

Sleep trial seeks participants suffering bushfire trauma

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A cognitive-behavioural clinical trial is seeking participants for a sleep disturbances treatment for people affected by a bushfire.

The trial, supported by Natural Hazards Research Australia and Federation University Australia, is aimed at anyone experiencing sleep disturbances – such as insomnia, nightmares or trauma symptoms – as a result of living through bushfire. It is an online, self-paced, sleep-specific intervention called Sleep Best-i. Participants can be community members or emergency responders and the experience of a bushfire does not need to be recent; it could be several years or even decades ago.

The trial is part of a Natural Hazards Research Australia 'Online cognitive-behavioural intervention for treatment of insomnia and nightmares in bushfire survivors' research project being conducted by clinical psychologist Fadia Isaac, Professor Gerard Kennedy and other researchers at Federation University. The study is funded through Natural Hazards Research Australia's Postgraduate Research Scholarship program.

Fadia recently won a Collaborative Research Australia Early Career Researcher Competition for this innovative study and said that early signs are promising, but more participants are required.

'Many people who are suffering post-bushfire trauma have to overcome significant barriers to receiving treatment, especially those who live remotely or feel stigma when seeking face-to-face treatment.

'This self-paced intervention is done at home, giving people self-governance and greater privacy when seeking help for their sleep disturbances,' said Fadia.

The trial takes either 4 or 8 weeks to complete, depending if the participant is assigned to the intervention or control group based on their initial assessment. Participants are asked about their experience with bushfires and asked to rate their sleep and trauma symptoms. Once eligibility for the trial is established, participants complete short assessments and provide feedback through online modules. The trial is conducted within the

participant's home and at their own pace using sleep-specific technology such as Fitbits to track sleep.

'Taking part is easy and does not involve being hooked up to sleep devices. Participants can commence at any time.

'Each week participants watch a module focused on a different aspect of sleep disturbance, for example nightmares, and receive tips for the week to help tackle that particular sleep disturbance. For nightmares, this could be rewriting the nightmare in a benign way, such as changing the ending to something pleasant and rehearsing the new dream during waking hours.

'This is a proven technique and the brain is more likely to remember that benign dream than the nightmare, so this is how they can shift that nightmare from being such a bad experience,' Fadia explained.

By taking part in this trial, participants can improve their knowledge of sleep difficulties and how they develop as well as reduce mental health risks. Participants who complete the trial and provide data receive a \$100 shopping voucher.

Based on the success of the trial, the intervention will be implemented widely in Phase 2 of the project. The intervention could also be developed as an evidence-based, free resource.

Recruitment is open until the end of 2023 or until participant spaces are filled.

For more information, visit:
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