

Preparing your mind to deal with the bushfire season

The bushfire season for 2009-10 will be a stressful time for a lot of people throughout Victoria. Those in high-risk areas will need to keep alert throughout the summer and monitor conditions in their surrounding area. It is normal to feel anxious during this time of year and this anxiety may be worse for people who were affected by last summer's bushfires.

This fact sheet provides tips to prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for the bushfire season.

How your mind deals with a threat

During a threat or emergency, our bodies are placed in a heightened state of alert. This is a natural response to danger that helps us deal with immediate circumstances.

The heightened state helps us:

- think clearly
- plan and make decisions
- set priorities based on the immediate situation.

While this is a natural response, maintaining this state through a long period, such as the bushfire season, can make our mind and body fatigued, and lose efficiency.

Preparing your mind

It is vitally important to prepare yourself before the bushfire season starts and plan your actions to deal with a threat or emergency should one arise. The best way to do this is to prepare a Bushfire Survival Plan. More information on this can be found on the CFA website at www.cfa.vic.gov.au

Preparing a Bushfire Survival Plan will help you cope throughout the bushfire season as it will help reduce the uncertainty and anxiety around what you and your family will do should a threat arise.

The following tips will help your mind prepare for the bushfire season:

- Develop a plan that suits your household.
- Discuss the plan with all members of the household and make sure they know that staying to defend involves the risk of physical injury and even death.
- Ensure the plan assesses the ability of members of the family to deal with the stress of a fire.
- PRACTICE THE PLAN.

Plan to stay informed during a threat or emergency

In the preparation of your Bushfire Survival Plan, it is important to consider how you will receive up-to-date information during a threat or an emergency. Reducing the uncertainty of your situation will help reduce any unnecessary stress.

Consider the following:

- Attend community meetings such as CFA Fireready meetings or Community Fireguard groups so that you are aware of the risk in your area.
- Maintain contact with neighbours and local sources of fire information in the area, especially during high fire risk days.
- Work out how you're going to receive information during a threat or emergency.

Remember, fire conditions can change quickly, so your plan should not assume that a warning will be received.

A special note about children

It is understandable that you want to keep your family close in a stressful situation, but if you are planning to stay and defend your home during a bushfire, it is strongly advised that children and vulnerable people are well away from any danger area.

There are several reasons for this:

- Children are more vulnerable to stress than adults.
- Although children may appear to cope in a crisis, their reaction to the event may not be evident until a much later time.
- Reactions to crisis can lead to children becoming unable to cope with ordinary problems, suffering sleep problems and nightmares, and having relationship issues with parents, siblings and friends.

When developing your Bushfire Survival Plan, be clear when and how vulnerable people in your household will leave your area.

If your plan is to stay and defend, make sure that your children are being looked after by someone who is well known to them and who they feel safe around. Remain positive and reassuring, and ensure that you plan regular communication with your children to let them know that you are safe.

Information

For further advice on the mental stress of emergencies and dealing with these, visit the Better Health Channel: www.betterhealthchannel.vic.gov.au

If at any time you are worried about your mental health, call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.

If you would like to receive this publication in an accessible format please email preparedness@dhs.vic.gov.au

This document is also available in pdf format at www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire