

How we can better manage mental health impacts of bushfires

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Fire tore through Tallaganda State Forest in NSW during the 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires, burning trees and scrub. Credit: Jamie Kidston/ANU

With an El Niño summer promising hotter and drier conditions for much of Australia, we must rethink how we measure the impact bushfires and other extreme weather events have on our mental health and well-being, according to experts from The Australian National University (ANU).

The researchers say we must acknowledge that the [mental health](#) impacts of weather-related disasters extend far beyond those directly impacted by these events—it can also impact people living thousands of kilometers away. The research is published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.

They also argue authorities most likely underestimated how many Australians experienced declines in their mental health and well-being because of the devastating 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires.

ANU researchers surveyed more than 2,000 residents in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and surrounding regions in the aftermath of the Black Summer fires to determine their level of exposure to the fires using a [bushfire](#) impact score. This helped gauge not only residents' physical loss but also the emotional toll.

Beyond the [health consequences](#) of suffering [smoke inhalation](#), which almost all participants reported, about 60% of respondents said they were directly impacted by the bushfires. This includes whether that person had to evacuate, whether they lost property, or if their travel was impacted.

"There was a lot of media coverage which featured devastating imagery of koalas and other Australian wildlife perishing in the fires. That can cause emotional and [psychological distress](#) for a lot of Australians," lead author Dr. Zoe Leviston, from the ANU School of Medicine and Psychology, said.

"The negative impacts of bushfires can be profoundly and acutely distressing for people with a deep connection to the land, and for those who directly experience loss.

"What we show in this study is that the direct impacts of the bushfires is

not the only factor that determines mental health and well-being outcomes—it's also the psychological stress, both acute and more subtly, of experiencing the loss of cherished environments, ecosystems and wildlife."

A second nation-wide survey of more than 1,400 people six months after the Black Summer fires found many Australians reported a strong sense of loss, after the fires claimed dozens of lives, burnt more than 24 million hectares of land, and killed or displaced nearly 3 billion animals.

"You could be on the other side of the continent witnessing the devastation and that solastalgic response to [environmental destruction](#) is enough to negatively impact your mental health," Dr. Leviston said.

Solastalgia is the distress we feel as a result of unwanted environmental change, or in this case, destruction to the environment.

Coined by Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, solastalgia is the homesickness we experience while still at home. It is also linked to our emotional connection with the land we live on.

"Solastalgia is often deeply connected to a location or place, but how we've come to understand place is changing," co-author Associate Professor Aparna Lal, from the National Center for Epidemiology and Population Health, said.

"We've often understood place as something within a geographical boundary, such as our state or territory, but increasingly it's more understood not just as a geographical construct but as a sociocultural or environmental construct as well, especially as the diffuse impacts of climate change grow.

"In terms of preparedness for future events, we need to start thinking

more about rolling out [mental health resources](#) more broadly in regional and remote communities to be able to account for solastalgia and the long-term mental health consequences caused by extreme weather."

According to the authors, the findings suggest policymakers and mental health organizations should be more aware of the role of solastalgia and its impact on peoples' mental well-being, and how we distribute mental health support services across the country, particularly as climate change-driven disasters become more frequent and intense.

"Traditionally the way we assess the damage caused by bushfires is thought of in terms of direct physical impact, such as how many people had to evacuate, how many people lost property and how many people lost their lives, which is all important information to capture," Dr. Leviston said.

"But importantly, people not directly impacted by a bushfire event also experience solastalgia and poorer mental health outcomes following bushfires. By not taking solastalgia into account, we are being very conservative in our estimates of bushfire impact on peoples' mental health and well-being.

"Given the less visible impacts of disasters such as solastalgia, [climate scientists](#) and the health sector should work together to identify areas where compounding disasters are more likely to occur and deploy resources accordingly.

"While solastalgia itself is not a [mental illness](#), the experience is distressing enough that it is capable of causing a real and diagnosable illness."

More information: Zoe Leviston et al, Solastalgia mediates between bushfire impact and mental health outcomes: A study of Australia's

2019–2020 bushfire season, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*
(2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102071](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102071)

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