AABAT Inc. - March 2020

Dealing with stress associated with bushfires or other significant life events

Background

Following the stressful summer that took place over 2019–2020, AABAT hosted a bushfire recovery webinar. AABAT's policy unit has collaborated with other leading professionals to provide information that assists with managing stress. This includes information about further support resources.

We acknowledge all the professionals across the AABAT community who have come together to share their stories of loss and contribute to the below considerations to support recovery.

Purpose

This paper seeks to provide key considerations in supporting self and others to reduce the impact of future stress response/s. This is shared as an open resource for the AABAT community by the AABAT policy unit.

Introduction

The webinar conversation highlighted the following realities amongst the AABAT community, these are well supported by literature.

- Many people in our community have experienced threatening bushfires or other significant life events that contribute to frightening and challenging feelings. This has had a direct impact on our wellbeing, sense of safety and connection.
- We have seen a rise in labels, judgments and disputes that perpetuate blame, shame and which can divide communities.
- We all respond to things like 'disasters', trauma, grief and loss differently and we must each find a vehicle and pace of recovery that suits us. Many have a dual responsibility/ies in helping others on this journey.
- At times the responses that arise in us following bushfires or other significant life events are not commensurate with our personal values. This creates a personal sense of malalignment which can be a conscious or subconscious reaction.
- Our community shares many strengths and resources that can be harnessed to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Key Considerations

To effectively respond to stress and other feelings associated with the bushfires or major life transitions it can be helpful to understand the key theory that underpins our response.

Social Ecological Recovery

Social ecological recovery acknowledges that the narratives following major disasters can both inhibit and promote recovery. These narratives can perpetuate stress responses to the natural environment and influence subsequent decision making. This concept provides a broader context, a more global stress response, from which to consider our individual stress responses.

- Socially prescribed narratives can reinforce unhelpful relationships with nature during natural disasters. These often involve blaming native vegetation for causing the harm.
- Media will often use emotive language personifying and demonising natural elements; creating acrimonious relationships with nature and between those with differing views and experiences.
- We refer to these sense-making myths to enable us to make sense of a catastrophe; however these provide an absolute and binary view of situations that are really complex.
- Ultimately these social attitudes, retold in myths, influence the response of decision makers in prescribing the social response.
- Nature-blaming narratives potentially bias the ways in which human beings make decisions through policy. There is a risk that ideology then increases the conditions that fuel the risk of fires. This has been central to climate-change narratives.
- Frontline responders to a catastrophe receive a deserved proportion of accolades and support; however often the efforts and beliefs of others go unacknowledged and can be demonised along with nature. This can contribute to community stresses.
- Social ecological recovery requires us to step back and reflect, especially under pressure from social drivers for an immediate, reactive response that results in contradictory outcomes for people and nature.
- Grief, combined with binary media depictions, can contribute to fear of natural environments that prevent social ecological recovery.
- These blame-ridden narratives may confuse our social understanding of risk and how to live in the Australian environment.

Source: Strong, S (2017). Further reading.

Stress and Trauma

Major events such as the bushfires can trigger direct trauma responses, increased levels of stress and traumatic memories. These responses must be understood, acknowledged and individually interpreted to enable personal recovery. Sometimes this requires the support of others.

- Most research links trauma to experience/s of 'toxic stress' and/ or rupture which has had an impact upon the brain or on brain development.

  From a neurodevelopmental perspective, trauma is not the event. It is the individual's response to the event. Traumatic stress occurs when an extreme experience overwhelms and alters the individual's stress related physiological systems in a way that results in functional compromise in any of the widely distributed stress response system (Ungar, M. & Perry, B.D. 2012: pg 7).

- Experience of a traumatic event (rupture) without repair can contribute to future trauma cues (predisposition to trauma) and trigger a reduction in current wellbeing.

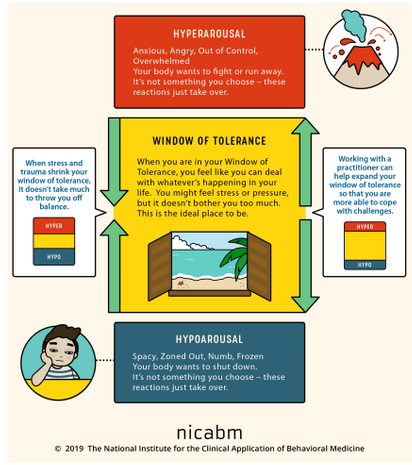
- Even those who did not directly witness or have to respond to the bushfires can experience traumatic responses to hearing about and/or seeing images of the bushfires.

- Trauma will disconnect, isolate and destabilise otherwise healthy systems.

- Everyone has a window of tolerance and different trigger points. Stress can be good when it is predictable, moderate and controlled as it can build resilience. It becomes toxic when it is unpredictable, severe, prolonged and if pre-existing vulnerability exists.

Window of tolerance:

Often our personal coping behaviours or receiving support from others (for example through co-regulation) enables our lived experience to remain within our window of tolerance or safe zone. Stressors can stretch this outside our safe zone contributing to a hyper- or hypo-arousal response. Prolonged experience in this state can contribute to 'toxic stress'.



- Stress responses can be perpetuated by social media and alerts. These present a constant trigger to remain alert.

- Other people active in social media can use this platform to offload their stress. This can have an unintended impact of enhancing the stress of readers who have also been affected. This keeps us in a hypervigilant state.
- Brain development is sequential and at each stage we develop behaviours that support regulation; where people have experienced ongoing trauma throughout different stages of their lives, their window of tolerance may be smaller, and their potential to be triggered by exposure to possible trauma cues may be greater. Where people have had prior experience of similar trauma, for example the Black Saturday bushfires, they may be more vulnerable to a stress responses now.
- It is important to recognise that people have the potential to heal and recover from these types of traumatic experiences and may experience growth and increased resilience with appropriate support.
- At times of stress we often have to care for lower level brain functions first (Brainstem and Diencephalon Cerebellum) for example our body temperature, before attending to emotional needs (Limbic). This may involve engaging in rhythmic, repetitive activities which regulate the lower level brain functions, for example, going for a walk, swimming, playing a musical instrument before accessing emotional support.
- Our ability to engage with concrete cognitions and reflection (Neo Cortex) is usually compromised during and after stressful experiences and we need to attend to our lower level needs before asking ourselves or others to engage in cognitive processing. This means avoiding complex cognitive therapies until both our basic needs and lower level brain functions have received support.
- Burnout is a result of stress accumulated over long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding.

Grief and Loss

In addition to stress or trauma reactions, a normal response to traumatic events (particularly bushfires) includes feelings of grief and loss.

- Grief and loss are not only experienced when we lose a physical or emotional attachment, it can be associated with any loss of control, independence or social system. We often forget to acknowledge the grief that can arise from any loss.
- Often grief is complex, you may be dealing with a loss while also performing a role (such as caregiver or professional) where you are supporting others to deal with grief and this can occur within a community dealing with grief. This makes managing grief hard.
- It can be complicated by pre-existing physical or psychological issues and also financial worry. However grief is a normal response to loss and does not need to be managed as a mental illness.
- Grief can occur following a loss that happened some time ago or can come through an experience of cumulative loss.
- Philosophical and spiritual questions might arise regarding faith or the meaning of life at times of grief and loss.
- The grieving process is not linear but cyclic and will re-appear at different times across the lifespan or as the result of memory triggers.

Eco Burnout

Thinking about social, psychological and environmental recovery must be informed by the above concepts. In addition to this we acknowledge the macro experience of climate change and the prevailing sense of worry this can build. The Australian Psychological Society has released specific advice about noticing and responding to the burnout to which climate worry contributes.

Eco burnout relates to:

- Holding in mind, or being aware, of a large, complex, global problem.
- Seeing climate problems as overwhelming and urgent.
- Carrying a burden of knowledge that society as a whole is unable or unwilling to face.
- Holding prolonged attention on disturbing and negative information and future projections.
- Having high levels of investment and unrelenting commitment to the issue.
- Knowing that our fellow human beings, and our own way of life, have both unwitting and unintentional negative consequences on the environment.
- A burden of knowing that society as a whole is disconnected and not taking action.

Source: https://www.psychology.org.au/getmedia/994934a8-2916-4599-8806-aa3e0d2fd3c3/Dealing-with-burnout-climate-change.pdf

How can you respond to these feelings and experience

The following provides information on how you can notice and respond to stress and other feelings associated with the bushfires or major life transitions.

Warning Signs can include amongst other things:

- Stress responses may present as anger or frustration and irritability.
- They can also present with a flatter effect — e.g. loss of energy, depressive symptoms.
- Traumatic stress may present as memory loss and difficulty with focus and attention.
- Feelings of hopelessness.
- Feelings of guilt when engaging in self-care.
- Unbalanced time spent on things — e.g. noticing spending too long at work.
- Tension in the body
- Suppressed or stimulated appetite
- Sleeplessness
- Panic attacks
- Repetitive thinking about the issue or experience

Self Care

Our AABAT community is often providing support to others. To safely and effectively do so, a focus on looking after self is key.

- Ensure your basic physiological needs are being met (shelter, food, water, clothing, sleep and we would add…. social connection).
- Acknowledge that grief and loss are present and aim to build support around yourself and others as soon as possible.
- Engage in activities that bring you into the present and support you in remaining grounded, for example mindfulness, yoga and other exercise.
- Restricting unhelpful behaviours — e.g. engaging with apps that keep you hypervigilant or unhelpful substance use.
- The brain has a strong reward system and it is natural for us to seek pleasure through activating the ‘feel-good’ chemicals in the brain. Where this is done in unhealthy or unhelpful ways such as through substance use we may experience temporary relief but this comes at a cost to our long term health and wellbeing. It is important not to simply remove the unhelpful behaviour, but to replace it with things that offer healthy reward.
- Positive social connection is key. Seek relationships that provide structure: consistent, predictable, stable patterns that create healthy “Firing and wiring” opportunities for neurobiological systems.
- Seek healthy, safe, stable and supportive environments. Have fun.
- Re-establish consistent and predictable routines for yourself.
- Seek and provide compassion and nurture to self and others — engage with yourself empathetically.
- All brain functioning is state dependent: Promote self regulation — breathing, distraction, groundedness.
- Use grounding and self-compassion techniques to target lower parts of the brain — it may not be appropriate to target the ‘rational’ cortex….. yet.
- Use statements, not questions — express your needs.
- Good enough is good enough — don’t be hard on yourself.

Connecting with nature

We acknowledge that trauma experiences and feelings of stress, grief and loss within the context of natural disasters have impacted on our relationship with nature. Some considerations in reconnecting with nature include:

- Reframe descriptions of the environment and people away from disconnected and conflict-driven narratives towards connected socio-ecological systems.
- Make connection with nature safe — undertake activities that avoid fear triggers and allow a graduated re-exposure to any places that might bring up feelings of loss.
- Connect with the natural world at a micro level — read changes in the natural environment that are within your immediate world. Give yourself time to get back to the natural places you have previously accessed.
- Acknowledge that there exists a need for a broader global response but also an immediate personal imperative to connect with your immediate world. Consider activities that enable ‘grounding’ of self in nature.
- Give space for unscripted interaction with nature, activate play responses.

Supporting others

Following your focus on self care and safe reconnection with nature we encourage you to consider how you can best support others. This will include reflection on the key considerations above and how they might apply to others as well as ensuring an evidence-informed response. In supporting others you may like to consider:

- Recognise that recovery is a very individual process and timing is important — basic needs might need to come first.
- Be aware that others may remain in a hypervigilant state and this can trigger further issues. You may be responding to a coping behaviour in someone rather than the person themselves. The person is not the problem.
- When communicating with others, account for the shock that you or they may have experienced. This means information will often need to be revisited.
- Maintain boundaries — unpredictable changes in a relationship can elicit further stress responses.
- Encourage children to determine their own recovery and try to provide space for creativity, expression and play. Listen to your ‘inner child’ and what needs may be unmet.
- Be conscious about the use of absolute language such as ‘never’, ‘always’, etc. and avoid describing complex situations in binary ways.

For further information on available supports see: https://aabat.org.au/bushfire-recovery-resources/

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Australian Association for
Bush Adventure Therapy Inc.

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