

# Staying Engaged in the Climate & Bushfire Crisis

A collection of psychological ideas and resources in  
response to the 2020 Australian Bushfires

*Psychology*  
*for a Safe*  
*Climate*



## Introduction

Just like you, we too are trying our best to stay informed and connected in our current bushfire catastrophe. We know how much everyone is feeling the pain. It's heart-wrenching. We also know how these events have ignited outrage. We hear your rage, horror, disbelief, sorrow. And we are with you on this. We see your community spirit, your heartfelt compassion, your giving natures.

As these events continue, we are calling on you to harness and grow your inner resources. To do what you need to do to stay wise, supported and nourished.

This is a truly difficult time, and how we cope will be different for all of us. It depends on whether we are directly affected, whether we have lost something or someone close to us, whether we are bearing witness day to day, and whether this is all adding to the everyday life challenges we face.

Most marvelously, the resources guiding us on psychological care during climate change is growing. While we can't claim an exhaustive compilation for you, we have selected some of our current and all-time favourites to showcase on the following topics:

- [Tend to your emotional needs and sustain action on climate change](#)
- [Self-Care with Self-Compassion](#)
- [Good Grief!](#)
- [Radical Acceptance to empowerment](#)
- [When in a crisis, know who to call!](#)
- [Emotionally supporting bushfire affected communities](#)
- [Doom and Bloom: A guide for Transformational Resilience](#)
- [Presence, Parenting, and the Planet](#)
- [General coping skills](#)
- [Active Hope](#)

Our hope is that these resources will inspire you to explore different ways of meeting the bushfire crisis, and to sustain your love for life and your engagement with climate change. The resources selected are those that we ourselves are tapping into in order to support

ourselves. We welcome your feedback, in fact it would really help us to grow! Send us a message [here](#).



## Tend to your emotional needs and sustain action on climate change

Believe it or not, but all emotions have a function. Given how painful some emotions are, it's understandable we might wish them away or despise them. Yet, at the heart of the matter, there is no such thing as a "bad" emotion - even our painful ones have part of being human. Each emotion has something to share with us: wisdom about what is important to us and how we might need to orient our behavior to respond.

At the same time, our mind and bodies have particular habits that can get us stuck in certain emotions. And it can be helpful to learn some [brain basics](#) - like the tendency for our mind to focus on the negative, and the reality that "what you focus on you amplify". Another way to put it is "what fires together, wires together".

The key is to be aware of all this, and to know it's not your fault you have feelings or focus on negative thoughts, that we are all born with a brain that does this. The skill is to be self-aware and to choose for yourself what thoughts help you, and how can you let go or change what is unhelpful.

If intense painful emotions continue, or if you find yourself hyper-focused on the suffering to the point of impairment, then it's time to engage in some [emotional regulation skills](#) and possibly [seek some support](#).

Your body, mind and spirit, just like those around you, has basic needs in this climate crisis.;

- Needs for a sense of safety, to be soothed, calmed, and be anchored.
- Needs to feel motivated, capable, participatory, and productive.
- Needs for connection and togetherness.

Keep learning about your mind, about growing beneficial resources, and see how this can inform your engagement with climate change. Check out this website on the [brain and needs](#) for ideas to get started.



## Self-Care with Self-Compassion

This is the time to listen carefully and with kindness to your own needs too. This may sit uncomfortably for some. We so often compare ourselves, and for many we are significantly and comparably safer and more secure than others. Our empathy says to focus on the other, which is needed, but can result in us feeling guilty for focusing on ourselves. It's time to let go of this false binary. We are all important. Listen to [your self-compassion](#). This invites us to be inclusive as we care for the world.

Try listening to some [free guided](#) audio's to learn how to practise.



## Good Grief!

“Ecological grief .....the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change. (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018)”

Get to know about [ecological grief](#), and healthy ways of being with and working through your grief.

Explore the [Good Grief Network](#), whose program focus on personal resilience while strengthening community ties to help combat despair, inaction, eco-anxiety, and other heavy emotions in the face of daunting systemic predicaments. The state of the world seems unmanageable, chaotic even. For those of us paying attention, awareness of our systemic issues is confusing and painful. You may feel pulled to act, but don't know what to do.

Explore the Good Grief Network for a fantastic collection of podcasts, articles, books and more.





## Radical acceptance to empowerment

It is important to be aware of and accept how we feel even if they are feelings of despair. Acceptance for how you feel, even when you don't like it, or it is painful, is the first step to finding a way through. The reason we call this radical acceptance is to acknowledge that it's truly radical to accept pain. Yet the alternative is to fight our feelings, actively avoid our feelings, or dwell alone on our feelings. All these ways of coping are common, and we know from our experience they can be costly, exhausting and ultimately counterproductive.

The key is to acknowledge our feelings and ensure they are met with understanding, support and care. This includes speaking to ourselves with encouragement and kindness. Expressing our feelings to others we trust is especially helpful. Being heard, and hearing similar concerns from others helps legitimise our feelings, and can mobilise energy to engage with the issue with collective action.

We can help each other to discover our unrealised strengths, skills and qualities. The example of Greta Thunberg is a very valuable one. She moved out of her depression by becoming active and creative about what she could do.

Radical acceptance helps to foster psychological flexibility, which is needed to respond to climate change in ways that are sustainable and meaningful for you. When you begin to notice fatigue, changes to your daily routines of self-care, impacts on your work or relationships, or feel in general more frenzied and reactive, these are critical signs to listen to.

**Stop**, tend to your needs and proceed mindfully. This might involve changing your limits on what you can do temporarily, evaluating self-care as essential for ongoing actions, giving yourself permission to let go, and connecting with the reality that this problem is for us as a collective. Remembering that when you have a break, someone else, somewhere in the world, will be ramping up their action.

Check out the Australian Psychology Society resource for [8 ways to stay empowered](#)





## When in a crisis, know who to call!

To change everything we really do need everyone.

Get into the habit of speaking to friends, family and colleagues that you trust. Talking regularly about how you feel also encourages others to do the same. As we like to say, “the problem of one is the problem of many”. Meaning, that if you are feeling upset or angry about something, it’s very likely others are too. In this way, sharing how you feel is also a gift. You role model the benefits of giving expression to feelings, how to be vulnerable and supported, and thereby paving the way for others to open up too.

It may be necessary to seek professional support from a psychologist or trained counsellor. Debilitating depression, anxiety or panic may need immediate help. Try to find therapists known to be understanding of the emotional impact of climate change. GPs can provide a mental health care plan that offers some contribution to the cost.

Chat with your local health professionals, your GP, psychologist or counsellor, or employee assistance program (if you have one!).

If you are in a crisis there is help out there. Never under-estimate how talking to someone in a moment of suffering can turn things around for the better.

Check out the [crisis numbers](#) for various states in Australia.

Don't hesitate to call:

[Emergency Services 000](#)

[Lifeline 13 11 14](#)

[Beyond Blue.1300 22 4636](#)



## Emotionally supporting bushfire affected communities

The wealth of information detailing how to support our affected communities is staggering and honorable. Here are just a few psychological resources focused on early responding to extreme weather events. We acknowledge each community is different and will have varying levels of access to supports, and so this is more if you are wondering what's the "right" thing to do or say, and if you are looking for some basic guidance.

The Australian Psychological Society has published information on recovering from [bushfires, and preparing for bushfires](#).

The Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health have evidence-based [resources on supporting yourself and others following a traumatic event](#)

Trauma expert's Dr Rob Gordon and Anne Leadbeater share in a podcast their [valuable insights](#) on coping with trauma, helping others who have experienced trauma, and seeking different ways to move forward.

And to understand some of the mental health impacts of bushfires, see [Black Saturday: the hidden costs](#): A Six-year study of mental toll from Australia's worst bushfire shows social ties are key to resilience and recovery



# Doom and Bloom:

## A guide for Transformational Resilience

We recognise the value in growing our psychological skills for personal and collective resilience when faced with adversity. In fact, sometimes the only choice we have is to activate ways of coping by tolerating and getting through a crisis without making it any worse.

Check out this [slide pack](#) outlining Bob Doppelt's psychological skills guide for building Transformational Resilience using the acronym **GROWTH**:

- (i) **Ground** and centre your nervous system
- (ii) **Remember** your personal strengths, skills, resources, and social support network
- (iii) **Observe** your reaction to and thoughts about the situation, with self-compassion
- (iv) **Watch** for new insights and meaning in life
- (v) **Tap** into core values, how you want to be in the face of climate adversity
- (vi) **Harvest** hope for new possibilities by making choices that increase personal, social, and environmental wellbeing.



## Presence, Parenting, and the Planet

Earlier this year the Australian Conservation Foundation and 1 million women released a [report of 6500 women](#) that revealed 45% of 30-39 year old women said they have children, or plan on having children, but worry about the dangers of climate change for their kids. This is only natural, to be expected really, when one accepts the reality. The key is finding ways to harness the worry - to act on worry with intention and meaning, and to allow its energy to drive us to learn more. Like, how can we support our kids during this unprecedented time?

Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., is an internationally acclaimed author, award-winning educator, and child psychiatrist. In this [video session](#), he explores three key aspects of our children's future that can help create the structure for effective parenting in our contemporary times. The field of attachment research reveals that parental presence—how a parent or other caregiver is open to and focused on the inner life of the child—is the best predictor of how emotionally and socially resilient a child will be as they develop into young adults. This parent-child relationship helps foster a secure attachment by providing the four S's of being seen, soothed, and safe to cultivate security.

The Australian Psychology Society also offers some [information to help parents](#) think through how they can respond to the current reality of climate change, and the threat of worse impacts to come. Answers are provided to common questions that parents ask, as well as strategies for assisting parents to cope with the 'uncomfortable truths' of climate change, and ideas about how to support their children to cope with it.



## General coping skills for challenging times

It's so true that during times of crisis the first thing that slips from our routine is self-care. This list is common sense, and we trust you know that. But we also know how easy it is to de-prioritise these actions.

So, consider this is our loving-kind way of reminding you to commit yourself to care for your precious body, your clever creative mind, and your natural needs for connection. We need to be healthy, strong and supported so that we can face this mess together!

- Do find friends you can speak openly with about your feelings.
- Do spend time in nature, walking, gardening, sitting, being creative.
- Do set time aside from climate change to do things you find pleasure in – this is critical to wellbeing.
- Do keep up or start an exercise plan, or yoga, sport etc.
- Do eat well. It is tempting when you feel down about the world to let go of your former healthy activities just when you most need them.
- Do try meditation - it is very helpful to many, and helps still the overactive mind, to focus on the present, and to appreciate all that is good in life.
- Do remember the importance of a good night's sleep and without e-gadgets last thing.
- Do reach out to your natural supports and/or professional help.
- Please try to avoid getting into the habit of using alcohol, drugs, gambling, shopping, or anything else that may help short term, but has an impact on your wellbeing long term.
- Do explore and express your gratitude and appreciation.

What could you do today?

Keep learning and quench your curiosity by exploring the evidence based [5 ways to wellbeing!](#)



## Cultivate Active Hope

Joanna Macy coined the term active hope to make clear that at heart hope is something that we do rather than something we have. It involves being clear about what we hope for and taking steps towards bringing this about. Active hope requires us to find our own strengths, to discover what our unique contribution can be in this time of unravelling. Often it requires that we discover and cultivate new strengths, build networks of connection and support across differences.

Macy advocates that we begin with facing and feeling the difficult emotions that arise when we confront what is happening to our world. Active hope situates the recovery and support of life on this planet with the recovery and cultivation of aliveness within ourselves, and within the communities and cultures we live in.

Hope is a process that does not require optimism. Rather than weighing up what we believe is 'possible' before we act, we focus on our intention - what do we aim to bring about, act for, or express? The answer to this question becomes our guide.

Explore [this resource](#) of short videos by Joanna Macy to learn more.

