



MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR AUSTRALIANS AFFECTED BY THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRES

Frequently Asked Questions

What is included in the Government's Mental Health measure?

The *Supporting the Mental Health of Australians Affected by Bushfires* measure will ensure people have access to coordinated and tailored support they need to recover from the effects of the 2019–20 bushfires. An investment of \$76 million is being provided over two years.

The measure has four parts:

- the *Bushfire Recovery Access Program* — providing on the ground counselling and mental health support for individuals, families and emergency response personnel affected by bushfires
- trauma informed care training for emergency service personnel who attended the bushfires, and training for employers of front-line emergency staff
- coordination of mental health services to ensure people seamlessly get the help they need
- supporting communities in recovery.

Bushfire Recovery Access Program

The Bushfire Recovery Access Program provides on the ground mental health support for those directly affected by bushfires in three ways:

Free counselling

Free distress and trauma counselling sessions are available for individuals and families and emergency services personnel affected by bushfires.

Up to 10 free sessions are available through mental health services commissioned in bushfire affected regions by Primary Health Networks (PHNs).

Services Australia also has social workers that can help with short term counselling, information and referrals to support services.

Medicare Bushfire Recovery Initiative

Bushfire affected individuals and families, and emergency response personnel will be eligible to receive Medicare rebates for up to 10 psychological therapy sessions through GPs, psychologists and other mental health professionals.

Medicare Bushfire Recovery Telehealth initiative

Individuals, families and emergency response personnel who cannot easily access mental health professionals in person, will be able to obtain counselling and support through video telehealth services, with Medicare rebates.

Who is eligible for the free frontline emergency distress and trauma counselling?

Anyone affected by the fires is able to access these services. You do not need to have suffered a financial loss as a result of the fires to access these services. People living in residential aged care facilities are also able to access these services.

Where do I access the free frontline emergency distress and trauma counselling?

Free counselling is available through:

- Services Australia's Mobile Service Centres and Mobile Servicing Teams
- recovery centres and evacuation centres
- mental health services commissioned by Primary Health Networks (PHNs)
- existing mental health counselling hotlines, including Lifeline (13 11 14), Beyond Blue (1300 224 636) and Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800).

In addition to free counselling services, Primary Health Networks will employ Bushfire Trauma Response Coordinators to help you in access these services.

The Bushfire Trauma and Response Coordinators will be a single point of contact for individuals and communities to ensure the right mental health supports are offered in the right place at the right time. They will help with coordinating access to mental health services, improving integrated support with state and local government efforts, and navigating a range of mental health supports to help people access the care they need. Coordinators can be contacted via your local PHN. You can find the contact details for all PHNs by visiting www.health.gov.au/phn and clicking on the Map Locator.

How can I access a social worker for assistance?

Social workers are working in the Australian Government's Mobile Servicing Teams which are travelling through the fire affected areas. The locations of the teams are advertised on Services Australia's website on www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/subjects/bushfires-access-and-update-us#a2

You can ring Services Australia's Disaster Hotline on 1802266 or the Employment Services Line on 132850 and ask to speak with a social worker. You can also visit a Service Centre and ask to speak with a social worker. All the social workers have a social work degree and provide free services.

What is available for young people?

Young Australians may be particularly vulnerable. The additional Medicare rebated items will allow young Australians affected by the fires to access more mental health support, including through their local headspace services.

Local headspace services can be found at: <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/>

What is Better Access?

The Better Access initiative, introduced in 2006, is funded through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and provides Medicare rebates to patients for selected mental health services provided by eligible GPs, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.

The Better Access initiative was introduced to address low treatment rates for high prevalence mental disorders such as depression and anxiety — particularly presentations of mild to moderate severity where short term evidence based interventions are most likely to be useful. It aims to improve outcomes for people with a clinically-diagnosed mental disorder through evidence-based treatment.

Patients can claim up to 10 individual sessions per calendar year. These can be accessed face-to-face and/or by telehealth (videoconference) for eligible patients. Further information on Better Access is available at www.health.gov.au/mentalhealth-betteraccess.

How do the new Medicare Bushfire Recovery Medicare funded face-to-face sessions differ from current arrangements under Better Access?

Currently people need to have a GP mental health treatment plan and a diagnosed mental health condition to access the existing Better Access initiative. However, the Government has removed these restrictions for the new Medicare Bushfire Recovery items. To access the new Medicare rebated items you do not need to have a diagnosed mental health condition, GP referral or mental health treatment plan. This aims to ensure people can quickly access these services.

Under this measure, people affected by bushfires are able to self-refer to an eligible allied mental health provider. The new items are available to all people living in the community and there is no age restriction. People living in residential aged care facilities are also able to access these services.

Individuals who currently access services under the Better Access initiative and were directly affected by the bushfires, will be able to access the additional 10 sessions under the Bushfire Recovery items.

What is the Medicare Bushfire Recovery Telehealth initiative?

People affected by the bushfires, who do not have access to face-to-face Medicare Bushfire Recovery Sessions, are able to claim rebates for video consultations. You do not need to have a diagnosed mental health condition, GP referral or mental health treatment plan. Services can be delivered by allied mental health professionals who are eligible to provide Medicare services under the Better Access initiative, that is:

- psychologists
- occupational therapists
- social workers.

GPs can also provide mental health and wellbeing support services through telehealth. These GP services will provide essential support, overcome workforce shortages in areas affected by bushfires, and improve provider choice for individuals, families and first responders.

Why is this new Telehealth initiative needed?

Bushfire Recovery Telehealth services have been introduced to enhance ease of access to, and increase choice in, mental health services in those areas of Australia affected by bushfires. It is widely recognised that there are barriers for those who need to access these services and these changes work towards removing some of those barriers.

How much will Medicare Bushfire Recovery face-to-face and telehealth sessions cost?

Consultation fees charged by health professionals are determined by the provider or practice. Only a portion of costs are covered by Medicare unless the health professional bulk bills. The Government encourages all health professions to bulk bill Australians affected by the fires. When deciding on a provider, you may wish to contact them for a full list of fees for services.

How long will the Medicare Bushfire Recovery services be available?

The services are available until 30 June 2022. People can access the immediate counselling and GP bushfire telehealth items now.

From 1 July 2022, Medicare rebates will continue to be available to eligible Australians under existing Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) arrangements, including the *Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the MBS (Better Access) initiative*, for help to access mental health professionals and care. Further information about this initiative, including on eligibility requirements and how to access services, can be found in the Better Access initiative [factsheets for patients and professionals](#).

Training and support for emergency personnel

How will this training support emergency service personnel?

It is important that emergency service personnel who attended the recent bushfires are trained to recognise the signs of trauma and provide evidence-informed care. Training will be provided to front line emergency staff in trauma informed care and psychological first aid. Training will also be provided to organisations managing front line emergency staff to identify personnel at risk.

The Department of Home Affairs is also funding a number of mental health initiatives to support emergency services workers who responded to bushfires across Australia in 2019–20. The Department of Health will work closely with the Department of Home Affairs to ensure that all initiatives support and complement each other.

Who will deliver the training and when will it be rolled out?

The Government will use existing providers with expertise in trauma informed care to deliver the training. Training will begin to be rolled out by the end of January 2020.

Response Coordination

What is the role of the Bushfire Trauma Response Coordinators?

The Bushfire Trauma Response Coordinators are a single point of contact for individuals and communities to ensure the right mental health supports are offered in the right place at the right time. The Coordinators will be engaged by PHNs and work in those communities severely affected by bushfires. They will help coordinate access to mental health services, improving integrated support with state and local government efforts, and navigating the mental health system to reduce the burden on those in need. Coordinators can be contacted via your local PHN. The contact details for all PHNs can be obtained by referring to the website at www.health.gov.au/phn and clicking on the Map Locator.

What is the Government doing to prepare for mental health recovery following future natural disasters?

The Commonwealth and states and territories will work together to develop a cross-jurisdictional mental health framework to enable whole of government preparedness for future natural disasters. This framework will set out a joint approach to disasters, the response and recovery with a focus on accountability and transparency by each of the parties. Development of the framework will commence after the current bushfire season.

Supporting communities in recovery

What other supports are being provided to affected communities?

Primary Health Networks (PHNs) in regions severely affected by bushfires will provide small community grants of up to \$10,000 for activities at the grass-roots level to strengthen social connectedness and peer support activities, as well as assertive outreach initiatives to prevent suicide and identify individuals at risk. This measure is based on the successful community grants rolled out through the *Empowering*

Our Communities initiative in response to the drought. Community grant rounds are expected to open in April 2020.

Bushfire affected PHNs will also be provided with additional funding to expand their mental health services in fire affected regions. PHNs will use this funding to provide tailored support based on the specific needs of local communities.