Be You Bushfire Response Program Webinar Transcript

Understanding trauma responses following a bushfire: From post-traumatic stress to post-traumatic growth

Presented by Ben Rogers, Rob Gordon PhD, April Harrison and Jess Moroney on 25 February 2021

Ben Rogers

Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to our Bushfire Response Program webinar for today, 'Understanding trauma responses following a bushfire'. My name is Ben Rogers, and I'm the manager of Community Trauma at Emerging Minds.

If you haven't attended a session like this before, you will notice that you won't be able to use your microphone or webcam, and that you're in 'listen only' mode. This is due to the large number of attendees that will be online today. We ask that if you've got any questions, please do direct them through the chat box where some of our lovely colleagues will be there to answer them and feed them back to us as a panel.

I'd like to start by acknowledging that I'm meeting on the traditional country of the Kaurna People and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I'd also like to acknowledge the deep connection the Kaurna People of the Adelaide Plains have with land and the waters of this country, and also acknowledge that we have panellists meeting on different land today. So, I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, as well as the Peramangk Clan of the Adelaide Hills.

Remember that your own wellbeing is a priority. Before we get started today, it's really important to take a moment to remember that when we're talking about mental health in any context, including trauma, that it can affect us in a lot of different ways.

Today our panellists are going to be talking about their own life experiences, and experiences of bushfires. Really just tune into what's right for you and identify that you come with your own unique experiences. If there's anything that we've covered today that has any uncomfortable feelings for yourself, please feel free to take a break, or opt-out if that's right for you, and reach out to your support network or your Employee Assistance Program. You can see on this infographic we've got a variety of numbers and support services that you can connect with, as well. Today's session will be recorded, so you're able to watch it at a later stage.

We're really excited to bring this second webinar in a series of webinars presented by the Be You Bushfire Response Program and hosted by Emerging Minds. Hi to everyone out there today. This series has been created to focus specifically on the 13 priority areas within the Bushfire Response Program. For those that aren't aware of the program, I will touch on that in a moment, but I wanted to say hello to everyone joining us from those 13 regions today.

With delivery partners

Early Childhood Australia A voice for young children

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation

emerging minds Advancing the mental health of infants, children and adolescents

Funded by

Australian Government Department of Health

We also wanted to welcome educators joining us from other areas across the country, particularly those joining us from areas which have been recently impacted by fires. We know that South Australia and Western Australia have been recently impacted, so welcome to everyone joining us from those regions. We hope that you're going okay, and please do tune into your own self-care needs as we explore this topic today.

As you can see, there are three key learning objectives that we're going to explore today with the panel. Firstly, we'll look at the different types of trauma responses that children and young people have following a bushfire. We'll look at the educator's role in this area, as well as specific strategies that can support both children and young people in the recovery process. As I've mentioned, we are looking at trauma responses with a focus on understanding and supporting that response as part of the recovery process. If you have been recently impacted by fires, to find specific resources on the immediate response, please visit the Be You website where there's a Bushfire Response Program Resource Pack available, as well as the Emerging Minds website, if you view the immediate section within the Community Trauma Toolkit.

A little bit about this program: the Bushfire Response Program is funded by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and the Department of Health to deliver mental health support to schools and early learning services affected by the bushfires at the beginning of last year. This is a really unique program as there are four organisations who have collaborated across this program. We have Beyond Blue's Be You initiative, we have Early Childhood Australia, headspace, and Emerging Minds. As you can see through this visual, the program has four key components, and the most important part of that program is our Contact Liaison Officers (CLOs). We have Contact Liaison Officers across the 13 regions through four states in Australia, and they're employed through headspace and ECA. Hello to all the CLOs who are joining us today.

Their role is really to work alongside these learning communities and to support them around the impact of trauma, by providing information, workshops, and resources. They're also supporting with recovery planning, as well as supporting those learning communities to connect with local services and supports. All of those components make up the Bushfire Response Program.

It's now my pleasure to introduce today's panellists. I'd like to invite Rob, April and Jess. Hi guys, before we dive into the presentations today, I wanted to invite each of you to share with the audience a little bit about what's captured your interest in this area. We might start with you, Rob, if that's okay? As a clinical psychologist, what's drawn your interest into this area of trauma responses following a bushfire?

Rob Gordon PhD

It started for me when I was working at the Children's Hospital in 1983, just starting to get a bit restless. Then Ash Wednesday occurred in one of the rural catchment areas of the Children's Hospital, and I was asked to be part of that team. I found that actually, no one really quite knew what we should be doing. So, I got really interested in trying to work it out. Then there were other fires and other events, one thing led to another, and I got asked to be a consultant to the Victorian Recovery Arrangements. Then Red Cross asked me to be a consultant for them. That's given me a continuing involvement with virtually everything that's happened in Victoria, and many events around Australia and New Zealand, in the intervening time. I learned something from every event - constant education.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, Rob. April, how did your experience of the Black Saturday fires shape your work in this area?

April Harrison

As Ben said, I was affected by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. I was eight years old at the time, so quite a young child, but I do remember most of it. I guess my experiences growing up after being affected that way, and being at a school that was actually burnt down in the fires, my experience has definitely shaped my ideas of trauma and recovery. Since then, I have been involved in a number of projects, helping those who have also been affected by fire, and I'm here today to share my experiences with bushfire and hopefully help some of the people that have been affected.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, April, looking forward to hearing you speak today. And Jess, as an educator and principal, what's, your experience with the bushfire recovery process?

Jess Moroney

I live locally in the Adelaide Hills and at the end of 2019, my family and all of the school families were impacted fairly significantly by the Cudlee Creek bushfire. I've got a bit a lived experience, of my own personal side of responding to a bushfire, but then the professional side of supporting an entire school community to respond to a fairly recent fire as well.

Ben Rogers

Thank you Jess, April and Rob. Please join me, the audience, in giving our presenters a very warm, virtual welcome today. We're going to start the presentation by hearing from Rob. Over to you, Rob.

Rob Gordon PhD

Good afternoon, everyone. I wanted to just really put a context around my comments. When we talk about trauma, we know that in terms of a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress, probably between 5-15% of people involved in bushfires, whether that be children or adults, are likely to get all the symptoms. At the same time, we know that everybody involved is deeply affected by it. We're not so much interested here in a formal diagnosis of a mental health condition, post-traumatic stress disorder, but understanding the nature of trauma, and how it affects people. It's against that background that I'd like to start off by just talking about, “What is trauma?”.

The word trauma comes from the Greek word, meaning ‘wound, damage, or injury’. So, trauma in medicine is the care of externally caused injuries. When we apply this to psychology, the mind, and the human being, we have to ask, “What's wounded? Where’s the damage?”. I think there are three forms of damage. The first is: there’s too much excitation, too much arousal in the system. The fear, the dread, the horror, the emotional intensity. It goes beyond what people have experienced before and along with that is: it defies the meaning, the sense of how things fit together, and what to expect. The assumptions and expectations are really destroyed. Life has to be recreated with a new set of assumptions, that's a really important part of trauma, and that's something that adults can do for children if they are clear on how to do that.

That brings us to the question of development. We need to understand that development is constantly going on for children. The real dynamic of development is: where does the energy come from? To keep moving out of your comfort zone into trying new things, demanding things, difficult things, running risks. It comes from the fact that you gain the reward and the satisfaction, the feeling that you're being big and grown up.

This constant interplay of building a kind of store of energy from your achievements, and then reaching out and trying something new. When we have a huge experience, we need to use a lot of that energy just to cope, just to hold ourselves together, manage the anxiety.

That might mean that some children, maybe many children, temporarily don't have the energy to keep doing the new things and going beyond their comfort zone. That can lead to what we call a fixation of development, where the person just stops at the stage where they're at and it's too hard to go on. Or even more, regression, where they go back to an earlier stage where they felt comfortable, where they understood everything, where they feel secure. They only feel ready to move on when they actually have got the big experience in hand, when the trauma is to some extent dealt with. The research that's coming out now backs up my clinical experience, which is: if we allow this inevitable process of fixation or regression and meet the kids where they're at, support them there, when they are ready, they will move back onto the track and go back to where they should have been.

Let's think about the different ways in which traumatic experience presents itself. In early childhood and preschool, children don't have very many ways in which they can express their distress. It's going to come out first and foremost, not so much in them talking about the event, although they might, but the real impact is going to come on the disruption of their basic forms of behaviour. Sleeping and eating, clinging and dependency, would be a sign of regression. A fear of separation, and then fear of anything that's new and different and unusual, the dark, noise, nature. They become disorganised, startled reactions at the trivial things: somebody dropped something and they leap. And they might re-enact in play in a symbolic way or in a literal way, the same story. Then, in their talk, or in the ideas that they form, often young children get very distorted ideas. We need to watch out for those.

When we come to older children and primary school, we find that they will now have more space in their mind to be thinking about it. They may be worrying about it, thinking that it's going to happen. We still get some of these other features of the clinging and the disorganisation, but often children at this age will manifest their anxiety with physical complaints, or overactive behaviour, disruptive emotions, anxiety and sadness, difficulty concentrating. Any of these things that are significantly different from how they were before. If we dig, we will probably find behind all this they worry about things. And one other response, which we need to keep in mind, is the withdrawal and the detachment that children engage in, as a way of just getting control: "I don't want to think about".

When we come to late primary and secondary, there's a much more complicated inner world. The anxiety may be about the trauma, but it may also be about the loss of trust and confidence in the people around them if they saw them disorganised, or their confidence in the future. This opens to more complicated reactions like depression, anger, fear, guilt: "What could I do? What should I have done?", disillusionment and pessimism: "I didn't think the world was going to be like this", leading to doubt about the future, loss of motivation, and feelings of, "What's the point of it all?". And then, some kids will escape into their peer group. They don't want to be in a family where people are unhappy, they just want to get out and do things. Other kids who find the peer group challenging don't want to go out, they want to stay in the security of home. Avoidance of work, they just want to enjoy themselves. Or some go into thrill seeking, substance use, and escapism.

So, these are the problems, and what we've got to be clear about is: if we focus on the resources for recovery and resilience, charting the children's response, then we can support them. And the number one is the attachment to familiar people. It may be there is a person in the school from an earlier year that the child felt particularly good about, then try and create an opportunity for that, create an open communication about the trauma. They may or may not want to talk about it, but we can certainly keep it open and say, "We're available to talk about it". Normalise their reactions, most of them will never have experienced these responses before. And we need them to have confidence that most people get through this in a few months.

We need to remember the difference between expressed emotion, and unexpressed emotion. Having it out in the open is always better, and we shouldn't be worried if children start talking, and then burst into tears. They don't need counselling, they need the comfort of expressing themselves in the confidence they have in us. And then this constant process of helping them adjust their assumptions: “Yes, bushfires occur, but we have services, we will get help. There's a whole lot of people to help us.”

This leads on to the real question of resilience, which is, “How do they help to have confidence in themselves that they can handle these problems and challenges?” To go on from this we're going to listen to April's experience. April has spent a fair bit of her developing life in a bushfire affected community, and I think her experience is very helpful for us. Thanks, April.

April Harrison

Thanks, Rob. Hi, everybody. As Rob said, my name is April. And I'm here to share my experiences with bushfire and its effects, and hopefully provide some insight into my education and my recovery in my community. Every child is unique, and therefore, each child has their own way in which they will respond to and deal with trauma. By this insight, it is important to be able to not only identify, but provide continued and effective support strategies for recovery, following any traumatic event. This allows children and young people to feel as though they are able to cope, and therefore begin their journey to recovery. Not all children will react in the same way after a traumatic event. I remember being extremely closed off and refusing to talk, or even think about the fires in the years following. I was always changing the topic whenever it came up, and I was ignoring the fact that I had been through this traumatic experience. Whereas my sister and some other children at school were openly talking about it. Some were quiet and reserved, others acted out, and some became fearful of not being at home, myself included. Though we may have shared aspects, one person's response was not the same as the next, because everybody was different.

Being able to recognise that each child and person is different and will respond differently, is important in being able to provide support, as not all forms will work for everyone, and adjustments may need to be made based on that particular child. Being open about the traumatic event and encouraging, but not forcing conversations, I believe, is a valuable strategy. The fact that the conversations aren't forced, I think, is really important, as personally being able to talk about the fires in my own time was something that I really needed. It allows children to talk and ask questions if they feel comfortable. However, not forcing conversations means those who aren't ready to talk, don't have to. It also makes the topic seem more normal and easy to talk about later in life and may make this scary topic more manageable for the children to talk about.

Immediately following a bushfire, different responses are to be expected. Some may block it out, like I, and continue possibly sharing effects later, whereas others may have trouble with normal activities from the beginning. Immediate responses to a bushfire can be seen in a multitude of different forms, as Rob suggested. Feelings of lack of control, shock and loss, are only a few to name. Each person, depending on their personality, background, and life experiences, will react to trauma differently. And some children may not react in the way they are expected. I recall when I was young after the fire, that it did not phase some children. They went about their normal lives and continue to behave in the same manner they always had. However, they began to demonstrate some long-term effects in the years following. Whereas, some children were greatly affected in the initial stages: being restless, having feelings of separation anxiety, and fear, being quite common.

Being a child who refused to talk about it, from what I remember and what my parents and teachers told me over the years, I responded with a mixture of the two. I was quiet, because I didn't want to acknowledge the fires. I tried to ignore any feelings or thoughts about it, but I was also able to continue my learning and my education.

Being able to recognise these initial responses in children or young people allows you to help them work through what they're feeling and begin their road to recovery. Long-term trauma also manifests in different ways. Learning difficulties, anxiety, and high emotional levels are to be expected, but are not always the only ways children and young people may be affected. Personally, I have experienced and still experience anxiety as a lasting result of the trauma I went through. I anticipate that there are elements I will never lose. I'm okay with that because it is a part of my life and it's a part of who I now am, other aspects of post-traumatic stress have decreased in their presence, as they are expected to as you recover and as time goes on, to which I only feel those when target address specific stimuli. For example, around seven years after the bushfires, I was at a high school where there was a small fire. Because of this stimulus, I moved into a state of shock, and I was really quite scared and my emotional response was very high. In recent years, I've been around places where there's also been small fires and alarms going off, but my reaction has not been as great, because my recovery has gotten a lot better. Recovery is a process, and an ongoing one at that, which takes time and effort, but I can say that through my experience, it does get better.

All the support that has been given to me by teachers, family, and friends over the years has been so crucial in my recovery and many other people's recovery. As it is ongoing, it is important to remember that effects of bushfire will vary for everyone and that the timing of everyone's recovery is not the same. Coming from a young person whose school was burned down in the fires, one of the most beneficial tasks done in the immediate aftermath was having a temporary school location set up. It allowed all children and their families to come together in a place where there were others who understood, not only what you had been there for all the feelings, emotions, and thoughts that were running through you. It created a sense of normalcy for the entire community. And to this day, my mum says it was the best thing that was done for us. It doesn't have to be a school location, but even a temporary community meeting point. I know for those who were affected by the most recent fires that the existence of COVID-19 made it hard for people to come together in person. Moving online, whether it be through message boards or video meetings, I imagine, would still be able to bring people together enabling the beginning of recovery.

Following the 2009 bushfires my school life was greatly adapted. The wellbeing of students, though always important, became a key focus. We were still expected as students to complete school work and be in a learning environment every day. However, the pressure was greatly diminished as the teachers decided day-to-day, based on the class and students present, how to govern the classroom. Some days work would run like normal, other days quiet activities became the task at hand. Being able to be flexible in how the classroom is governed, I believe, is also an important strategy following a bushfire, as children may find it hard to cope with normal schoolwork to the experiences they've had. The continuation of school, however, is also important, as it provides normalcy and continuity in the lives of those affected. I believe understanding and being able to adjust is essential, because after something so big as a bushfire, everyone's lives are going to be different. That means that other things might have to change in order to accommodate that.

As this webinar is aimed at educators with the goal of providing them with insight and strategies to not only support children and young people, but the families around them, it is essential that they are also looking after themselves. That they feel as though they are capable of providing support. By providing educators with the strategies mentioned today, it is in our hopes that the confidence in themselves have increased, as they feel prepared and able to not only identify different trauma responses, but be able to provide support for the children that they educate. Today, I still have an amazing relationship with my teachers who supported me after the 2009 fires. My siblings still go to the same school, and my family and I are still heavily involved with the community. I have so much gratitude and appreciation for all they have done for me then, and they encouragement and support they provide to me today. Without them, I probably wouldn't be the person that I am today.

I believe that following a bushfire, especially in a school that is directly affected, the teachers being able to provide support to the student is one of the most influential factors in recovery. Not only immediately, but long-term. An important factor in being able to provide support, however, is to ensure that the teachers themselves, are supported, because they, too, have been affected and are working through their own traumatic experiences. I think that following the 2009 fires, the supporters and teachers should have been provided with more support themselves. They were not only attempting to provide support for everyone around them, but they also had to manage their own emotions and experiences, which I imagine would have been very hard when everybody was leaning on them, and they had nobody to lean on. I believe supporting the supporters it is such a crucial factor. And talking about educators, I will now pass over to Jess who is a principal at a primary school that was affected by the Cudlee Creek bushfire. Thank you.

Jess Moroney

Thanks April. As an educator, it's always so powerful and important to listen to the voice of young people. To hear April's story, and how recovery is an ongoing process, I think that sets a great scene into speaking a little bit around what we've recently experienced and are continuing to experience. I thought I'd kick off just with a little bit of context. And the context for us is that we had a fire that broke out December 20 of 2019. So, that was a week into the long school holiday break. The timing of the fire, I think, was fairly critical in terms of the response and the support that we had for the community. The timing was pretty challenging. It was one week into the school holiday break, which means: April spoke around one of the important factors was having a school to come back to, for our students it was the very start of the holiday, so they didn't have the school to attend. For the next number of weeks that safe place of school wasn't available to them. Also, the other safe place, which is home for almost all of our students, looked very differently. As a parent of children, who were also affected by the fire, I knew as a parent myself that I probably wasn't my best self.

Unfortunately for our children, there was a safe place that was not their school, but also at home we had parents on the phone to insurance companies, and lots of phone calls being made around checking in on how they are. We have children that were really inundated by bushfire talk. So, the timing was really tricky. As educators it was also tricky that after a long school year, a week after the school year finished, we ended up with the fire hitting. All of a sudden, educators were all hands on deck. We had to look at preparing ourselves for students to come back, and that meant that our holiday break was significantly shortened. We also then had to think around being a school holiday break, "What was a way that we could get in contact with all of our families to initially assess the impact of the fire?". I remember it was the day after a fire swept through my property, I was sitting at the place I'd evacuated to and I started to ring every family. Just to touch base and see how they were going, what the impact was, and then also ascertain what sorts of supports we would need for our community moving forward.

Having spoken with the families over the next few weeks and months, and even a year later, one of the biggest pieces of feedback I've had was that initial phone call - right in the middle of the fire passing through our area - that was one of the best things that they had happened to them, because they knew there was a school waiting for them. They knew they were key educators that were going to welcome them and their children back, and that there were people here to look after them. I guess my little pocket of wisdom I had there was, as an educator, making sure that you have up to date contact details for every child, at any time. Because we needed them right in the middle of a school holiday break.

As we were starting to unpack, and we were on our break and we were thinking around what to expect when children returned, we lent on the experts. We had this expectation that children would be returning with some significant behaviour changes. We expected that we would require some immediate social workers and psychological first aid, and that was certainly the case. We also expected that we'd have to be incredibly flexible with students pre-empting re-entering the education setting.

We thought we'd potentially need modified programs, we'd need a lot of social workers on hand. Whereas in reality, at least in those first few weeks, we actually saw a great sense of relief of children coming back in those initial first few weeks of school. I've never started a school year to see so many happy smiling faces and just everyone was really excited to be back. Parents were really excited to be dropping their kids off and giving them that safe place to play again. As Rob mentioned, there was certainly some talk in the art of the fire and experiences. There were certainly children that were playing and re-enacting the experience with the fires, but as Rob mentioned, completely age appropriate. While we kept an eye on it and we were listening out for anything that we thought we might need to support with, it was really a great opportunity where children came back and they were incredibly happy just to have that normality of a school setting available for them again.

What we did notice though, was that after the first few months and for us, it was probably around six months, we saw some signs of trauma start to appear and there was a delayed response to that trauma. The first signs were really, we had parents that were contacting us and explaining that they were really having trouble with their children, getting them to school in the morning. They asked us, "Was there anything going on at school? Was there anything to do with the learning?", and the more we unpacked it, there was really nothing different at school. But these were children who had never had issues separating from parents, but they were finding it really tricky from about Sunday night through, and really having signs of not wanting to attend. We also heard there were some real issues with children being able to sleep. And one of those things that we unpacked, there was a fair bit going on six months ago, we had COVID, as April spoke around. Children were unable to play the usual weekend sports, socialising was limited. So, we had to ask the question, "Was it bushfire related? Was it COVID related?", and to be honest, it was probably a little bit of everything. We really had to look at what supports could we put in place, again, continuing through that six-month period.

Rob spoke about having key educators and we made sure that every child in our school, was case managed and had a key educator that they trusted. The strategy Rob suggested around: it doesn't have to be the current class teacher, but having someone who the child has worked really closely with in the past, was something that we certainly put into place. The other thing around COVID is that we had to be innovative. The community was screaming out for opportunities to come together, and during that time we were still unable to have lots of people gathering together. So, we looked at ways that we could shift any community-based activity online. We looked at every morning, parents at home, children at home, staff at school, and the students that were at school, we'd get together for some fitness. So, everyone on the screen doing the same fitness activities. We looked at having social gatherings online. There was a pretty famous pizza night, where everyone had pizza at home instead of coming together for a pizza night. And we just looked at what was an opportunity, even during challenging times of a pandemic, where we could provide that social opportunity that had been lost.

One of the challenging things in my role was looking after educators. Given that we're in a rural area, almost every educator that worked within my school was also personally impacted by the fires. So, we use the analogy that you've got to put on your own oxygen mask before attending to others. I remember I ran a session for all of the educators in local schools, in the week before school returned, and we spoke around some of the challenges we were facing. But also some of the challenges we were going to face. I've never looked around the room at a professional learning day and seen so many sets of tears from, adults, essentially. We could tell at that moment there was some damage for us, and that we had to look after each other before we start looking after the children and the families that were coming back. We started with a really open conversation around educators, we know that one of your number one priorities is to look after the children. But sometimes, even as a classroom teacher, you may not be the right person for that child at that moment.

We spoke around being really honest in putting up your hand, and if things are really challenging for you, know that there is someone else waiting in the wings that can step in and provide that support to the children. We had a really clear guideline around who can be there to provide the extra support if the classroom teacher, or the wellbeing person, was not the right person at that moment.

For educators, we looked at consistency. We knew that education was going to be the true leveller, and education was still going to be the safety net. So, we looked at making sure that education was still our priority. Speaking with our educators, being able to focus on what they know best was one of the best ways to work through this system. We looked at the calendar, we left anything on the calendar that supported education, or supported recovery, and we also looked at things that could be lost for the year. We dropped off anything that we deemed was unnecessary, to make sure that education, student wellbeing, and staff wellbeing was the most important thing. We looked at a few extra opportunities to make sure that staff wellbeing - so connecting staff with each other, and a few extra fun activities and things where staff could relate to each other - was really important in keeping morale high. Knowing that it was going to be a challenging year, there were still certainly ways that we could look out for each other.

Some of our effective strategies that we found: we were really cautious. I think a lot of people in bushfire affected areas would have experienced that there are lots of people with the best intentions that reach out to schools wanting to offer support. We were fairly cautious, we didn't want to turn the bushfire into a circus. So, we looked at just targeting a few small organisations, or accepting a few small organisations, who could provide the support we needed at that time. One that worked just beautifully for our children was an organisation called Story Dogs. This was a gentleman who came in with a Labrador who would just sit in the library, and children could come and read to this gentleman and the Labrador, and just open up and talk. Some of the things that the children opened up about were really insightful for us to get a sense of how they were feeling. They opened up far more to these two people, or the person and his Labrador, than what they did to many other people. It was a great opportunity for parents and staff to get a sense of what's really going on within our school.

The other thing that was crucial was the case management. We were really cautious not to make assumptions about how impacted a child was based on their geographical location to the fire. So, we touch base with every family, as I mentioned, then at multiple points throughout the year, just to make sure that they were doing okay. I think you have to proceed with caution and not make the assumption that if someone lives 15 or 20 kilometres away from the bushfire scar, that they are not impacted. We certainly noticed that trauma existed in different situations for different children. Then the last thing that we really noticed, and was effective for us, was just to be cautious to check out those people that were saying that they were fine, that were commenting that their neighbours had it worse than them, and the people that were the support network for everyone else around them. Having checked in with some of these real stoic people, it was probably six months down the track that we realised that they needed some support as well. They'd been the rock for everyone around them, and a little bit later down the track we came to the realisation that stoicism doesn't mean that people are traveling okay. So, just being really cautious to keep an eye on everyone and check in with everyone.

We did learn a few things that we'd like to do differently. We would like to think that we won't experience this situation again, but living where we do we have to be open minded and realistic. One thing I certainly learned is that, as a leader, as an educator, we have to lean on others for support. It's something I didn't do well, and it's something that probably six months into our recovery, I noticed things were getting pretty tough for me. So, leading by example and just showing that message that it's okay to put your hand up and say you need support, and it's okay to band together, and it should be recommended to band together and help each other through a traumatic situation.

We did have the challenges of COVID in there, but I'd really like to think that opportunities to re-engage the community is one of the things that we've heard time and time again, is that that's something that was lost. The opportunity to talk and get together, and open up about what's going on, is something that I would strongly recommend if you're facing this situation. You look at ways to support the community, so do that as well.

I'll welcome Ben back in, who will be facilitating some Q&A.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Jess. Really insightful reflections of something that you're you still experiencing in many ways, with the recovery process in the school environment. So, thank you, Jess. And thank you to April, and to Rob, as well. I'll welcome you back now, because we've got plenty of time now for some questions. There's been some questions and comments coming through on the chat group, so I thought we would go to an open conversation, an informal conversation, about some of those topic areas.

Rob, we might start with you talking about this idea of trauma responses. You mentioned that 5-15% of children will have ongoing pervasive symptoms related to this type of trauma. When do you know if a trauma response requires additional services, and what can an educator do to monitor that?

Rob Gordon PhD

It's a really important question, and I think that I noticed working with families in schools, that very often most people are having their first disaster. So, they don't quite know what to look for. Often, we see a loss of confidence in parents and educators about whether their ordinary observations and skills are appropriate in this completely different situation, and the answer is, yes, they are. The things to really look for, as Jess was saying, it's normal for kids to be talking about it, to have a bit of reaction, it's normal for that to happen early on. And as April said, for some kids, they're okay and they have it later on, six months later. The six month time is a really well documented period where people sort of accommodate it, and then they get very tired after six months. Here, it's often mid-winter, dark and cold, and it all gets too much, and it comes out.

The first basis is to go back to your fundamentals: relationship, communication, security, and making adjustments. I was thinking of the kids that Jess talked about who don't want to go to school. I think the question is, do they not want to go to school, or do they not want to leave home? If the parents are unhappy and stressed, they don't want to take their eyes off them. Some kids are very engaged in supporting their parents, and maybe one of the best things they can do is just have a day off. Just have a day off and stay at home. They don't have to do it every week, or whatever, but every now and again have a day off so that everything has this flexibility. Or they go to school, they're not happy, they can go and sit in the library and talk to the reading dogs or something. Just take that pressure off, because the healthy kids will be processing it in their own way. They just need the space and the support. Then you need somebody who's actually finding out what's going on inside. That doesn't need to be a psychologist or social worker, just be anyone that the child will confide in. Then I would suggest that that person can talk with the professionals as to how do they decide if this child needs something more or not. If they are too distressed and their capacity to function at school is interfered with, or they have an inability to form relationships, or there are really big symptoms at home like behaviour or sleeping problems, or they are over distressful, then yes, we would actually get some kind of help.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Rob. And Jess this kind of blends into this idea of case management that you talked about within your school. I wonder if you can expand a little bit on that process of case managing. Also, for those schools that are larger in scale, how would they go about monitoring a big cohort of children?

Jess Moroney

I think to a certain extent, we were fortunate being a smaller school, that it was a bit easier to have a lens on how everyone was going. In a larger setting, I've spoken with a few other leaders that we linked with at the same time, and it was essentially the same process. It was probably just a little bit more sophisticated, but I had my spreadsheet with every family and every child, and I had who was the key contact person. Then at a larger site, having a chat with some of the leaders, it was really some delegation involved as well. It was middle managers that had spreadsheets of their key staff, and their key staff having their spreadsheets.

We used a traffic light system. Something fairly simple as to whether you've touched base, whether the phone call was answered, whether it was a return phone call or a message left. And just a couple of key comments around, "How is this family tracking?" and, "How at-risk do I feel there are? What supports are involved?". Keeping records was really important, because after 30 or 40 phone calls, you cycle back to the first one and you've often forgotten. Record keeping was really important for my setting, and the more I've spoken to leaders, and teachers, and wellbeing officers in other schools, it was the record keeping that kept everyone focused and on track and making sure that there wasn't anyone that slipped through the cracks. The other thing is that when we did find a few families that we thought were tracking okay, just making sure we did cycle back to them a few weeks or months again, just to double-check that they are still tracking okay. That certainly worked for us, and other larger sites as well.

Ben Rogers

Yeah, thanks Jess. April there's curiosity around your experience and everything that you reflected on in your presentation, particularly this idea of, at first not wanting to talk, but then down the track being open to that. So, what are some practical ways that educators can support children and young people who potentially don't want to talk about their experience?

April Harrison

I think making the experience and the idea of the bushfire that they've been through as a general topic, don't make it this big, scary topic that the kids feel lots of stress and pressure about. I knew that I didn't have to talk, if I wasn't ready to talk. With my teachers, if we were sitting in a circle and they wanted to talk about settling for a day and the topic of the fires would come up, I didn't have to say anything if I didn't want to. I think that was very, very important, especially for my personal recovery. I really needed this time to myself before I was able to talk about it with other people.

I don't think it was until five or six years after the fire that I had a proper conversation with somebody about what I had been through, and what my family had been through. I think making it a general topic, not putting the pressure on it, and not forcing the conversations. Making it an easy thing to talk about - taking away the pressure, I think, is really important.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, April. There's a few questions coming through around self-care, Jess, and curiosity around how you modelled self-care for your staff. How did you scaffold self-care for your staff overall? I know we've talked on this around a lot of different ways you went about it, but can you expand on that for the audience?

Jess Moroney

We took some time fairly early on to actually spend a bit of a reflection time around what self-care looks like for each person on staff. For me, it was every now and again not being afraid to leave at a reasonable time, instead of sticking back like a lot of educators do, and going and doing something just for myself. I quite enjoy running, so I made sure to. It's really easy to drop off those things that you enjoy doing at a stressful time when you feel inundated with a lot of things going on. So, really checking in with each other and making sure that you were taking that time for yourself. I can't think of a year where I've bought more coffees for staff than I probably did in the last 12 months. It's those little things that you can do for each other. I've got staff members that every Monday they'd come in with it with a tub of biscuits and just things that you could do to make sure that people were happy.

And that there were a couple of things to look forward to throughout the year. We had a staff member that was really keen on yoga and so they came in and organised a yoga session. So, looking at just little ways that you can lighten the mood a little bit. Within a school quite regularly it's all go, and then you roll into a meeting and there's professional learning. So every now and again we just paired that back a little bit, and we had something that was just worrying about educator wellbeing. I think it's the only time in my career that I've ever said that something else might be more important than professional learning, but it was really about making sure that the right supports were there for people at the right time.

Ben Rogers

You mentioned that idea of holding the space at the start before you went back to the school environment, to share how you're feeling as well. So, there's lots of different things Jess. We'll add some resources that we'll send out around wellbeing, as well, that can give some more ideas for the audience. But thank you, Jess.

There's a question, Rob, that is directed towards you that looks at those communities that have pre-existing and longstanding experiences of trauma, both at an individual and community level. What is the impact of cumulative trauma on their recovery efforts?

Rob Gordon PhD

This is really important. What Jess said is so important, that you can't equate the impact with the physical impact - the psychological impact with the physical impact. You can have some people who lose everything, but they're well insured, they've got lots of supports, and so on. And others, who maybe have a terrible evacuation experience who in the end don't have anything burnt. Or people, as you're saying now, who have had a very difficult traumatic life up to now and have just found safety insecurity. I've met a number of people affected by disasters who said, "I've had a terrible time in my life, and I just thought I'd actually found safety and security". I think the first thing would be what Jess pointed out: don't make any judgements, reach out. The whole community will be affected, and we need to make everyone feel they have the right to access the services. There will be a bunch of people who have been carrying a lot of trauma and difficulties from other events, nothing to do with the bushfires, and coping with it.

But suddenly, when the whole environment is upset and all the people around them, maybe all their friends, are talking about trauma, it all becomes too much for them. This is the moment when they will often come forward and say, “I can’t deal with it, I need some help”, and it might be about all sorts of other things.

As educators and school leaders we can model these values because the community will tend, if we're not careful, to opt for simplistic ideas. That's what we do when we're stressed, “If you haven’t lost anything or haven’t had anything burned, why are you complaining so much?”. We need to just keep broadening this. We can do it first through the children, because the same dynamics will happen in the playground. Through educating, the psychological impact is very far reaching. I think one of the things we can emphasise, going back again to points that April and Jess made, is this working together as a community. That sense of being together, being of value just for who I am, means that some people will say the first time they ever felt really belonged was in the post-disaster period. This is a really powerful experience for some people. I think it shows those enormously powerful healing forces that come just from getting people together and being able to care for each other.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Rob, and April I might extend that to you. Now, obviously having that lived experience in your community at King Lake and the Strathewen community, were there certain things you can reflect on that really supported that unity in the recovery process?

April Harrison

Being quite young at the time, I remember a lot of community activities being done. Strathewen especially, they used to have a soup night every Thursday, which went on for years after the fires. It wasn't just the first year after, I think it went on until I was 14, which is six or seven years after the fire. The community was very close - and coming from such a small school, it only had around 30 kids at the time - the community was already close. I think making sure that you have those community activities, and that you're connecting with people, is extremely important. You're surrounded by people who have been through a similar experience to you. I think it's much easier to talk about what you're feeling and thinking, and what you've been through with somebody else that really understands.

My mum always said it was a relief coming back to our temporary school a few days after the fires, because she felt like she didn't have to hold it in anymore, because she was surrounded by people that understood what was going through her head. And I definitely think that that is completely true, yeah. Maintaining that community support and the friendships and the activities is really, really valuable.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, April and Rob. And I know Jess, you reflected on that. You mentioned that world famous pizza night that you had as a community. But anything you wanted to add to that conversation?

Jess Moroney

I think connectedness was huge. Probably on a personal level, we would out of our property for a little while. I think it was the day after the fire when we're able to get back in the area, there was a community meeting at the local oval. People I’d seen, but didn't really know who they were, they would just come up and hug you. There were tears everywhere, but there was an absolute connectedness.

That is still really strong now that I've gotten to know a lot of neighbours, no matter how near they live to me, and it's really strengthened our community. I think that's something that does happening in an event like this, people band together and it changes your life. There's some pretty tricky moments, but there's some really rewarding moments that come through the recovery as well.

Rob Gordon PhD

I just want to make a comment about the school as a community hub. Particularly in small rural communities, probably everyone who's lived in that community for any length of time has either been to it or their kids have been to it. You know, that sort of thing. What I've learned is that the school is a community centre like no other - and even if people haven't been there, they love their school, it's a part of them. If you try and take it away from them, that's terribly traumatic. Therefore, I think people will often come along to a meeting at the school, when they're much less comfortable coming to see some speaker at the town hall. I've done many, many of these meetings and quite often the town hall has half a dozen people, sometimes they're outnumbered by the helpers. But when it's a school with its own community, those people will come because they're going to meet their friends, they're going to talk about the kids. But then all sorts of other people will come as well. This awareness of the school as the centre of community life, is crucial.

Ben Rogers

You mentioned Rob in your presentation this idea of recovery and resilience. We've got time for one more question today. There's a few we won't get to, so we'll make sure our panellists respond to those as part of the resource pack to follow. But the final question looks at this idea of post-traumatic growth, what is post-traumatic growth, and what's an educator's role in supporting this process?

Rob Gordon PhD

This is a really important topic, because if we go back to the three areas of damage - and you see that in the kids, and some of the adults said easily their emotions are up and down as soon as the smoke comes. You get this surge of arousal way beyond what's appropriate, and so I think really recognising that over time we need to talk about it. And what I usually say is that people need to use the talking part of their brain to override the pure instinct part of their brain, which is, they need to say, "It's only a small fire, or it's only a barbecue over the back fence, it's only a bit of smoke". Or if they run into a fog bank, "This is alright, it's cold weather. It's not smoke, it's not dangerous, it's fine". And so on. And they need to be aware that they need to do that for probably, sorry to say it, a couple of years. They need to live through a few more very hot, dry summers to get the one bad one into perspective. That's one thing.

The second one is, the meaning: what happens, why do fires occur? They are part of our landscape. We can't stop them happening. We can reduce them, we can mitigate them, but we have to live with them. And so, that leads to the third one, which is expectations. We have to expect them. Now, the analogy I like to make, is that we bring children up from a very early age to know that if they run without looking onto the road, there's a fair chance they'll be killed. If they run around in dry grass in the summer with bare feet, there's a fair chance they'll get bitten by snakes. If they put their hand under a piece of galvanised barn, they'll get bitten by a redback spider. And this is why New Zealanders never come to Australia. But, you know that there are these dangers and we educate kids to know they're there and we pair that with the appropriate behaviours. And I think that's where we have to go with fires.

We have to actually say, yes, these things happen, floods happen.

There's a whole range of dangerous things that happen. Once we've got security, we can start to expand a child's understanding: What do you do? Who do you rely on? And if things went wrong, and families weren't prepared and they did all the wrong things, they've got to be saying to the kids, "This is what we've learned, this is what we'll do next time. We're a lot wiser, we're a lot more prepared. You'll be safe, we'll keep you safe". Then that's something that just has to keep going for a few years. And if they're like April they won't start talking about it until the year after next.

Ben Rogers

I feel like we might have our next webinar topic, Rob. Really sorry to cut you off at the end there. We've come to the full hour, and we've managed to expand this conversation, and we'll continue to do that through this program. So, thank you to the panellists today: Rob, April, and Jess. I really appreciate all your guidance, reflections and insights today. It was such a fantastic conversation and I really appreciate it.

To all our Learning Communities who joined us today, we really appreciate you tuning in, and we're going to be floating out more information in the resource pack, as well as another webinar coming up in April. We could potentially have had the topic there at the end, with resilience and recovery. So, thank you to everyone.

END TRANSCRIPT