



Take Care to Give Care



Two Green Threads  
*Supporting Wildlife Carers*

## Introduction

Caring for wildlife can be an extremely rewarding and fulfilling experience. Wildlife volunteers do an amazing job of caring for native animals that are sick, injured or orphaned, before the animals are released back into their natural environment. At a time when animals and their habitats are increasingly threatened, the volunteers of the wildlife sector play a key part in the future of wildlife on our planet.

The critical role of volunteers within the wildlife rehabilitation sector is challenging and supporting the physical, mental and emotional wellness of these volunteers is vital. Many wildlife volunteers are drawn to the role because they prioritise the needs of animals, but it's important to also remember that **taking care to give care**, means you also care for yourself so that you can care for wildlife for longer.

Two Green Threads is a registered national not for profit supporting the volunteer sector of native animal rescuers and carers with a mission to empower and energise the lives of those that care for our wildlife. We have prepared a series of guides with the purpose of helping build resilience for individuals and the wildlife volunteer sector as a whole.

This guide provides suggestions for managing the challenges that might arise for wildlife volunteers particularly following a large scale natural disaster like bushfire, severe drought, flood or cyclone. It offers information and prompts to help wildlife volunteers balance their care of wildlife with care for themselves.

## The impact of disasters on native animals and wildlife volunteers

The combination of climate change plus habitat reduction and the increased presence of people in nature refuge areas is resulting in more negative outcomes for wildlife, and an increased need for human assistance for rescue or rehabilitation. When a disaster strikes, however, like the mega bushfires of Spring/Summer 2019 /2020, unprecedented numbers of native wildlife can need assistance all at the same time. Then, the immediate demands on local wildlife volunteers increases enormously, and with this comes the risk of exhaustion, overwhelm and burnout.

Furthermore, for many wildlife volunteers, extreme weather disasters are understood in the context of climate change, and this means the risk of more extreme weather to come, with a range of devastating impacts on wildlife and habitat. The existential threat of climate change on the survival of species, humans, and biodiversity around the world is challenging at the best of times, and it can be very hard for some people to find hope and optimism in times of extreme weather disasters.

## Challenges that you might experience as a wildlife volunteer during a disaster



Experiencing an enormous increase in demand for your time.

Trying to sustain a frenetic pace of energy and focus.



Finding it difficult to think about your own needs, or take care of yourself, because you want to prioritise the needs of the wildlife.



Finding it difficult to set limits and say no to new animals.

Watching endless coverage of the news and social media detailing the destruction of the disaster, and finding it hard to turn off or take a break.



Finding it hard to get a break from reminders of the disaster, because you have the injured wildlife at home with you.



Struggling to find others nearby that you trust to hand over the responsibility of caring for a native animal, in order to have some respite.



Being personally impacted by an event yourself, either damage to or loss of your own property, or that of people you know.

Being on high alert for months on end.



Not knowing how or where to access support for your mental health.



Wanting to participate at the frontline disaster zone yourself but not sure how or where wildlife volunteers fit within the emergency services arrangements, or because of your wildlife commitments at home make you feel constrained.

## Stress reactions for wildlife volunteers

When wildlife volunteers are highly stressed and living through a difficult time like a disaster some common reactions include:

### PHYSICAL

Feeling exhausted by the 24/7 demands of caring for an injured animal

- Sleep difficulties - difficulty getting to sleep, or staying asleep

- Changes in appetite

- High levels of tension

- Upset stomach, headaches, pounding heart

### MENTAL

Difficulty concentrating, making more mistakes than usual, difficulty making decisions

- Nightmares, flashbacks of traumatic things you've seen or experienced

- Having difficulty with being able to see an end to the disaster

- Finding it hard to have hope and positivity about the future

- Negative self-talk

### EMOTIONAL

Sadness, anger and despair at the widespread loss of habitat

- Fears of further losses to come

- Grief at having to sometimes euthanise animals

- Being more irritable with loved ones

- Feeling guilty about saying no to requests

- Feeling helpless and hopeless

### BEHAVIORAL

Avoiding people and places

- Loss of interest in usual activities

- Withdrawing from other parts of your life because you feel like you don't have time, or you believe others don't understand the demands of your job caring for injured or orphaned wildlife

- Neglecting important relationships



## Building resilience

The extraordinary demands that can be placed on a wildlife volunteer raise the importance of building your resilience.

Being resilient doesn't mean that you don't still get affected by the emotional and physical demands of being a wildlife volunteer. Being resilient means that as stressors build up there is a shorter lag time between getting knocked down and getting back on your feet and you may be less likely to get knocked down in the first place.

### THE A-B-C OF RESILIENCE INCLUDES:



AWARENESS



BALANCE



CONNECTION

## Awareness

Examine how much is on your plate. Look at your life above and beyond your wildlife volunteer activities. How much responsibility do you have? How many other stressors exist for you?

Become familiar with your own stress signals, like getting short-tempered and irritable, crying easily, making more mistakes than usual, or losing interest in things that used to interest you, and changes in how you normally behave.

Pay attention to how you're thinking and feeling. Notice how your body is feeling. Notice what thoughts are looping through your head. For example, are you running an unhelpful story in your head about being a failure if you are not 110% caring and thinking about the needs of wildlife?

Ask yourself how you're going and what you need. Take note of how much you are exposing yourself to images and stories and activities involving pain, suffering, loss and death.

Ask yourself whether your relationships are being negatively impacted by your volunteer role. Are others telling you that they think you've changed?

Think about what has helped you cope in the past, for example talking to a trusted friend, sharing your fears with someone, spending time in a favourite place in nature, tending your garden, or listening to music.

Notice if you are using unhealthy strategies to cope with stress, like drinking alcohol or using other drugs or medication, or withdrawing from everybody for long periods of time.

Be aware of any personal triggers that may make the work more difficult e.g. working with certain ages or species of animals etc.

## Balance

Practice some grounding exercises. For example, sitting or standing, feel the soles of your feet planted firmly on the ground. Breathe in and out slowly from your abdomen, with awareness of each breath. Say to yourself, "I am here right now. Nowhere else." Bring all of your attention to exactly what you are doing in the here and now.

Take time to do some brief gentle stretching and/or deep breathing several times a day.

Keep a list of the positive impacts that being a wildlife volunteer brings to your life. Review it when you're feeling the need for inspiration.

Don't hesitate to ask for help for yourself. Taking care of yourself allows you to care for others. Start a list of self-care strategies you'd like in your life, even if you're not currently capable of making them happen.

Do something creative art, crafts, writing, dance, music.

Practice some limit setting. Remind yourself that your availability does not have to be all or nothing, and saying no to a request does not mean that your commitment is any less.

Reduce your level of trauma input. Don't watch or listen to news reports any more than absolutely necessary.

Be gentle with yourself. If you have spiritual/philosophical beliefs and practices, remember them and use them at this time.

Create a routine of doing at least one non-wildlife volunteer activity that 'nourishes' you each day.

Maintain your level of professional development. Attend trainings on topics that help you perform your duties better, help you feel more confident, and be more resilient.

## Balance...Continued

Let yourself have a cry from time to time if it helps. Some people find that expressing their sadness by crying can be a relief. It is sad that our native animals are suffering for any reason.

Put some words to your feelings to help make sense of them (e.g. I'm feeling sad, I'm feeling angry). Writing in a journal can be a useful way of identifying thoughts and feelings.

Remind yourself that you'll make better decisions for your animals if you are rested and coping well yourself. Take a deliberate regular break for hours at a time, even though you might have guilty feelings or thoughts about taking the time off.

Establish and/or maintain healthy routines like taking time to do physical exercise, preparing and eating healthy meals, making sleep a priority (e.g. going to bed much earlier than usual to make up for waking for night time feeds).

Make time to practise relaxation. You can use a formal technique such as meditation, or yoga, or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity like gardening or listening to music. Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.

Learn to say 'yes' to activities that are not wildlife volunteer-related e.g. listening to music, dinner with friends, hobbies, movies. Keep reminding yourself that things will get better, and that you do have the ability to manage.

Spend time on things that give you a sense of meaning in life beyond just caring for animals. Acknowledge to yourself what an immense job you are doing, and thank yourself for the care and effort you are making everyday.

Establish daily routines to help you be more organised.

## Connection

Spend time with people that you care for and who care about you. Talk with them about how you're feeling.

Talk with wildlife volunteer friends, share stories, skills and strategies about the 'people part' of wildlife caring, not just the animal-related angles.

Have regular email contact with your wildlife volunteer network to check in and see how everyone is going.

Find an experienced wildlife volunteer as a mentor who can help you think through your work, give you strategic advice, and be a good sounding board. Consider whether there is value in having a conversation to make this a more on-going mentoring relationship.

Suggest, or help to organise regular informal social gatherings with your wildlife organisations. Create or find positive reasons to come together as a group e.g. potluck dinners, group outings.

Make time for friends and family. Reach out to friends on their birthdays or other special days. Let them know you're thinking of them.

Regularly spend social time with your community, family and friends, both those who live within your immediate world, as well as those outside your community.

Offer to speak to school, religious, or community groups about the role of a wildlife volunteer.

Join a community group or take a class in something unrelated to animal care.




## Remember

If you don't feel like things are getting better, consider seeking professional help from a psychologist or your GP for support with coping strategies and for dealing with burnout.

Stay in touch with [twogreenthreads.org](https://twogreenthreads.org) for other resources that might be useful as we work out ways to support one another and understand our reactions, thoughts and feelings.

Please share this 'Take Care to Give Care' guide widely with anyone that might draw strength from the advice it contains.



*"Courage doesn't always roar.  
Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at  
the end of the day saying  
'I will try again tomorrow'."*

*Mary Anne Radmacher*



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**Lyn Page:** Psychologist highly experienced in disaster response and recovery with involvement as a member of the Disaster Response Network Australian Psychological Society, Contributor to Practice Certificate in Disaster Response Australian Psychological Society and Volunteer Field Psychologist Australian Red Cross assisting communities post major international and Australian disasters.

**Dr Kevin Becker:** Senior Partner and Psychologist at Organizational Resilience International [oriconsulting.com](http://oriconsulting.com), is highly specialized in the areas of psychological trauma and crisis and has worked extensively with governments, organizations, and communities following many major disasters such as 9/11; the 2004 Tsunami; Hurricane Katrina, the Kashmir earthquake in 2005 and multiple others. Kevin provides trauma consultant services to the International Foundation of Animal Welfare (IFAW).

**Dr Susie Burke:** Environmental psychologist and therapist, with many years of experience working on climate change and disasters. She runs workshops for mental health professionals in disaster preparedness, post-disaster recovery and mental health and has developed many resources for the public on coping with climate change, recovering from disasters, dealing with burnout, and talking with children about disasters, climate change, and other threats. She began the Australian Psychological Society Disaster Response network and has a depth of experience on communities reactions and experiences post disasters.

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