

Useful skills for disaster recovery

Helpful thinking

Following the bushfires, many people's way of thinking about the world and themselves may have shifted to have a very negative focus. They might now see the world as dangerous and unpredictable, and be thinking things like, "Things will never be right again", or, "No-one can keep me safe".

These thoughts are very understandable given personal experience of the fires, but they can also cause additional intense sadness, fear or anger. Thoughts have a direct impact on how people feel, and when negative thoughts become habits of thought, they can increase distress and make it harder to deal with the situation. Then, they become unhelpful.

Tackling unhelpful thinking

A useful skill to learn is to notice if you are thinking in an unhelpful way, and try to find more helpful thoughts that make it easier to manage.

Catching yourself thinking unhelpful thoughts can be tricky. Often these thinking habits are automatic, and we don't notice what we're saying to ourselves, but just know we feel bad. Noticing that you are feeling worried might come first. Then, ask yourself what you might have been thinking. Perhaps it was something like, "This wind is like the winds during the fires and if we have more fires this year, I won't be able to cope", or, "Everything is ruined – I'll never get things sorted out".

The next step is to come up with an alternative, more helpful thought, which should give rise to more positive feelings like being in control and feeling more hopeful. Try, "I've coped with a lot already and discovered strengths I didn't realise I had", or, "This is hard work and will take a while, but I've started – just keep chipping away".

Of course, as with most things, you will get better at noticing unhelpful thoughts and focusing on helpful alternatives with practice. And the good thing about habits of thought? There are always plenty of opportunities to practice! If you're finding getting started difficult, it may be helpful to seek assistance from a health professional.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/