

YOUTH VIEWS

a resource to help you get back on your feet.

By April Harrison, Megan Wall, Daniel
Leadbeater and Katitza Marinkovic Chavez

INTRODUCTION

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In this booklet, we share some of our experiences of being resilient after our communities were affected by the Black Saturday Bushfires in Victoria, 2009.

We created this resource to help other young people reflect and share how they take care of themselves after a traumatic experience like a disaster, from their own perspectives and expertise.

For us, sharing our feelings and experiences helped us build and grow stronger connections with the people that we know, as well as with others who have faced similar adversities.

We want to reach out and connect with other young people to let them know they are not alone, that what they are feeling is normal and that it is okay not to be okay.





APRIL HARRISON

April is a 19 year old studying a Bachelor of Science at the University of Melbourne. She is passionate about supporting the education of younger generations and using her experiences, particularly the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires, as an opportunity to help others. She is also extremely interested in animal welfare and artistic expression.



MEGAN WALL

A Graphic Designer from Kinglake who is enthusiastic about sharing tips and experiences to help people cope with different events and disasters in their life. Megan is passionate about helping others and about looking after your mental health.



DANIEL LEADBEATER

A metal fabricator from Kinglake, Daniel is someone who has experienced a lot in his few years of life. He is passionate about using what he has learnt and experience to help others, and sharing his point of view to ensure that the best help and information is out there for other people who are or have been in a situation similar to him.



KATITZA MARINKOVIC

Psychologist, Research Fellow at the Child and Community Wellbeing Unit, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne. Kati is passionate about collaborating with children and young people to promote their right to have a say in matters that affect their lives, especially in areas related to the environment and disaster recovery.

MEET OUR TEAM



This resource was created *for* and *by* young people, with support from researchers at the University of Melbourne, and funding from Perpetual.

LET'S TALK MENTAL HEALTH.



After a setback or traumatic event, your mental health can take a back seat and be forgotten until it seriously starts affecting your life. Traumatic events can cause different mental health issues that can affect you even a long time after they happened. Because of this, it's important to recognise when we have mental health problems and get help.

One of the most important things to remember during difficult times is that **you're not alone and no matter how you feel, it is important to reach out and talk about it to someone you trust.**

Whether you feel yourself struggling a lot or even thinking your feelings are insignificant, all your emotions are valid and if you find yourself struggling, don't be afraid to talk about it.

IT'S OKAY TO NOT BE OKAY

First, let's talk about trauma and chronic stress and how they can work hand in hand. Disasters can be quite traumatic in many different ways. People can experience terrifying things that create a big shock in their life and bring forward feelings of fear, sadness and loss of control. Trauma can also arise from experiences that feel very challenging and stressful.

When we experience very high levels of stress for a prolonged period of time, we can feel like there's no escape or relief. This can affect not only our psychological wellbeing but also our physical and social wellbeing as we start to forget to take care of ourselves and stay connected with those around us.

Some people might be fine, others may develop a stronger sense of resilience and some might really struggle to process what has happened. Common responses can include feeling little to no motivation, finding it hard to keep a routine or focus on anything, feeling less interested about things in your life that used to be important to you, feeling worried about the future, sleeping more or less than normal, and feeling very tired.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS

Take care of yourself

- Be kind to yourself. Your path is different to everyone else's, so move at a pace that makes you feel comfortable and supported.
- Don't be hard on yourself, relax and take time for yourself.
- Do things that bring YOU joy and take your mind off things. Get a good rest and take care of your physical health.
- Remembering to take care of your mental health after a traumatic experience is important. It can help you heal and be more resilient.
- Avoid overloading yourself with social media and the news. They can be upsetting, and not always based on facts.

Connect to others and seek help when you need it

- Don't isolate yourself. If you want to reach out and talk to someone whether it be a friend, family member or professional, then do so and get the help you deserve.
- If you don't feel comfortable talking to a friend or family member there are plenty of helpful resources out there and people to talk to who can help you. We included some suggestions across this resource.
- Everyone has their own individual ways of coping with things whether they feel big or small, so it is no different when it comes to dealing with a traumatic event such as a natural disaster. There is no right or wrong way to get through something and process your emotions. If you try something and it doesn't work, there are more options out there for you.
- Mental health is extremely important. Acknowledging that all experiences and emotions are valid is crucial to making people feel accepted and comfortable.

With time, create a routine for your life

- Recovery can happen fast, be straightforward and to the point, but it can also take longer, feel complex and confusing. All options are valid and how you cope with something is a personal and individual experience. There are so many helpful routes out there to get back on your feet.
- Try to gradually return to a 'new normal' by connecting with things that are familiar and important to you, even if there have been changes. Be patient, recovery takes time.

'Mental health is extremely important and after a traumatic event it is more at risk. I struggled for years with my mental health after the fires and more recently, the pandemic.

However, I found that reaching out to talk with people can really help and make you feel less alone. You'd be surprised how many other people feel the same way you do.'

- Megan W.

Where can you ask for help?

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636 or beyondblue.org.au

Headspace: 1800 650 890 or headspace.org.au

ReachOut: reachout.com

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au

There are more options listed at the end of this booklet.

You can also visit a **GP or other health professional**.

Mental health is extremely important and acknowledging that all experiences and emotions are valid is crucial in making people feel accepted and comfortable.

Experiencing a disaster like a bushfire can have different implications and outcomes. It is important to seek help and guidance on how to deal with the implications of trauma, not only in the immediate aftermath, but in the long term as well.

Disasters affect everyone differently, and different people may be affected by different types of losses (e.g. loved ones, home, material belongings, pets, school, the opportunity to do their favourite activities or see friends) and to different degrees. There are some common reactions that most people go through. However, each person has a unique experience and therefore unique reactions and outcomes that affect them in a very personal way.

We all experience grief after losing something or someone that is important to us. It's a normal and healthy reaction.

Different people experience and express their grief in different ways. It's common to feel sad, angry, scared or guilty: you're not alone.

These feelings may last for some time, but you will start feeling better.

Sharing positive memories and treasured mementos with others, or carrying out a ritual or commemorative action can help you feel better.

Within your body:

Trouble sleeping:

Sleep is so important to the human body. We need it to repair and replenish us. Sleeping difficulties may manifest in nightmares, or difficulty falling or staying asleep.

Relaxing your mind before going to sleep is something that may help alleviate sleeping difficulties. Meditation before bed and removing the influences of devices (though it may be hard) are also useful in helping young people fall and stay asleep without disturbance.

Appetite changes:

Not wanting to eat or eating too much are often coping mechanisms that people use to maintain control over aspects of their life.

Realising that food and nutrients are important to help your body function is the first step to gaining back your normal appetite. Start small and be mindful. Try to get into an eating routine to get your mind and body used to your normal appetite again.

Personal relationships:

Young people may struggle with relationships with friends and family after a traumatic event. Young people may also become more dependent on others after an event to the point at which they need someone constantly. Friends are so important after a traumatic event

Trust in people who care about you. Recognising that the people who love and care for you want you to be OK is the first step to opening up and turning to them after a traumatic event. Even though it is difficult, talking to people about your experience helps you work through it. Personally, I wished I had talked sooner about it with those who care about me.

Emotional health:

Being hyper-alert and easily startled:

People who have gone through a traumatic experience are often hyper aware of their everyday environment and what is happening around them. They are often easily startled and will become distressed in situations similar to their traumatic experience. This is often accompanied with expecting something bad to happen again.

As someone who has anxiety, I know how hard it is to deal with situations which are distressing. Something that helps is grounding or centring yourself in the moment and place you are in and reminding yourself that you are safe. Taking small steps everyday will help you feel comfortable again.

Feelings of guilt:

Young people often feel guilty for not being able to contribute more during the event. However, you need to realise that you did the best you could in the moment and that what you did was enough.

Taking care of yourself:

Self-care ensures that you are looking after yourself before you are able to look after others. Sometimes, young people may be drawn to risky behaviours after traumatic events for several reasons. Lacking in self-care whether that be in personal hygiene or safety is common after a traumatic event.

How can you improve your self-care? Take time for yourself, allow your mind and body to process things in your own time and not in accordance with what others think is right. Be mindful of your actions and what you feel is right for you. If you feel as though you need help, go to a friend or family member, and allow them to help you.

Remember, you cannot help anyone until you help yourself.

School and work:

Some people may find it difficult to settle back into everyday life after a traumatic event. After a disaster, young people can lose interest, motivation or have increased stress levels when it comes to normal work or school tasks. There may also be instances of difficulty managing and prioritising study, school, or social demands.

Routine is helpful. However, going straight back into what your life was like before the traumatic event may be difficult. **Take small steps and build your routine from basic** to more complex as you go. Personally, returning to school and having a routine even though it was different, was key for my community after the fires, and brought back a sense of normalcy.

Looking after your mind:

Having trouble concentrating or remembering things is common after a traumatic event.

Flashbacks or nightmares can also become apparent. After a traumatic event, your mind can go in loops attempting to make sense of everything. People may often find themselves questioning their purpose in life or their faith in the world.

Mental health is just as important as physical health. A good first step in calming your mind, is acknowledging what you are thinking but reminding yourself that you are no longer in that situation.

Meditation can also be extremely helpful in calming the mind and body. You can also seek help from a doctor or psychologist if you are having trouble with daily activities, they are there to help you above all else.

ACTIVITY

Putting yourself in someone else's shoes

Time: 20 – 30 minutes.

This activity is designed to make you think of how people with different life experiences might respond to the outcomes of trauma.

You can do this activity in groups or individually. If in groups, discuss your ideas in relation to each prompt. If you're doing it individually write them down and share afterwards if you feel comfortable.

Reflect or discuss on each point for 5 - 10 minutes:

- Imagine you are a **parent with 3 children who are in high school, who also works 5 days a week and experienced a traumatic event**. What would you be feeling? How would you be coping? What would be your main priority?
- Now, think about the way you would respond to this event if you were a **child in primary school** or a **young adult who lives alone**, thinking about the same questions above.
- If in a large group, you can come together to share your ideas and viewpoints.

LESSONS

Not making assumptions about people's experiences is extremely important, especially when discussing delicate topics such as trauma. Being open and non-judgemental is key to being supportive.

The responses of the people we imagined in this activity would be completely different, not only because of their difference in age, but because of the current occurrences in their lives.

If you are a parent, you need to consider your children and might even put your own feelings aside; if you are a young child, you are likely to be resilient and bounce back more easily though you may experience evidence of traumatic stress later in life.

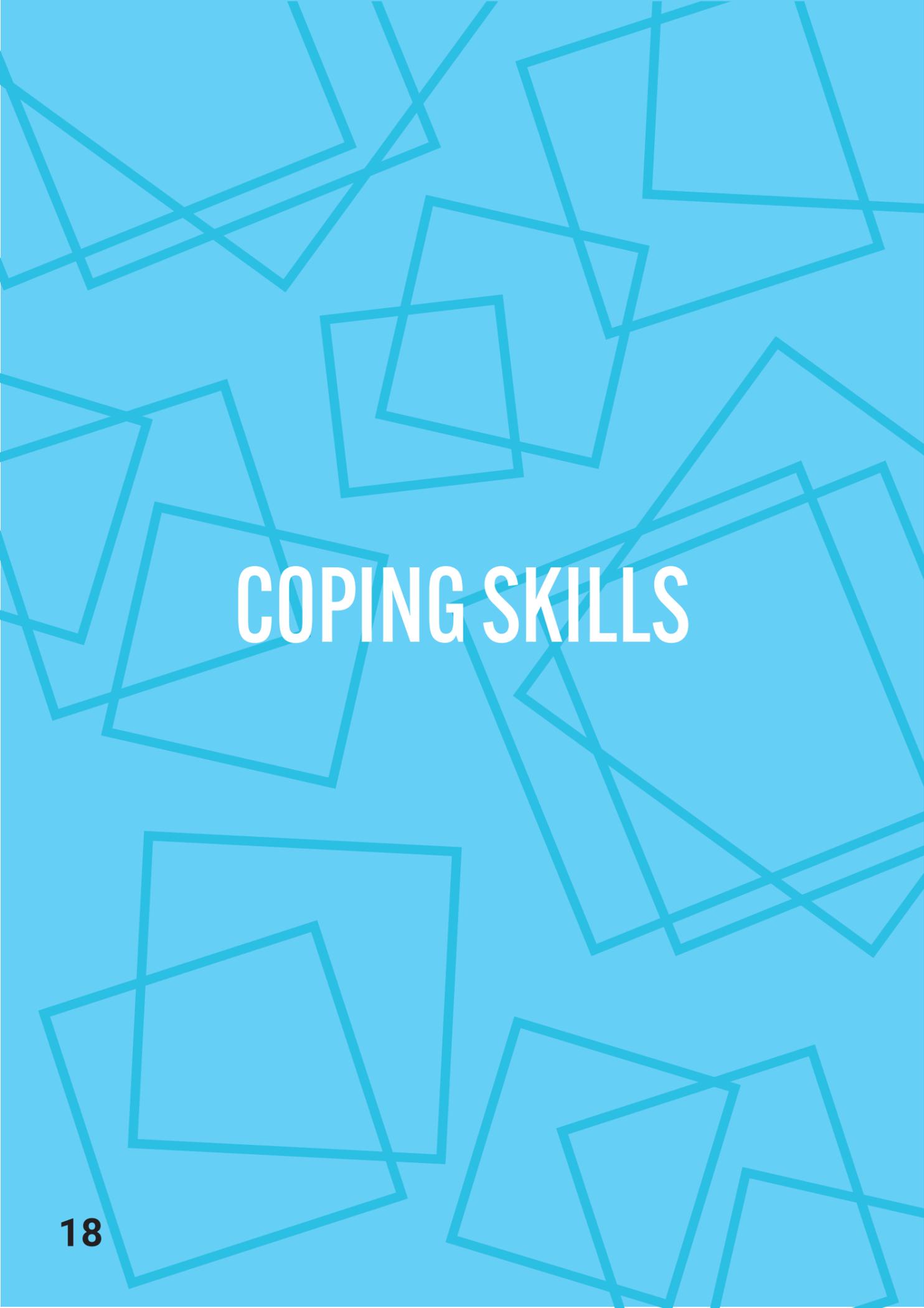
And if you are a young adult who lives alone you may feel very isolated, alone and like you can't talk to anyone.

Everyone will have different perspectives, experiences, and reactions to traumatic events, and it is important to recognise this so you can better understand others' reactions and your own.

What did you take away from this activity?

'Personal experiences of trauma are different for every individual. Someone's past experiences, personality, home life and choices affect how they respond and deal with trauma and its effects. My personal experiences, even if we went through the same or a similar event would differ from yours and the next person's.'
- April. H





COPING SKILLS



COPING SKILLS

Turning to friends, family, the community and professionals to cope with trauma and its after effects is a coping skill implored by many who have gone through some form of trauma. There are, however, other strategies that can help us cope with the many emotions we may be feeling in the aftermath of a disaster.

Everyone will have different things that help them cope, as every person is different and unique. There are many ways people cope with stress and trauma, whether that be individually or in groups, and all are equally valid.

Coping strategies

Playing with or caring for animals

Playing with or caring for animals can help you feel more empathy and love towards others. It can also help increase self-esteem, reduce feelings of loneliness and even improve your relationships with others. It also introduces an element of responsibility for something that is dependent on you for food and shelter and therefore may bring a sense of purpose into one's life.

Animals possess no judgement and are simply devoted and kind creatures who bring comfort to many people, especially those who need it most.

Art / Getting creative

Art activities can be enjoyable and help you feel calm and more creative. Expressing yourself through art can give you some relief and help you explore and understand your feelings. You can use your art to communicate with others or keep it private, ultimately you have control over what you create and how you will use it.

Being creative is a great way to express emotions and feelings that may be hard for some people to put into words to talk about with others.

Some possibilities include: painting, drawing, making clothes, jewellery, sculpture, etc, photography, videography, digital art, murals, animation, theatre and performing arts.

Clubs / Groups

Participating in a club or group activities can help you get a sense of belonging, socialize with others, have fun in a group setting and establish a sense of connection with others after a traumatic event like a disaster.

You can also develop life skills, become a leader, mentor or a role model for others.

Being part of a group or team involves sharing goals and achievements with others, which when shared are often more rewarding and exciting. Youth groups are also a fantastic place to make connections with people similar to you or who have similar experiences. You can find clubs in sports, music, dance, theatre, volunteering and many other things.

Gardening

Gardening can help you explore the natural cycles of life. Being in touch with nature can also help you reduce stress, enjoy the little things, enable you to be more in touch with the world around you and not so focused on internal ruminating feelings. It also introduces elements of physical activity, and can increase your hope and confidence. Being outside in nature is often very rewarding and relaxing for your mind and body.

Get online

Digital platforms and other technologies can be important to connect with others. Using them can be fun and relaxing, or motivate your curiosity to learn and develop new skills. They can also help you feel freer to express your feelings, have fun and be creative.

You can play video games, blog, surf the net, use social media sites.

Games

Playing games can help bring people together, feel connected and have fun. Games can be challenging or easy, and help you develop skills for problem-solving.

You can play cards, board games, computer games, puzzles, ball games, etc.

Relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques can help you feel more calm and rested, and are helpful for managing stress.

You can meditate, practice yoga, get or give yourself a massage, use breathing techniques, colouring books, etc. You can learn these activities from Apps such as Smiling Mind, professionals or guides.

Volunteering

Helping others can be very rewarding and help you feel more empowered and connected to others. If your community was affected by a disaster, you can help in its recovery. You can also become a mentor and a role model for others.

You can join groups at your school, join a charity, community group or collaborate with emergency services.

Reading or watching movies

Books (including comics, audio books, etc.), movies and series can be relaxing and increase your attention, imagination and creativity.

For some people books are a fantastic source of comfort and enjoyment, and escaping to a book for sometime brings people happiness.

Cooking

Cooking alone or with others can be very rewarding, fun, and can bring you a sense of achievement and satisfaction. It also gives you an opportunity to help out in your home and develop some new skills that will be used in the rest of your life. Additionally, it can help you have a healthier lifestyle.

Scrap-booking

Making a scrapbook can help you keep records, reflect on important moments of your life, and offer you a way of expressing your thoughts and feelings creatively. You can share your creations friends and family, or keep them private.

Writing

Writing can stimulate your imagination, creativity and give you a sense of relief. Writing can help you reflect about your thoughts and feelings, and express yourself. Your creations can be private or shared.

You can keep a journal, blog, create stories or songs, letters or poems.

Disaster preparedness

Preparing for a future emergency can help you feel more empowered, safe and connected to your family if you work on this together. Knowing that you are prepared for an emergency that may occur can bring a sense of safety and relief.

You can prepare an emergency kit, clean the area around your house, make a list of emergency contacts and develop an emergency plan with your family.

To find out how visit:
<https://www.redcross.org.au/prepare>

Seeing a psychologist

Seeing a professional who specialises in trauma or stress treatment can be extremely beneficial. They are there to listen to and help their patients, giving them a number of techniques they will be able to use within their own lives, in order to cope with feelings that arise after experiencing a traumatic event.

Seeing a psychologist may assist individuals who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, helping them recover and work through the emotions and thoughts they may be feeling and thinking.

There are also free helplines that you can call when you feel the need to talk to someone about your problems and mental health, and websites that provide useful information for young people who are going through difficult times (see the Resources section of this booklet for more information).

Connecting with others in times of Covid-19

Covid-19 has introduced an element of disconnection into the everyday life of many, making us feel estranged from friends and loved ones. Here are a few strategies and activities that people might use in order to feel more connected during these isolating times.

Video calling with friends and family, individually or as a group can help you feel more connected. Both hearing someones' voice and seeing their faces is more effective at making others feel connected than a simple phone call or message.

Writing and sending letters to your friends may bring an element of joy into your life during these tough times. Not only does it allow you to be creative it is also exciting to receive letters and have a pen pal. Self care is also extremely important in times of loneliness. Ensuring that you take time for yourself and reflect on your own feelings and emotions. Online gaming with friends may include an element of fun and connectedness.

hey! you've got this

ACTIVITY

What works for me?

Time: 20 - 30 minutes

Take this time to choose one of the suggested coping strategies in the previous page, and that you are able to do at this moment. Have a go at working your way through it. You can also choose some to do in your own time and reflect on them outside this workshop.

You can relate it to whatever aspect of your life you like or simply be creative with it.

You can choose to work individually or in groups and feel free to share your work if you feel comfortable.

Work on this strategy for 20 - 30 minutes or until everyone feels comfortable to return to the next section.

There are many coping strategies that people use not only when overwhelmed with memories or feelings of trauma, but in everyday life. Implementing one or two into your daily life could help you manage school stress. Or, you can simply try for the purpose of giving something a go to see if it helps keep you grounded and maintain better control over your emotions.

'Personally, I have implemented different coping strategies into my own life in order to overcome and deal with feelings of stress and anxiety following a traumatic event.'

One that I have found extremely beneficial is seeing a psychologist that gave me specific coping techniques to use in times of extreme stress. I have also turned to caring for animals and cooking as activities used for coping.

- April. H



ONE SIZE
DOES NOT
FIT ALL

everyone deals with trauma in their own way.

RESILIENCE
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We, as humans, are complex beings and aren't all programmed the same way. We think differently and deal with stress in different ways. However you deal with things, it is important that you are able to do so and gain back your life.

This is where resilience comes in. Resilience is about progress and bouncing back after difficult or tough situations like trauma or disasters. It is important to be able to recognise hard times when you are struggling, but even more so to be able to build yourself back up and keep moving forward.

There are different ways of understanding resilience. Here, we share our perspectives based on our personal experiences.



ACTIVITY

Building Resilience

Time: 15 minutes

Spend some time suggesting ways in which you could make yourself more resilient. You can do this in a group or on your own. It can be anything you want, specific or general as long as it helps you build your resilience in some way.

Feel free to share your ideas and have a discussion.

The purpose of this activity is to identify some things you can do to help build your resilience, make you stronger and able to bounce back to every challenge you face.

Resilience comes in all forms. It is the ability to come face to face with obstacles and keep pushing through them. Many people doubt their own resilience, however, they may not realise that it has been there all along. As young children we are the most resilient, we are growing up in a world that is changing every day, yet we keep pushing through. Though you might not remember it, you have most likely already shown great resilience in your life.

I think that young people can turn to many outlets to uphold and even increase their resilience. You don't have to start with something extravagant, it can be a small goal, an activity that you do every day, that slowly becomes habit and already you are bouncing back from the traumatic event you experienced.

My advice is start small. Make and maintain a few small goals or visions for your life and try and work towards them a little every day. They don't have to be important for others, they should be meaningful to you, as it is important to focus on yourself now. It might be reading a little every day, journaling or writing your thoughts out every morning or night, making a conscious effort to spend some time outside. Little by little these small actions will become habit and a part of a new routine and before you know it, you are building your resilience.

Improving our physical and mental health are important to increase our resilience. Taking care of our bodies and minds allows us to be the best we can. Nutrition, sleep, and exercise are important factors that influence our health. If we are healthy, we can keep moving forward, keeping up our resilience, not letting anything stop us.

There will be times when you feel as though you can't push any harder or you lose sight of what you were working towards, and that is perfectly ok. If you **allow yourself to feel these emotions without criticising yourself**, you can reason with yourself and treat it like a problem to solve. Resourcefulness and problem solving makes moving forward easier.

Coupled with this is the regulation of **our emotions**. After a traumatic event everything seems upside down. We may be extremely vulnerable after a traumatic event, easily startled or upset. Being able to regulate your emotions in response to different conflicts, uncertainties, or moments allows you to remain in control of your situation, hold your head up and face everything with strength.

Finally, an important part of resilience is **working together**. If my community hadn't come together after the bushfires, I don't know what would've happened. We supported and were supported by each other. You are not alone and that is something to remember. Turn to your friends, your family, your community. They can be there to be resilient for you when you feel as though you can't. In time, it will build up, and one day you may be helping someone else.

There are different ways to be resilient after a trauma or disaster, different ways to build yourself after experiencing a setback in your life. It is important to remember to take time for yourself and to care for your mental, emotional and physical well-being. Also, to know that there are tips and help out there to get you back on your feet and back on track with your life; to continue to live and breathe.

You can watch ['Looking Back: Flowers from the Ashes.'](#) This video, created by April, shares her journey to resilience after the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires.

Looking Back: Flowers from the Ashes

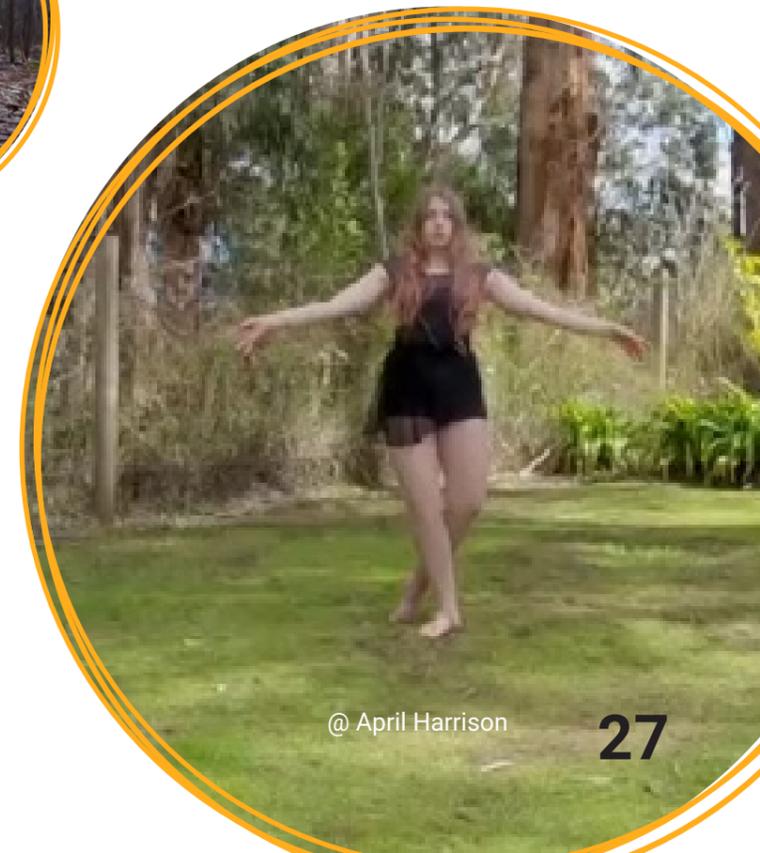
by April Harrison



'Young children are thought to be extremely resilient, however this doesn't mean that their experiences are any less real.'

My personal experience in regards to adjusting to a temporary school and home after the fires was challenging. However, my community, especially the school community, was supportive of every person, allowing people to come together and lean on each other.'

- April



@ April Harrison

RESOURCES

Additional Resources for Teenagers and Young People

Booklets and Resources

Australian Red Cross

<https://www.redcross.org.au/stories/podcasts/after-the-emergency>

Better Health Channel

<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>

Phoenix Australia (Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health)

<https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Phoenix-Teenager-Brochure.pdf>

Websites and Helplines for Support

Beyondblue

1300 22 4636

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/young-people>

Emerging Minds

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/>

Headspace

<https://headspace.org.au/young-people/life-issues/>

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

<http://www.kidshelp.com.au>

Lifeline

13 11 14

<http://www.lifeline.org.au>

Reach Out

<https://au.reachout.com/>

<https://au.reachout.com/collections/dealing-withstress-from-the-drought>

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