

Information provided by Dr Rob Gordon, who is working with the Victorian Government to assist communities to deal with the emotional aftermath of the fires.

Coping With Stress and Depression

As the recovery process moves from the emergency to the rebuilding phase, many people are coming face to face with the reality of the long and hard road ahead. For many, this is a time of extreme uncertainty, worry and stress.

Clinical Psychologist Dr Rob Gordon is an expert in disaster trauma and has been engaged by the Victorian Government to work with bushfire affected communities. Rob Gordon has been visiting bushfire affected towns, and says that many are feeling overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness during this phase of the recovery, as they wait for the rebuilding processes to happen.

“When people feel as though they’re not tackling their problems, there is a sense of helplessness, and that creates stress,” Dr Gordon said.

“The more stressed we get the more we focus on what we should be doing immediately to feel as though we’re getting somewhere. “It’s important during this phase to stay focused on the longer term, and remind yourself that it can’t happen quickly, but the wheels are in motion.”

Dr Gordon says it’s also important that people push themselves into social or other activities at this time, and help ward off depression.

“When we are stressed we don’t feel we have the energy to socialise, but it’s really important we give ourselves that push to get out and get involved in something.” “It’s a recipe for depression to stay put and feel angry and helpless.” “People who are connected with social networks always recover better than those who remain isolated and uninvolved.”

Dr Gordon says men particularly can struggle through this time, as there may not be a great deal to do if they are not yet in a position to clear their property, and are often not as connected to social networks as women. “It’s important for men to recognise and focus on the fact that they are emotionally stressed, and to act on it. There is help available.” Dr Gordon said.

Winding Down Before Breaking Down – Why Survivors Need To Stop And Rest

“People need to maintain a pace that will last the distance. Recovery from disaster is about running a marathon, not winning a 100-metre sprint – even if that’s what was required to outrun the fire.” – Dr Rob Gordon

Almost three months on, many survivors of the bushfires continue to function at unsustainably high levels of activity and stress - risking their health and their ability to deal with the longer term rebuilding task. Dr Rob Gordon says many people have not stopped since the fires and are on the point of exhaustion.

“Many people in bushfire affected communities are still operating on adrenalin, and may be becoming very tired without realising it,” Dr Gordon said. “But they still have a long way to go to recover and rebuild, so it’s important that they try to think about the longer term and this means getting some rest.” Dr Gordon said there was a tendency after a disaster for people to remain in a state of intensely focused action – or adrenalin mode – which starts during a crisis.

“When a threat occurs and we have to fight a bushfire, we go into adrenalin mode, which opens up great reserves of energy we didn’t realise we had. “As long as we stay on adrenalin those reserves are available and we feel we can keep going. “The problem is we do not necessarily come out of this state when the immediate crisis is over, because of uncertainty or worry about the future. “What happens then is that people will suddenly come to the end of their energy and find it difficult to manage emotions. They might start to feel angry, irritable, overwhelmed and afraid all the time.”

Dr Gordon said staying in adrenalin mode was a health risk, aggravating existing health problems, or contributing to common stress reactions such as headaches, skin problems, digestive difficulties, tension, muscular aches and pains and generalised soreness.

He said it was important for family and friends to try and recognise when someone was at risk, because they may not recognise it themselves. “Being in adrenalin mode shuts down our natural feedback systems. While people are in this mode they are insensitive to how they are feeling, although those around them will see that they are not attending to themselves.

“In adrenalin mode we don’t make good long-term decisions because it’s designed to survive a sudden immediate crisis. “It’s important to get out of this situation so that we can make good decisions.

“Anyone who has a loved one they are concerned about should listen to them and talk to them about the need to stop, rest and take stock.”

How to recognise if someone is in adrenalin mode:

- They are totally focused on the problems around them, wanting to go from one issue to the next
- They speak rapidly and in great detail about everything
- They can’t stop being busy and need to find things to do even when there isn’t anything important to do
- They might be tense, on edge and extremely irritable and frustrated
- They are often tearful and emotional when unable to do what they need to do, responding to frustrating situations with strong emotional reactions
- They may alternate between feeling strong and vigorous, then physically and emotionally exhausted.

How to help a loved one through this time:

- Encourage them to take time out, to stop being active and to try and relax, even if it’s only for short periods of time. If possible get them out of their local area for a while
- Talking – often just talking to someone can bring the adrenalin level down and help the person reconnect with how they feel
- Get them to see the big picture and long-term needs; in adrenalin mode people focus on simple concrete problems at the expense of the long-term situation. Talk about the decisions and forward planning they need to make about rebuilding their life
- Try to encourage the person to be strategic and effective in what they do. People are inefficient when in adrenalin mode
- Be supportive and encouraging, don’t just tell them they’re stressed and that they should relax. Listen to them, and help them to think about those aspects that they are not attending to, including their own long-term welfare.

Where to get help:
The NURSE-ON-CALL Bushfire Health & Counselling Line - 1300 606 024
Lifeline - 131 114
Parentline - 132 289
beyondblue 1300 22 46 36
Mensline Australia 1300 78 99 78
Kids helpline 1800 55 18 00
Salvation Army 13 72 58
Australian Red Cross 03 8327 7700
Department of Human Services - www.dhs.vic.gov.au/em/bushfire-recovery
Visit your GP
Visit your local Community Health Service:
Nillumbik: at Eltham, 9430 9100, at Hurstbridge: 9430 9100
Whittlesea: Plenty Valley at Whittlesea: 9716 9444
Murrindindi and Mitchell Shires: 1300 773 352

