

Trauma-informed tips for planning presentations for people affected by bushfires



Trauma-informed approaches seek to avoid re-traumatisation by empowering individuals in decision making, creating SAFETY and TRUST, CHOICE and COLLABORATION, and building strengths and skills. Being trauma-informed involves making conscious effort to understand and be responsive to the impact of trauma, helping people who have been affected by it to feel physically and psychologically safe and to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. To do this, finding ways to bring EMPOWERMENT into all interactions with individuals is useful. Here are some practical ideas on how to do this.

Things to keep in mind for the audience

- Ensure that one or two people trained in mental health support are in attendance and willing to provide support before, during and after the event. Remind the audience about their presence throughout the event.
- Be sensitive about inviting the media and external guests – this is likely to make everyone (both the audience and presenters) feel uncomfortable.
- People affected by trauma often value predictability (not surprises) - it feels safer. Where possible share an agenda/ schedule ahead of time and stick to it, so that participants know exactly what to expect.
- When people affected by trauma are not given choice and a sense of control, it can be triggering. Where possible, give participants the option to easily opt in or out of sessions. Arrange the room and seating so that participants can easily leave a session without feeling as though they are disrupting others.
- Before commencing, assure the audience that it is okay for them to leave at any time. You could consider asking participants to indicate if they are okay with a thumbs up or thumbs down gesture on their way out, so the support person knows if they should follow.
- People affected by trauma can have difficulty regulating their emotions and take longer to calm down and process information. Allow enough time/ schedule breaks to enable participants to self-soothe between sessions.
- People who have experienced a natural disaster, for example, bushfire (any trauma, really) may be triggered by reminders of it and experience strong emotional reactions (often fear) as a result. It is best to minimize participants' exposure to triggers and ensure that all speakers understand the importance of this. Triggers might be sights/ imagery/ photos/ videos, sounds, smells or thoughts that remind them of the lead up to, or actual traumatic event in some way. These triggers act like 'buttons' that turn on participants' 'alarm' or 'safety' systems. If you are not sure whether something may act as a trigger, or if it is unavoidable, play it safe by warning participants that something potentially triggering is coming up, and offer them the option to leave the room if they are feeling uncomfortable.
- Be aware that trauma responses can include both hyperarousal (obvious agitation; e.g. crying, shaking, sweating, raised voice) AND hypoarousal (e.g. glazed eyes; 'zoning out'; 'shutting down') which can be harder to detect.
- If participants do become affected, offer to help them find a place where they feel safe and can turn on their 'soothing system' – for example, by taking some slow, deep breaths and encouraging them to notice what they can see, hear, smell, taste and touch around them.



- To help people feel as comfortable as possible, do not ask specific audience members questions. Call for volunteers and if no one volunteers, move on. Avoid pressuring or coercing individuals to speak.
- Be aware that some participants may feel uncomfortable if they are asked to write things down and if what they write may be visible to others. Give them choice and flexibility as to whether they write things down, verbalize, or just think about them.
- Arrange for a list of relevant service providers to be made available to all participants (preferably in printed form and possibly re-sent at a later date via email).
- As people may have lost their houses and clothes and be under financial pressure, keep the dress code casual and costs as low as possible to minimize embarrassment.
- Consider ensuring that someone with an understanding of trauma-informed practices checks presentations before the event, to minimize risk.
- Be aware that asking people to explain what happened at the time of fire can be harmful and should be avoided.

Tips to share with presenters (if they have experienced a bushfire too)

- Find out exactly what the organizers are expecting of you (e.g. topic, length, style, equipment), so you don't experience any last-minute surprises.
- If you do not want to share your story when the media is present (which is totally understandable), make this clear to the organizers in advance.
- Remember you can specify upfront if there are any areas which you would prefer not to talk about or receive questions on.
- Alternatively, think about (in advance) how you might be able to politely decline to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.
- Try to put yourself in the audience's shoes and consider sharing only parts of your story that you are confident will be helpful for them. Where possible, focus on messages of hope and recovery, keeping in mind that showing and retelling your experience of trauma may act as a trigger for audience members.
- Think about how you will manage your own self-care at the event (who you can talk to, ask questions of, seek support from, where you can go to practice your presentation/ take a break).
- Take some water and don't be afraid to stop and have a drink during your presentation if you feel overwhelmed.
- Ensure you have someone you can debrief with afterwards. Choose someone you trust.
- Plan to do an activity afterwards that makes you feel relaxed.
- Remember it is fine to leave any situations, presentations or conversations that are making you feel uncomfortable, or if you just need to take a break. Your health and wellbeing are a priority as well. You are not doing anything wrong or being rude if you leave.

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This resource has been developed working within a trauma-informed approach. The contents are intended as a guide and should be adapted and expanded to accommodate individual safety needs of participants.

