



Looking After Yourself

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Everyone knows about the 2009 Victorian Bushfires and how they swept through and changed many communities and lives. Many people were touched by the fire in some way, but not everyone knows how it feels to experience this personally – like you do.

You may have experienced personal loss and significant change in your life because of these fires. You may have lost friends/family, lost your home or pets, or you may have to attend a different school or sporting ground because of the fires. With all these changes it is normal to have strong emotional reactions. They might include:

- Anxiety
- Feeling 'revved up'
- Tiredness
- Feeling irritable
- Being hyper-alert
- Being generally more emotional
- Sleeping problems
- Being more easily frightened
- Your appetite going up or down
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Withdrawing from family and/or friends

The intensity of these feelings and reactions will often reduce over time, but some people may experience them for 6 - 12 months or even longer. As the next bushfire season approaches, for some the feelings may even begin to re- emerge. It is different for everyone.

Because everyone's experience is different, what will help will also vary. Some people will just need some practical help and then they will be back on track, while others may need longer term help.

What can help?

After experiencing a traumatic event it is important to feel safe and secure in your living environment. It's also important to look after yourself. Doing your best to return to 'normal', can also really help your recovery.

Some things that can help you to recover include:

- Eating well, and maintaining regular routines
- Returning to work and/or study (maybe cutting back the number of hours you are doing for a while until you feel more able to cope)
- Doing things that help you to relax and that you enjoy
- Spending time with friends and family
- Keeping regular sleep patterns
- Limiting how much news you listen to (listening to stories about bushfires can be helpful, but it can also make you more stressed).

Finally, talking about your experience can also help you to recover, but you need to do this at your own pace and in your own time. You could talk with someone you trust about your experience, or you may prefer to talk to a health professional at one of the local health centres or local councils.

What doesn't help

Things that won't help you to recover include using alcohol or drugs - this will often make you feel worse.

Doing too much can also leave you feeling exhausted and overwhelmed, so make sure you are taking it easy.

It is not a great time to make any major life decisions. Leave these decisions until you are more settled and have time and energy to think through your options.

When to seek professional help

It's important to be able to recognize the signs that tell you that you would benefit by getting help with your experiences. Signs that you need professional help can include:

- If you are feeling like you can't cope
- If you need to talk with someone independent
- If you are experiencing lots of the emotional reactions listed above
- If some of the emotional reactions listed above have been going on for more than one month
- If you can't do your normal study/work
- If you are feeling hopeless and that you can't keep going
- If you are thinking of harming yourself or someone else

Recovery

Recovering from a trauma such as the bushfires can take a little while, but some things that might help you along the way include:

- Setting realistic goals
- Talking about ups and downs
- Making a plan to manage any stressful times (like anniversaries)

The most important thing to remember is that it can take some time for these feelings to go away but there is always help available if you need it.

Helping Others

Remember that each person has their own way of coping but often you will find yourself offering help to others around you.

Sometimes the best way you can help is to be there to listen when they want to talk and offer practical support, like offering to help out with day to day tasks, or perhaps reminding people to have a rest or to try to get back to what they enjoy doing.

Sometimes just asking people if they are ok helps people to see that help is around when they need it.

Where to get help

For more information about the bushfires and what help is available to you log onto:

- www.headspace.org.au/bushfirespace
Information and ideas about getting help
- www.kidshelpline.com.au
Information and online counselling
- www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire
Details about Victorian bushfire supports
- www.health.vic.gov.au/mhal
Information about the Mental Health Advice Line
- www.dhs.vic.gov.au/bushfireappeal/Fund-Payments/support-payments
Details about how to access counselling