

# Forging, protecting, and repairing community resilience informed by the 2019–2020 Australian bushfires

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters are inherently traumatic. The unexpected, unpredictable, threatening, and overwhelming nature of these events can be destabilising and distressing, potentially leading to psychological trauma (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Psychological trauma encompasses how people respond to physical and psychological events that involve actual or life-threatening situations resulting in an intense fear of helplessness (Flannery, 2015). Yet, the experience of psychological trauma is not inevitable, and indeed much can be done to 'trauma-proof' communities and the many emergency service personnel who respond to such events. The experience of a natural disaster, such as the 2018 Californian 'wildfires' and the 'bushfires' currently occurring in Australia, provides the knowledge and context to inform all future trauma-related preparations and responses to disaster experiences. Our premise is that if effectively trained, prepared, and supported, communities can consolidate and reinforce community resilience and social capital during natural disasters. Communities which continually enhance their resilience will have reduced likelihood of experiencing trauma and/or lowered degree to which trauma is experienced, which increases their capacity to respond more positively to future events.

## 2 | BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Creating a sustained and ingrained community-wide resilience needs to be supported to enable persistence through to future natural disasters. This is not to say that community resilience ensures that community members will be unaffected psychologically by natural disasters. Rather, it means that the experience of stress is followed by normal rather than diminished levels of physical, cognitive, behavioural, and/or emotional functioning (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013). A community resilience approach recognizes that exposure to risks, such as bushfires and other natural hazards, can lead to growth and development (Bromley et al., 2017). It creates an understanding born of first-hand experience that makes any subsequent and similar occurrence feel familiar, which, in turn, diminishes at least the sense of the unknown. Through development of individual and collective knowledge, growth of resilience at individual and community-wide levels can ensue. This perspective incorporates an understanding of resilience beyond 'bouncing back to the original state' to embrace resilience as a continuous and progressive development in which

individuals and their communities incorporate experiences and associated learnings to create a new level of stability (Bennett, Rohleder, & Sturmberg, 2018).

In areas prone to recurring extreme natural hazards such as severe weather events or bushfire risk, a conscious model of community resilience is paramount to preserving and developing the social and economic community fabric. Implementing simple, planned strategies is the most effective means to achieving resilience on a broad scale. These strategies can include preparedness from the household level upwards; understanding the diversity within the community and ensuring community engagement across all parts of the community, including the vulnerable and frail aged; incorporating disaster preparedness education into all facets of community life; and linking community organizations, such as religious institutions, schools, small businesses, and government services, to create partnerships and reciprocity (Bromley et al., 2017). Developing strategies which combine these features build a community's social capital. Social capital in turn serves to reduce the likelihood of health conditions (Tsuchiya et al., 2017), such as post-traumatic stress disorder, which is widely reported in the aftermath of natural disasters (Cohen, Shapira, Aharonson-Daniel, & Shamian, 2019).

## 3 | ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN DISASTER COVERAGE

A significant, but difficult to categorize, influence on the experience of natural disasters and the learning derived from that experience, is the media. Media can be an important, timely and localized source of information during times of heightened emergency. In the recent bushfires in Australia, the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), issued regular emergency updates via their radio and television channels, in addition to bulletins on their Emergency web page (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020), with record numbers of viewers on both live television and streaming services. Not only can the media disseminate important information and advice quickly, it has also been seen as fulfilling an important therapeutic function when responding to trauma (Yell, 2010).

Despite their capability to provide urgent emergency information, criticism of the role of media in natural disasters is pervasive. Media portrayal of bushfires has been accused of being fatalistic and painting residents as victims, thus failing to promote self-protection

measures (Cohen, Hughes, & White, 2007). Scapegoats, such as deliberate fire-setters or poor land management, may be inappropriately referred to, removing the understanding that bushfires are naturally occurring events to be expected and prepared for. This was evident in the recent reporting of the false or over-exaggerated role of arsonists in the Australian bushfires of 2019–2020 (Nguyen, Brunero, Thomas, Keane, & Mills, 2020). Finally, some media coverage can lead to the emotional exploitation of those directly impacted. Referred to as 'disaster porn' (Kitch & Hume, 2008, p. 4), this occurs when the media seeks to elicit a demonstration of loss and grief by interviewing people immediately following the event, including at the scene of the disaster. Recent coverage of the Australian bushfires included video footage of affected residents being interviewed at the site of their fire-damaged properties, reliving their experience in situ. The risk of eliciting strong emotions in an effort to deliver 'clickable content' may result in re-traumatization.

It should be recognized, however, that journalists, in being exposed to traumatic events, often repeatedly so, are themselves at risk of psychological trauma (Smith, Newman, & Drevo, 2009) particularly vicarious trauma and need to be supported in turn. This can be reflected in an expression of mutual grief with residents, with some becoming embedded in the communities from which they are reporting. In addition, the general public is being recommended to limit their news consumption to limit ongoing exposure (Australian Red Cross, 2016).

#### 4 | PRE-EMPTING TRAUMA IN EMERGENCY SERVICES PERSONNEL

Another cornerstone of community-level responses to natural disasters is appropriate resourcing of both the community services and the local emergency services. Recent bushfires in Australia have brought the role of volunteer fire services to the fore with overwhelming community support for local emergency services, in part driven through social media. For example, an Australian comedian raised over AUD\$50 million via a Facebook fundraiser for the Trustees of the NSW Rural Fire Service, and celebrity-studded concerts and sporting events have been planned to continue fundraising efforts. In a service that is designed to respond to natural disasters which, by definition, are potential traumatic, rural firefighters are at risk of psychological trauma. It is essential that we 'trauma-proof' these personnel so that they can continue to provide their service and contribute to building their community's resilience and social capital.

Trauma-proofing results from a trauma-informed approach to recruitment, training, awareness raising, and debriefing. Trauma-informed care is a model commonplace in health care. It recognizes the role of trauma and its impact on recovery (Cleary et al., 2020). By developing a trauma-informed care framework into the foundational training of rural fire service personnel, individuals will have a deeper understanding of trauma and how to build their own resilience prior to, and as a consequence of, exposure to fire events.

Delivering a model in which the experience of a natural disaster including the experience of distress is presented as an opportunity for growth, rather than as something to resist or overcome, is a novel approach. How to incorporate strategies for building their own resilience can also be taught directly to personnel prior to deployment, rather than acquired by experience. Research examining resilience in other similar areas, such as among healthcare professionals, has found a role for training interventions in creating self-awareness and understanding of the need for resilience (Cleary, Kornhaber, Thapa, West, & Visentin, 2018). Such interventions can be easily modified and applied to the emergency services setting.

#### 5 | DO NOT FORGET THE VOLUNTEERS

The final, and quite timely, point in building communities that can be resilient in the face of more frequent natural disasters is to recognize the role of volunteers. The current Australian bushfire situation has resulted in a heightened public understanding and appreciation of the importance of volunteer fire services, the extent to which volunteerism occurs, and how essential volunteers are to the safety of communities. In Australia, the fire service is comprised largely of volunteers—over 70,000 in the state of New South Wales alone—who are able to mobilize quickly when bushfires occur in their local area (Langford, 2019). When trauma-proofing our emergency service personnel it is therefore essential that we consider how best to extend support and intervention to volunteers and family members, to equip them with the capacity to forge resilience in the face of natural disasters.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Sancia West PhD, RN, Lecturer<sup>1</sup> 

Denis C. Visentin PhD, Senior Lecturer<sup>2</sup> 

Amanda Neil BSc Hons, Grad Dip Ec, PhD, Select Foundation,  
Senior Research Fellow<sup>3</sup> 

Rachel Kornhaber PhD, RN, Senior Lecturer<sup>4</sup> 

Valerie Ingham PhD, Associate Professor of Emergency  
Management<sup>5</sup> 

Michelle Cleary PhD, RN, Professor and Associate Head Global<sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Health and Medicine, University of Newcastle,  
Newcastle, Australia

<sup>2</sup>School of Health Sciences, College of Health and Medicine,  
University of Tasmania, Sydney, NSW, Australia

<sup>3</sup>Menzies Institute for Medical Research, University of Tasmania,  
Hobart, Tasmania

<sup>4</sup>School of Nursing, College of Health and Medicine, University  
of Tasmania, Sydney, NSW, Australia

<sup>5</sup>Australian Graduate School of Policing & Security, Faculty  
of Business, Justice and Behavioural Sciences, Charles Sturt  
University, Bathurst, NSW, Australia

## Correspondence

Michelle Cleary, Professor, University of Tasmania, Locked  
Bag 5052, ALEXANDRIA NSW 2015, Australia.  
Email: michelle.cleary@utas.edu.au

## ORCID

Sancia West  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7738-9390>  
Denis C. Visentin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9961-4384>  
Amanda Neil  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1344-6672>  
Rachel Kornhaber  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6556-6775>  
Valerie Ingham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7908-5155>  
Michelle Cleary  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1453-4850>

## REFERENCES

- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2020). *ABC Emergency*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/emergency/>
- Australian Red Cross. (2016). *Looking after yourself and your family after a disaster*. Melbourne. Retrieved from <https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/e5dd400b-d18c-4e6f-ae9c-fbe55b25a6f4/LookingAfterYourselfandYourFamilyAfterDisaster.pdf.aspx>
- Bennett, J. M., Rohleder, N., & Sturmberg, J. P. (2018). Biopsychosocial approach to understanding resilience: Stress habituation and where to intervene. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 24(6), 1339–1346. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jep.13052>
- Bonanno, G. A., & Diminich, E. D. (2013). Annual research review: Positive adjustment to adversity – Trajectories of minimal–impact resilience and emergent resilience. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(4), 378–401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12021>
- Bromley, E., Eisenman, D., Magana, A., Williams, M., Kim, B., McCreary, M., ... Wells, K. (2017). How do communities use a participatory public health approach to build resilience? The Los Angeles County Community Disaster Resilience Project. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(10), 1267. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14101267>
- Cleary, M., Kornhaber, R., Thapa, D. K., West, S., & Visentin, D. (2018). The effectiveness of interventions to improve resilience among health professionals: A systematic review. *Nurse Education Today*, 71, 247–263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.10.002>
- Cleary, M., Kornhaber, R., Visentin, D., West, S., Neil, A., Kezelman, C., & McLean, L. (2020). Before, during and after: Trauma-informed care in burns settings. *Burns*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.burns.2019.12.003>
- Cohen, E., Hughes, P., & White, P. B. (2007). Media and bushfires: A community perspective of the media during the Grampians Fires 2006. *Environmental Hazards*, 7(2), 88–96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envhaz.2007.07.007>
- Cohen, O., Shapira, S., Aharonson-Daniel, L., & Shamian, J. (2019). Confidence in health-services availability during disasters and emergency situations-does it matter?-Lessons learned from an Israeli population survey. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(19), 3519. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16193519>
- Flannery, R. B. (2015). Treating psychological trauma in first responders: A multi-modal paradigm. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 86(2), 261–267. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-014-9329-z>
- Kitch, C., & Hume, J. (2008). *Journalism in a culture of grief*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Langford, S. (2019). Why do Australia's bushfire defences rely on tens of thousands of volunteers? *The Feed*. Retrieved from <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/why-do-australia-s-bushfire-defences-rely-on-tens-of-thousands-of-volunteers>
- Nguyen, K., Brunero, T., Thomas, S., Keane, D., & Mills, N. (2020). The truth about Australia's fires – Arsonists aren't responsible for many this season. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-11/australias-fires-reveal-arson-not-a-major-cause/11855022>
- Smith, R., Newman, E., & Drevo, S. (2009). *Covering trauma: Impact on journalists*. Retrieved from <https://dartcenter.org/content/covering-trauma-impact-on-journalists>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services*. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 57. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13–4801. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- Tsuchiya, N., Nakaya, N., Nakamura, T., Narita, A., Kogure, M., Aida, J., ... Tomita, H. (2017). Impact of social capital on psychological distress and interaction with house destruction and displacement after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 71(1), 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pcn.12467>
- Yell, S. (2010). 'Breakfast is now tea, toast and tissues': Affect and the media coverage of bushfires. *Media International Australia*, 137(1), 109–119. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x1013700113>