



We work with Country and Outback South Australians to provide health care for healthier communities

MENCONNECT

Information Tailored for Men

Taking Care of Yourself after a Crisis

By Dr John Ashfield

The recent Pinery bushfire disaster demonstrated just how resourceful Australian men can be when “their backs are to the wall.” Firefighters, landholders, and volunteers alike, even when their lives were at risk, pressed on unhesitatingly and relentlessly. They did what men have always done best: they suppressed their fears, and distanced themselves from the emotional content of their own experience, in order to be undistracted in their effort to impose control over the destructive forces and chaos threatening their communities and families.

Few examples better reveal how men “not being in touch with their emotions”, and being able to remain task focused and clear-headed in a crisis, are an indispensable asset to human survival. And, contrary to popular misconception, data on post-disaster mental health problems suggest that the majority of men cope at least as well or generally better than women do, despite equal or greater exposure to dangerous, distressing and life threatening circumstances.

Some men do of course run into trouble. Strictly regulating emotions and thoughts that might impede one’s capacity to respond to a crisis – putting them on hold, to be dealt with once threat and danger have passed, can result in some potential psychological challenges later on. Problems that may later emerge include:

- Suppressing or shutting out emotions long after doing so is needed or serves any positive purpose. It may be necessary to make a conscious effort to reconnect with and work through emotions put on hold, by taking time out to be reflective, and allowing thoughts and feelings to emerge and to be fully felt.
- Struggling to relax, or to make time for proper rest; being locked into restless activity. Whilst men resolve emotions often by “pushing them out” into physical activity, obsessive activity may be a way of avoiding dealing with feelings that are “calling out for attention”.
- Staying at home or withdrawing from usual social activities and social contact – especially with friends, is commonly a sign of not coping, and of emerging depression or anxiety.

January 28, 2016

Confiding in a friend, talking about issues, and staying socially involved can be very healing and are vital to maintaining mental health. Activating our *social brain* – the cluster of brain activation areas that light up when we are sociable, can make mood buoyant and reduce anxiety and stress.

- Increased alcohol intake. A more than moderate alcohol intake serves only to aggravate the symptoms of not coping, and diminishes the quality of much-needed sleep.
- Too little sleep. Sleep, and plenty of it needs to be a high priority. It is restorative - boosting mood and energy and promoting physical and 'inner' healing. It is also the time when our experiences and memories are processed in the most helpful way. Sleeping in and early nights aren't being lazy or slack, they are crucial at times of ongoing stress.

If, after the experience of all that has happened over the last weeks of crisis, any of these problems seem too difficult to budge – and especially if they are associated with prolonged stress, anxiety, irritability, anger, depressed mood or fatigue, it is plainly time to seek professional support. Talking to a doctor may be the best place to start.

As men, we can weather most crises and difficulties very well. But there are limits to what we can cope with alone. We owe it to ourselves and to our families to seek assistance long before we experience being overwhelmed.

Country and Outback Health, is providing free and confidential counselling services in response to the Pinery fire. Contact: **(08) 8209 0700**