



BUSHFIRE THREAT AND SLEEP HEALTH

COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND ANXIETY

- Ongoing anxiety about risk can lead to sleep deprivation
- Planning ahead is important
- Implement strategies for being warned of danger during the sleep period
- There are things you can do to help 'turn off' at night
- Maintain good sleep habits

Note: All words that are underlined relate to topics in the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au

This fact sheet is intended for those monitoring a threatening fire in their region over multiple days and nights and feeling anxious about the threat. Ongoing uncertainty can cause trouble sleeping but there are things you can do to help.

Bushfires are often unpredictable and people may experience weeks of uncertainty about whether they or their loved ones are at immediate risk. This uncertainty can produce anxiety over an extended period of time, interfere with the ability to get quality sleep and lead to sleep deprivation. (See also Anxiety and Sleep fact sheet).

We all feel anxious sometimes and this can be an adaptive emotion. Anxiety can help us focus on what we need to do for survival. Anxiety causes us to be 'hyper-aroused' and prepares us for 'fight or flight'. A problem arises, however, if our hyper-arousal is ongoing. We can't get good quality sleep if our body is ready to fight or flee when we go to bed.

Sleep deprivation makes everyone react more emotionally to events. It is good to know that if we are sleep deprived we may have more problems making sensible decisions quickly and/or helping our loved ones in also dealing with the crisis. There are things you can do to minimise difficulties.

Being well organised and having a good plan well before the emergency happens can help you wind down at night for sleep. Instead of your mind 'chattering' with worries, tell yourself that you have planned everything you possibly can and problem-solving during the night is unhelpful. Sleep is not the time to plan things – in fact that

rational part of our brain is not very active during sleep, drowsiness or with sleep deprivation. If we are hyper-aroused and trying to sleep the parts of our brain that deal with emotions are active and it is easy to catastrophise about possible future events.

When dealing with the threat of bushfires here are some things you can do to help maximise your chances of a good night's sleep.

Be prepared:

- Have a well-developed plan. Know what you will do in particular circumstances regarding where the fire is and the advice you are receiving. Writing down this plan is useful and can reduce your anxiety.
- If your plan includes possible evacuation make preparations in plenty of time, including a list.
- Stay informed but maintain some perspective on how often you need to update yourself on the fire threat. Check with yourself and others about whether you are needlessly obsessing about risk.
- If fire danger is at night, plan shifts across the sleep period with your family, housemates or neighbours so you can sleep knowing you will be awoken by someone if necessary.
- Know exactly what you will do if you need to evacuate at night and plan to be able to do this very quickly. Communicate plans with your children. Have things ready for pet evacuation too.



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- If you feel you need updates on the fire situation via your mobile during the night, set an alarm so you can get some deep sleep in between checks. If you rely on self-waking you are likely to have a much lighter sleep.

Calm your mind:

- If you are a worrier make a 'worry time' each day and write out all your worries. Think about options on how to deal with those worries and write these out. Work out what worries you can do something about and try not to dwell on those you have no control over. During the sleep period tell yourself you will worry again during tomorrow's 'worry time'.
- Avoid dwelling on distressing 'worst case scenarios' and 'what ifs', especially in the hour before bed and in bed.
- Take the time to learn how to relax so you can do this during the night if you can't sleep. An App called 'Smiling Mind' has helpful short mindfulness activities to help you relax. Another option is *Progressive Muscle Relaxation*, which helps relax both the body and the mind. Learn this via YouTube during the day and then replay the technique in your mind at night in bed.
- Don't try too hard to sleep, you can't force sleep. Try to focus on neutral or pleasant thoughts, such as your last or next holiday.
- Do not lie in bed awake for a long time. If you are feeling frustrated or hyper-aroused get up and go and sit in a quiet, dark room. Calm your thoughts until you feel sleepy or more relaxed again.

Keep good sleep habits:

- Keep your regular sleep-wake routine if possible and have short naps during the day if needed.
- Don't rely on caffeine or alcohol to manage when you are awake or asleep. Both can interfere with sleep quality.
- See also [Good Sleep Habits](#).

Children:

Remember that children will often take their cues from you in how they anticipate and react to a crisis. Discuss the situation calmly with them, letting them know what the plans are and that your top priority is everyone's safety, including any pets. Be aware that they may become distressed by images on the News and talk about their anxieties if necessary. Try to keep their normal sleep-wake routine and teach them simple relaxation techniques/breathing exercises if necessary, using Apps (e.g. Mindful Powers or Breathe2Relax) on mobile phones for example.

If you need help:

Whether you feel distressed through anticipating a possible emergency or actually recovering from a trauma or loss there are resources to help.

In a mental health crisis, call:

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
- <https://bushfireinfo.business>

The Australian Psychological Society has lots of excellent online resources for 'Psychological Preparation and Recovery', including for children. www.psychology.org.au/Australian-bushfires-2020

The Red Cross has developed a very helpful online resource 'Looking after Yourself and Your Family after a Disaster' www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/e5dd400b-d18c-4e6f-ae9c-fbe55b25a6f4/LookingAfterYourselfandYourFamilyAfterDisaster.pdf

For information on over 70 different sleep related topics, written by professionals, visit the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au. The underlined topics in this article are covered in detail there.



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