

Study from 'Black Tuesday' bushfires finds link to PTSD

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New research published in the *Australian Journal of Rural Health* has shown people who are forced to relocate after a bushfire are at a higher risk of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, otherwise known as

PTSD.

Led by Associate Professor Venkatesan Thiruvankatarajan from the University of Adelaide, and Dr. Richard Watts from Flinders University, the researchers spoke with people affected by the 2005 "Black Tuesday" Eyre Peninsula bushfires, which took nine lives, destroyed 93 homes and blackened 80,000 hectares of land near Port Lincoln on 11 January, 2005.

Corresponding author Associate Professor Thiruvankatarajan, from the University of Adelaide's Discipline of Acute Care Medicine, said understanding that relocating after bushfires was a trigger for PTSD was important in providing [support services](#) for those affected.

"Relocation was a significant factor in predicting PTSD at the six-month and two-year marks, while after seven years, personal loss, including damage and the destruction of property, was the key component," said Associate Professor Thiruvankatarajan, who is also a Senior Consultant Anesthetist at The Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

"People who relocate after a bushfire should be carefully assessed and supported to reduce PTSD.

"These individuals need to be monitored over time and offered psychological support to prevent long-term psychopathology issues. Those who suffer from personal loss also need to be monitored on a long-term basis and adequately supported to compensate for the loss of loved ones.

"Implementing outreach programs where victims can have access to a [general practitioner](#) or psychiatrist or psychologist will be useful for their short-term mental health. Psychological issues after a natural disaster can be delayed or manifest into something more serious if not treated early."

One-hundred and seventy-nine people were recruited for the initial study six months after the bushfires, with 103 and 87 people completing the two-year and seven-year follow ups respectively.

Dr. Watts, the lead author and an Adjunct Associate Professor of Rural Health at Flinders University, witnessed the bushfires first-hand having lived in Port Lincoln for almost 20 years.

"We found that 13.4% of people had PTSD six months after the bushfire, 10.7% two years after, and 4.8% after seven years," Associate Professor Watts said.

"Participants were asked about how close they were to the fire, whether they defended themselves and/or their homes, whether they were trapped and/or injured, and their emotional experience.

"These findings can hopefully lead to greater support for people who have to live through a [bushfire](#)."

More information: Richard Watts et al, Incidence and factors impacting PTSD following the 2005 Eyre Peninsula bushfires in South Australia—A 7 year follow up study, *Australian Journal of Rural Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/ajr.12909](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12909)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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