

What to expect in the Fourth Year

Dr. Rob Gordon

People expect things should back to normal by the fourth year. This may be true for some, but everyone has their own timing and no one can judge why it takes the time it does, especially those outside the area.

Some people have completed rebuilding and repairs, others are well into it and others are only just ready to start. Some are finished but cannot attach to the new house. Many have not regained a settled, routine lifestyle and are still under stress. For some financial recovery is still a long way off.

But only when the worst is over, can recovery from the extended stress start. When there is time to stop, tiredness starts. These reactions to restore the lost energy reserves and include: wanting to sleep all the time; not wanting to do anything, see people, go out; lack of energy, enthusiasm, interest, initiative. It happens when there is finally time to start picking up what was pushed aside for the last 3 years. Time for rest is needed - pick them up when energy is restored.

Depleted reserves does not cause normal tiredness that rebounds after a rest, but deep exhaustion that often feels worse after resting for a time and can be pushed aside by being active, although that masks the need for rest. It should be respected if we are not to pay for it later.

Physical symptoms of rebound from stress: general poor health, susceptibility to infections, headaches, muscular tension, poor digestion, appetite changes, restlessness, impatience, irritability, accidents and injuries.

Emotional fatigue causes loss of empathy, can't cope with emotional stories or films, reduced emotional responsiveness, reactions of anger, sadness and despondency, loss of enthusiasm. Moodiness and mood swings for no reason, mood linked to physical energy, tiredness causes feelings of depression. Feelings that were postponed during the stressful time surface.

There has been no chance to think about pre-disaster life goals and plans, but interests, goals and values are different. It is hard to reconnect to what was important before Black Saturday - it may seem too hard or not relevant. It feels as if the direction in life has been lost, it's not clear what to do. Other life problems pushed aside have to be dealt with.

All this has social impacts, with changes in social networks as different things become important; some friendships no longer give support, newer ones seem more important. Important people disappointed us at times and we withdrew from contact. Do we want to let that be? Or is now the time to try and reach out, forgive and reconnect to get back what we had before Black Saturday? Many people want time to themselves, to do nothing, and just waste time. This is essential to get a perspective on the experience, find out who you are, how you feel and what is important now.

We can call this stage "**Recovery from Recovery.**" It should be taken seriously. Doing it well protects against the sort of health problems that can follow extended periods of stress.

Looking after yourself and your family in the 4th year

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Respect your own and each others' needs even if you don't understand them. They will be more understandable when you get out of them..

Accept emotional and personal recovery can only happen after physical recovery.

Assume any unusual change in yourself or those you love over the next while is related to the fire experience and try to work out what the connection is. Reactions often don't directly refer to the disaster. This helps not to take it personally and find common ground. Problems are often presented around everyday hassles when in fact they are about bigger things, but a way of expressing them has not been found.

Keep taking plenty of rest and listening to what your body, mind and emotions tell you they need. You will eventually get energy back - provided you keep restoring. You just have a big overdraft. Help each other tune into yourselves. Give each other feedback about yourselves and what you need to get through "Recovery from Recovery", it is the only way you will understand each other. Commit time to recreation and activities you enjoy which add energy and make things feel worthwhile - maybe it is time to find some new interests, hobbies or activities, or take up things you never had time for before.

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. Don't let external demands determine your life; they will not take care of you.

Have regular health checks and review diet, exercise etc.

Make time to review, reflect, digest; a lot is going on at the back of your mind even if you are unaware of it. Writing down thoughts and reflections is a good way of getting to know yourself again and moves things forward, even if you don't show it to anyone. Drawing, painting, quilting or any other way of expressing yourself artistically is as good.

If you feel uptight and tense, learn a relaxation procedure or breathing exercise and practice it frequently, it will bring you down.

Continued ... Looking after yourself and your family in the 4th year

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Your body has conditioned itself to being stressed for three years now and has to be re-educated. Keep talking to each other and to trusted people outside the fires so you can put into words what is going on for you. But make sure there are times you can leave it all behind and be like “normal” people. The process of communication is what brings people together and helps us feel bigger than our problems.

Many people eventually look back on bad experiences as helping them to be wiser, more compassionate and understanding, changing their lives for the better. Posttraumatic growth is possible for everyone. But it only happens by continuing to take good care of yourself and those important to you. It takes time and working over what has happened. Wisdom cannot be rushed and only results from reflection on what we have lived through.