

After the firestorm

Supporting bereaved people following the 2009 Victorian bushfires



Christopher W Hall

MA GDACP BEd

Director

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

Abstract: On Saturday 7 February 2009, the Australian State of Victoria experienced the largest, deadliest and most intense bush firestorm in the country's post-European history. The death toll of 173 people represented Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire. This paper describes the state-wide specialist bereavement service established in the wake of this tragedy that combined practical and emotional support built around a psychosocial recovery framework and characterised by flexible, community-based, outreach-oriented, formal and informal programmes and activities.

Keywords: Bereavement, Australia, bushfire, psychosocial support, community

On Saturday 7 February 2009 – a day that has come to be known colloquially as Black Saturday – Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria, experienced the hottest temperature ever recorded in an Australian capital city. During the preceding week, the whole of South-Eastern Australia had experienced unprecedented heatwave conditions, with temperatures in Melbourne rising above 43°C (109°F) on three consecutive days. This heatwave followed a period of drought that had persisted for more than a decade. With humidity as low as six per cent and winds in excess of 100 km/h, senior government officials warned that it was likely to be the 'worst day in the history of the state' (Moncrief, 2009).

What followed was the largest, deadliest and most intense firestorm ever experienced in Australia since European settlement. With 173 deaths, and an additional 414 injuries, the death toll on 7 February represents Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire. One single firestorm, in the north-east of Melbourne, accounted for 120 of these deaths (Tolhurst, 2009) and released an energy equivalent to that of 1500 atomic bombs.

The fires affected 78 communities and displaced an estimated 7562 people. Many towns north-east of Melbourne were badly damaged or almost completely

destroyed. The fires destroyed 430,000 hectares of land, 3500 buildings, including 2029 homes and 55 businesses, and over 10,000 km of fencing. More than 11,000 livestock were killed or injured.

Responses to the Black Saturday bushfires included local, state, national and international relief efforts. The Victorian Bushfire Appeal raised more than \$379 million in donations. On 10 February 2009, the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments established the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) to oversee and coordinate the recovery and rebuilding programme. VBRRA continues to work with local communities to develop and implement rebuilding plans that ensure their particular economic, infrastructure, environmental and health and well-being requirements are met.

A community-based response

On 16 February 2009, the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was established by the state government with broad terms of reference to investigate the causes of, preparation for, responses to and impact on infrastructure of the fires. The final report, with 67 recommendations,

was published in July 2010 (Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, 2009a–d).

The Victorian Government, through its Emergency Management Act (1986), provides the framework for managing recovery in Victoria. A particular focus of this framework is the responsibility for the social health and well-being of affected communities and coordination and information-sharing between agencies. At the centre, and integral to the recovery process, is the local community. This framework has been previously applied to events such as the Port Arthur massacre (1996), the Bali bombings (2001) and the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004).

Shortly after the bushfire, an expert group was convened by the Victorian Government's Department of Health to advise on the development of a psychosocial recovery framework. The report, *After the Bushfires: Victoria's Psychosocial Recovery Framework* (Department of Human Services, 2009), articulates the principles and processes that have underpinned and shaped the framework. It addresses six core principles:

- coordination and integration
- enhancing local services
- community involvement
- flexibility
- sharing information, and
- training and support.

Including community involvement as a core principle of recovery meant that bereaved people themselves were offered opportunities to be involved in the recovery process. Following feedback from the bereaved and other experts, a participation process was established to ensure that people bereaved through the bushfires were linked with each other and with broader recovery activities, such as the development of memorials to acknowledge and remember the deceased. Information forums (with a strong emphasis on networking and peer support), newsletters and a website were established.

Community service hubs were rapidly established in communities affected by the bushfires. These locations provided a venue for financial assistance and other essential information and resources. They also provided bases for community-led recovery initiatives.

A dedicated Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service was established to help people affected by the bushfires with both practical and emotional issues: accommodation, finance, employment, education, counselling, health and legal services. Case managers worked with individuals and families to determine their needs and help them to locate and access the services they needed. Over 5500 households chose to use this service.

An initial focus following the disaster was on providing personal support, which included practical information on

responses to trauma, bereavement and self-care and linking people with appropriate services. Using these principles of psychological first aid, trained health, welfare and chaplaincy services and practitioners provided outreach and support services to affected communities in the immediate days and weeks following the fires.

Generalist mental health and counselling services were enhanced to address trauma and bereavement arising in the lives of affected individuals, families and communities. Specialist responses were also developed to address the specific and significant grief and bereavement issues associated with the bushfires.

Bereavement recovery framework

Shortly after the establishment of the VBRRA, a senior clinician from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) was seconded to the authority to assist in the development of bereavement support strategies.

The ACGB was established in January 1996, with funding from the Department of Human Services, to provide a state-wide specialist bereavement service across Victoria for individuals, children and families who need help following the death of someone close to them. The ACGB mission is to enhance community well-being by building the capacity and resilience of individuals, organisations and communities to cope with adverse life events. A fundamental principle of the clinical service is to be responsive to the diversity of needs of bereaved people by offering a range of services and programmes, in recognition that people grieve differently and that different things help different people. An awareness of cultural factors and a systemic orientation to bereavement support and interventions is integral to the service.

The opportunity to provide senior level advice on the development of bereavement support services in the earliest phase of the bushfires response was of critical importance. The bushfire bereavement support services developed by ACGB were shaped by the expressed needs of bereaved people, agencies and government. A flexible range of provision offered choices of office-based, outreach and telephone counselling for individuals, couples and families, and a range of support groups for bereaved adults and children.

Five extra half-time specialist bereavement counsellors were appointed and located within four bushfire-affected communities. They worked with 24 ACGB-qualified bereavement counsellors who provided bereavement counselling and support largely on a voluntary basis. Where possible, these services were delivered in partnership with local agencies.

It quickly became clear that many traumatically bereaved people were unable or unwilling to travel to office-based services. Many had experienced multiple

bereavements and losses, including, for some, the destruction of their family home and dislocation from their communities. A bereavement outreach service was established so that clients could be seen in an environment where they felt safe and comfortable.

The ACGB counsellors contributed to community forums for the bereaved and worked with bereaved people in planning and facilitating anniversary events. In addition, ACGB staff provided education about traumatic grief, produced guidelines on bereavement support, undertook community information sessions, provided clinical supervision and support to practitioners in other agencies, supported bereaved witnesses who gave evidence to the Bushfire Royal Commission, and conducted training for over 300 bushfire case managers.

Discussion and support groups

Drawing on local experience in supporting the bereaved following the Bali bombings and international research on support groups for firefighters and their families following the 9/11 disaster (Greene *et al*, 2006), support groups for people bereaved through the bushfires were established. The groups are facilitated by practitioners with training and expertise in trauma, bereavement and group process. The groups were established in partnership with local agencies to foster strong links for the participants into other, existing community resources. Special groups were also established for children to meet their specific developmental needs.

People recovering from major losses and disasters often find it helpful and comforting to meet and talk with others who have experienced similar losses and experiences (Silverman, 2008). Lifton (1973) suggests three essential elements of the groupwork process. First, a special *affinity* develops between members as they come together to share and make sense of overwhelming personal experiences. Second, a sense of *presence* emerges, as members receive and provide validation for their own and each others' feelings and experiences. Finally, Lifton describes a process of *self-generation* as members begin to change roles within the group as they develop new insights and subsequently become willing to help others as they have been helped.

A document, *Bushfire Discussion and Support Groups* (Department of Human Services, 2009), was subsequently published by the Victorian Government setting out the principles underpinning the programme, the style and format of the support groups, the roles of facilitators, the recruitment and support of facilitators, partnerships with local agencies, intake and triage procedures and programme evaluation.

Groups for bereaved adults

In the months following the bushfires, focus groups of bereaved people and workers guided the development of

a plan for bereavement support groups. In the 16 months following the fires, 12 groups were established for bereaved adults, with a total of 97 attendees. These monthly groups are held during the day and in the evenings in both bushfire-affected areas and metropolitan Melbourne. The Melbourne groups take a number of different forms, including a pizza and beer night for men.

These groups are intended for participants who are, essentially, ordinary people who have experienced a shocking and devastating experience. Those with specific mental health needs arising from the bushfires are referred for specialist help.

The themes explored by the groups have changed over time. In the early days the groups provided opportunity for detailed discussions about the unfolding of events on the day of the fires – the location and speed of the fires, who was involved, the lack of warnings from authorities, the individual losses and the deaths, the last contacts with loved ones who died, anxieties about the suffering of loved ones and individual stories of survival and loss. Members pieced together their stories and experiences in an attempt to gain a more complete understanding of the timing and sequencing of events.

Other frequent topics in early group meetings included difficulties in accessing information, problems with viewing the body and negotiating the coronial process, and complications about arranging funerals and memorial services. Group participants also discussed the fairness of grants and benefits, the Bushfire Royal Commission, anticipation of the first anniversary of the bushfires and difficulties with intrusive media reporters.

Later discussions have addressed issues such as coping with Christmas and birthdays, questions of permanent memorialisation and negotiating social relationships, particularly the insensitivity of others.

As one group member has said: 'The groups are invaluable. They provide you with an opportunity to be with others who really do understand your pain, people who understand that a year ago, one or more members of your family were incinerated in the fires.'

Groups for bereaved children

Kids Grieve Too (KG2) is a group support programme designed to meet the special needs of children aged 5–14 years who have been bereaved through the 2009 Victorian bushfires. In the KG2 groups, children are given an opportunity to talk to other bereaved children about death, funerals and anything specifically related to the death of a loved one. Being with other bereaved children also allows them to feel accepted and supported, and gives them a sense of hope for the future.

KG2 groups have a strong emphasis on practical activities, such as making memory boxes, dream catchers,

mothers/fathers day cards and masks. The groups also encourage children to remember the person who has died and find ways to honour their relationship with that person.

Disenfranchised grief of survivorship

Bushfire bereavement counsellors have identified a number of themes within Doka's (2002) typology of disenfranchised grief that illustrate some of the complexities of this work (Giljohann *et al*, 2010).

1 The loss is not acknowledged

In some bushfire communities a 'grief hierarchy' has emerged over time. Those at the apex of the hierarchy have lost partners and multiple first-degree relatives; all other forms of loss are relegated to subordinate positions and regarded by the community as less significant.

People's 'entitlement' to grief is thus related to the perceived severity of their losses. Funding initiatives for recovery may inadvertently reinforce this notion when some bereaved relatives seem to have greater access to financial support than others.

The term 'scales of grief' is often used in bereaved communities as people explore and weigh their own losses against those of others. Related to this is the concept of social comparison, where comparisons with others become the basis for self-evaluation (Carver & Scheier, 2000). Such comparisons may be negative or positive and can be made upwards (the person compares him/herself with others who are in a more favourable situation) or downwards (the person compares him/herself with others who are in a less favourable situation). Upward negative social comparisons are associated with lower levels of well-being; upward positive social comparisons are associated with higher levels of well-being, suggesting that such comparisons are a significant part of coping with stressful life events (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2009).

The outreach model enables a more preventative approach to be taken and for interventions to focus on building resilience

Losses that are not related to death remain unrecognised for many. The loss of photographs, gardens, pets, the natural environment and a sense of place – the 'returning to nothing' described by Read (1996) – are just a few examples of such losses that can be the source of great grief.

2 The relationship is not acknowledged

There may be a failure to recognise strong and meaningful relationships within communities that are not kin ties. The grief of the local shopkeeper, priest or teacher over the death of customers, parishioners or students may simply not be understood or appreciated.

Pre-existing conflict in some families can result in some family members being excluded from information, decision-making, rituals or events. This has often resulted in an increased sense of isolation and ongoing distress.

3 The circumstances of the death

The deaths of people who died at that time but not as a result of the fire can be seen as less tragic, both by the community and by the bereaved themselves. A heatwave in Victoria during the month prior to the bushfire resulted in 374 deaths (Cooper, 2009), yet these deaths received far less public and social attention in the shadow of the subsequent firestorm event.

4 The way grief is expressed

People express their grief in a variety of ways, influenced by the individual, familial, social and cultural contexts of their lives. Some bushfire-affected people manifested their grief through emotional expression, conversation and a desire to be with other bereaved individuals. Others processed their grief through practical activities and social and political involvement. An appreciation of the diversity of adaptive grieving responses is essential for both the broader community and those developing health and social policies.

The value of outreach

As is common in such disaster situations, many of the people needing support following the bushfires had no previous experience of counselling or the mental health system. Finding ways to reach out to and engage them was therefore crucial. This is in part why the outreach model was developed.

Generalist counselling service capacities were increased and extended far beyond the fire footprint, in recognition of the breadth of impact of the disaster, the relocation and displacement of local people, and the consequences of loss.

In the first 16 months following the bushfires, over 2000 people sought assistance from either generalist counselling services, grief and bereavement counselling, primary mental health counselling or specialist trauma and mental health treatment.

Four principles have underpinned and continue to form the basis of the provision of bereavement support for individuals, families and communities in the state (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010):

- *outreach-oriented* – many people are reluctant to use formal mental health and bereavement services. They are more likely to talk to people whom they have met and grown to trust, or who already have an established profile in the community. Especially in rural communities, many people prefer to meet counsellors locally, or in their own home. The outreach model also enables a more preventive approach to be taken and for interventions to focus on building people's resilience and capacity to cope with difficulties
- *informal and flexible* – models of service work best if they can be adapted to the situations of people whose lives and communities are still in a state of disruption and overload
- *integrated with local community activities* – many people will access professional support informally, during a conversation after a meeting, for example, or at a community gathering. Access to information and resources can be increased if social and mental health components are incorporated into other programmes and events
- *including social and group opportunities* – sometimes problems arise from a lack of understanding of 'normal' responses to loss and trauma in the wider community. There is a need for group and social opportunities to talk and share information and problem-solving.

Conclusion

A dominant social expectation is that, when the final bunch of withered flowers are thrown out and the last ready-cooked meal defrosted, life will return to 'normal'. Often the community of care swallows the lie that 'time heals all wounds'. But grief is like being lost. The familiar is gone and we must relearn how to live in the world. Those who point to replacements, deadlines or 'at leasts ...' reflect the inability or unwillingness of the community of care to walk alongside the bereaved person as their journey unfolds. This exacts its own toll of suffering. The disconnect between private experience and public expectation creates difficulties when the bereaved are told they 'should be over it by now'. They can no longer find a safe place to tell their story or seek solace in the presence of others. Public grief becomes private sorrow.

As CS Lewis (1961, p59) wrote: 'Sorrow turns out to be not a state, but a process. It needs not a map but a history ... there is something new to be chronicled every day.' The psychological rebuilding happens alongside and continues well beyond physical reconstruction. For many survivors of the bushfire, their chronicling of this experience is still in its infancy as they come to terms with the horrors of 7 February 2009. We have sought to put into place a framework of specialist and generalist support that is built into and with the communities affected. Through this we

have aimed both to provide direct support to individuals in ways they find acceptable and accessible and to strengthen the capacity and resources of the communities themselves to support each other and their own. ■

Ben-Zur H, Michael K (2009). Social comparisons and well-being following widowhood and divorce. *Death Studies* 33(3) 220–238.

Carver CS, Scheier MF (2000). On the structure of behavioral self-regulation. In: M Boekaerts, PR Pintrich, M Zeidner (eds). *Handbook of self-regulation*. New York: Academic Press, 41–84.

Cooper M (2009). Death toll soared during Victoria's heatwave. *The Age*, 6 April. Available from: www.theage.com.au/national/death-toll-soared-during-victorias-heatwave-20090406-9ubd.html [accessed 6 July 2010].

Department of Human Services (2009). *Bushfire discussion and support groups: for people who have lost someone close to them. Information for professionals*. Melbourne: Victorian Government.

Department of Health and Human Services (2010). *After the bushfires: psychosocial recovery in 2010*. Melbourne: Victorian Government.

Doka K (ed) 2002. *Disenfranchised grief: new directions, challenges and strategies for practice*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Giljohann A, Norrish A, Bailey M, Charles C, Djurdjevic S (2010). Shaping bereavement services to meet the needs of bereaved people following the 2009 Victorian bushfires. *Grief Matters* 13(2) 53–60.

Greene P, Kane D, Christ G, Lynch S, Corrigan M (2006). *FDNY crisis counselling: innovative responses to 9/11 firefighters, families, and communities*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Lewis CS (1961). *A grief observed*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins.

Lifton RJ (1973). *Home from the war: learning from Vietnam veterans*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Moncrief M (2009). Worst day in history: Brumby warns of fire danger. *The Age*, 6 February. Available from: www.theage.com.au/national/worst-day-in-history-brumby-warns-of-fire-danger-20090206-7zf1.html [accessed 2 July 2010].

Read P (1996). *Returning to nothing: the meaning of lost places*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silverman PR (2008). Helping built on personal experience. In: Doka K (ed). *Living with grief: before and after the death*. Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America, 175–191.

Tolhurst K (2009). *Report on the physical nature of the Victorian fires occurring on 7th February 2009*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009a). *Volume I: The fires and the fire-related deaths*. Melbourne: Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. Available from: www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports/Final-Report

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009b). *Volume II: Fire preparation, response and recovery (parts one and two)*. Melbourne: Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. Available from: www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports/Final-Report

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009c). *Volume III: Establishment and operation of the commission*. Melbourne: Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. Available from: www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports/Final-Report

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009d). *Volume IV: The statements of lay witnesses*. Melbourne: Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. Available from: www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports/Final-Report