

10-year anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires

Health practitioners toolkit

10 YEAR
ANNIVERSARY
OF THE
2009 VICTORIAN
BUSHFIRES



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Purpose

In early 2019 it will be ten years since many Victorians experienced the worst bushfires in our nation's history.

The 10-year anniversary is a time for us all to reflect and remember the more than 170 people who died, and commemorate the people who are still recovering from this event.

The Department of Health and Human Services, on behalf of the Victorian Government, is working to ensure anyone affected during the anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires knows how they can access the support that's best for them. This includes creation of this Health Practitioners Toolkit which aims to assist those providing support to affected community members.

Resources

You can order the following resources for free by visiting [2009 Victorian bushfires communications toolkit](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery) <www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery>

- A3 poster for display
- DL brochure on recovering from long-term trauma
- Yellow ribbons (limited numbers)

Information packs can also be downloaded from the 10-year anniversary of the [2009 Victorian bushfires communications toolkit](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery) <www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery> including the following:

- Media and communication draft content, tools and resources including an email signature block
- Digital copies of posters, fact sheets and brochures.
- A health and wellbeing information pack (aimed at practitioners)
- A conversation starter pack – helping guide discussions



Health
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Tips for communicating with impacted community members

The community will look to you to help them make sense of their reactions to the 10 year anniversary, and for information to access the support services available to them.

You may notice more people being referred on a mental health plan, or for treatments related to stress, depression, anxiety, grief, and trauma.

- Many of those directly impacted by the bushfires have experienced trauma, loss and disruption to their lives. Their recovery will be complex and unique to their own circumstances.
- Some people's trauma will be compounded by other things they are experiencing, such as the financial and emotional impacts of drought, or fears around experiencing another bushfire.
- It is important to be sensitive to the complexity of long-term recovery and the disruption traumatic events have, and continues to have, on people's lives.
- For some the loss is profound, and includes loved ones, property, business, pets, animals, environment, lifestyle, friends or all of the above.
- Some people find it hard to grieve and don't realise just how disrupted their lives have become until something happens that forces them to stop and reflect.
- The way a person reacts, including their emotional response, and the time it takes to recover, depends on many things. This includes the amount of available support for the person, other stressors being experienced in the person's life, the existence of certain personality traits, and whether the person has had other traumatic experiences.
- Anniversaries and other events which remind us of the initial traumatic event can bring up the same strong feelings of grief, trauma, guilt and loss.
- These feelings are completely normal, and for most people, they will subside after a few weeks on their own, as part of the body's natural healing processes.
- There are strategies people can use to cope with these strong feelings, including accepting that they have had a distressing or frightening experience, rest, exercise and talking with friends, family and other trusted community members.

Q&As

What kind of services will be provided to people living in affected communities?

The Department of Health and Human Services is providing support through existing, trusted, local service providers wherever possible to make sure communities have access to services which are tailored to their needs.

These include counselling services; mental health, alcohol and other drugs counselling; community engagement activities; and GP locums.

To find out what support is available for community members contact your Primary Health Network, relevant college or referral providers.

What events will be taking place to acknowledge the 10-year anniversary?

A state commemoration event will be held at the Royal Exhibition building on 4 February 2019. More details will be made available closer to the date at www.vic.gov.au/2009-bushfires.

Local events are being coordinated by councils – please contact your municipality offices for more details.

What support will be available at commemorative events?

Australian Red Cross and Victorian Council of Churches volunteers will be available to support commemorative or community events being held across the state during February 2019. They will be on the ground providing psychosocial first aid.

What support measures are in place to support the health sector?

Employee Assistance Programs have been boosted where requested, and additional training is available.

Please contact your service provider, your Primary Health Network or peak body for assistance.

What telephone counselling options do people have?

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- GriefLine 1300 845 745
- BeyondBlue 1300 224 636

Are there any take-home resources I can give to community members?

Our 'recovering from long-term trauma' brochure is available to order free of charge. It provides information on dealing with traumatic events and recovery as well as consumer information and contacts for services. You can order printed copies, instantly print a PDF version, or find an accessible version from [10-year anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires communications toolkit](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery) <www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery>.

Where can I go for more information?

There's more information about the anniversary available at [Anniversary of the 2009 Bushfires](http://www.vic.gov.au/2009-bushfires) <www.vic.gov.au/2009-bushfires>.

Key Messages

- Almost 10 years ago, many Victorians experienced the worst heatwave and bushfires in our nation's history. Tragically, 173 people lost their lives in the fires, and many more were injured, lost their homes or their livelihoods.
- As the anniversary approaches, people may experience different emotional and physical reactions. These feelings are normal and, on most occasions, will subside again within a few weeks as part of the body's natural healing and recovery processes.
- There are strategies you can use to manage these strong feelings, including accepting that you have had a distressing or frightening experience, rest, exercise and talking with friends, family and other trusted community members. You can find out more about health, wellbeing and trauma recovery strategies at the [Better Health Channel](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) <www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>.
- It's important to remember everyone's journey through recovery is different, and for many, recovery remains an ongoing challenge.
- Some people may also feel more anxious, stressed or nervous because of new bushfire

risks and drought this summer - particularly if they live in a bushfire prone area or have been affected by other bushfires.

- If you know someone who was affected by the 2009 bushfires, it's a good idea to check in on them to see if they are ok. People find it helpful to know that family and friends are thinking of them and talking and providing support can be beneficial.
- If you or a loved one need some extra support during this time, do not be afraid to speak up and reach out. There are many places you can go to for help. Depending on the challenges you are experiencing, you can speak with your local doctor, a mental health professional or call Lifeline on 13 11 14.
- If you are supporting someone who is finding this time difficult, it's important to remember you are not alone. There are many places you can go to for advice or help, including your local doctor, mental health support services, and accessing information and resources online. For example, [Better Health Channel](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) <www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au> and [Sane](http://www.sane.org) <www.sane.org>.

Long-term trauma

- Any event that involves danger, fear and unexpected loss results in the body going into a state of heightened arousal. This 'emergency mode' involves a series of internal alarms being turned on. Emergency mode gives people access to a lot of energy in a short period of time to maximise the chance of survival.
- Most people only stay in emergency mode for a short period of time or until the immediate threat has passed. Afterwards, it is common for people to feel deep exhaustion afterwards.
- For some people, emergency mode does not switch off. Distressing reactions can be triggered by memories and other reminders. When this continues, to cope with the stress and the fatigue, people begin to try to control it through avoidance or closing off their feelings. This does not help the underlying problem and in time it can cause an increase in stress and cause problems in other areas of their life.

To receive this publication in an accessible format, [email Emergency Management Communications](mailto:em.comms@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <em.comms@dhhs.vic.gov.au>

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Available at [10-year anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires - communications toolkit](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery)
<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery>