

# TOOL KIT Getting through bushfires, drought and extreme climate events

A self-help resource to help families dealing with bushfires, drought and extreme climate events

## How do bushfires, drought and extreme climate events impact on rural communities?

Some of the ways bushfires, drought and extreme climate events can affect rural communities are:

- Loss of homes and regular employment
- Financial hardship for farmers and other rural businesses, which may eventually lead to farms being sold and businesses closing
- Family and relationship problems (e.g. arguing, disagreements, lack of communication, physical conflict, relationship breakdown)
- Job pressure and overworking
- People leaving the community due to a lack of opportunities or income (particularly young people)
- Environmental problems, such as loss of vegetation and animals, drying of rivers, soil erosion and increased risk of bushfires
- Lack of community services, including health care, education, housing and employment organisations
- Higher incidence of physical and mental health problems amongst community members, as well as an increased risk of suicide
- Loss of social networks and a breakdown in community spirit

## How do bushfires, drought and extreme climate events affect individual wellbeing?

The stress caused by bushfires, drought and extreme climate events can affect our wellbeing in several ways.



Some common signs of stress may include but are not limited to:

- Physical symptoms (eg headaches, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite)
- Always feeling tired, lacking energy or motivation
- Changes in mood (eg anger, aggression, irritability, worriedness, anxiety and depression)
- Increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs to cope or escape the situation
- Feeling hopeless, worthless or like “life is not worth living”
- Thoughts of suicide or harming yourself

Most people experience some of these emotions at some point in their lives. However, if you are experiencing several at the same time or if they interfere with your ability to carry out daily activities, you should talk to someone you trust (e.g. partner, friend, relative) and seek help from your GP or another health professional.

## Strategies to help you manage the stress of bushfires, drought and extreme climate events.

### 1 Recognise when it's getting too much

Sometimes we're so busy trying to get things done that we might not realise that we need a break. Learning to listen to your body and recognising the signs of stress is the first step in doing something about it. Take notice of any changes in your physical health, your behaviours or your emotions that might indicate that things are getting too much for you. Listen to concerns from loved ones about your wellbeing or behaviour.

Seek help immediately if you have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself.

### 2 Talk about it

Talking calmly and openly to someone you trust about how you're feeling allows you to release negative emotions, helps to relieve tension and puts things in perspective. If you don't feel comfortable talking to someone you know, telephone helplines like Lifeline and online options (e.g. email, online chat, forums) are also available for confidential support and advice.

Remember, during bushfires, drought and extreme climate events, everyone in the community is likely to be experiencing similar emotions, so talking to family members, friends and neighbours can help everyone to release negative feelings and come up with practical ways of managing their stress and dealing with the situation.



### 3 Explore financial options

Put together an accurate summary of your financial situation – list all the income that you have coming in, and all of the expenses and debts that you have. Then, talk to your bank or financial adviser about options available to you to better manage your finances. There are lots of financial assistance programs available to rural families and businesses during bushfires, drought and extreme climate events, which may provide some relief. It can also be helpful to get together with family members (including children) to create a family budget you all agree on.

### 4 Visit your GP or health professional

Talk to your GP about your situation and let them know if you've experienced any negative changes in how you feel. Your doctor can provide useful advice on how to manage stress and also give you referrals to other services that might be able to offer you support.

## 5 Helping children and adolescents

Sometimes we don't discuss stressful situations with our children and adolescents because we don't want to worry them. However, usually children and adolescents pick up on when you are stressed and know when things aren't right, particularly if they witness their parents upset or arguing. Not knowing what's going on can make them worry and they may blame themselves for what's happening.

It's important to include children and adolescents in discussions about the situation and involve them in decision-making as much as possible. Help them to understand their responsibilities (e.g. concentrating at school, doing homework, helping at home) and reassure them that, although things are tough, you will get through it together. Talk to them about their feelings and notice any changes in their behaviour or mood that may indicate that they are feeling stressed.

## 6 Take care of yourself

Eat healthily, get at least eight hours of sleep each night and exercise regularly (preferably away from work).

Remember to take time out to relax – read a book, listen to music, watch a movie or try something new, like yoga or meditation. It's also important to do fun activities that you enjoy, both on your own and with family and friends. Spending time with friends and family helps to prevent isolation and loneliness.

Alcohol and drugs weaken your ability to make decisions, often making your problems worse. They can also lead to mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, so it's a good idea to limit your intake.

## 7 Be positive and proactive

Learn about the specific diagnosis and the system of treatment and care that is available. Mental illness is a broad term used to describe many conditions including mood and anxiety disorders, personality disorders and psychotic disorders such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Each condition has specific effects and treatments.

## 8 Seek and accept help from others

Research shows that people with strong connections with family, friends and their community cope best in times of crisis. A strong support network reduces your sense of isolation and gives you people to talk to when things get rough.

It takes strength and courage to ask for and receive help from others, but people are usually more than happy to help! Make a list of where to go for different types of help and advice (e.g. financial assistance, emotional support) and keep it in a handy place.

## 9 Act immediately if you have thoughts of harming yourself or suicide

Ongoing stress due to floods, drought and extreme climate events can cause you to feel hopeless or worthless and may lead to thoughts of suicide or self-harm. All thoughts or talk of suicide should be taken very seriously. If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, seek immediate help by talking to someone you trust, calling a helpline (e.g. Lifeline [13 11 14](tel:131114)) or visiting your GP. In an emergency, call 000.

## Places to go for help now:

- Lifeline 13 11 14 (24hrs) or [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- Government Assistance:  
<https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/help-emergency/bushfires>
- Drought Assistance Hotline 13 23 16
- Farm Assistance Hotline 1800 050 585
- Rural Financial Counselling Service 1800 686 175
- The Red Cross:  
<https://www.redcross.org.au/>
- St Vincent De Paul:  
[https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find\\_Help/NSW/Disaster\\_Recovery/](https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find_Help/NSW/Disaster_Recovery/)
- Salvation Army:  
<https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/need-help/disasters-and-emergencies/>

If your family is finding it difficult to pay for basic items such as food and petrol, you may be eligible for short term emergency relief assistance (e.g. food or petrol vouchers.) To access this kind of help, talk to your local Salvation Army, St Vincent De Paul or Material Aid/Emergency Response Agency.

## Utilise online resources:

Centrelink – [www.centrelink.gov.au](http://www.centrelink.gov.au)

Department of Agriculture and Water Resources:  
<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/>

Farmsafe: [www.farmsafe.org.au](http://www.farmsafe.org.au)

National Association for Loss & Grief (NALAG):  
[www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

Rural and remote mental health:  
<https://www.rrmh.com.au/>

For 24 hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14. For more information visit [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

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