. Alternatively, you can locate a psychologist in your area by visiting the APS Find a Psychologist website – [www.findapsychologist.org.au](http://www.findapsychologist.org.au).

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit [psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/](http://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)

# Looking after children who are anxious about bushfire season

Hot days and the potential risk of more bushfires can be a time of increased anxiety for many people. Children are also vulnerable, and the increased media coverage and discussion in the community, schools and at home about fires can raise their alarm. How do we help children to be aware of the threats, but also reassure them that they are safe and secure?



## Guidelines for parents and caregivers

### Signs that children are feeling distressed

Children are not always able to express complex feelings in the same direct way that adults do, and therefore might not show the same reactions to stress as adults. It is therefore very important to look out for changes in children's behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or anxious, such as:

- Changes in their play, drawing, dreams or spontaneous conversations
- Regressive behaviour – children behaving younger than they normally do
- Nightmares
- Anxiety about sleeping alone
- Trouble getting to sleep
- Irritability or anger
- Tantrums, increased defiance
- Fussy eating
- Withdrawing
- Wanting to stay close to a parent, becoming more clingy
- Decreased concentration or attention span
- Feelings of anxiety, fears, and worries about safety of self and others
- Increased aggression, angry outbursts
- Questions about death and dying
- Increased somatic complaints (sore tummy, headaches)

### What adults can do to help

Activities and suggestions vary depending on the age of the child.

#### Monitor media exposure

Children can become anxious after listening to or watching repeated stories about bushfires, and can come to believe that everywhere is under threat. Young children may not realise that footage on television is a replay and not another event. Be confident in your role as a parent and limit their exposure to news and other programs with potentially distressing images and sounds.

Limit the amount of time children listen to media reports about the fires.

If children are viewing media stories of distressing events, it is best to watch with them. They need your adult presence and perspective. Being able to talk about the material with a caring and reassuring adult can greatly reduce these reactions.

#### Listen to understand how children are feeling and thinking

Encourage (but don't force) children to talk about their thoughts and feelings about bushfires and other scary things.

Let them know that it is normal to think and feel that way.

Expect that children might ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to make sense of events.

Remain patient and provide truthful but simple and thoughtful explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of things.

Correct any misperceptions they might have about the events and likely risks.

#### Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings

Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them.



### **Reassure children**

Children need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after and that nothing bad will happen to them personally.

Let children know that there are people all over the place working hard to make sure that people stay safe, and that these people are very good at their job.

Do calming activities with children who are distressed.

Reassure them that you are watching out for them.

Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of affection through cuddles and hugs.

Maintain good routines – predictable family activity is very reassuring for children.

### **Be aware of how you talk in the presence of children**

Shield children from in-depth adult discussion about these events, especially if they cannot join in at their own age or stage of development. Children can distort what they hear or see especially when the information is received through indirect communication (for example, overheard adult conversations about worrying things).

### **Pay attention to your own reactions**

Children may respond to the anxieties felt and expressed by the people around them. They often see and hear far more than adults are aware of, and they will take their cues for how to respond from you.

Talk privately with trusted adults if you are needing to air your own feelings or explore your own reactions to threats.

Share your own feelings, but show that you are in control of them.

### **Leave children with a feeling of security but also hope**

Help children to see that their world is basically a safe place, and that life is worth living.

### **Seeking further help**

While most children can handle their concerns with the support for caring adults, some children may show prolonged distress and could benefit from professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents or caregivers to learn strategies for dealing with anxiety.

Speak to your GP about a referral to a psychologist or phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on **1800 333 497**. Alternatively, you can locate a psychologist in your area by visiting the APS Find a Psychologist website – [www.findapsychologist.org.au](http://www.findapsychologist.org.au).

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit [psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/](http://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)

# Psychological preparedness can save your life

When your home or community is threatened by a bushfire it can be terrifying. People who haven't experienced it before can underestimate how stressful it can be. Most people are not able to think as clearly as usual when they are under severe stress, and this can affect their decisions and reactions. You might already know that about yourself, and have noticed it in others.

Research shows that you are more likely to stick with a household plan if you have also prepared psychologically for a bushfire. Being able to manage your emotions in an emergency (that is, being psychologically prepared), can save your life and potentially the lives of others.

## How to prepare psychologically: a 3 step process

Once the household emergency plan has been set and you've prepared emergency kits, planned your evacuation strategy, and practised your plan, it is then time to prepare psychologically.

### 1 ANTICIPATE that the situation will be stressful

How do you think you will react to the stress? How do you usually react to highly stressful situations? Although these reactions are very natural, they can get in the way of other necessary preparations.

If you understand your usual reactions you can learn ways to manage them better when they happen.

How you feel in highly stressful situations is strongly affected by the way you cope with the physical signs of anxiety and the thoughts running through your head. Our physical and emotional responses in dangerous situations are referred to as "fight or flight". That is, you either fight for your life, or run for your life.

### 2 IDENTIFY your typical physical and emotional responses, and any frightening thoughts that might be adding to your fear

In highly stressful situations, the body usually shows signs of anxiety, such as a racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness and sweating. Where do you expect you will notice it most when you are experiencing a serious threat?

What are some typical thoughts that you might be having that could be making things harder?

Typical thoughts and emotions might be:

- *I can't cope;*
- *I'm so scared;*
- *We're going to die;*
- *This is awful;*
- *I don't know what to do;*
- *We're going to lose everything;*
- *I can't bear it;*
- *I wish this wasn't happening;*
- *I can't deal with it.*

Remind yourself that strong bodily sensations and frightening thoughts are normal reactions to stress but they are not helping you to stay calm and clear-headed. Don't get too critical of yourself though!

### 3 MANAGE your feelings and thoughts with simple breathing and self-talk

We can find ways to MANAGE any changes to our body, mind and thoughts through some simple breathing and self-talk strategies. These strategies can help you to feeling more in control, and better able to make decisions about how to stay safe.

Slowing down your breathing can help calm down your body's fear response. Focus on your out breath and extend it for as long as is comfortable for you. It is best to breathe through your nose if you can. Then let the in breath come in of its own accord. It will happen! It happens all the time without us thinking about it.

Replace anxious thoughts and images with more helpful ones, those that will support you more at this time. While concentrating on breathing out slowly, say to yourself things like 'relax', or 'stay calm', or 'It's OK, I'm managing OK'. 'I can handle this', 'focus on what has to be done' or 'no need to panic'. Try not to dwell on the bad things that might happen, but instead tell yourself that the calmer you are, the better you'll be at managing exactly what needs to be done.



# Preparing to return home following a bushfire evacuation



**If you have been evacuated, or were unable to return home as a result of a bushfire, there are a number of practical and emotional things to consider when you are ready or allowed to return home.**

**This information sheet provides some tips on things you may need to consider.**

## **Anticipate what it will be like returning home**

### **The physical environment**

It helps to think ahead about what the physical environment might look and feel like when you return home. There may be a delay in returning home if the area is not safe, or authorities are searching for missing people. The area affected may also be treated as a crime scene, if the cause of the fire was suspected arson.

After a bushfire, you may find your local environment has dramatically changed from the one you left. Some of the experiences people report after bushfire include:

- blackened, lifeless landscapes
- burnt out buildings, outbuildings, vehicles
- smell of burnt bush
- areas covered in ash
- road signs and familiar landmarks missing
- dead animals
- rotten food in the fridge (especially if the electricity has been turned off for days)
- search and rescue signs painted on houses.

## Preparing to return home

When the all clear is given, think about the following things:

- Are the roads open, and are they safe?
- Have you got enough fuel, food and water?
- Are mobile phones charged?
- Who will you inform that you are returning home?
- Have you got a torch and a radio?
- Have you got appropriate clothing, boots, hard wearing long sleeved shirts and long pants, as well as gloves, and a hat?
- Will you take children and pets on the first visit?
- Is your tetanus booster up to date?

## Returning home

If there is no apparent damage:

- Do not enter your home until fire officials say it is safe to do so.
- Use caution when entering burned areas as hazards may still exist, including hot spots which can flare up without warning.
- Work out what you need to do first, small steps at a time, check that power, phone, water, gas and sewerage/septic tanks are functioning. You may need to call essential services.
- Check on neighbours.
- Follow public health guidance on safe cleanup of fire ash and safe use of masks.
- Wet debris down to minimise breathing dust particles.
- Wear leather or thick rubber gloves and heavy soled shoes to protect hands and feet.
- Cleaning products, paint, batteries and damaged fuel containers need to be disposed of properly to avoid risk. Check with local authorities for hazardous disposal assistance.
- Be aware that the weather conditions and clean-up work may be tiring, so schedule plenty of breaks.

## Ensure your food and water are safe

- Discard any food that has been exposed to heat, smoke or soot.
- Never use water you think may be contaminated in order to: wash dishes, brush teeth, prepare food, wash hands, make ice or make baby formula.

## Inspecting your home

- Inspect the roof immediately and extinguish any sparks or embers. Bushfires may have left burning embers that could reignite.
- Take photographs of the damage, both of the building and its contents, for insurance purposes.
- Do not switch anything back on, including heating systems, if there is any structural damage. Have the house checked by an authorised electrician or supplier.
- If outside, stay away from broken wires and fallen electrical cables and call your power company immediately.
- Visually check the stability of the trees. Any tree that has been weakened by fire may be a hazard. Call an arborist if you think a tree may be in danger of falling.

## Emotional considerations

It is normal for people to have conflicting emotions as a result of returning home. Try to anticipate what conditions you may be confronted with and how you may react. Rehearsal of the scenario will allow you to feel more in control of the situation and less distressed.

Some of these mixed feelings may include:

- Relief at coming home – being able to get on with the job of getting your home and life back in order.
- Uncertainty about what it will be like in the coming days and weeks.
- Distress about the losses you've experienced – possessions, your home, garden, maybe even people or pets.
- Pleased for what did survive.
- Upset about the changes that you are faced with.
- Enthusiasm and motivation to get on with it and fix it all up.
- Worry about how you're all going to get through it.
- Worried that the bushfire might happen again, especially if the weather continues to be hot and windy.
- Hope for the future.
- Feeling overwhelmed – of the hard work ahead and the disruption to daily life.
- Replaying the frightening moments of the approaching disaster before you left.

### Identify the feelings and thoughts

1. Notice these feelings, and label them. Are you are feeling anxious? Angry? Sad?
2. Pinpoint where in your body these feelings are located. Some common places that people notice feelings of worry or distress include:
  - tight chest
  - gritted teeth
  - tense jaw
  - butterflies in the stomach
  - heart palpitations
  - sweaty palms
  - shortness of breath
3. Recognise what these feelings are about by putting them into words, for example, "I'm feeling nervous about going back home because I felt scared when I was there last. Maybe I'll experience all those feelings again."

### Managing feelings

The next step is to find ways of managing your feelings. Learning useful techniques can make all the difference in how you react.

If you are feeling anxious or upset, try to:

1. Slow down your breathing.
2. Challenge negative thoughts and replace them with more helpful ones.
3. Only do what you can.
4. Try not to take your anger out on others.



## **Moving beyond hopes and fears**

The recovery period can often feel overwhelming, lonely and difficult.

Some people find the following helpful:

- Getting back into a routine: familiar patterns of mealtimes (with familiar food), school/work of some sort, and bedtime routine are important for adults as well as children.
- Break tasks into small steps and work through them one at a time.
- Think about what you have achieved at the end of each day.

## **Making sense of what has happened**

People often find themselves going back over the experience, thinking about it, trying to put some sense and order to the events, and working out what happened and why. It is natural to try to understand what happened, but try not to stress about things that are outside your control.

Below are several suggestions to help your personal recovery as well as to hasten the recovery of your community:

- Find a support network – to tell your own story as well as listen to the stories of others.
- Keep a record of your thoughts.
- Look to the future and start to make plans.
- Give yourself and others time to work through feelings. Be willing to give yourself and allow those around you some slack. You have to take the journey together.
- Most of all avoid isolation. Those people who seek out support, involve themselves in their communities and make full use of the various services offered recover faster and better. You are entitled to the assistance available.

## **Further Information**

Have a look at the Red Cross 'After the emergency' website, Facebook and Twitter for more information:

<http://aftertheemergency.redcross.org.au/>

<https://www.facebook.com/AustralianRedCross>

<http://twitter.com/RedCrossAU>

Keep listening to ABC local radio in your state for information: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/emergency/>

Contact your local government or relevant state government for information about recovery.

*This information sheet has been developed by Australian Red Cross and the Australian Psychological Society to provide general information in order to help people deal with the consequences of a disaster.*

Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health

# Recovering Together after a Natural Disaster - Fire

## Information and Activity Sheet for Families with Babies and Young Children

When natural disasters happen, nearly everyone has some reaction and emotional response, whether they are directly or indirectly affected. These emotions affect people of all ages, in different ways. They can occur immediately, later, or even long after the disaster has passed.

People may experience thoughts, feelings, physical reactions or behaviours that are intense, confusing and frightening. Such experiences are usually most severe during or straight after the disaster, then fade with time.

Babies and young children can easily become distressed by what is happening in the world around them. Anything that creates stress for the family can make babies and young children feel unsafe and unsettled. Without help, they may continue to be affected by the disaster, with long-term

impacts on their physical and social development and their emotional wellbeing.

Babies and young children manage their feelings through their relationships with parents and other caring adults. Parents and carers need to look after their own emotional wellbeing, so they can support their baby or young child.

Remember, **babies and young children communicate through their behaviour**. If your child doesn't seem to 'be themselves' or you have concerns about their behaviour, think about what their behaviour may be telling you.

You will find information and activities below. There is also a short story to read and talk about with your baby or young child.

### Did you know that in times of stress, babies and young children may

- become worried, but may not have the words to tell you
- be clingy or whiney, have more tantrums, or seem more 'helpless'
- become aggressive
- cry a lot
- eat less or more than usual
- have difficulty sleeping or sleep more
- need repeated reassurance that they are safe
- want to be closer to their parents or carers and need more cuddles

### Things parents and carers can do

- read the story over the page with your child and talk about the pictures
- name your child's feelings, for example "you seem to be feeling sad"
- try to spend time having fun with your child each day. Choose activities you know they enjoy, for example bubbles, games, reading
- replace special toys as soon as possible if they are lost or damaged. They can be a comfort
- answer questions honestly but don't give more information than is needed

- re-establish regular routines as soon as possible. Such routines are calming and create predictability
- avoid exposing your child to natural disaster coverage through television, radio or newspapers.
- try not to discuss worrying topics in front of babies and young children. They understand more than we realise

### Things to remember

- talk with your child's childcare worker or other carer about how your child is feeling
- talk to a professional and ask for help if necessary
- stay in contact with others
- look after yourself

If you or your family are finding it difficult to cope with a natural disaster, professional help is available.

### Where to get help

- Your local doctor (General Practitioner)
- Your local Child and Youth Mental Health Service
- Your local Child Health Service
- Lifeline (24hr) **131 114**
- *beyondblue* info line **1300 224 636**



# Birdie and the Fire



One day, there was a fire in Birdie's forest. Birdie had to fly away to be safe from the fire.



There were hot flames and a lot of smoke. The fire-fighters used big hoses to spray the fire with water. Helicopters came and dropped water on the flames.



When the fire was over, Birdie's tree was all black. Birdie felt sad.



Helpers brought sticks to build Birdie a new nest. Birdie felt safe and happy again.



Developed by the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (QCPIMH), Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service, with the support of the National Perinatal Depression Initiative.  
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ANDREA MURRAY & ANIL TORTOP

# BIRDIE and the FIRE



This is Birdie.





Birdie is a happy bird who likes to sing.  
She lives in a nest in a  
tall tree near a forest.  
Birdie feels cosy and safe in her nest  
high up above the ground!

Birdie likes to catch worms  
and talk with her friend Mr Frog.  
Mr Frog lives in a pond  
with green lily-pads.



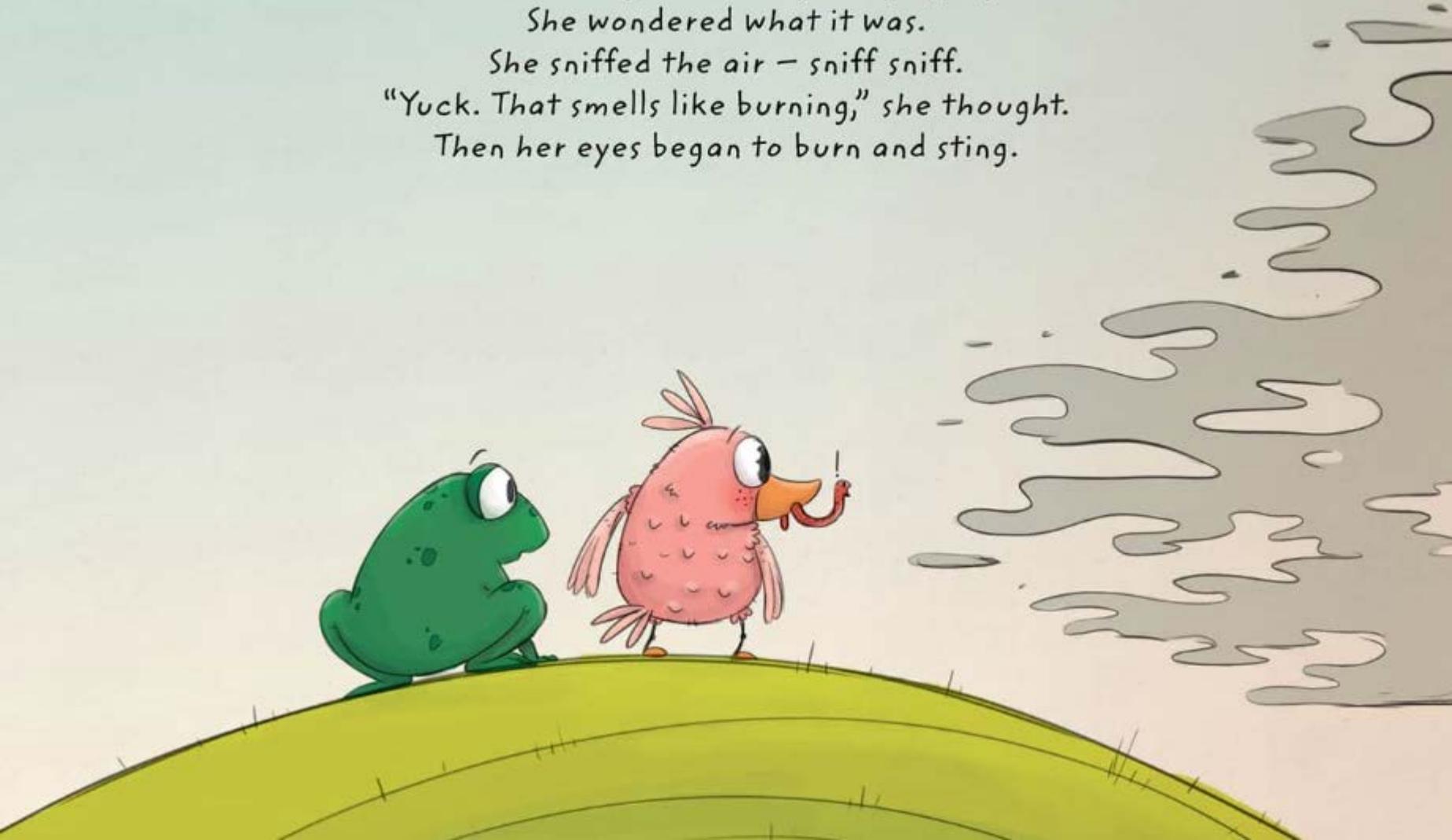
One day when Birdie was looking for worms,  
she heard a strange crackling and popping noise.

She wondered what it was.

She sniffed the air – sniff sniff.

“Yuck. That smells like burning,” she thought.

Then her eyes began to burn and sting.





Birdie flew back up to her nest  
and looked around.

All the birds were chattering and chirping.

The insects were buzzing!

There was lots of hot wind –  
whoooooo.

“Come on, Birdie – we have to go!  
There is a fire coming!” said her friends.



The crackling and popping got louder and louder.

Everything hissed and spluttered.

Birdie didn't like the black smoke – it made her cough and it made her eyes sore.

Birdie was very frightened. She flew off to find a safe place.

Birdie and Mr Frog hid near the fire truck that came to help. The fire truck had a loud siren. The fire-fighters shouted in loud voices to each other. They used their big hoses to spray the fire with water. Noisy helicopters came too and dropped water on the fire - chop chop - whoosh.



Birdie and Mr Frog didn't like all the noise. It was very scary.  
They hugged each other and closed their eyes tight.  
They waited and waited for one whole day and one whole night.  
Luckily, their friends had brought some food.



When the fire was over, Birdie flew back to her tree.  
Oh no! The trees were gone! Her nest was gone.  
Everything was dirty and black and stinky — even her feathers!  
Birdie was very sad. She started to cry.



Lots of helpers came.  
They brought buckets and shovels and saws,  
to clean and fix and plant.  
z - z - z went the saws; swish went the hoses;  
dig dig dig went the shovels;  
chop chop chop went  
the blades of the helicopters.  
Birdie didn't like all the noise.  
She covered her ears with her wings.



Some helpers brought food to eat.  
Other helpers brought sticks to build Birdie a new nest.  
Some of Birdie's friends brought feathers  
to make her a bright new coat.  
Birdie felt better.



Soon the trees and bushes started to grow.  
The animals and birds of the forest came back  
and there were happy sounds again, bees buzzing and birds chirping.  
Birdie and Mr Frog were both safe. Birdie was happy again.



**Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service**  
**Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health**  
childrens.health.qld.gov.au/qcpimh

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# Emerging Minds.

National Workforce Centre  
for Child Mental Health

# Traumatic events, the media and your child



When disasters or traumatic events occur in Australia or elsewhere in the world, they're often given constant media coverage. It can seem like every time you turn on the TV, radio or go online there is more news about the event, who has been hurt and what is happening in the immediate aftermath.

Media coverage during times of disaster or traumatic events is important: it can provide those who are affected with news and information about where to go, how to get help and when it's safe to return to their homes. However, many people, including children and families, can become absorbed by the constant news stream about the event and sometimes they can watch or listen for hours.

## Impact of too much media exposure

Adults need to be mindful of how much exposure their children have to coverage of disasters or traumatic events on TV, radio or the internet. The media often focus on the most frightening aspects of an event and this coverage can contain graphic, scary and disturbing images. Seeing this type of media coverage can cause distress or worry for children. Children will also often discuss what they have seen in the media with each other. As a result, even though your children may not watch coverage constantly at home, they are still exposed to it through their friends and chatter on social media.

Media coverage can have an impact on children in the following ways:

- they can feel that they are unsafe and that something bad may happen to them or their family
- they can be led to think this event is happening constantly, rather than one event being replayed
- they can spend a great deal of time thinking about the event, which can affect their sleep and time at school
- they may be anxious that the same sort of event may happen to them or their family.

The more media coverage children see, the more likely they are to become afraid or upset.

## Delivery partners:



Australian  
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RACGP

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## How to help your child

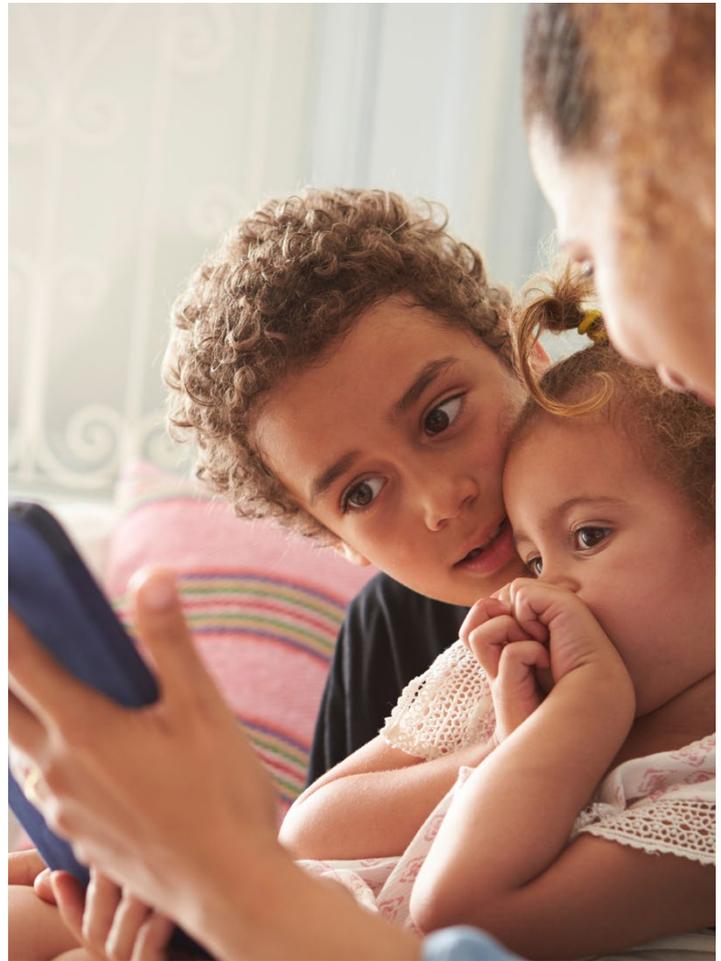
It's important that parents, carers and other family members help children to cope with the media coverage that they may see of a disaster or traumatic event.

Some recommended ways to manage this include:

- try to be there with your children when they are watching coverage of the event. This way you can talk to them about their fears and answer any questions they may have
- speak to children about the event in language they will understand, and set limits on the amount of time that they are able to watch TV or internet coverage of the event
- explain to your children why you are doing this, that you don't want them to worry unnecessarily, and that adults are managing things
- provide alternative activities for your children to take them away from the media coverage, such as watching a different TV show or playing a game
- give your children information to help them to understand what's happened, why it's happened, how likely this is to happen to you and your family
- remind your children that while what's happening in the traumatic event is upsetting, there are also lots of good things happening in the world, though these don't always receive the same level of attention
- reassure your children that they're safe and that you're there to answer their questions
- provide support and comfort to them if they're upset or feeling unsafe.

Talking to your children and continuing to follow the normal routines and rhythms of your daily life are important ways to help them feel safe and secure. Keep in mind that if your children begin to show signs of excessive worry or distress at the media coverage they have seen, you may need to speak to your GP or another health professional.

This resource was written by Professor Beverley Raphael and Amanda Harris, with updates in June 2018 by Nicola Palfrey. Professor Beverley Raphael is a psychiatrist former Chairperson of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN). Amanda Harris is a psychologist and former Director of the ACATLGN. Nicola Palfrey is a clinical psychologist and Director of ACATLGN.



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# How to Cope with the Stress of Natural Disasters

## Have you been involved in a natural disaster?

Everyone needs support after being in or witnessing an event that may be traumatic, but everyone will be affected differently. It's important to find the right level or type of support for you.

You will find this information helpful when you consider what will help and what won't help – then you can make a plan for yourself. You can also talk with a trusted adult about getting the right sort of help if it all feels a bit much.

Tips\* for the initial days and weeks after a natural disaster:

- Ensure you're physically and emotionally safe, and be with those who are helpful to your wellbeing
- Engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and feeling grounded (use of drugs and/or alcohol can be counterproductive with this)
- Facilitate connection with others, especially those who help you feel okay
- Get involved in the repair and recovery of your community and family and friends. This can help foster a sense of hopefulness which is important to recovery.
- Be mindful of exposure to traumatic information through stories, traditional and social media. It can be helpful to take a break from the 24-hour news cycle.

\*5 Essential elements of immediate & midterm mass intervention: Empirical evidence. Hobfoll et al, 2007

## Common reactions to a natural disaster

Natural disasters can be hard to cope with and they can happen unexpectedly. Many people who have been through a natural disaster feel different emotions.

### Fear and anxiety

It's common to worry that the disaster, whether a flood, bushfire or cyclone, could happen again, or to find that you're not feeling safe.

### Grief and loss

There is no 'right' way to grieve for loved ones who have died or other major losses. It's very personal, very individual, and it's very much OK to grieve.

### Anger and confusion

It can be difficult to understand a natural disaster because the damage seems so unfair, and there's usually no-one to blame. This can make you feel frustrated, angry and confused.

### Sadness and emptiness

You might be sad about losing family members or friends, and perhaps your home and precious possessions. If you've been asked to stay away from your home, or if your friends are still away, or if your neighbourhood is badly damaged, feelings of sadness can turn to feelings of emptiness.

### Denial

When bad things have happened, some people prefer not to think about them at all. This might be a help to start with, but our feelings can catch us by surprise later on. It's OK to distract yourself, but also find some time to think about what has happened and how you're going.

## **Guilt**

You might feel guilty after a natural disaster. It might be about something that you did or didn't do at the time, or you might just feel bad about yourself. Sometimes you may feel guilty as people experienced loss or harm that you didn't.

## **Shock**

Shock makes you slow down. It's a common way our bodies react to keep us safe in the first few days after a disaster and feelings of shock may come and go over a few weeks. You might feel numb or out of yourself.

## **Other emotions**

You might start to withdraw from your family and friends, or perhaps start to get irritable with others, as you try to manage your emotions. Some young people use alcohol and other drugs to 'switch off', but this probably won't help them cope with the challenges ahead.

Thinking about the event all the time, and having trouble sleeping, are common after a traumatic experience, but if this happens for any length of time you should definitely seek some professional help. Your appetite can change as well: some people want to eat more, and others find they don't feel hungry.

## **How to look after yourself during a tough time?**

Have a routine. When everything feels 'a little out of control', a regular routine can help you manage things and make life seem more organised.

Allow yourself some 'worry time'. If you're constantly worrying about, or replaying the stressful event, then set aside some time to worry each day. At other times, remind yourself to leave these thoughts until later.

Set some realistic goals. You could break large goals down into small achievable steps. This will let you prove to yourself that you have the skills and strength to recover, and feel good about yourself.

Reduce alcohol and other drug use. Alcohol and other drugs can mask your feelings, but sometimes make your feelings stronger so that you're less able to manage.

Use your strengths and surround yourself with support. Everyone has strengths, and you can draw on yours. Surround yourself with people who are reassuring and comforting, and who allow you to be yourself.



# Supporting your Child after a Natural Disaster

Everyone needs some support after being in, or witnessing a natural disaster.

Information for parents/family members/friends of a child, adolescent or young person who has experienced a natural disaster.

Natural disasters are inevitable but uncommon. Everyone needs some support after being in, or witnessing a natural disaster, but everyone is different so the type or level of support they need is different and changes over time. If you are reading this fact sheet you are likely to be aware that it is important to seek support following natural disasters. It's great you want to support your child/young person. headspace encourages you to make sure you are also supporting yourself.

## Helpful tips\* for the initial days and weeks after exposure:

- Encourage young people to be physically and emotionally safe, and be with those who are helpful to their wellbeing
- Support young people to engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and feeling grounded (use of drugs and/or alcohol can be counterproductive with this)
- Facilitate connection with others, especially those who help young people feel okay
- Include young people in the repair and recovery of themselves, peers, families and your community. This can help foster a sense of hopefulness which is important to recovery.
- Be mindful of exposure to traumatic information through stories, traditional and social media. It can be helpful to take a break from the 24-hour news cycle.

\*5 Essential elements of immediate & midterm mass intervention: Empirical evidence. Hobfoll et al, 2007

## Common Reactions and Behaviours

### Grief and Loss

People who have survived a natural disaster often feel a sense of grief and loss, but there are no 'right' or 'wrong' feelings and they can vary markedly from one person to another. You may be supporting a child who has lost family members, friends, neighbours, pets, their homes and cherished possessions. Young people sometimes have trouble explaining their feelings, and they may seem 'cut off' or bewildered. They might feel they cannot grieve openly, particularly if others seem to have lost even more.

### Confusion, Guilt and Shame

Trying to understand a natural disaster can be confusing, especially for young people. This can make them feel angrier and more frightened as the days go by. Sometimes survivors of a disaster feel guilty that they have survived while others have not. Younger children sometimes feel a sense of personal responsibility, as if they caused the disaster in some way. Young people may feel ashamed of how they are feeling, and withdraw from other people or hide their feelings.

### Fear, Anxiety and Insecurity

Sometimes people feel anxious, frightened and unsafe for weeks or months after the disaster, despite being physically safe. This is a normal reaction to a frightening event, but it can add to a person's distress.

## **Reactions to Trauma**

Young people can 'act out' when they are grieving or traumatised. They can become aggressive or irritable, and start having problems at school. Alternatively, they might become withdrawn and 'clingy', and find it hard to separate themselves from family members.

Children might develop physical complaints like stomach aches and headaches in response to their distress. Some adolescents may self-harm, use drugs or alcohol, or develop eating disorders as a response to their emotions.

## **Reactions of Parents/Families**

Most people, of all ages, recover well from the emotional effects of natural disasters. Families, especially parents, have an important role in the healing process. But parents and families have their own problems to cope with, and you may find yourself juggling your own reactions to the disaster with your responsibilities for your child. Reactions can include:

- Guilt about not being able to shield your child from the effects of the disaster.
- Fear and anxiety about the continuing safety of your child.
- Negativity about the world in general, which you may not be able to conceal from your child.
- Impatience and frustration about your child making a slow recovery.

## **How to help your child**

### **Provide Stability**

Maintain some regular activities and encourage your child to eat, rest and sleep well. Explain what will happen today and the next day, as best you can, and write down a plan to remind them. Provide as much security as possible, by being around, giving your child time to talk, and by developing some comforting routines. Involve your child in choosing new belongings, and perhaps remember old toys and other treasured possessions with a 'goodbye ceremony'.

### **Offer Reassurance**

Tell your child about what is being done to help the whole community. When possible, reassure them that their friends and other family members are safe, and contact them if you can.

### **Normalise, but don't Minimise**

It can be a relief for young people to know that their feelings are normal, but be careful to acknowledge and respect their emotions. Do not dismiss or minimise the intensity and importance of their reactions.

### **Explain gently, create a shared story**

When your child is calm and feeling safe you can talk about how natural disasters are random and unpredictable. Correct any confused explanations of the disaster your child may have.

Give your child the chance to talk about what they miss and what they have lost, but do not push them to talk. Acknowledge that what has happened is not 'fair'. If you have lost loved ones, tell them enough details so there are no 'secrets', without causing extra distress.

Young children might need only a small amount of information, but they do need reassurance that natural disasters are uncommon and they are now safe. Try not to discuss worrying 'adult' issues about the disaster in front of young children.

### **Use your Child's Strengths and Likes**

Talk about the strengths you know your child has, and how they can use them. For example, they might like to draw or tell stories, so let them do this to explain what has happened and how they are feeling. It's quite okay to talk about how the disaster has affected you, and how you are trying to get life back on track.

### **Be Available**

Make time to be with your child, to do normal things, and to have some quiet time with them. Try to be available emotionally, although this can sometimes be hard when you, too, have a lot to cope with. If you seem anxious, it can reinforce their view that the world is unsafe. At the same time, allow your child some space, and some time to themselves.

### **Encourage coping skills**

Encourage your child to step back from their problems or negative feelings and think of ways to reduce their distress. Help them work out ways to solve problems, and find ways to relax and reduce their anxiety.

### **Be a Role Model**

Look after yourself and be true to how you feel. Try to keep your life as structured as possible. If you can, put off big decisions until you feel more stable. Get enough rest, and talk with friends, family and health professionals if you're feeling overwhelmed. Don't forget that caregivers need care too.

### **When to get help**

You should think about getting help if your child is having difficulties more than about six weeks after the disaster, or is not functioning well in normal activities. Services such as your local doctor, community health centre, school counsellor or local mental health service can provide advice and assistance.

Seek immediate help if you think your child is at risk, for example of self-harm. Call your local hospital, emergency services, Lifeline (13 11 14) or Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800).

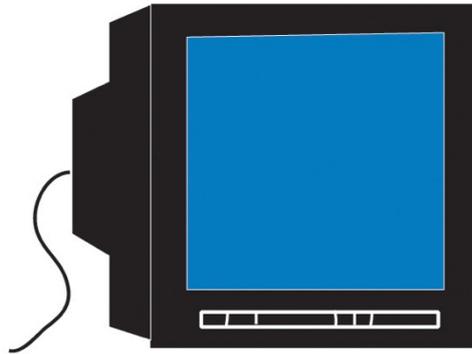


# **Bush Fire Social Story**



There have been fires burning near my house.

television



My family and I watch the news and see fires burning near my house.



I can see and smell smoke in the air and sometimes it is hard to breathe.

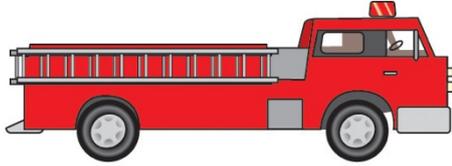


The sky may be red and it may get dark.



Mummy or Daddy will take care of me  
and make sure that we are safe from  
the fire.

fire truck

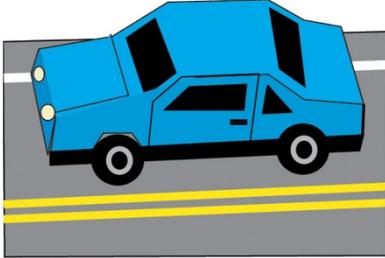


Firefighters will look after the fire.



When I feel scared or confused I can ask my parents to tell me what is happening.

car



suitcase



We may have to pack up our belongings and special things.

wave



home



Sometimes we may have to leave our house. Our parents will make sure that we and our pets are safe.



We may have to go to a safe place.



Sometimes friends or family might stay with us because it's safe at our house.



It will be okay.



**Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre Inc**

Access to Justice  
ABN 85 989 128 796

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## **FREE LEGAL HELP**

**Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre** is open and can provide assistance - you can receive advice, information and referrals from our Centre.

Call us on **1800 229 529** to get advice or to make an appointment.

Or email [info@shoalcoast.org.au](mailto:info@shoalcoast.org.au)

**Legal Aid NSW has also set up the disaster recovery assistance line**

**1800 801 529**

For anyone needing urgent advice with insurance claims, social security entitlements or any other urgent legal matters arising from the current fires.

See also their website on legal help for victims of natural disasters with lots of useful links:

<https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/get-legal-help/legal-help-for-victims-of-natural-disasters>

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