

**MEDIA RELEASE**  
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## **Fire disasters cause psychological stress**

Many people will be psychological victims of the fires sweeping through south-eastern Australia as much as physical or economic victims, warns the Australian Psychological Society (APS).

“During and immediately after a disaster of this magnitude the focus is understandably on sheer survival and rescue,” says Professor Bob Montgomery, President of the APS. “But soon after, most people will naturally show signs of distress. At this point, survivors benefit most from simple practical and emotional support. Getting some order and control back into their lives and having their emotions validated as the normal reactions to severe stress. These are basic components of psychological first aid, to help people heal themselves,” he says.

Professor Montgomery notes two common errors can occur in the immediate post-disaster stage that can cause later problems. Many survivors will be in psychological shock, emotionally frozen and quiet, a reaction often misinterpreted as indicating they have not been badly affected by their experience and don't need much psychological support. The second error occurs when well-meaning people encourage survivors to take the attitude to 'just forget it, you're safe now.' This attempt at reassurance is meant to help, but Professor Montgomery indicates that the survivor can think there is something wrong with how they reacted during or after the crisis. He says it's more helpful to normalise their reactions as being how most people react to a traumatic experience.

“People have a great capacity for healing themselves and most don't need any special professional help to deal with the psychological impact of a traumatic event, just practical and emotional support,” he says. “However, there will always be some people who are at risk of prolonged and serious reactions, usually in the form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This involves flashbacks and nightmares of the original event, disturbed sleep, increased anxiety and tension, avoidance of normal activities, especially those that may include reminders of the trauma. PTSD is a potentially serious psychological problem, associated with depression, anger, strained relationships, excessive use of alcohol or other drugs, and suicide.”

The best way survivors and those around them can help is to keep an eye on themselves and each other for persistent signs of distress. If a survivor is still showing signs of distress three or four weeks after the trauma, like those noted above, then it's time to seek some professional help before the problem becomes chronic. Professor Montgomery encourages survivors to talk to their GP with a view of referral to a psychologist. “PTSD rarely goes away of its own accord, and can often get worse,” he says.

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*The APS is the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 16,500 members. The APS is committed to advancing psychology as a discipline and profession. It spreads the message that psychologists make a difference to peoples' lives, through improving psychological knowledge and community wellbeing.*

**For media enquiries please contact:**  
**Elaine Grant**  
**Communications Manager**  
**Australian Psychological Society**  
**T: 03 8662 3363 | M: 0412 683 068**  
[www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)