

Victorian Bushfires Case Support Program

This program is free - and we encourage you to get in touch.

Support coordinators will be a single point of contact, working with local residents to link them directly with vital support, such as information and advice, mental health support or financial counselling.

They will also help with practical things like filling out paperwork, accessing grants and financial claims, and navigating services.

People in fire-affected areas in Gippsland and North East Victoria are eligible. The program also includes support for people who may have been impacted by the bushfires in these areas but live in other parts of Victoria.

To access this service, contact [1800 560 760](tel:1800560760).

10 free counselling sessions

Individuals, families and emergency service workers in East Gippsland Shire can access up to 10 free and confidential counselling sessions without a GP referral.

To access the service, phone [1800 001 068](tel:1800001068) or email bushfiresupport@rav.org.au

Other counselling services

LifeLine - phone [13 43 57](tel:134357) - A 24-hour telephone service that offers confidential support and advice to help you deal with stress and personal challenges.

Beyondblue information line - phone [1300 224 636](tel:1300224636) - An information line that offers expert information on depression, how to recognise the signs of depression, how to get help, how to help someone else and how to stay well.

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre - phone [1800 015 188](tel:1800015188) - provides confidential support and information for women and children living with family

violence or to anyone who knows a person living with family violence.

Mensline - phone [1300 789 978](tel:1300789978) - A telephone support, information and referral service, helping men deal with their relationship problems.

Nurse-on-Call - phone [1300 606 024](tel:1300606024) - A 24-hour telephone service that allows people to discuss any health-related issue with a registered nurse for the cost of a local call.

Kids Help Line - phone [1800 551 800](tel:1800551800) - A 24-hour telephone service that provides phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5-25.

Phone Triple Zero ([000](tel:000)) if you or someone you know is in immediate danger.

Family violence

Family violence can happen to anyone. It's not your fault. Family violence is most commonly carried out by men against women who are their current or former partners. This is known as intimate partner violence. Women and children are at increased risk of family violence before, during and after a disaster. Feeling stressed or angry is no excuse for family violence or sexual assault.

Family violence can also be carried out by:

- people, including family members, who provide support for people with disabilities
- adult children against their elderly parent(s)
- young people against their parents
- people in same-sex relationships
- family members against others in their extended family
- siblings

Family violence affects children even if they're not physically hurt. Even if they don't directly see or hear the abuse, they know it's happening and are affected by living in a tense or scary home.

Family violence can include:

- physical and sexual abuse
- emotional, psychological, cultural or spiritual abuse

- financial abuse like withholding money
- controlling what you can and cannot do
- isolating you from family and friends
- stopping you from leaving the house
- threatening you or other people like children or extended family members
- harming things you love like pets or personal belongings

How to access support

Dial [000](#) if you are in immediate danger.

You can contact these services if you or someone you know needs help or support:

safe steps – [1800 015 188](#) (24 hours a day, seven days a week) – for women and children who are victims of family violence

1800 Respect – [1800 737 732](#) (24 hours a day, seven days a week) – for people experiencing or at risk of experiencing sexual assault, domestic or family violence

Men's Referral Service – [1300 766 491](#) (8am to 9pm Monday to Friday; 9am to 5pm Saturday and Sunday) – for men using controlling behaviour

Sexual Assault Crisis Line – [1800 806 292](#) (24 hours a day, seven days a week) – for victims of sexual assault

Child Protection – [13 12 78](#) (5pm to 9am Monday to Friday, 24 hours on weekends and public holidays) – for children and young people whose safety is at risk

Disability support

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) can support National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants once people are out of immediate danger.

Phone the NDIA Contact Centre on [1800 800 110](#) for information and advice on how to assist participants impacted by bushfires.

Aboriginal Victorians



The Bushfire Recovery Aboriginal Reference Group is a community-led group, established to work collaboratively in meeting the needs of bushfire-affected Aboriginal community members.

Information regarding support and access will be distributed shortly. It will focus on:

- culturally informed and holistic healing
- healing Country
- caring for elders and carers
- cultural heritage restoration
- rebuilding Aboriginal community infrastructure
- resourcing support for the ACCO sector
- financial relief funding for Aboriginal individuals and families
- housing stress
- residential Aboriginal communities
- economic development


For more information, contact Aboriginal Victoria on [1800 762 003](tel:1800762003).

Children and young people



For children and young people

It's okay to feel stressed and confused after a disaster. If you feel this way, you should talk to your parents or guardians about it.

Headspace is a national youth mental health program and they have a lot of information on their [How to cope with the stress of natural disasters webpage](#). They provide this advice about dealing with the stress of the bushfires:

- talk with a trusted adult about getting the right sort of help if it all feels a bit much
- do things that make you feel 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 alcohol and other drugs can be counterproductive with this). Look for ways to include some routine and re-engage with pre-exposure activities as much as possible (e.g., playing games or sports, hobbies, etc.)
- find ways to connect with others, especially those who help you feel OK
- explore ways to get involved with repair and recovery of your community, and family and friends. This can help foster a sense of hope 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

There are people in the community who you can talk to directly:

- Kids Help Line – phone [1800 551 800](tel:1800551800) – a 24-hour telephone service that provides phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5-25

For parents and guardians

Children can feel overwhelmed and devastated when directly affected by bushfires or from the scenes that emerge afterwards. Sometimes, they don't have ways of understanding what they see and can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of anxiety, stress and sadness.

At the same time, children can also have a natural ability to be resilient and adapt to challenging events.

Here are some signs to look out for:

- a child becoming more clingy towards a parent or carer
- changes to sleeping or eating patterns, or both
- the emergence of new physical complaints – such as stomach ache or headache
- changes in mood – such as being more easily irritable, or shutting down
- changes in a child's behaviour or learning at school
- appearing on edge and frightened – for example, being more easily startled, developing new fears, having nightmares or regression in behaviour

If you (or one of your child's carers) notice these or other changes then it is important to ask the child what they are worried about. Talk to them in a way that is open and appropriate to their age. Listen to their questions and fears and show them that you understand.

If you are concerned and need assistance you can get help from:

- your doctor
- local community health centre
- psychologist
- Beyond Blue ([1300 224 636](tel:1300224636))

COVID-19

We urge all Victorians in bushfire-affected areas to observe any restrictions and advice announced by the Victorian Government. If you suspect you have COVID-19, call the dedicated hotline on [1800 675 398](tel:1800675398).

Tips from Dr Rob Gordon

Dr Rob Gordon is a clinical psychologist and expert in mental health, first aid and supporting people affected by bushfires. He has been working alongside BRV providing advice and support for bushfire-affected communities.

The session below provides tips and advice for communities preparing for tourists and visitors returning to the area after a bushfire event.

Tourists Returning to Bushfire Areas: Protecting Business and Self-Care

Tourists and visitors returning to bushfire affected areas create mixed feelings. They are welcomed as a sign of normality and good business, but their reactions can cause problems and stressful encounters. It is a predictable tension. Sometimes tourism providers welcome them while the rest of the community feels intruded upon, or the same people feel both reactions at different times depending on how their visitors respond.

These notes draw on experience working with tourist businesses over a number of disasters to offer pointers to manage the experience and offer strategies to deal with the stresses.

What to expect from tourists

People coming into a community affected by disaster typically display a range of responses.

1. **Empathy and compassion:** especially if they are informed on the nature of the event and the losses sustained. Empathy helps a person draw on their experiences and relate the impact to something they have been through themselves. Those who have empathy are likely to respect privacy and wait to be invited to talk about it. Sometimes they have their own emotional associations to the place from the past.
2. **Curiosity:** Their awareness of the drama makes them want to know more about it to understand what it was actually like. They often want to satisfy their curiosity and overlook the impact that their inquiry might have on those who went through it.
3. **Excitement and sensationalism:** Many people have stable, secure lives and have not been exposed to violent natural events except through the media. They are excited to think they are where it all happened, and locals are sources of information. Their excitement makes them overlook what locals went through. Excitements override privacy and blocks awareness of the potential lingering emotional distress.

What tactless or unaware tourists say

There a number of typical responses which can be expected.

1. **Inquisitive:** They genuinely want to know about the events. They ask questions like what happened, were you there, what was it like.
2. **Personal inquiries:** They imagine the person in front of them in the disaster and want to know about them. They ask, did you lose your house, do you know anyone who lost theirs, did you have to evacuate, did you fear for your life? They are unaware that such questions take the person back into a traumatic and distressing experience.
3. **Hurtful questions:** These show how unaware the questioner is about the effects of traumatic and tragic events. Their overriding interest is to satisfy their curiosity and feed their interest. They ask are you still affected, how come things have not been rebuilt, it's been months now you should be over it, it doesn't look that bad, you weren't affected were you, you would be better to get on and forget about it rather than dwell on it.

Such questions and comments come from the interest and excitement often equated with media (“it was unreal – just like a movie”). They have no relevant experience to relate to what local people have been through. They are unable to imagine what it was like and equate it with lesser crises they have been through. They don’t know how long genuine recovery takes and emotional and personal recovery continue long after things seem back to normal.

Some people feel threatened by uncontrollable threatening events, and need to make light of it, and imply if they had been there, they would have dealt with it better, quicker or more effectively. Minimising or denying reality is a common way of avoiding the pain of tragic and traumatic events.

What can be done about it?

Expect and prepare for tactless, uninformed comments. Prepare materials ahead of time that might provide information about what happened or answer common questions. A sign on the counter may tactfully indicate staff prefer not to discuss the day of the disaster, but the information is available in the information sheet available there.

Such information can provide facts, photographs and personal accounts of the event. It provides a focus for any conversation and information does not need to come from the staff member. It reduces the opportunity for questions. A statement about the particular circumstances of the premises may be added to it.

A brief statement about the emotional impact might also be made available such as:

“Welcome to our community and to the local Café. We hope you enjoy your stay. Please be aware the events of the recent fires were distressing to many people in this community and although we are well on the road to recovery, many people still feel hurt and sensitive to questions about it. Please respect the privacy of the community.”

In order to avoid repeatedly answering the same questions, a sheet of contact information can provide details of where further information can be obtained for people who want to know more, including local and state media, local websites and local government resources.

It is helpful for tourism providers in an area to exchange experiences and develop a list of common questions they are being asked. Instead of having to improvise answers while busy serving them, simple scripts can be developed that provide

answers but do not reveal unnecessary detail and direct attention away from sensitive issues.

Prepare simple, polite responses that can protect from intrusion such as:

“Thanks for asking but it’s still a bit raw to discuss – there is information at the information centre that may provide what you are looking for.”

“I’d rather not talk about it if you don’t mind, it brings it all up again and we are focusing on the future.”

“Yes, it was a terrible time for everyone, but now we’re focused on getting back to normal.”

Responding to hurtful or intrusive questions

- Be prepared - someone will inevitably ask them.
- De-personalise them - remember that anyone in your situation would feel as you do and the person asking is unaware of what they are saying.
- Recognise the questioner’s lack of experience of trauma and tragedy and unawareness of their effects.
- Protect your boundaries, preserve your role as the business provider and focus on the service you are providing.
- Try not to show emotion which may further stimulate the person. Some people feel guilt when they cause upset and then protect themselves by blaming the person they have hurt.
- Have short, simple responses ready that clarify your position while allowing the questioner to keep their dignity – usually ignorance is the basis of the questions.
- Have some jokes ready to distract and throw them off serious questions such as, “yes it certainly put us off BBQ’s for a few weeks!” or “Well I’ve given up smoking, so I don’t think about it!”
- Share jokes, anecdotes, answers and sayings so everyone can use them.

Managing emotions

Be prepared for the emotions that may be roused: hurt at the insensitivity, anger at the intrusion, impatience that it is the same dumb question again, sadness at reminders of loss.

Have a few techniques to restore your emotional control:

- Breathe slow and deeply, speak calmly, think about what you will say.
- Focus on the here and now such as what the person is asking and how to answer them not on your memories
- Have a few strategies up your sleeve such as suddenly interrupting the conversation with “Oh excuse me just a moment, I can hear the phone out the back/I think something’s boiled over” so you can step out of the immediate situation for a moment to compose yourself.
- Ask a colleague to take over for a moment (if there is one)
- Take a short break if you are feeling a build-up of emotion – people are used to waiting for a few moments and that may make all the difference.

Recognise and take care of your own stress as you get back to business

Develop a simple briefing process for yourself and your staff before the start of a day or shift to think about likely stresses that will come with the routine work with questions people are likely to ask. Make sure materials needed are available and everyone knows where they are and remind everyone about the responses you have learned to use to manage the intrusions.

Build a support network of people with whom you can share your experiences, frustrations and hurt feelings. Others in the same business can be supportive of work-related stresses.

Share the experience by having opportunities to talk, discuss, debrief and solve problems.

Report responses you found worked well and seek ideas for situations where you were not sure what to say. Others can often help to find words or phrases that work.

Use business networks to arrange access to trained professionals to be available to conduct debriefings or support sessions about difficult encounters. These might include staff from several businesses. Remember if staff groups are under stress it is often expressed as interpersonal tensions and conflict. Such sessions help work through the impact, help learning and preparation for new events and better prepared.

Support processes are most effective when they are provided before things become too intense and repeated regularly.

Self-Care

Some simple self-care strategies will reduce the cumulative impact of these stresses:

- take regular time out
- preserve a sense of humour
- be part of a supportive group
- have ways of managing emotion when it is raised
- focus on making the interaction successful for your business
- remember as things normalise these questions will reduce, but there will be people who will come a long time after who will be curious

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