



**MENTAL
HEALTH
FIRST AID**
Australia

These guidelines are designed to help members of the public to provide mental health first aid to someone who is experiencing distress related to Australia's bushfire crisis.

The role of a mental health first aider is to assist the person until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves.

A first aider cannot make a diagnosis of mental illness or provide therapy.

ASSISTING A PERSON AFFECTED BY THE BUSHFIRE CRISIS

Australia's unprecedented bushfire season is affecting the mental health of many of us.

People may be affected by many aspects, for example:

- Feared or actual loss or injury of a loved one, personal injury, or illness
- Loss of pets, livestock, job or property
- Fighting fires
- Worry and uncertainty about the safety of loved ones, animals and property
- Memories of previous fires
- Witnessing distressing scenes in the media
- Supporting others who are directly affected
- Distress about the destruction of our environment and loss of lives (including the lives of animals)

Not everyone will react the same way. Even someone who is extremely distressed may feel better in a few days or weeks. Some people report feeling more resilient or experience a greater closeness within their community. Others go on to develop a mental health problem, e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress disorder or a substance use problem.

People may experience emotional upset, sadness, guilt, difficulties sleeping and intrusive memories (including nightmares). Usually these reactions settle down within a month.

HOW CAN I HELP?

WHAT CAN I DO IN A CRISIS?

On the scene, or in a recovery centre or emergency shelter:

- Follow the instructions of professional responders.
- Ensure your own safety before trying to help others.
- Reflect on your own emotional state before offering to support others; it might be better to get someone else involved.
- Try to remain calm and be patient.
- Give accurate information if they want it and you have it. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know what to say or lack knowledge if this is the case.
- Do not make promises you may not be able to keep, e.g. "I'll take you home soon", or assure the person that everything will be fine.

WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

Ask the person how they would like to be helped. Tell the person about services that are available to support them.

If the person wants to talk, be prepared to listen. If this is too distressing for you, find someone else for the person to talk to.

Behaviour such as withdrawal, irritability and bad temper may be a response to the traumatic event. Try to be caring, even if you find the person's behaviour challenging.

HOW CAN I HELP?

WHAT SHOULD I AVOID?

- Do not force the person to talk about their experience or their feelings about it, nor probe for details.
- Do not interrupt them to share your own feelings and experiences.
- Do not minimise their experience, or compare it to others, e.g. "It could have been worse" or "You should be over that by now".
- Do not offer religious solace by saying things like "God has reasons".
- Do not discourage the person from expressing their feelings, e.g. don't tell a person to stop crying or cheer up.
- Do not tell the person how they should be feeling.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT THE PERSON OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS OR MONTHS?

People recover at their own pace. The person may be more sensitive to events or stress for a while and some days will be worse than others.

Particular sights, smells and experiences (e.g. media reports) may heighten the person's distress, and the person may need extra support if this occurs.

Some people may experience flashbacks (sudden powerful memories that can feel very real). You can help by reminding them that they are safe e.g. by drawing attention to their immediate surroundings.

SHOULD THE PERSON SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP?

Some people experience extreme distress right away and may wish to talk to a professional about it. Others will prefer to spend time with loved ones and use their regular coping strategies. If a person wants to talk to a professional, do what you can to help them arrange this.

After four weeks, the person should be feeling a little better, and be back to some of their normal routines. If things aren't improving, they might need professional help. Feeling very distressed all the time, having nightmares or flashbacks, having trouble thinking about anything else, and withdrawing from loved ones are all signs that professional help might be needed.

A GP can help determine the best option for professional help.



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Based on: Mental Health First Aid Australia. *Assisting a Person Following a Potentially Traumatic Event: Mental Health First Aid Guidelines* (revised 2019). Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2019.

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All MHFA guidelines can be downloaded from mhfa.com.au/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines

If the person expresses thoughts of suicide, seek help by calling:

Lifeline **13 11 14**

Suicide Call-back Service **1300 659 467**

Kids Helpline **1800 55 1800**
(For young people under 25)

For local resources for post-bushfire recovery, call:

ACT (02) 6205 2927

NSW 1800 679 737

NT 08 8999 3473

QLD 1800 173 349

SA 1800 362 361

TAS 1300 135 513

VIC 1800 226 226

WA 13 3337