



AUSTRALIAN  
Primary Mental Health  
**Alliance**

*Supporting you and your community*

## Beyond the Bushfires

[www.beyondthebushfires.com.au](http://www.beyondthebushfires.com.au)  
1300 514 811



AUSTRALIAN  
Primary Mental Health  
**Alliance**

Towards Wellbeing

[www.apmhalliance.com.au](http://www.apmhalliance.com.au)

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The Australian Primary Mental Health Alliance (APMHA) is a leading, national provider of mental health and wellbeing support services. Our Company beginnings started in rural northeast Victoria and Goulburn Valley regions.

Many of our staff were affected as locals and have been involved as first responders of the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires.

We provide a variety of mental health, counselling and support services to rural and remote locations as well as urban settings.

We offer telephone, web based or face to face options to maximise access to local communities.

We deliver tailored training and education to local community and to health professionals in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

Please visit our website to learn more about us:

[www.apmhalliance.com.au](http://www.apmhalliance.com.au)

*We at APMHA welcome you.*

*Our clients are the most important visitors to our counsellors.*

*They are not dependant on us, we are dependent on them.*

*They are not an interruption on work, they are the purpose of it.*

*They are not an outsider to our business, they are part of it.*

*We are not doing them a favour by serving them, they are doing us a favour by giving us the opportunity to do it*

**Ghandi**



## Support is available:

### For general counselling or advice

Call 1300 514 811 (M-F: 9am-5pm)

This number provides you with confidential and free support. The friendly mental health professionals may also refer you to a local health provider for ongoing support.

This can be provided face to face, telephone or via a secure online platform.



### For urgent or crisis support:

Lifeline: 13 11 14  
Griefline: 1300 845 745  
BeyondBlue 1300 224 636

Your General Practitioner  
Your local Community Health Centre



### For further information:

[www.beyondthebushfires.com.au](http://www.beyondthebushfires.com.au)



## Step 1: Review the activity list and/or create your own.

Create a list of at least 5 activities you would like to try.

Think about activities that have made you feel better in the past.


## Step 2: Pick an activity to do.

You may pick more than one activity from the list you made above. Plan a day and time when you can engage in this activity over the next week. Write it down below and add it to your calendar so you schedule this in!

<b>Monday</b>	
<b>Tuesday</b>	
<b>Wednesday</b>	
<b>Thursday</b>	
<b>Friday</b>	
<b>Saturday</b>	
<b>Sunday</b>	

## Planning enjoyable activities -Worksheet:

Anniversaries relating to difficult events may impact on you doing things that were enjoyable or rewarding. It's important to remember to take time for yourself, and time to engage in pleasant activities. Engaging in pleasant activities can make us feel better and more motivated to complete the day to day things that need to be done.

### Some activities to consider:

Indoor Activities	Outdoor Activities	Social Activities	Rebuilding Activities
Read a book	Dancing	Call friend / family	De-clutter
Drawing / Painting	Go to the park	Meet someone for lunch	Community working bee
Listen to music	Running	Join a sporting team	Fundraisers
Watch a movie	Walking the dog	Meeting new people	Babysit for a friend
Journal writing	Gardening	Try a new hobby	Clean up a beach or park
Yoga / Meditation	Swimming	Volunteer	Help a friend

*This list provides you with ideas about things you may enjoy doing. Think about activities you have enjoyed or found meaningful in the past.*

## Introduction

Natural disasters (such as bushfires, floods, storms and drought) are extremely challenging for people who are directly (or indirectly) affected. These challenges and associated symptoms can re-emerge during events such as anniversaries and celebrations, catching even the most well prepared people off-guard.

During these times, a person can experience a wide range of thoughts, feelings and memories that can be intense, frightening and confusing. While these are common reactions to an extraordinary situation, this stress can lead to physical and emotional symptoms which can grow and become overwhelming if ignored.

Most people recover after disasters by drawing on their own strengths and support from others, however others may go on to develop ongoing symptoms and will need extra support.

As time passes, these anniversary dates can further trigger feelings and emotions from the disaster period. During these times, it can be difficult to understand the difference between a normal response and signs indicating you should seek additional support.

This booklet is designed to help you (or someone you know) understand the reactions that may be experienced during times such as these.

It is important to remember that support is always available and close by.

## Common Reactions

An anniversary reaction is an annual echo that can be experienced after the loss of someone close, a natural disaster or a difficult event. While an anniversary reaction can be predictable (specifically timed, emotionally taxing and truly distressing), individual symptoms can vary from one person to another.

Anniversaries relating to traumatic events can have a profound impact on a person's psychological wellbeing. Some people will be able to manage how they feel during this time, while others may find it difficult to cope. Emotional and physical reactions to an anniversary can also depend on the initial impact of the event itself and the degree of loss experienced.

Common experiences and reactions can include:

- ◇ Feelings of sadness, fear or anger
- ◇ Feeling unwell - headaches, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, moodiness, weight loss/gain
- ◇ Feeling overwhelmed
- ◇ Tearfulness
- ◇ Flashbacks or unwanted reoccurring memories or bad dreams relating to the initial events
- ◇ Difficulty focusing attention and concentration
- ◇ Feeling numb, detached or withdrawn
- ◇ Increased substance use (Alcohol, smoking) etc.
- ◇ Replaying the event over and over.

## Online support and information

### 6. Smiling Mind

[www.smilingmind.com.au](http://www.smilingmind.com.au)

*This free app offers a wide range of mindfulness programs for both children and adults.*



### 7. 1GiantMind

[www.1giantmind.com](http://www.1giantmind.com)

*This free app can help teach you how to meditate in 12 easy steps.*



### 8. THIS WAY UP

[www.thiswayup.org.au](http://www.thiswayup.org.au)

*This free app provides online learning programs, education and research in anxiety, depressive disorders and physical health.*



### 9. Onlyhuman

[www.onlyhumanapp.com](http://www.onlyhumanapp.com)

*This free app can help you create habits of self-care.*



### 10. SANE

[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

*National mental health charity supporting mental health awareness, information, specialist support, research and advocacy.*



### 11. Beyond the Bushfires Information

[www.beyondthebushfires.com.au](http://www.beyondthebushfires.com.au)

*Local website containing relevant support information relating to Vic 2009 Bushfire anniversary.*

## Online support and information

### 1. Beyondblue

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

☎ 1300 224 636

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with the Beyondblue Support Service with a trained mental health professional.



### 2. Phoenix Australia

Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health

[www.phoenixaustralia.org](http://www.phoenixaustralia.org)

Information on coping with trauma including fact sheets, advice for adults, children and parents.



### 3. REACHOUT

[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

Practical support, tools and tips for adolescents and parents.

### 4. myCompass

[www.mycompass.org.au](http://www.mycompass.org.au)

A personal self-help tool for your mental health.



### 5. moodgym

[www.moodgym.com.au](http://www.moodgym.com.au)

Moodgym is an interactive self-help book which helps you learn and practise skills which can help to prevent and manage symptoms of depression and anxiety.



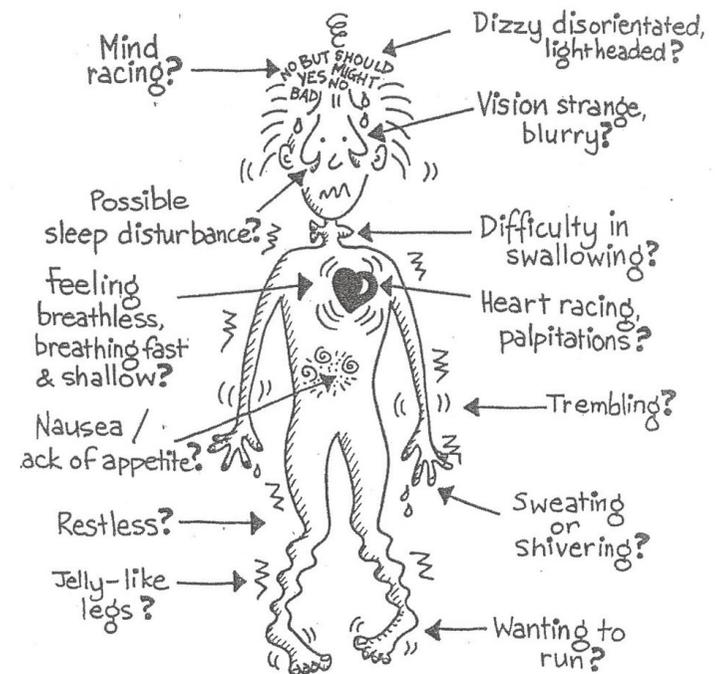
These reactions can be quite strong and can come upon you unexpectedly. Certain words, pictures, smells and sounds can often be triggers.

It is also not uncommon for people to experience these reactions from time-to-time when reflecting on difficult events in their lives.

If these feelings affect a person's ability to move about through their day-to-day activities, it is important to discuss this with a health professional or your GP.

### Reflection activity:

Circle the symptoms which may sound familiar to you.



## Grief and Guilt

Everyone copes differently with grief after suffering a loss. While grief is an intense feeling which is felt a long time after the event has occurred, this intensity usually diminishes with time and support for most people.

However, for some, grief reactions can persist and remain intense for a long period of time.

Supports which may benefit you and your family include:

- ◇ Grief counselling
- ◇ Involvement in community support groups
- ◇ Using structured support phone apps such as MoodGym / MindSpot
- ◇ Accessing telephone support lines like: Lifeline 13 11 14 and Beyondblue 1300 22 4636
- ◇ Linking to online websites and resources like [www.headtohealth.gov.au](http://www.headtohealth.gov.au)

## Guilt

People connected to traumatic events can often experience guilt because others may have been less fortunate than them.

Survivors guilt is a common term for this experience. It occurs frequently after a disaster and can also be triggered by commemorative events or anniversary dates. People may also feel guilty seeking help, if they feel others are more deserving.

If feelings are intense or prolonged, it is important that everyone seeks help during this difficult time.

## Counselling Referral Process

### How to access local services during this time.



## Phone support

<b>Beyond the bushfires counselling services</b>	1300 514 811
<b>LifeLine</b>	13 11 14
<b>Kids Helpline</b>	1800 551 800
<b>MensLine Australia</b>	1300 789 978
<b>SuicideLine Victoria</b>	1300 651 251
<b>Sane</b>	1800 187 263
<b>Or you can call your General Practitioner!</b>	

## Remaining Strong and Well

Remember that most people who experience a difficult event will recover. Some will take more time than others, but most people are able to recover by drawing on their personal strengths and the care and support of family, friends and the wider community.

Often, there can be positive outcomes despite the tragedy. Many people who live through difficult events or natural disasters develop new skills, closer bonds in their community and feel a sense of pride in their recovery journey. For many people, anniversaries are used to highlight these community bonds and support those still on their recovery journey.

Remember that there are many services available to support you at any point in your recovery journey!

### General rule with seeking help:

It's a good idea to seek help if you are feeling like it is difficult to cope.

When making this assessment, please consider:

- ◆ **Duration**— How long and/or frequent is the emotional response occurring?
- ◆ **Impact**— Is the emotional response making it difficult to engage in day-to-day activities?
- ◆ **Intensity**— How severe is the emotional response being experienced?

## Fight / Flight Response

Most people experiencing problems with anxiety visit their doctor because of worrying physical symptoms. It is important to understand that often these symptoms are not based on a physical problem, but actually the result of what is often termed the 'fight flight response'.

When we are threatened by something or are in danger, our body responds with a series of changes aimed at preparing us to fight (protect ourselves) or flight (flee/escape). This is a primitive response which automatically protects us from possible danger. Often this experience can result in symptoms of anxiety.

Remember that anxiety is a normal feeling when we are stressed. Low levels can energise us and improve our general performance, reactions and thinking, such as before a race, preparing for a birthday or special event etc. Too much anxiety (especially if it is prolonged) can diminish our ability to be resilient and cope with day to day stressors.

### Reflection activity:

**What are your early warning signs of anxiety?**


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## Reducing Sleep Disturbance

Sleep disturbance commonly involves difficulty getting to sleep with or without early morning wakening (usually around 3am) followed by a restless night thereafter.

To restore a pattern of normal sleep, it is important to practice sleep-promoting behaviours during the day, in the evening, at bedtime and during the night.

It is important to remember that adults are no different to children, we also need wind down routines.

### Reflection activity:

Consider how you put your 'inner child' to bed.

### Sleep Promoting Behaviours

#### During the day:

- ◇ Organise your day to keep your inner clock running smoothly. Set regular times to eat meals, exercise etc
- ◇ Regular gentle exercise during the day is important
- ◇ Set aside time for decision-making during the day, to avoid worry or anxiety at night.
- ◇ Avoid napping during the day.
- ◇ Try to go to bed and get up at regular times.
- ◇ Try not to drink more than 2 caffeinated drinks during the day (coffee, tea, soft drinks, etc.)

#### During the evening:

- ◇ Put the day to rest. If you still have things on your mind, write them down to be dealt with tomorrow.
- ◇ Light exercise in the evening may help sleep. Avoid exercising late as this may make sleep more difficult.

## C

### hoose your news

News and social media can sometimes be confronting and upsetting, especially around anniversary dates relating to traumatic events. You may need to restrict your exposure to media platforms if some of the content is becoming distressing to you or a person close to you or focus on recovery messages during this time.

## A

### ctively listen

Allow the person to talk about what they are going through if they want to. Remember that it is ok to just listen to what they have to say. You do not need to respond with lots of questions or feel you need to have the answers. Sometimes people have difficulty expressing themselves and need time to verbalise their thoughts. Sometimes too many questions can make someone feel overwhelmed or misunderstood. Be patient and be present.

## R

### espond sensitively

People will process grief, loss or stress in different ways. You might want to share your experience and hear other experiences from those around you. However, it is important to recognise that others may not be ready to do this. Remember that some people may still be distressed by the event everyone had different triggers. So whilst being mindful about our own feelings and triggers, remain sensitive to the signals and needs of others.

## E

### ncourage social connection

When a person is stressed or struggling, they may reduce their social activities. Social connections are important to help us feel loved, understood and part of the greater community. If you recognise you or someone you know is withdrawing from social interaction, encourage regular contact with others. You could invite someone for a coffee or go for a walk. Remember, a laugh is always bigger when we share it with others!

## When helping yourself or others remember: T.A.K.E C.A.R.E!

### Talk

It is important to talk about what is happening for you. Consider those around you and your own needs and ensure you have enough time to talk about your concerns. Sharing emotions and talking about stressful events can be difficult so it is important to ensure you feel safe to speak with trusted people.

### Ask for help

Grief, loss and stress can often make you feel like you want to isolate from others. If you or someone you know is struggling, remember you can seek further support within your community. Speak with your GP, family / friends, or other health professional. Remember help is available for you and for those around you.

### Keep it simple

Remember helping yourself and others does not have to be complicated. Sometimes the best way you can support yourself (and someone else) is to continue with your usual routine where possible. This might include sharing a meal and attending your normal activities with others each week.

### Engage in self-care

Sometimes when we are looking out for others, we forget to look after ourselves. **Be aware of your own health and take time to do the things you enjoy!** Implement strategies to support your wellbeing and encourage those around you to do the same. Don't forget to do what you can to maintain regular exercise, a balanced diet and regular sleep patterns (pg. 9).

Remember you can help others better when you help yourself first.

- ◇ Throughout the evening, try to implement a 'wind down' routine. This could include at least a half an hour of quiet activity ie. reading or listening to music.
- ◇ Avoid drinking caffeinated drinks after 4pm.
- ◇ Avoid smoking for at least one hour before bed.
- ◇ Don't use alcohol to help you sleep and keep alcohol intake to a moderate level.
- ◇ Make sure your bed and bedroom are comfortable (not too cold or warm)
- ◇ Avoid a heavy meal close to bedtime

### At Bedtime (put your inner child to bed):

- ◇ Try to develop a calming bed routine such as having a warm bath or shower, or do yoga or relaxation. This way your body will learn to know that you are getting ready to go to sleep.
- ◇ Prepare your environment: ie: low music, dim lights to help prepare your body for sleep.
- ◇ Go to bed when you feel sleepy.
- ◇ Don't use technology while in bed (playing on phone or watching tv)
- ◇ Try to not have serious conversations or arguments before you go to bed.
- ◇ Relax and tell yourself that sleep will come when it is ready. Perhaps use a smart phone sleep app to help induce sleep.

### During the Night:

- ◇ If you wake up too early and struggle to get back to sleep, don't lie in bed worried or annoyed. Get up and do something relaxing to distract you and then return to bed once you are sleepy again.

- ◇ Get up at the same time each morning. Don't sleep late to make up for lost sleep
- ◇ If noise or light wakes you throughout the night, get ear plugs or a sleep mask.
- ◇ Avoid sleeping pills: They do not provide a long term solution to sleep problems.

## Sleep Diary

If you are experiencing sleep disturbance, it may be worth completing a sleep diary. A sleep diary can help you record and monitor your routine to see if there are any habits that may be affecting your sleep.

On the following page is a sleep chart for you to complete. Below are some simple instructions to follow:

<b>Instructions:</b> Follow the key below when recording your information.	
Letter C	Record C when you have a coffee, tea or caffeinated drink
Letter M	Record M when you take medication
Letter A	To record when you consume alcohol
Letter E	To record when you complete exercise
Letter I	To record when you go to bed
Shaded boxes	Top record when you are asleep (remember to leave boxes unshaded to record when you are wake during the day and night).

**Please Note:** The first line in the chart is an example from the summary below.

*On Monday I worked and then went for a walk at 1pm. I had a beer with dinner at 6pm, fell asleep watching the tv at 8pm and then took myself to bed at 11pm. I woke at 3am, but managed to get back to sleep by 4am. I started my day at 7am, had a coffee at 8am and my medicine as I walked out the door at 9am.*

## What does this tell you about your drinking habits?

### Standard Drinks



### Excessive drinking is:

More than two standards drinks per day is considered excessive drinking. Daily drinking is considered habitual.

## Helping yourself and others

The anniversary of a traumatic event can also provide an opportunity for ongoing emotional healing. Recognising, acknowledging and paying attention to the feelings and issues that surface during a difficult anniversary can help a person develop strategies to reduce the emotional impact. Self care activities like yoga, meditation, music, meeting with friends can support a person's overall wellbeing.

The following pages outline some self care options which may be beneficial for you.



Today's date	Day	Type of day (Work, School, Off, Holiday)	12noon	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12 MN	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am
Sample	Sunday								A				I									CM				
	Monday																									
	Tuesday																									
	Wednesday																									
	Thursday																									
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	Saturday																									
	Sunday																									

## Being Aware of Unhelpful Activities

At times, it is tempting to engage in unhelpful activities in order to cope with difficult events. While these activities may appear to be helping you cope in that moment, they often can create an increase in symptoms which can hinder your recovery.

Try to limit some of the following activities:

- ◇ **Working too much**  
 Keeping busy is good but throwing yourself into work to avoid painful feelings can be unhelpful as it can lead to burnout and overwhelm.
- ◇ **Stressful work or family situations**  
 These situations can be hard to avoid but try to actively reduce the number of stressful interactions between you and others.
- ◇ **Withdrawal from family and friends**  
 It's ok to have some time for yourself but try not to spend too much time alone. Positive social connections help anchor us and reminds us that we are not alone in our stress or struggles.
- ◇ **Denying your feelings**  
 Our emotions can be like as pressure cooker. If we do not provide them with a healthy way of releasing, our emotions can get the better of us.
- ◇ **Alcohol and/or drugs**  
 You may feel better in the short term, however prolonged use can cause serious physical and emotional problems for you and your family/friends.