

# After the fire



Tasmania Fire Service



What to do in the hours and days after fire strikes

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# Introduction

**The unthinkable has happened: your home has been damaged or destroyed by fire.**

While what has happened to you may be difficult to understand and accept, there are things you can do right now to begin rebuilding your life and your home.

There are organisations and people who will help you do this. Your starting point is securing and protecting your property.

If you need professional support to help you through this difficult period, contact your GP. Lifeline (13 11 14) also provides confidential 24-hour counselling, support and referral.

The Tasmania Fire Service offers this booklet to help you through this difficult time.





# Step 1



*Secure your property*



*Limit access*

## Secure and protect your property

In the event that an investigation needs to take place your home will be secured until the investigation is complete. Entry to the property will be controlled by the Tasmania Fire Service and Tasmania Police. Once the investigation is complete, the Tasmania Fire Service or Tasmania Police will hand the property back to the owner.

Your home may need to be protected from any further damage by weather, theft or vandalism depending on the degree and nature of damage.

The owner of the building or structure is responsible for making sure that any openings are secure and only approved access to the site is permitted. External doors and openings to the structure should be secured and locked. This can be done by using plywood sheeting to board up entry points or with the use of temporary fencing to keep people off the property.

In rented premises the occupier is responsible for informing the estate agent or landlord or Housing Tasmania of the fire.

Assistance with site security can be obtained from

- insurance companies (depending on your level of insurance)
- general building contractors (see Yellow Pages)
- a building firm (see Yellow Pages.)

If you are in need of temporary housing and are currently a Housing Tasmania tenant, contact Housing Tasmania as soon as possible and advise them of your circumstances. Otherwise contact your insurance company or local family welfare organisations who may be able to assist in finding temporary housing. (See back cover, or see Yellow Pages: Organisations – Family Welfare).

Make a list of all items on site and do not remove anything from the site until you have completed your list.

# Step 2

## Your health & safety

Fires may restart from hidden, smouldering remains; if this happens contact the Tasmania Fire Service immediately on 000.

Do not re-enter a damaged property unnecessarily as it can be very dangerous.

The utilities (gas, electricity or water) to the site may have been shut off or disconnected by the Tasmania Fire Service or other agencies.

### Electricity and Gas Supply

If you are unsure of whether something is safe, ask a relevant qualified tradesperson for advice. Household wiring and appliances (gas or electric) must be inspected by a qualified tradesperson before the appliance is reconnected or utilities are restored to the site.

## Building Safety

Buildings or structures affected by fire can easily become unsafe.

Walls, roofs and ceilings can give way without warning and floors or stairs may not be as sound as they appear.

A building inspector will be required to ensure structural safety before you re-enter the building. Your insurance company (depending on your level of insurance) will contact a building inspector, or the local council's building inspector may be of assistance.

## Food

Discard any food, beverages, or medicines exposed to heat, smoke or water damage. Refrigerators and freezers left unopened will hold their temperature for a short time, but do not re-freeze frozen food that may have thawed during the incident.



*Use qualified tradespersons*



*Arrange inspection*



*Discard food*

# Step 3



*Notify your insurance company*



*Make a list of damaged property*

## Insurance

If you are insured, your insurance will be the most important single aspect of recovering from a fire loss.

Your insurance policy is a contract between you and the insurance company. The insurer promises to do certain things for you and in turn you too have some obligations. After a fire loss, one of your first obligations is to **immediately notify your insurance company** or insurance broker.

Advise the claims manager of loss or damage and provide them with a forwarding address and telephone number if circumstances have meant leaving the damaged home.

It is important that you protect your property and take reasonable precautions from further damage or losses from weather, theft or vandalism, such as covering any holes in the roof or walls. Your insurance company will provide you with advice. The insurance company may refuse to pay losses that occur after the fire incident.

Make a list of damaged personal property, detailing the quantity, description, original purchase price, purchase date, damage estimate and replacement; refer to your insurance contract for further advice.

It is important to coordinate with the insurance adjuster or loss assessor before contracting for any services.

If you enter a contract with any cleaning or repairs contractors without the insurance company's knowledge or consent, you may be left with bills to pay that otherwise would have been covered by insurance. The sooner your insurer or their broker is notified; the sooner the insurance claim can be processed.

Do not discard or throw away damaged goods without first consulting your insurance company or before an inventory is made.

If you cannot remember the name of your insurance company, or the details are not available, contact the Insurance Council of Australia (see Yellow Pages).



# Step 4

## Leaving your home

It may be necessary to leave your home because of structural damage or because it is unsafe.

Contact the local police to inform them of your intentions and provide them with a contact address or phone number.

Your insurance may allow for emergency accommodation. Check with your insurer.

If relatives and friends are unable to help with accommodation, or provide the level of support you may need, there are community-based organisations that may be able to provide assistance.

If you are an existing or new Centrelink customer receiving a social security or pension benefit, you may be entitled to a “crisis payment”; contact Centrelink (see back cover) to have your claim assessed.

If you are receiving a Veterans’ Affairs pension or benefit, contact your Veterans’ Affairs office as you may be entitled to a “crisis payment”.

If you are in need of urgent or crisis accommodation, check with the local family welfare organisations that may be able to assist in finding temporary housing. (See back cover, or see Yellow Pages: Organisations – Family Welfare).



*You may have to leave your home*



*Seek help to relocate*

# Things to do



*Retrieve medicines that have not been affected by the fire*



*Retrieve personal items such as jewellery*

If you need to enter your home, check first with the fire officer in charge at the site and police, if they are present. Make sure the area is safe to enter and follow all instructions. A structural engineer may be needed to give advice.

There will be many things that you will want to retrieve. However, when you re-enter try to find the following items to take with you:

- ☐ Identification
- ☐ Credit cards, cheque books
- ☐ Legal documents
- ☐ Insurance contracts or policies
- ☐ Medications that have not been affected
- ☐ Eyeglasses, hearing aids, prosthetic devices or personal aids
- ☐ Personal items such as jewellery, photo albums, videos etc.

(Remember to contact your insurance company before removing any items.)



# Things to do

## Notify the following of any relocation or new address and contact details.

**Hint:** You may wish to note the name of the person you spoke to and the date for future reference.

☐ Your employer

Details:

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☐ Family and friends

Details:

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☐ Your children's schools

Details:

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☐ Post Office – to hold or forward your mail

Details:

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☐ Delivery services – such as newspapers and milk

Details:

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☐ Utility companies – such as Telstra, the local council

Details:

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☐ The Police – if the fire is under investigation

Details:

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☐ Insurance Company

Details:

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Who needs to be notified?



Redirect your mail

# Step 5



Clean clothes



Clean cooking utensils

## After the fire – salvage hints

**Note** – *salvaging property should be undertaken only after consultation with your insurance company.*

If your home has not been completely destroyed, you may be able to salvage some items that are affected by heat, smoke or water but are otherwise intact. Here are some hints to aid you in their restoration.

- **Clothing** – Smoke odour and soot can sometimes be washed from clothing. The following formula often will work for clothing that can be bleached:

*4 – 6 tbsp of washing powder, 1 cup of household chlorine bleach, 4 litres of warm water. Mix well, add clothes, rinse with clear water and dry well.*

*To remove fresh mildew, wash with soap and warm water, then rinse and dry in sun.*

- **Cooking Utensils** – Wash with soapy water, rinse and then polish with a fine powdered cleaner. You can polish copper and brass with special polish or salt sprinkled on a piece of lemon or salt sprinkled on a cloth saturated with vinegar seems to work as well.

- **Power and Electrical Appliances** –

If the Fire Service turned off your gas or power during the fire, call your electric or gas company to restore these services – do not attempt this yourself.

Do not use appliances, particularly electrical appliances that have been exposed to water until you have an authorised service technician check them.

- **Non-Perishable Food** –

Wash cans and jars in detergent and water, marking food contents on the can or jar with permanent marker if labels come off. Do not use cans that are rusted, dented or have bulged.

- **Fridge and Freezer Food** –

If your home freezer has stopped running, you can still save the frozen food. Keep the freezer closed as it has enough insulation to keep frozen food for at least one day.

Alternatively, move your food to a neighbour's freezer or wrap the frozen food in newspaper and blankets or use an esky. Do not re-freeze food that has thawed.

# Step 5

- **Flooring and Rugs –**

When water gets underneath linoleum, it can cause odours and warp the wood floor. If this happens, remove the entire sheet. If the linoleum is brittle, a heat lamp will soften it so it can be rolled up without breaking. If carefully removed, it can be re-cemented after the floor has been completely dried.

Allow rugs and carpets to dry thoroughly. You can clean throw rugs by beating, sweeping or vacuuming and then shampooing. Dry them as quickly as possible by laying them flat and exposing them to a circulation of warm air. Using a fan on the rugs will speed up the process. Make sure they are thoroughly dry as even surfaces that appear dry may still have moisture remaining at the base of the tufts and this can quickly rot a rug. For information on cleaning and preserving carpets, call your carpet dealer or installer or qualified carpet cleaning professional.

- **Mattresses and Pillows –**

Your mattress may be able to be renovated by a company that builds and repairs mattresses. If you must use your mattress temporarily, put it into the sun to dry then cover it with rubber or plastic sheeting. It is almost impossible to get a smoke smell out of feather pillows or foam.

- **Leather and Books –**

Wipe leather goods with a damp cloth then a dry cloth. Stuff purses and shoes with newspaper to retain shape. Leave suitcases open. Dry wet leather goods away from heat and sun. Rinse leather or suede jackets in cold water and dry them away from heat and sun. You can use steel wool or a suede brush on suede leather.

Attend to wet books as soon as possible. The best method to save wet books is to freeze them in a vacuum freezer, which will remove the moisture without damaging the pages. If there is a delay in locating such a freezer, place them in a normal freezer until a vacuum freezer can be located.



*Clean carpet*



*Clean bedding*



*Clean books*



# Step 5



Clean & oil locks



Clean after a fire

- **Locks and Hinges** – Locks should be taken apart, wiped with kerosene and oiled. If locks cannot be removed, squirt machine oil through a bolt opening or keyhole and work the knob to distribute the oil. Hinges should also be thoroughly cleaned and oiled.
- **Walls** – To remove soot and smoke from walls, furniture and floors, wear rubber gloves and apply the following mix:  
*4 – 6 tbsp of washing powder,  
1 cup of household chlorine bleach,  
4 litres warm water.*  
*Rinse with clear warm water and dry thoroughly.*  
Walls may be washed down while wet. Use a mild soap or detergent. Wash a small area at one time, working from the floor up. Then rinse the wall with clear water immediately. Wash ceilings last. Do not repaint until the walls and ceilings are completely dry.  
Wallpaper can also be repaired. Use a commercial paste to re-paste loose edges or sections. Contact your wallpaper dealer or installer for information on wallpaper cleaners. Washable wallpaper can be washed like an ordinary wall, but take care not to soak the paper.
- **Furniture** – Do not dry your furniture directly in the sun. The wood will warp and twist out of shape. You can rub the wood surface with a 4/0 steel wool pad dipped in liquid polishing wax, wiping with a soft cloth then buffing. Remove any drawers and let them dry thoroughly.  
Wet wood can decay and mould, so remove any mud or dirt by scrubbing with a stiff brush and cleaning solution, then allow it to dry thoroughly. Open doors and windows for good ventilation. If mould forms, wipe the wood with a cloth soaked in a solution of borax dissolved in hot water. To remove white spots or film, rub the wood surface with a cloth soaked in a solution of cup of household ammonia and ½ cup of water. Wipe dry and polish with wax. Consider contacting a professional cleaning services company. (See Yellow Pages.)

# Step 6

## keeping a record

Use this page to list details relevant to the fire to keep a record of contact names and numbers that will help you through the process of rebuilding your life.

Date and time of fire:

Police Officer's name:

Station:

Telephone number:

Date:

Fire Service Officer's name:

Station:

Telephone number:

Date:

Insurance Company name:

Type of policy:

Policy number:

Insurance assessor's name:

Landlord or real estate's contact details:

for further information contact:

**community fire safety on freecall 1800 000 699**



*Emergency service officer contact details*



*Insurance assessor contact details*

# Your wellbeing



*Support is available*



*How are you coping?*

## Coping with a stressful event

Traumatic experiences such as fire tend to be sudden and overwhelming. In some cases, there are no outwardly visible signs of physical injury, but there is nonetheless a serious emotional toll.

It is normal and very common for people who have experienced traumatic situations to have very strong emotional reactions such as depression, anxiety, sadness, anger, fatigue, nightmares and difficulty concentrating. These are common responses.

Children as well as adults can suffer from stress following a fire. Understanding normal responses to these abnormal events can aid you in coping effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, and help you along the path to recovery.

### Normal reactions to a stressful event

#### Mental reactions

- Trouble thinking clearly, planning and making decisions
- Can't concentrate or remember details
- Can't stop thinking about the fire
- Thinking about other bad things that have happened in the past
- Trouble speaking clearly

#### Physical reactions

- Tension, stress and tightness in muscles
- Feeling weak or tired, loss of energy
- Headaches, shaking, sweating, upset stomach or aches and pains
- Loss of appetite, cravings for sugar, alcohol, coffee or cigarettes
- Feeling tired but can't sleep, disturbed sleep or bad dreams

#### Emotional reactions

- Feeling numb, detached or disconnected
- Irritable, bad-tempered or impatient, unable to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed or hopeless
- Sadness and grief, crying easily
- Feelings are easily hurt, overly sensitive to what others say, feeling misunderstood
- Anger or blaming others
- Fear and anxiety, easily startled
- Feeling differently about the people close to you

### Looking after yourself

- Recognise that you have been through an extremely stressful event. Give yourself permission to feel bad, and find positive ways to cope.



# Your wellbeing

- Be more careful than usual.  
Following a traumatic event you are more vulnerable to illness and injury.
- Take care of yourself:
  - Get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep
  - Try to eat regular, healthy meals
  - Try to do a little exercise every day (regular exercise helps reduce the physical effects of trauma).
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope. Stimulants such as tea, coffee, cola, chocolate and cigarettes will make the feeling of being 'hyped up' worse. Using alcohol or other drugs to numb the pain will create more problems in the long term.
- Make time to relax.
- Keep a routine going. Try to include exercise, work and relaxation in your schedule every day. Do one thing you enjoy every day.
- Try to resume normal activities as soon as possible (but don't overdo it).
- Avoid making major life decisions too quickly. Focus on making daily decisions to start feeling in control of your life again.
- Spend time with people you care about. If you feel comfortable talking about feelings, this can help with the recovery process. Avoid becoming isolated.

## Getting support

Most people will recover over time with the support of family and friends. However, sometimes distressing events can be difficult to overcome, and professional help may be useful. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness – it is another strategy to help you recover from the fire.

**You should consider seeking professional help if you continue to experience strong reactions more than two weeks after the fire.**

You should also consider seeking professional help if:

- You feel very distressed, frightened, irritable or jumpy a lot of the time,
- You are unable to carry out your normal roles at work, school or with your family,
- You feel hopeless, despairing and think you can't go on, or
- You are thinking of harming yourself or someone else.

## Where to get help

Your GP is a good place to start. They can also refer you to other service providers who may be able to help.

Lifeline (13 11 14) provides confidential 24-hour counselling, support and referral.



*Get plenty of rest*



*Try to do a little exercise every day*



# Contacts

In an emergency **dial 000**

SERVICE	CONTACTS
Ambulance Services	<b>For emergencies telephone Triple Zero '000'</b>
Anglicare Tasmania	FREECALL <b>1800 243 232</b> FREECALL <b>1800 800 588</b> – 24 hour service Emergency Accommodation Assistance <b>www.anglicare-tas.org.au</b>
Australian Red Cross	FREECALL <b>1800 246 850</b> <b>www.redcross.org.au</b>
Catholiccare	<b>6278 1660</b> (Hobart) <b>6332 0600</b> (Launceston) <b>6431 8555</b> (Burnie) <b>6423 6100</b> (Devonport) <b>www.Catholiccaretas.org.au</b>
Centrelink	<b>13 24 68</b> <b>www.centrelink.gov.au</b>
Colony 47 Inc	FREECALL <b>1800 265 669</b> <b>6222 1530</b> <b>6214 1311</b> <b>www.colony47.com.au</b> E-mail: <b>admin@colony47.com.au</b>
Health and Human Services	<b>1800 800 588</b> Housing Connect <b>housingconnect@dhhs.tas.gov.au</b>
Hobart City Mission	<b>6215 4251</b> (Moonah) <b>6215 4200</b> (Hobart) <b>www.hobartcitymission.org.au</b>
Housing Tasmania	<b>1300 665 663</b> Monday to Friday 8.30 am to 5.00 pm <b>www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/housing</b>
Lifeline	For 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention <b>13 11 14</b> <b>www.lifeline.org.au</b>
Salvation Army	<b>13 72 58</b>
Service Tasmania	<b>1300 135 513</b> <b>www.service.tas.gov.au</b>
Tasmania Fire Service (Fire Safety Information)	<b>1800 000 699</b> <b>fire.tas.gov.au</b>

## Tasmania Fire Service

Corner Argyle & Melville Streets Hobart

Postal Address **T** 03 6230 8600  
GPO Box 1526 **F** 03 6234 6647  
HOBART TAS 7001 **E** [fire@fire.tas.gov.au](mailto:fire@fire.tas.gov.au)



**TAS ALERT**  
[alert.tas.gov.au](http://alert.tas.gov.au)



Tasmanian  
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Tasmania Fire Service

