

MEDIA RELEASE
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Immediate support strategies for bushfire survivors

One of the best things we can do immediately after a disaster is to provide support strategies that promote safety, comfort and help. The Australian Psychological Society (APS) identifies five key elements in providing immediate support for disaster victims including:

- promoting a sense of safety and control
- helping people contact friends and loved ones, and connecting families
- assisting people to get the help they need while encouraging them to get involved in their own recovery
- allowing survivors to have their own reaction, and
- instilling hope

Psychologists at the APS acknowledge that the devastating bush fires that swept across Victoria on the weekend were a highly traumatic experience, and that this experience can lead to a sense of disbelief and disconnection from normal everyday life.

APS President, Professor Bob Montgomery says "Large numbers of people have had their lives totally disrupted by the fires over the weekend. Naturally, there are thousands of professionals, volunteers, family and friends, who are wanting to know the best ways of supporting people who have been through the trauma of fires destroying their homes and community."

To re-establish a sense of safety, people need help to meet basic needs for food and shelter, and obtain emergency medical attention. People often need repeated, simple and accurate information on how to get these basic needs. To enhance a person's safety and to provide comfort, people need clear information about what is going on, and about the services that are available to help them.

One important thing that survivors are likely to need is contact with people that are predictable, familiar and respectful. Some people need to share stories and emotions, and need to be listened to, but in a way that does not encourage disclosure beyond the level that they wish to discuss. Others may not want to talk at all, and this is also ok. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel. People should not be pressed to talk about their experiences if they don't wish to. It is not useful, and may even be harmful, to directly encourage disaster survivors to ventilate their responses in the initial phase.

Instilling hope and confidence in the face of adversity has been identified as a crucial part of coming to terms with events such as these and of facilitating recovery.

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.

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