



Mental Health  
Australia

# THE IMPACT OF NATURAL DISASTERS ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH



Australia is a country where natural disasters are a constant. Bushfires, floods, drought, severe storms, cyclones and seasonal weather events are common and sadly cyclical for many communities. Especially rural and remote communities who are often already disadvantaged by limited access to reliable services and resources.

On the ground, in the towns and suburbs where these disasters occur, communities generally rally in the time of need. We know from evidence that practical support is vital for our mental health during the immediate stage of a natural disaster. And we also know that strengthening social support networks are critical. Networks themselves that often include the 1000s of trained volunteer firefighters on standby each summer and in action on the front line, or the many 'mud armies' cleaning up after floods or cyclones. Local people in local communities providing that practical support during a time of great stress, anxiety, fear and immediate need.

At **Mental Health Australia** our vision is for mentally healthy people, but also for mentally healthy communities, and it is often during a natural disaster where we see Australian communities step up to help each other and support their own. How these communities stay healthy in the days, weeks, months and years that follow a natural disaster is where governments, and the mental health sector, need to step in and focus their attention and action. What we do once the fires are extinguished, and the flood waters recede is paramount to the mental health of all, and there is a bank of evidence, frameworks, research, reporting and even a Royal Commission to point us in the right direction.

Every candidate in the 2022 Federal Election will be representing a community that will have been, who will be impacted by a natural disaster at some point. How governments prepare for, and handle the aftermath of these disasters, is a major issue for all Australians, and an issue that impacts the mental health of many.

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# THE FACTS

## How does a natural disaster impact our mental health?

*"There is compelling evidence of the impacts of natural disasters on mental health. Natural disasters give rise to increased rates of stress, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol and substance abuse, aggression and violence, suicide, and exacerbation of other underlying mental health problems."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"The impacts of disasters can be long term, complex, and intangible. Collectively, we are only now beginning to fully understand indirect, flow on and cumulative effects of disasters. We do know that disasters can trigger long-term challenges across a range of areas, including reduced education and workforce participation, increased crime, and physical and mental health and wellbeing."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"In addition to stressors related to exposure to a disaster event, aftermath stressors have significant detrimental impacts on the mental health and well-being of those affected by disasters. These stressors may include things such as disruptions to housing, managing insurance claims, experiencing subsequent health issues and struggling to access support services."*

**Our Stories - Beyond the disaster, National Mental Health Commission**

*"Geographical barriers, unsafe conditions and loss of essential services all arise after a disaster and can lead to significant delays in support, prolonging trauma and exacerbating emotional distress."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"Children and young people are particularly susceptible to ongoing mental health effects as a result of a natural disaster - which can result in poorer educational outcomes and a loss of a sense of stability and safety."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"Natural disasters can also impact on the mental health of first responders. A range of psychological issues can arise from traumatic events, including anxiety, depression and PTSD"*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

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# WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT DO?

*"Australian, state and territory governments should agree to develop consistent and compatible methods and metrics to measure the health effects of disasters, including on mental health."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"State and territory governments should refine arrangements to support localised planning and the delivery of appropriate mental health services following a natural disaster."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"While a range of programs and funding are provided, there is scope to improve the coordination and delivery for mental health services. The long-lasting trauma of disaster events over the last decade underscores the need for greater planning for the delivery of long-term locally based and appropriate mental health services."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"For those recovering from a natural disaster - perhaps claiming insurance, applying for support from governments and charities, rebuilding their homes, and attending to health and mental health concerns - we heard that navigating the recovery support system can be complex and exhausting. These processes should be designed with closer attention to the needs of these people."*

**2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**

*"Once the initial post-disaster period comes to an end, priorities should shift to identifying and supporting those at risk of developing mental health problems."*

**Black Dog Institute**

*"Disasters and hazards will continue to test Australians in various ways over the coming years. To better prepare for these events, the mental health response needs to be adequately funded and planned to be in place over many years. Mental health care needs to be integrated into future disaster planning, and provision of services needs to be strengthened for communities at higher risk."*

**Black Dog Institute**

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# LOOKING FOR MORE DETAIL OR RESOURCES?

**June 2021 - National Mental Health Commission**  
[National Natural Disaster Mental Health Framework](#)

**June 2021 - National Mental Health Commission**  
[Our Stories - Beyond the disaster](#)

**March 2021 - Black Dog Institute**  
[Mental Health Impact of Floods](#)

**October 2020**  
[Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements - Final Report](#)

**June 2020 - Mental Health Australia**  
[Submission to Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee Inquiry into lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-2020](#)

**May 2020 - Statement from the Prime Minister**  
[Local economic recovery plans will help towns and regions hit by bushfires get back on their feet as part of a new \\$650 million package of support from the Morrison Government.](#)

**February 2020 - Black Dog Institute**  
[Mental Health Interventions Following Disasters](#)

**January 2020 - National Mental Health Commission**  
[Australia's mental health and wellbeing is priority for bushfire recovery](#)

**October 2019 - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare**  
[Health inequalities in rural and remote areas](#)

**December 2018 - Senate Community Affairs Inquiry**  
[Accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia - Final Report](#)

**May 2018 - Mental Health Australia**  
[Submission to Senate Community Affairs inquiry into accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia](#)

**May 2018 - Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia**  
[Submission to Inquiry into accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia](#)

## **Additional Resources thanks to Mental Health Australia Members and Stakeholders**

[National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation - Bushfire Recovery Assistance](#)  
[Beyond Blue Bushfire Support](#)  
[R U OK? Bushfire Support](#)  
[Reachout Bushfire Support](#)  
[Headspace - Coping with the stress of bushfires](#)  
[Lifeline Bushfire Support](#)  
[Marathon Health - Support for Bushfire affected Australians](#)  
[Suicide Prevention Australia - Mental health and suicide prevention strategies for the Bushfire Recovery Fund](#)

Mental Health Australia would like to thank its member organisations and key stakeholders for contributing to this extensive body of work on how natural disasters impact the mental health of all Australians. If you are a member of Mental Health Australia and would like to add to these resources, please contact [info@mhaustralia.org](mailto:info@mhaustralia.org)

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