

## Looking after ourselves in the midst of the bushfire emergencies

The word “*unprecedented*” has been uttered countless times over the past month, when describing the bushfire events that we as a nation, are presently being faced with. This is new and uncharted territory for everyone; never before have our communities faced so much devastation, trauma and distress to each other, our animals and our landscapes. And yet at the same time we have also never seen such overwhelming examples of selflessness, courage, compassion and generosity.

So what is the difference between those who build resilience after such tragic events and those who develop greater vulnerability?

What they learned from the Black Saturday Fires five-years following the disaster, was 21% of survivors in ‘high impact communities’ (those who experienced multiple deaths), and only 4% of those who in ‘low-impact communities’, went on to develop ongoing severe psychological distress such as PTSD or depression. (Gibbs et. al 2016)

Black Saturday research also demonstrated that even without professional mental-health intervention, many survivors not only recovered, but experienced ‘post-traumatic growth’ and went on to *rebuild* or *reinvent* their lives. This reminds us to be hopeful for the future of our communities. But right now in the midst of crisis, we must expect (and it is necessary) for many people to remain in survival-mode functioning (fight-flight and ‘freeze’). Now is not the time to ‘screen for risk’ - so what can we do, when many of us feel relatively helpless?

In the absence of safety, there are things we know are helpful and act protectively. Right now we can work to **build a secure base** around those who are vulnerable, to help them withstand the ongoing traumatic stress of these events. The research demonstrates the following things are helpful during the crisis for those being impacted:

- **Helping people keep connected** with family members followed by friends and community; informal networks are usually the main source/preference for support over formal services
- **Maintaining involvement in community;** community connection is protective - as an individual’s number of group memberships increases, their mental health improves
- **Supporting parents:** helping parents to understand that trauma impacts children and supporting them to adapt their parenting to provide greater security, is protective. After the crisis has passed, supporting parents to identify the signs that their children aren’t coping or recovering is also helpful, so that they can seek formal mental health support services
- **Understand everyone is different;** the bushfires impact everyone differently and people will require different responses to increase their coping. For some people speaking about their stress or trauma is supportive. For others dealing with stress actively (physically) is more helpful. We are all different and even those who have experienced the same events will be impacted differently.
- **Don’t forget about those who weren’t in the path of the fires;** those who haven’t been directly exposed to the fire fronts can also be impacted heavily by these events e.g. by knowing a family member who has died in the fires, or who lost their home, or who was under threat but okay. Remember to check in on these people also and understand the experience of secondary trauma can be just as adverse as direct trauma.
- **Involving people and their local community in decision making that impacts them;** acknowledging the distress and offering choices where possible also acts to protect people against the effects of traumatic stress.

**For all of us right now at Anglicare – we need to make deliberate plans to self-care;**

Making active efforts to deactivate your stress response system is important during times of crisis and high stress – this is as easy as doing regular abdominal breathing, which activates our parasympathetic nervous system. We must give our bodies time to ‘rest and digest’ either by doing something you enjoy, trying to relax or spending time with those you feel connected to.

Remember we need to fill up our own cup in order to fill the cup of others.....