

Starting the conversation

How to talk about the 10-year anniversary of the Victorian bushfires

10 YEAR
ANNIVERSARY
OF THE
2009 VICTORIAN
BUSHFIRES



Contents

What happened?.....	1
What can I expect around the anniversary.....	1
I think I might need support but don't know where to start.....	1
What can I say to someone who was affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires?.....	2
Do I need professional help?	4
Useful contacts.....	4

What happened?

Almost 10 years ago, many Victorians experienced the worst bushfires in our nation's history. Tragically, 173 people died in the 2009 Victorian bushfires and many more people were injured, lost their homes, property, pets and livelihoods.

What can I expect around the anniversary?

As the anniversary approaches, it is normal to experience different emotional and physical reactions. You may notice people you know or in your community who seem stressed, anxious, sad or just not quite themselves. If you were impacted by the 2009 bushfires, you may feel or behave differently to how you would normally.

Anniversaries can bring back the same feelings of loss, grief, stress and anxiety experienced at the time of the bushfires.

In most cases, strong feelings will subside within a few weeks as part of the body's natural healing and recovery processes. Sometimes though, these feelings don't subside or they can be overwhelming, and that is when people may need extra support.

It's also important to remember everyone's journey through recovery is different, and for many, recovery remains an ongoing challenge.

I think I might need support but don't know where to start

It's great that you have recognised it might be beneficial to talk to someone. There are many ways you can get support. The Victorian Government is working with local councils and trusted service providers to deliver health and mental health support to affected communities. These include counselling services; mental health, alcohol and other drugs counselling; community engagement activities; and GPs.



Health
and Human
Services

You might like to begin by:

- calling family or friends
- talking to trusted members of your community
- going online and looking at information on the Victorian Bushfires website (www.vic.gov.au/2009-bushfires) or the Better Health Channel (betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
- making an appointment with your GP or visiting your local community health centre

How can I start a conversation about my experience with the 2009 Victorian Bushfires?

You might like to say:

'Did you know it's been ten years since the 2009 Victorian bushfires and sometimes I still think about it like it was just yesterday?'

'I was affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires and with the anniversary coming up, I'd really like to talk through some of the thoughts I am having at the moment and how I'm feeling.'

'I am finding the lead up to the anniversary of the bushfires tough.'

'Over the next few weeks in the lead up to the anniversary of the 2009 bushfires, I might need someone to talk to – is it ok for me to call you?'

'Would you come with me to one of the anniversary events?'

What can I do to help someone who was affected by the 2009 Victorian 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.

Conversations around traumatic incidents like bushfires can feel uncomfortable, but it is important to just let people know you are there for them if they need to talk. It's also ok if what you say isn't perfect – just give lots of opportunity for the other person to talk if they want to.

Sometimes, just giving people an opportunity to feel heard and acknowledged and to know that support is there for them is enough to make a big difference.

You may not have been personally affected by the 2009 bushfires, but most of us have had a time in our life where we have felt sad, guilty, fearful or anxious. Try to remember how you felt in those moments and the things that helped you.

- If the other person wants to talk, it's ok to ask questions about how they feel.
- Listen carefully and be sensitive to the other person's situation. Be guided by them as to what is and isn't ok to talk about.
- If the other person doesn't want to talk, try talking about general topics. They may need more time to feel comfortable.
- Sometimes, just trying is the most important thing. You don't even have to talk – a hug, sitting with someone, a cup of tea or dropping a hot meal on their doorstep can mean the world.

You might like to begin with:

'Hello – I've been thinking of you lately and wondering how you've been.'

'Hi, I'm thinking of going to one of the events to remember the Victorian Bushfires and was wondering if you might like to come with me?'

'Hi there. I saw some information the other day about the 10th anniversary of the Victorian Bushfires and I remembered your experience. How have you been?'

'Hello - I know the ten-year anniversary of the bushfire is coming up soon and I wanted to let you know I've been thinking about what happened to you and if that might be affecting you now?.'

'Hi – I know the anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires is coming up and I've been thinking of you. It's difficult to know the right thing to say, but I love you and I'm here for you.'

Some questions you might like to ask:

'Would you like to do anything in particular for the anniversary?'

'Have you considered attending one of the memorial events?'

'How have you been feeling in the lead up to the anniversary?'

'What support have you got at this time?'

'When is a good time to next speak?'

'What's the best thing I can do to support you?'

Some things you might like to say:

Acknowledge the pain and loss of the other person – don't try to fix it, just listen.

'I can't believe it's been ten years since Jeff died.'

'You've done such a great job continuing to live your life since the fires, and it hasn't been easy.'

'I'm really proud of you. It has been really challenging and you've been really brave.'

Tell them it's normal to have strong physical and emotional reactions.

'Anniversaries are tough – it's normal to be finding this time difficult'

'All the experts say sleep and exercise can help – what has been working for you?'

'Anniversaries can bring up all the same feelings of trauma, but they should subside in a few weeks on their own as part of the body's natural healing processes.'

Make sure they have support –whether that's you, friends or family, someone in their community, a health professional or, a combination of help.

'There's support available if you need it.'

'There's lots of information about how to get support online'

'Would you like me to make a doctor's appointment for you?'

'What would help you right now?'

Do I need professional help?

People should make an appointment to see their GP if they or someone they know is:

- feeling overwhelmed and are unable to handle their intense feelings or physical sensations
- showing physical stress symptoms
- re-experiencing vivid flashbacks of the event
- find that relationships with family and friends are suffering
- very negative and unoptimistic and is saying that they can't see the good in anything anymore
- using more alcohol or drugs
- being physically or verbally violent
- experiencing other significant changes in their behaviour.

Useful contacts

General telephone counselling services

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

Online resources

- [Better Health Channel <www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
- [Sane <www.sane.org>](http://www.sane.org)
- Mental Health First Aid Australia [<www.mhfa.com.au>](http://www.mhfa.com.au)

Family violence

- If you are in immediate danger, call 000.
- National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling service on 1800 737 732 (1800 RESPECT).

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

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place Melbourne.

© State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, January 2019.

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)