

Responses in the Third Year after Disaster

By Dr Rob Gordon

In the third year, people are more settled in their circumstances, have rebuilt or found alternative accommodation and are proceeding with their plans. The pace slows and the future takes shape. But many still face uncertainty, coping in accommodation which is far from ideal. Everyday life difficulties still demand full attention and the pace, though a little more in routine, is still overloaded with all that needs to be done.

For most people though, stress reduces, life becomes more stable, routines develop. The past two years are looked back on as a blur of constant activity, maintaining necessities of personal and family existence. But at last there is time to go beyond coping, to stop, take stock, think and remember.

It is only when we stop and reflect that some of the most important aspects of life changing experiences can be attended to. They concern understanding and evaluating what has happened in the fires and during the last two years of recovery.

There is a long way to go to recover from some of the indirect effects of the fires. It has been estimated it takes communities (and therefore their members) up to seven years to fully recover from the financial consequences of disasters. During this time, when the financial position is being recouped, life will be harder and more stressful.

Another area which takes longer to recover is the effects of disrupted life for the first year or two. Getting on with recovery takes all the time and resources and inevitably many areas of life are neglected or ignored. They include wider social contacts, interests, recreational activities, personal projects and commitments, which allow us to express ourselves, enrich our lives and give depth and variety to our existence.

It is important therefore to recognise that even when all evidence of the fires and losses is no longer visible, the financial, social and personal consequences are being worked through. It is hard for friends, family and other community members to understand this and there are still moments when those affected feel misunderstood by those they want support from.

It is common for people to emerge from the immediate recovery demands with narrower, more subsistence oriented lifestyles. If they are to satisfy the previous variety and complexity of life, they need to expand and diversify their activities to regain the areas that have been lost in the preceding two years.

Increased leisure enables expansion back into life. But it brings other opportunities. There is more time to think how much has been lost. It is common for people to gradually take an emotional inventory of losses when they have settled down. Only then do they remember all that is gone, want to use lost items or miss the presence of important personal or family objects. A range of emotions are evoked again such as sadness, grief, anger, guilt, regret or emptiness although they will not be as raw and intense as after the fire.

Having more time and energy not only enables thinking and remembering, but people often say that they have not had time to feel. Unexpectedly, when things seem to be easier, they feel moody, upset or have reactions that don't seem to make sense.

We cannot remember or make emotional adjustments in a vacuum, so these important processes tend to happen more after the obvious consequences have been worked through. Sometimes, vague or confusing feelings come up for a time before the person works out what is going on. Emotions about the fire and losses in the short term are usually obvious but we usually do not have to attend to other, more complex layers to the mind. They are habits, assumptions, expectations, routines, hopes and they orient us to the future and help us make sense of things.

A disaster disrupts and changes these aspects of ourselves, but we can't just look into our minds to find out what has happened; it comes to light gradually, often in response to something where we do not feel as we expect. These reactions are related to feelings which tell us who we are, what is important in our lives and what goals are important. It is where our priorities about what has more or less significance are set up.

Issues and problems that were postponed during recovery come to the fore to be dealt with. They include anything put aside while the essential tasks were dealt with. Issues in relationships, between partners, parents and children, neighbours, other family members or friends can come up when there is finally space for them to present. People (including children and teenagers) have often put up with a lot from each other during the difficult times; this may have led to changes in how they interact, what they expect from each other and perhaps they even forget how the relationship was before the fires. Now, when there is more leisure and energy, they run out of patience, or suddenly can't accept how it is any more.

Children themselves often put some of their needs on hold during recovery when they can see things are so hard for their parents. But they are often confused and their needs come back, but in the form of bad moods, uncooperative behaviour, loss of interest, fears and insecurities and reluctance to take up the appropriate activities for their age.

Another important area which is neglected during recovery and comes back to bite us as things settle down is health. Small health problems, injuries and disorders are ignored, we tend to eat poorly, neglect lifestyle activities which maintain health or avoid bad habits. We get away with not taking care of ourselves for a while, but there is a common pattern that while stress is high, the body generates stress chemicals to keep us functioning. Only when we can finally rest and the body comes out of stress does the cost come home to roost. People often have health crises in the period following a prolonged stress episode.

Other problems relate to the formation of habits that do not allow for a healthy lifestyle, such as constant work, narrow interests, not attending to grief, trauma or other emotions. These can result in feeling restless and agitated when there is nothing to do, being moody or unhappy when everything seems to be going well or suddenly feeling preoccupied with the events of the disaster.

Common Reactions for the Third Year

- Heightened emotions: anger sadness and despondency
- Fatigue: not normal tiredness that rebounds after a rest, but deep exhaustion that often feels worse after resting and is pushed aside by being active
- Emotional fatigue, loss of empathy, can't cope with emotional stories or films, reduced emotional responsiveness
- Moodiness, mood swings for no reason, difficulty keeping enthusiasm going
- Loss of direction in life, not certain what to do
- Changes in social networks resulting from different things being important; some friendships no longer give support but newer ones seem more important
- Changes in interests, goals and values
- Wanting time alone, needing time to do nothing, wasting time
- Poor health, accidents or injuries
- Other life problems that were pushed aside come back to be dealt with

Looking after Yourself and Your Family

- Respect your own and each others' needs even if you don't understand them.
- Accept emotional and personal recovery can only happen after physical recovery.
- Assume that any unusual change in yourself or those you love is related to the fire experience and try to work out what the connection is. This helps not to take it personally and find common ground. Problems are often presented on the basis of everyday hassles when in fact they are about bigger things.
- Keep taking plenty of rest and listening to what your body, mind and emotions tell you they need. You will eventually get energy back - you just have a big overdraft.
- Give yourself good recreation activities you enjoy which add energy and make things feel worthwhile - maybe it is time to find some new interests, hobbies or activities.
- Put energy into rebuilding relationships, family and important friendships. Make time to be together by changing routines and patterns.
- Review lifestyle, think about what has been lost or slipped out of sight; think about how you would like to live and how you might move towards the life you want.
- Have health checks and review diet, exercise etc.

- Make time to review, reflect, digest; even if you are now aware of what is going on at the back of your mind.
- If you can't relax, learn some relaxation procedure or breathing exercise and practice it frequently, it will bring you down.
- Keep talking to each other and to trusted people outside the fires so you can have help to put into words what is going on for you. The actual process of communication is what brings people together.

Many people look back on bad experiences as helping them to be better people and changing their lives for the better. But this is only possible by continuing to take good care of yourself and those important to you. And it takes time. Wisdom cannot be rushed and only results from reflection on what we have lived through.