



Recovery after disaster

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Recovery after disaster

Coping with stress after an emergency

The impact of a crisis has obvious distressing effects, but other effects build up in the aftermath, easily go unnoticed and can cause additional difficulties. Threat, fear, discomfort, emotional upset, anxiety and stress are obvious. But helplessness is common during and after the impact. It easily causes anger, because we do whatever we can to make life controllable and secure, and when we can't, we feel out of control.

It is important to deal with the stress in recovery because it affects everything else, and unlike many other results of emergencies, we can do something about stress.

We go into stress mode when we have problems we can't sort out. Stress reactions help us cope with being in difficult or dangerous situations in two ways.

First, they focus us on the problem at the expense of everything that is not the problem; so we eat, drink and sleep the problem, ignoring the rest of life. We tend to neglect everything that makes life worthwhile, even if it is not affected by the problem. Then we get everything out of proportion and easily feel overwhelmed.

The second effect of stress is that our focus on the problem makes us less aware of ourselves and the results of what we do. Ignoring ourselves helps us survive by masking how tired we are. In stress, we easily run ourselves down without noticing until we are too tired to do what we should do. Then emotions get intense, it all feels too hard, we can't see how to get through it and feel overwhelmed.

Lack of joy, not caring for ourselves, getting exhausted make the end of the emergency the start of further problems that can run throughout recovery.

To avoid recovery stress, it is important to separate out worries about what might have happened during the emergency from taking stock of the effects that build up afterwards. Stressed minds only come to stressed conclusions.

The best protection is to keep interrupting recovery stress. We can't control the emergency, but we can manage recovery.

It can take months to recharge after a period of stress. Recharging happens by deliberately including recreation, getting away from the worries and doing fun things. Without these, it is harder to get a realistic perspective and the emergency never seems to be over.

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Recovery after disaster

Building trust and confidence in your community post-emergency

As time passes, some people put the emergency behind them and stop thinking about what happened, others think of little else. Community reactions become mixed, some people want to talk to those with similar views but avoid those in a different space.

At first, everyone has been through the emergency together and share common problems. Six months later, different reactions push people apart. Some still worry and don't know what will happen; some are over it, confident everything is all right; others are in between. People feel frustrated by too much talk of the emergency or not enough.

This is usual in communities after emergencies and causes misunderstandings. Opinions are expressed without being able to find out what's really happening, because people are not in the loop.

People wonder if they have a problem or not, drop out of activities that brought them together in the crisis and don't want to talk to anyone with different views. Some feel isolated at this stage and worry if they should be worried.

Try not to judge others but focus on what you need. Recovery is a cycle of feeling involved with the emergency, keeping normal life going, then needing to know what is happening.

There are some things people can do to help:

- First, remember everyone must focus on their own needs; try not to be frustrated with them for being in a different space. They have good reason to be where they are, but no one else really understands their situation so they don't know why, even if they think they do.
- Second, keep in touch with community recovery activities. If you don't need them now, you will be involved if you get stressed later. Supports work best if they are in place before a crisis.
- Third, think about what was important for your life and family before the emergency and check if you are doing it again after all the disruption, especially if it involved having fun or being with family and friends. If you're not, start.
- Fourth, if you are worried about health or other problems, see people who can give information to help get on top of it; if you aren't sure, contact the recovery groups.

Recovery from personal or community problems is easier if people stay connected with those who can get people together and provide information.

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Recovery after disaster

Tackling uncertainty and anxiety ahead of the next fire season

The year turns toward summer and hot weather again. Memories and reactions about past fires are stirred to life. Emergencies are about the damage caused, but equally about a changed sense of safety in the environment. We shift our perception of the emergency into perspective over time, when they don't happen again. It takes several seasons to fully regain confidence.

For some people, worry, insecurity and a changed sense of safety are part of the recovery journey.

People who are feeling these things often find it hard to separate the reality of the threat from feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, and are not sure how much to trust authorities who have information and control.

There are two problems: the real concern that fires can get out of control; and anxiety from the loss of safety that was there before.

Real concerns are best dealt with by preparing, and having confidence in the people responsible for protecting the community. Anxiety cuts across this; it is harder to manage until it is recognised for what it is – the fear of what *might* happen. When things might happen, there is nothing we can do until they happen. It is uncomfortable, but inevitable, as we move towards the fire season.

You can do several practical things to get ready.

First, tackle the real threat.

- Take the initiative. Put energy into being prepared. Get up to date with local arrangements for fire and other hazards; and update your safety kit, plans and contact numbers. Get information from your Council, CFA, SES and Red Cross.
- Contact neighbours and organise mutual communication and help arrangements. Whatever differences other people have, the threats are shared; but working together makes everyone safer. Do it as a street and as a community.

Second, tackle uncertainty and anxiety.

- Anxiety easily turns into stress and anger, and creates conflict. We get angry when we can't get certainty to take away anxiety. We need to recognise when we feel anxious and tackle those feelings, rather than look for answers that might not be available.
- Anxiety is reduced by support from others who share the problem. Participate in community activities, even if they are not about the emergency; get involved – isolation makes anxiety worse.
- Avoid the build-up of stress; do something to unwind. Seek reassurance from people you trust; get information from agencies and professionals who have it; and keep informed about what is being done in the community.
- Find out where you can give feedback, raise concern and ask questions. Others probably share similar worries, and those with information might not be aware of what you need.

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Recovery after disaster

Summer strategies to manage feelings and reduce stress

Threat, fear and uncertainty of emergencies create feelings that attach to anything associated with an emergency incident. Weather patterns, sights and sounds of the day, smoke and ash all stir up the emotions whenever they happen. Feelings are also stirred by information about the event, its risks, and the actions taken. Whatever is done by anyone associated with the disaster causes feelings.

Once feelings come to the surface, it is harder to get things into perspective; they take people back to the event and away from the present. This interferes with recovery - focusing on getting things done trying to feel better.

Then we look to emergency services and other responsible agencies to reduce those feelings. We concentrate on what is being done in order to feel better.

Emergency issues need to be separated from emotional recovery and 'getting on' with life. Issues associated with the emergency and risk should be handled by political processes. Expecting politics to solve emotional recovery means removing risk, which may not be possible. Emotions need to be dealt with by emotional strategies.

As summer approaches, it is important to have strategies to manage feelings and reduce stress and not wait for problems to be solved by others.

- When upset, stop and think about what you are feeling. Try to name the feeling and see if it is realistic.
- When we're worried, we are more likely to remember bad things that caused the feelings, and we ignore what has been learned or done to make it better. Focus on what has been done, and what will be different in the future.
- Interrupt feelings of upset by changing mood, talk to others, do satisfying things, make plans and preparations. Stop thinking and do something else, then come back to it later.
- Schedule what gives a positive mood: meet friends, leave the area for a while, enjoy entertainment, follow a hobby, or decide to do nothing.
- When worried, don't do it alone, get information, share worries with others who can offer advice.
- Above all, don't just let feelings run rampant - recognise them, be active and do something to deal with them and do something to make good feelings.

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Recovery after disaster

Accepting the risk of bushfire and creating a new future

As the weather warms the reality of another summer looms. It takes us back to previous summers, the fires and the problems they caused. This could raise worries about what might happen, threats that haven't been removed, the overall uncertainty, and the continuing risk.

Recovery is usually seen as on getting over problems, back to how things were before it happened – like an illness. In emergencies, that means getting back to how things were before the fire.

But the fire, smoke, and everything associated with it, undermines our trust, security and confidence of life before the fire. It happened and it might happen again, whatever anyone says. We can't have the same future as before.

Recovery has to mean something different; surviving the emergency, dealing with its effects and creating a new future.

Instead of the old assumptions, the new future has to accept that things do go wrong. To feel good about the new future we must accept risk, consider what can be controlled, and form new assumptions that include possible problems.

As we approach the new summer three things will help us reduce worry and fear and begin creating a new idea of the future:

- **First: accept and define the risks.** We do it when we drive our car, and being realistic about the risks helps us to be safe. What's different here is that we didn't have the risk of fire in mind this time last year. This year we do.
- **Second: make plans in case something happens.** Accept the possibility of a problem, and get the information to take action. Do the thinking and make the decisions before an emergency happens. If it does, it's then a matter of putting your plan into action.
- **Third: make preparations.** Go beyond planning; make sure you're set up with equipment and supplies, make contact with people you might do things with or go to. Rehearse a scenario so you know how long things take, and can work out practical problems.

Accepting possible risks and knowing you're well prepared means you can confidently prevent harm to you and your family. It also helps shape a new future that accepts the reality of living with fire, and adds it to the other dangers we manage in life.

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Recovery after disaster

Learning to trust your own thinking and actions

Emergencies undermine trust and confidence in nature, other people and authorities who normally keep things safe. Trust and confidence are vital to our peace of mind; when aspects of life seem untrustworthy, we respond with worry and anxiety.

It becomes hard to restrict these feelings to the original problems. They generalise to anything connected with them. We can easily feel we don't know what to trust.

When we lose trust, and become doubtful and uncertain, stress chemicals in our brains prepare us for survival by assuming the worst. We take more notice of information about what threatens us, than what should give us confidence. We often ignore or distrust information that should reassure us.

Stress chemicals simplify our minds and make it hard to see how complicated the situation might be. This helps when we are under threat, but keeps us on edge and prevents us rebuilding confidence in the new future.

This applies to our view of nature, authorities, experts, neighbours and perhaps ourselves. We might simplify the weather threat and think that any hot or windy day is dangerous, whereas there is a combination of factors that make it out of the ordinary.

With ourselves, we're more likely to remember what we didn't do, and ignore what we did do and the reasons why and what we've learned as a result and would do next time.

In recovering from emergencies, research shows that those who only focus on fixing problems are at a disadvantage because many problems are beyond our control. Frustration and worry then make us more stressed.

But the same research shows when we focus on how we feel and our overall state of mind, we often do better because we're dealing with something we can influence.

As we approach the summer season, we can all make a difference to how summer affects us:

- Make sure you take in all the information, and notice what's being done to make situations safer, not just problems and threats.
- If trust and confidence has been undermined, ask what you can trust.
- Notice how you feel, and work to keep a balanced state of mind so you can use all the information available.
- Manage your mood and feelings by talking to others, seeking information, and contacting people who help keep our community safe.
- Set up networks of friends and neighbours to help each other in crisis, and know what supports you can call on.
- Be active, plan and practice what you would do in a crisis, so you can trust your own thinking and actions.

Whatever happened last summer, the best preparation is to have been through it and know what can happen.

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