

SUPPORTING YOUR EMPLOYEES DURING AND AFTER BUSHFIRES



Whether directly affected through threat to personal property, evacuation orders, disrupted holiday plans or worrying about family and friends in bushfire areas, there is no predictability in reactions. Some people remain stoic and practical, even when they have been through great disaster, while others, who may have not even been directly impacted or near fire may demonstrate significant signs of anxiety. A sense of powerlessness may also be felt, due to lack of information and the relentless media focus on the information it can obtain or chooses to repeatedly report which can distort perception of the scale and threat of the disaster.

The effects can last a long time

Do remember that impact is felt not just at the time of bushfires, but also in the days, weeks and months that follow.

Also consider that as employers we have a duty of care. There are powerful legal and moral imperatives that oblige us to actively monitor and manage psychological risk.

Steps you can take as a manager:

1. IDENTIFY EMPLOYEES WHO MAY BE AFFECTED BY THE BUSHFIRES

Use your internal knowledge and networks to identify employees who may be affected by the bushfires – both directly or indirectly. This is the active listening and intelligence gathering phase.

- Actively check-in with staff about how they are travelling and whether they have any concerns about any of their work colleagues.
- Pay attention to employees who may still be on leave or, even importantly, not at work when they are meant to be.
- Don't make any judgements or assumptions about who will or will not be affected by the disaster.
- Be open to listening to the impact and needs being expressed by staff as this will guide what you can do practically to assist recognizing these may change over time.

2. PROVIDE PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

You may not think you're the right person for this but you need to be prepared to support employees in relation to their concerns and needs in the times during or following any bushfire disaster.

- Help yourself by asking employees what type of support they believe would be most helpful.
- Others may be emotionally stretched or worrying about their job performance or even about losing their job. Reassurance may be all that is required.
- Others might need carers' leave to look after displaced, ill or aged family members for a defined period.
- Be open and flexible to respond in highly individualized ways to the needs of your employees.
- Seek internal support and guidance from your human resources/people and culture teams as they may have additional resources and suggestions for how support can be individually or collectively planned and provided.
- If you're not near the bushfires and safely in the centre of one of Australia's cities, consider your employees may feel the need to help. Look at what charities and others are asking for and give staff choices about how to help, or how they can join in with an organisational response.



Spot light note - Interestingly, research tells us that it's usually the manager closest to the employee that is the most trusted and the most effective at providing reassurance and support following traumatic events such as bushfires. So, keep support local and focal even if there is a mass organizational response.

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3. PROVIDE INFORMATION

There are two key forms of information that need to be provided at during and immediately following major bushfires:

1. **Organisational** - the employee needs to know all the practical information that is related to their employment such as relevant policies and procedures, formal support, leave entitlements etc.
2. **Health related** - provide them with the information relating to the normal reactions to experiencing traumatic events, self-care, looking after their work colleagues etc.

Sometimes, human resources/OH&S teams plan, prepare and coordinate this information for managers. Then it should be shared with staff using regular internal channels such as staff meetings, executive briefings, team leader huddles - whatever is right for you in your workplace.

4. ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING FOR YOUR FAMILY TOO



Remember during major bushfires, whole families are sometimes affected. Your immediate family may also be able to be able to access support under your EAP.

5. MONITORING EMPLOYEE REACTIONS

Sometimes staff reactions to disaster are mild. Other times they are delayed or more serious. Irrespective, you as a manager need to remain vigilant, particularly during the two to three weeks following major bushfires. It's important for managers to monitor the employee for warning signals such as:

- Expressions of extreme feelings of guilt or shame
- Irritability or emotional outbursts
- Unusual worry, distractedness or anxiety
- Lack of concentration or unusual memory lapses
- Uncharacteristically poor or variable work performance.
- Withdrawn behaviour or active avoidance of work or responsibilities.

6. IF CONCERNED - REFER FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP

If you see or become aware of any uncharacteristic behaviour or changes that seem unusual for an individual, see it as a prompt for offering further support, and possibly, additional professional help.



Remember - if you are unsure what to do, you as the manager can access Manager Assist on 1300 687 327 to talk over any concerns you may have about any team members. Or, you may just want to talk about your own coping abilities during these tough times.

Never feel as though you are trying to provide all the support alone, our team of professional counsellors are always available and willing to assist you or members of your team when it is needed the most.

As your EAP provider **Converge** is always here to listen.

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