

Preparing to return home following a bushfire evacuation



If you have been evacuated, or were unable to return home as a result of a bushfire, there are a number of practical and emotional things to consider when you are ready or allowed to return home.

This information sheet provides some tips on things you may need to consider.

Anticipate what it will be like returning home

The physical environment

It helps to think ahead about what the physical environment might look and feel like when you return home. There may be a delay in returning home if the area is not safe, or authorities are searching for missing people. The area affected may also be treated as a crime scene, if the cause of the fire was suspected arson.

After a bushfire, you may find your local environment has dramatically changed from the one you left. Some of the experiences people report after bushfire include:

- blackened, lifeless landscapes
- burnt out buildings, outbuildings, vehicles
- smell of burnt bush
- areas covered in ash
- road signs and familiar landmarks missing
- dead animals
- rotten food in the fridge (especially if the electricity has been turned off for days)
- search and rescue signs painted on houses.

Preparing to return home

When the all clear is given, think about the following things:

- Are the roads open, and are they safe?
- Have you got enough fuel, food and water?
- Are mobile phones charged?
- Who will you inform that you are returning home?
- Have you got a torch and a radio?
- Have you got appropriate clothing, boots, hard wearing long sleeved shirts and long pants, as well as gloves, and a hat?
- Will you take children and pets on the first visit?
- Is your tetanus booster up to date?

Returning home

If there is no apparent damage:

- Do not enter your home until fire officials say it is safe to do so.
- Use caution when entering burned areas as hazards may still exist, including hot spots which can flare up without warning.
- Work out what you need to do first, small steps at a time, check that power, phone, water, gas and sewerage/septic tanks are functioning. You may need to call essential services.
- Check on neighbours.
- Follow public health guidance on safe cleanup of fire ash and safe use of masks.
- Wet debris down to minimise breathing dust particles.
- Wear leather or thick rubber gloves and heavy soled shoes to protect hands and feet.
- Cleaning products, paint, batteries and damaged fuel containers need to be disposed of properly to avoid risk. Check with local authorities for hazardous disposal assistance.
- Be aware that the weather conditions and clean-up work may be tiring, so schedule plenty of breaks.

Ensure your food and water are safe

- Discard any food that has been exposed to heat, smoke or soot.
- Never use water you think may be contaminated in order to: wash dishes, brush teeth, prepare food, wash hands, make ice or make baby formula.

Inspecting your home

- Inspect the roof immediately and extinguish any sparks or embers. Bushfires may have left burning embers that could reignite.
- Take photographs of the damage, both of the building and its contents, for insurance purposes.
- Do not switch anything back on, including heating systems, if there is any structural damage. Have the house checked by an authorised electrician or supplier.
- If outside, stay away from broken wires and fallen electrical cables and call your power company immediately.
- Visually check the stability of the trees. Any tree that has been weakened by fire may be a hazard. Call an arborist if you think a tree may be in danger of falling.

Emotional considerations

It is normal for people to have conflicting emotions as a result of returning home. Try to anticipate what conditions you may be confronted with and how you may react. Rehearsal of the scenario will allow you to feel more in control of the situation and less distressed.

Some of these mixed feelings may include:

- Relief at coming home – being able to get on with the job of getting your home and life back in order.
- Uncertainty about what it will be like in the coming days and weeks.
- Distress about the losses you've experienced – possessions, your home, garden, maybe even people or pets.
- Pleased for what did survive.
- Upset about the changes that you are faced with.
- Enthusiasm and motivation to get on with it and fix it all up.
- Worry about how you're all going to get through it.
- Worried that the bushfire might happen again, especially if the weather continues to be hot and windy.
- Hope for the future.
- Feeling overwhelmed – of the hard work ahead and the disruption to daily life.
- Replaying the frightening moments of the approaching disaster before you left.

Identify the feelings and thoughts

1. Notice these feelings, and label them. Are you are feeling anxious? Angry? Sad?
2. Pinpoint where in your body these feelings are located. Some common places that people notice feelings of worry or distress include:
 - tight chest
 - gritted teeth
 - tense jaw
 - butterflies in the stomach
 - heart palpitations
 - sweaty palms
 - shortness of breath
3. Recognise what these feelings are about by putting them into words, for example, "I'm feeling nervous about going back home because I felt scared when I was there last. Maybe I'll experience all those feelings again."

Managing feelings

The next step is to find ways of managing your feelings. Learning useful techniques can make all the difference in how you react.

If you are feeling anxious or upset, try to:

1. Slow down your breathing.
2. Challenge negative thoughts and replace them with more helpful ones.
3. Only do what you can.
4. Try not to take your anger out on others.

Moving beyond hopes and fears

The recovery period can often feel overwhelming, lonely and difficult.

Some people find the following helpful:

- Getting back into a routine: familiar patterns of mealtimes (with familiar food), school/work of some sort, and bedtime routine are important for adults as well as children.
- Break tasks into small steps and work through them one at a time.
- Think about what you have achieved at the end of each day.

Making sense of what has happened

People often find themselves going back over the experience, thinking about it, trying to put some sense and order to the events, and working out what happened and why. It is natural to try to understand what happened, but try not to stress about things that are outside your control.

Below are several suggestions to help your personal recovery as well as to hasten the recovery of your community:

- Find a support network – to tell your own story as well as listen to the stories of others.
- Keep a record of your thoughts.
- Look to the future and start to make plans.
- Give yourself and others time to work through feelings. Be willing to give yourself and allow those around you some slack. You have to take the journey together.
- Most of all avoid isolation. Those people who seek out support, involve themselves in their communities and make full use of the various services offered recover faster and better. You are entitled to the assistance available.

Further Information

Have a look at the Red Cross 'After the emergency' website, Facebook and Twitter for more information:

<http://aftertheemergency.redcross.org.au/>

<https://www.facebook.com/AustralianRedCross>

<http://twitter.com/RedCrossAU>

Keep listening to ABC local radio in your state for information: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/emergency/>

Contact your local government or relevant state government for information about recovery.

This information sheet has been developed by Australian Red Cross and the Australian Psychological Society to provide general information in order to help people deal with the consequences of a disaster.