

Helping your children cope with the after effects of the bush fire disaster

How children react and how you can help

When disaster strikes everyone is affected. Knowing how to recognise trauma reactions in children and respond to these in a caring and supportive way can lessen the stress for all involved.

"My son has been waking in the middle of the night upset after having bad dreams that the house is on fire"

What is normal?

Trauma reactions to natural disasters such as bush fires may appear immediately after the event or they may arise over the weeks following the event. Reactions can vary greatly. The loss of treasured possessions, pets, and sense of security can be felt very strongly. The sorts of reactions you can expect include: nightmares, fear of the darkness, clinging to parents, loss or increase in appetite, aggressive behaviour, competition with siblings for parental attention, withdrawal, loss of interest in regular activities, and sleep disturbances.

There may be other reactions that your child could be experiencing. These reactions may vary according to a child's age.

Children 5 years and under

Children 5 years and under have a tendency to be strongly affected by their parents' reactions. At this age children are unable to protect themselves, as a result, fear can arise, and your child may become anxious when separated from you.

Children 6–11 years

At this age children are able to understand loss and permanent change. Their anxiety can be high, this may be linked to the fire or it may cross over into unrelated areas. Other reactions could be: regressive behaviour (eg. thumb sucking), refusing

to go to school, outbursts of anger, depression, feeling numb, physical complaints that have no medical basis, and concentration difficulties resulting in poor school work.

Children/adolescents 12–18 years

This age group may have reactions similar to those of adults. Reactions may be: flashbacks, avoiding anything that may remind them of the traumatic experience, anti social behaviour, rebellion, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, agitation or decrease of energy, change in friends, substance abuse. A young person in this age group may also feel guilty at being unable to 'stop the fire' or 'save the house'. Difficulty talking about thoughts and feelings is common.

"I don't know what to do about my daughter's behaviour, she won't do any of her jobs and gets really angry and abusive"

What can I do to help?

There are things you can do to help your children recover from the trauma. Let your children know about your own feelings through the fires. If you were scared it is good to let them know this as it will allow them to feel OK about any fears that they have. Letting your child know that it is normal to

feel upset after a terrible experience, such as a fire, is a good place to start. Encourage your children to express their feelings and listen to them without passing judgement. If your child is unable to discuss their feelings don't force them to, but let them know you are there to listen when they are ready. Patience and tolerance lets your child know what they are experiencing is normal. Reassure your child that you love them and that they are not responsible for what happened.

If your child is experiencing regressive behaviours do not criticise by saying "You're behaving like a baby" this will only discourage them from opening up.

Include your child in making plans for the future and cleaning up any destruction to your home.

Talk to your child's teacher so that you can work together in supporting your child through this terrible time.

Keep as much as possible to regular routines and activities. This provides the child with a sense that things will return to normal and helps to reduce their anxiety following the disaster.

Children, particularly those up to around 11 years, look to their parents for security. It is helpful to let them see that you are now in control of the situation. For example, by making plans for future safety.

Helping different age groups

Immediately following a traumatic event children often need extra attention and reassurance. Be sensitive to these needs and over time allow the level of attention to return to normal. The following tips provide a few guidelines:

5 years and under

- give plenty of hugs and affection
- spend time together doing activities they enjoy
- spend extra time with them before they go to bed

- allow them to share a bedroom until they can return to their own without fear.

6–11 years old

- allow time to play with adults and friends
- encourage discussion of events with adults and friends
- temporarily relax your expectations of them
- include them in rehearsing plans for future disasters.

12–18 years old

- allow time for individual attention
- temporarily relax your expectations of them both at home and school
- encourage structured and non-stressful activities either alone or with friends
- allow them to talk about the bushfires, but do not insist if they don't want to
- young people can gain a sense of control over the situation if they are able to contribute to some aspect of getting things back to normal.

When should I consider further help?

Most children will adapt and grow through traumatic experiences with caring and support from family, friends and teachers.

If you become aware of very severe reactions that are continuing for more than a few days or if less severe reactions have continued consistently for a period of more than 6 weeks you may need to consider seeking professional help.

Where do I go for further help?

Contact your GP or the Child and Adolescent health service in your Area Health Service. If you would like further help finding an appropriate referral contact **Lifeline's Just ask on 1300 13 11 14 or your local Lifeline 24-hour telephone counselling service on 13 11 14.**

We invite your feedback and comments. Call 1300 13 11 14

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