The summer season has arrived bringing lots of sunshine but also some very hot days, wild thunderstorms and high winds to some parts of our beautiful country. As we approach the end of a very challenging year, we are especially mindful that these kinds of weather conditions can trigger thoughts of the unprecedented bushfires and associated trauma for so many communities just one year ago.

How might children and young people react this bushfire season?

Everyone reacts differently and this is OK. Our responses this bushfire season may vary depending on:

• personal losses last year (loved ones, pets, property, precious items)
• what we have experienced since the event
• the level of disruption experienced in our daily lives and on those around us
• the quality of the physical and emotional support we have received, and remains available, from family, community, schools and other support networks
• exposure to disaster-related media from last year

Children and young people can become anxious, upset, withdrawn or angry without realising what the feelings are about. They might also show signs of reluctance to sleep alone, go to school, be apart from parents and worry for the safety of loved ones. Some children and young people may want to participate in public or private memorial or remembrance events but others may prefer to avoid thinking and talking about the event altogether. The way we each respond to change and loss, immediately and over the longer term, can differ a great deal.

This first year anniversary offers an important time to:

• Take note of, and respond to, our reactions to seasonal triggers (such as high winds, total fire ban days, burning off, smoke)
• Remember losses associated with last year’s fires
• Stop and identify accomplishments
• Recognise those who are supporting the recovery process
• Promote resilience and healing

It can be helpful to know that it is common to have strong reactions at anniversary times. Recovery takes time, and it requires rebuilding on many levels — physically, emotionally, and spiritually. All in all, anniversaries can be a time when we can do with a little more support as we continue to process the impact on our lives.

1 The above insights have been drawn from the following resources:
https://theawarenesscentre.com/what-is-the-anniversary-effect/
https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/webcast_disaster_anniversaries.pdf
How can we best support children and young people at this time?

• Take time to check-in with yourself
• Be open to age-appropriate communication – be honest about your own reactions and concerns and help children recognise and cope with disaster reminders
• Limit children’s exposure to media relating to the anniversary
• Support children to feel safe – review family action plan, attend to bushfire tasks around the property, remain calm, spend time together
• Seek opportunities for children to make positive differences in their lives and communities
• Prepare them for the anniversary and offer choice – e.g., around whether to participate in bushfire related memorial events in the community and at school

Reflect

• Reflect on how things are going for your child – how do they seem to have adapted at home, at school and in the community? Do you have any questions for their teachers about impacts at school? Have they re-engaged with extra-curricular activities? Do you need to help them rebuild community connections? Are things progressing in a generally positive direction?
• Seek help if your child's overall reactions and emotions seem to be getting worse rather than better since the fires (bearing in mind that anxiety may rise again in response to the anniversary and in response to trigger events such as hot, windy days, the sight or smell of smoke)

For educators:

Many schools have played an important role in supporting children in bushfire-affected communities, providing timely and appropriate information for them and for their families, as well as offering programs and interventions aimed at managing post-disaster stress. Such programs can be very effective in acknowledging the impact of change and loss resulting from the bushfires (or other natural disasters), teaching positive coping strategies and building a support network.

An example of one such intervention is the Stormbirds program, which continues to be offered in many affected communities.

The aim of the Stormbirds program is to support children and young people to adapt to experiences of change, loss and grief resulting from natural disasters such as bushfires.

Stormbirds participants have the opportunity to:

• Learn about how change, loss and grief are part of life and normal to experience following a natural disaster (Session 1)
• Develop skills to name and attend to their feelings, cope on difficult days, problem solve and make good decisions (Session 2)
• Remember good times and special places (Session 3)
• Identify their support network - people they know, places they go or things they can do when they need some extra help (Session 4)
• Have a say about their experiences in a safe and supportive environment (all sessions)

What was the most significant learning for your child as a result of the program?

PARENT/CARER
Developing a “toolkit” for coping and problem solving.

CHILD PARTICIPANT
That it’s ok to be worried

CHILD PARTICIPANT
That I am not alone