



## BUSHFIRE RECOVERY SERIES

### Tips for children who are anxious about bushfire season.



Look out for signs of distress & changes in children's behaviour - children are not always able to express complex feelings in the same direct way that adults do, and therefore might not show the same reactions to stress as adults. Changes in children's behaviour that may suggest that they're unsettled or anxious include:

- Changes in their play, drawing, dreams or spontaneous conversations
- Regressive behaviour – children behaving younger than they normally do
- Nightmares
- Anxiety about sleeping alone
- Trouble getting to sleep
- Irritability or anger
- Tantrums, increased defiance
- Fussy eating
- Withdrawing
- Wanting to stay close to a parent, becoming more clingy
- Decreased concentration or attention span
- Feelings of anxiety, fears, and worries about safety of self and others
- Increased aggression, angry outbursts
- Questions about death and dying
- Increased somatic complaints (sore tummy, headaches)









**Monitor Media Exposure.** Children can become anxious after listening to or watching repeated stories about bushfires, and can come to believe that everywhere is under threat. Be confident in your role as a parent and limit their exposure to news/media with potentially distressing images and sounds. If children are viewing media stories of distressing events, it is best to watch with them. They need your adult presence and perspective - being able to talk about the material with a caring and reassuring adult can greatly reduce these reactions.



**Listen to understand how children are feeling and thinking.** Encourage (but don't force) children to talk about their thoughts and feelings about bushfires and other scary things. Let them know that it is normal to think and feel that way. Expect that children might ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to make sense of events – be patient and provide truthful but simple explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of things.

If you would like to book an appointment and /or speak with one of our Counsellors, it's as easy as calling 1300 66 77 00 or visit our website [www.accesswellbeingsservices.com.au](http://www.accesswellbeingsservices.com.au)



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**Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings.** Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them.
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**Reassure children.** Children need to know that they are safe, are being looked after and that nothing bad will happen to them. Let children know that there are people all over the place working hard to make sure that people stay safe, and that these people are very good at their job. Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of affection through cuddles and hugs. Maintain good routines – predictable family activity is very reassuring for children.
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**Be aware of how you talk in the presence of children.** Protect children from in-depth adult discussion about these events. Children can distort what they hear or see especially when the information is received through indirect communication (eg. overheard adult conversations about worrying things).
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**Pay attention to your own reactions.** Children may respond to the anxieties felt and expressed by the people around them. They often see and hear far more than adults are aware of, and they will take their cues for how to respond from you. Talk privately with trusted adults if you are needing to express your own feelings. Share your own feelings with children, but show that you are in control of them.
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**Leave children with a feeling of hope and security.** Help children to see that their world is basically a safe place, and that life is worth living.
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**Seeking further help.** While most children can handle their concerns with the support of caring adults, some children may show prolonged distress and could benefit from professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents/caregivers to learn strategies for dealing with anxiety.

Speak to your GP about a referral to a psychologist or phone the Australian Psychological Society. Find a Psychologist service on 1800 333 497. Alternatively, you can locate a psychologist in your area by visiting the APS Find a Psychologist website – [www.findapsychologist.org.au](http://www.findapsychologist.org.au).

*Reference: Australian Psychological Society, 2020. "Australian bushfires 2020: Psychological preparation and recovery." <https://www.psychology.org.au/Australian-bushfires-2020>*

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