

UNDERSTANDING & MANAGING ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS: TIPS FOR FAMILIES AFFECTED BY BUSHFIRES

Anniversaries are times of remembering, reflecting and review. When the anniversary marks something sad, distressing, terrifying or tragic it might bring about the same or similar reactions to those originally experienced. For some, the remembering will renew feelings and worries that something similar might happen again. For others, the anniversary might bring new challenges, such as thinking about the events and wondering about the future.

As the anniversary of the bushfires of last summer approaches there will be increased media coverage, increased discussion in the community and schools about the fires and the potential risk of more bushfires. This may be helpful, but, as is often the case, children are vulnerable to over-exposure to such discussion and media coverage. Rarely do they have control of the nature, timing, degree and content of this exposure.

Understanding your children during the anniversary period

Children may react to the anniversary of the bushfires in a variety of ways, depending on their age, developmental level and previous experience with trauma, loss and the fires themselves. Other influencing factors will include experiences since the fires, which may have been helpful or unhelpful, and the impact of these, as well as emotional support currently available to them from parents, extended family, other significant people and their school. At anniversary times children can become anxious, upset, withdrawn or angry without realising what the feelings are about. Young children might also show signs of reluctance to sleep alone, be away from parents and worry for the safety of loved ones.

School-aged children can demonstrate new fears and avoidant behaviour around what they now consider is risky or potentially dangerous. Adolescents may become more reckless and act out, or spend time discussing the danger with their friends, trying to predict what might happen and strategies to keep safe. For some children and adolescents, the anniversary will trigger their feelings of being unsafe and increase their level of anxiety. They might not want to go to school, be away from family and loved ones or participate in public anniversary events in any way. Instead they may seek out relationships and environments where they feel protected from bushfire reminders, and where there is familiarity, predictability and people who are able to 'tune in' to them.



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Those who might need special support

There are some children who will need a special eye kept on them and perhaps need additional support during the anniversary period. These are children who:

- were personally affected by the fires, either by being caught in them or had loved ones caught, who have had family members or friends die as a consequence of the fires, whose homes were burnt down or who had pets perish, were fearful for their lives or those of people they care about
- saw or experienced things that made them feel fearful or terrified
- have experienced any of a range of challenging life events since the fires such as temporary accommodation, relocation of neighbourhood and or school, whose parents and teachers have been stressed by the fire and post fires demands, have experienced illness themselves or in significant others and perhaps death of someone important
- have a previous history of trauma, grief, loss and displacement, which may also require recognition
- are known to be sensitive to emotional challenges and who need reassurance
- are physically, intellectually or otherwise vulnerable or who have developmental disabilities.

What you can do to help?

Open & age-appropriate communication

Be aware that the anniversary may bring with it additional challenges and strong emotions. But also it may not. Monitor any responses and talk with your child about what you are observing.

Children are best supported when somebody important to them knows what's happening for them. It's okay to talk to your children about things that have happened to them, what they are thinking, and what their feelings might be. Your children might be feeling more worried, scared, or sad than usual. They might be thinking more about the fires or how their lives have changed - what they think and feel might be reflected in the things they talk about, in their drawings, or their play.

It can be helpful to begin your conversations in an open way such as:

- "I notice you seem a bit edgier (or a bit jumpier, or quieter) than usual ... I wonder why that is?"
- "It seems to me like you are talking (or drawing or playing) more about the fires at the moment... I wonder why that is?"
- "People seem to be thinking about the fires a lot again... I wonder if it's like that for you?"

It is not uncommon for children to feel generally more anxious and not link it to the trigger of the anniversary. By understanding children's specific traumatic reminders or triggers and their personal feelings, fears and concerns, adults may be able to help them to feel more settled, react less strongly and to cope more comfortably. Your children might also be influenced by the weather conditions and feel more nervous and restless on hot, windy days or when they can see or smell smoke or when total fire ban days are declared.

You may also be feeling anxious about the anniversary, the weather and fire related warnings. Be honest and genuine with children. It's okay to share your feelings and thoughts; this allows them to learn from you and to know that you are open to talking and expressing feelings about such things. However, if possible, your own deep and intense emotional moments are best managed in an adults-only context, especially if there is not someone present to focus fully on your child and the impact on them.

Children three years after Canberra bushfires

Although the experience of the Canberra 2003 Bushfires was quite different, we know what parents said about their children three years after the bushfires. Some parents noted their children's ongoing concerns about fires and described these as:

- fear of smoke, fear of being alone, easily stressed and very emotional
- fear of another fire coming
- frightened by the sound of fire engines
- nervous and restless, especially on hot, windy days or when they can see or smell smoke
- panic reaction to smoke (whatever its source) or the smell of smoke in the air
- always upset when burning off - children think it will happen again
- concern whenever any of the family are away for work, school camps, etc
- disinterested in going on holiday or being away from home.

Macdonald, Raphael, Woodward & Winkworth in Camilleri et al. (2007)



Marking the anniversary

Let children mark the anniversary in their own way. Some children may want to note the anniversary and others will want to ignore it and go about their regular business. For some children this may be because marking it is not relevant for them; for others because it is too frightening, or distressing. The younger the child, the more they live in the moment and are less likely to reflect or benefit from reflection.

Don't pressure children to participate in ceremonies, or memorials. Let them find their own way and be respectful of that. Some children may want to be part of school or community events and activities. Others may find a quiet family or personal moment meets their needs. Some children may honour the occasion by writing a story, doing a drawing, planting a tree, talking to a star, making a movie or making a memorial (remember to ask your child if they would like to do this).

Continually raising the subject with your children when they are not ready can seem like nagging or not letting them have times of normality. Judge when you think might be a good time to ask them how they are feeling – a quiet “how are you” might provide the opportunity for them to share their thoughts and feelings or to remind them that you are willing to listen when they are willing or able to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Letting your child know that you are available to talk and listen to their feelings and to support them and to take your cue from them is a good way of being supportive.

Feeling safe

Some children will ask, “Will the fire happen again?” “Will things be like that again?” Be honest. You can reassure them that many people are working to make the environment as safe as possible and that there are things that you as a family are doing to be prepared, but there is no guarantee. Working on your family emergency action plan may help children to take active steps to feel safe.

Knowing that they can trust the adults in their life is vital for children and for this to happen – you need to be honest. It is okay to share your feelings and thoughts about whether fires will happen again in a manner appropriate to children's ages and developmental stage; this allows them to learn from you and to know that you are open to talking.

Media

Repeated exposure to media coverage may increase your child's anxiety levels and distress. Young children may not realise that footage on television is a replay and not another event. Be confident in your role as a parent and limit their exposure to news and other programs with potentially distressing images and sounds. (DVD's are a good standby).

Community connectedness

Taking constructive action is one way to feel less powerless and frightened. The anniversary can be an opportunity to strengthen ties with others in the community.

Consider how you and your family feel about possible ceremonies or memorials – some parents and older children may dread these and find it distressing – some may prefer not to be involved. It is important for everyone to respect, without judgement or criticism, individual and family choices.

School

Some schools may intend marking the anniversary. Find out what is planned and prepare your child or discuss whether they want to participate.

Seeking help

The Black Saturday bushfires and others in Victoria in 2009 were tragic and serious. The anniversary may trigger a lot of strong emotions for some people. If your child's reactions and feelings are getting worse rather than easing, consider seeking help from a qualified mental health professional, talk to your child's teacher or your GP. Teachers are an immediate source of support for children and it's best if they are aware that your child might be having difficulties, so that they can monitor the child and provide additional reassurance. Together you can form a supportive network for your child.

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