

After the Fires – Supporting Adolescents.

Pre-adolescent (ages 12 to 14)

Peer reactions are especially significant in this age group. Students need to feel that their concerns are both appropriate and shared by others. Responses should be aimed at lessening tensions and anxieties and possible guilt feelings.

Typical reactions include:

- sleep disturbance
- appetite disturbance
- rebellion in the home
- refusal to do chores
- loss of interest in peer social activities
- school problems (e.g. fighting, withdrawal, loss of interest, attention-seeking behaviour)
- physical problems (e.g. headaches, vague aches and pains, skin eruptions, bowel problems and psychosomatic complaints)

The following may be helpful:

- group activities geared toward the resumption of routines
- involvement with same age group activity
- group discussions geared toward rehearsing appropriate behaviour in future disasters
- structured but undemanding responsibilities
- temporarily relaxed expectations of performance at school and home
- additional individual attention and consideration
- encouragement of involvement in school/community reclamation activities (e.g. clearing up, planning replacement gardens and replanting).

Adolescent (ages 15 to 18)

Most of the activities and interest of the adolescent are with their peers. They tend to be especially distressed by the disruption to their peer group activities and, possibly, being left out of community efforts.

Typical reactions include:

- psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. rashes, bowel problems or breathing difficulties)
- headaches and tension
- appetite and sleep disturbance
- hypochondriasis
- increased pre-occupation with self
- agitation or decrease in energy level
- irresponsible and/or delinquent behaviour
- reduced resistance to parental control
- poor concentration.

The following may be helpful:

- encourage participation in community rehabilitation or reclamation work
- encourage resumption of social activities (e.g. athletics or youth clubs)
- encourage discussion of disaster experiences with peers and significant others
- temporarily reduce expectations for level of school and general performance for those most affected
- peer counselling
- provide information on common responses to disaster
- encourage the students to help each other.

Some teenagers may have been actively involved in fighting the fires either alongside their parents/carers or as members of volunteer brigades. These teenagers may be experiencing different reactions and may have different needs. They will have been acting as adults, risking their lives and will need to have recognition of their experiences.

Parenting Adolescents: often families feel more anxiety following a crisis and parents and caregivers may restrict their teen's activities for example limiting them going out without an adult or setting early curfews or restricting driving. Help the adolescents understand this increase in protective behaviours is temporary as the family recovers and won't last forever. Be mindful of your own anxiety and allow, as much as possible, age appropriate activities.

When to seek more help – minimise the change in trajectory !

- If you feel overwhelmed, have intense emotions that don't reduce in a few weeks.
- Severe and continued sleep disturbance
- Intense anxiety or emotional difficulties
- Feel numb and empty
- Preoccupation with or avoid anything related to the bushfires.
- Behaviours that are getting you into trouble at home or school – aggressive / emotional outbursts.
- Have relationship problems – friends, family, colleagues
- Have thoughts of self-harm

Where to get help

- School Counsellors – registered psychologists available in all schools
- Community Health centre
- GP
- Private Practice Psychologists