

PREPARING FOR THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE BUSHFIRES

The new summer brings memories of Black Summer last January. There are various reactions - fear and anxiety, exhaustion and feeling it is too much to deal with again, and anger and frustration that life is not returning to normal.

These reactions are expected after dramatic, traumatic or painful events. Understanding them help to work through them and continue recovery instead of bringing back the painful past.

Living through dangerous, painful and distressing experiences puts us into *survival mode* and focusses us on our senses, decision-making and actions and they arouse intense emotions.

In survival mode, strong links form between sights, sounds, emotions and what we imagine the instinctive mind. We connections smoke, heat, wind, sirens, the emergency app warning sound with fear, panic, confusion and threat. The sights and sounds in the next summer become "triggers" to fire off the same emotions as when they were formed.

Strong reactions are common when the conditions associated with the fire experience occur again. But reacting strongly strengthens the link so we become upset at smoke, heat and anything else associated with the fire experience. Anything similar triggers the whole experience.

Though the smells and sounds seem the same as the day of the bushfire, they aren't the same. The smoke is of a burnoff, barbecue or small fire. The gusty North wind is not blowing out of a forest dried by years of drought, there is grass around but it still has moisture in it. It is a hot day but conditions not those of the firestorm.

Everyone who went through the fire will not know all their triggers till they find themselves in the situation again. But it is essential to change the reaction by remembering how the present situation is different to the fire instead of repeating the emotions. Thinking of how this situation is different separates emotion of the past from the present helps to put it in the past and helps us be ready for the present situation instead of rerunning last year.

It will take several summers without a bad fire to get this one into perspective. But if we allow the triggers to reactivate the emotions without understanding them, it will take longer.

Thinking about what has been learned, and what was not known and what could be done differently if it happened again all allow the past to help prepare for the future. Accepting and learning from mistakes helps to feel more prepared and confident. Discussions with family and neighbours, working out what everyone will do if there is another fire counteracts fear and replaces it with a plan.

Following these suggestions means each new summer can help towards getting over last summer and making it an important part of experience that makes us wiser.