

Be You Bushfire Response Program Webinar Transcript

A roadmap to recovery following a bushfire

Presented by Ben Rogers, Professor Lisa Gibbs, Janette Cook AM, and Michelle Roberts MAP on 20 May 2021

Ben Rogers

Good afternoon everyone and welcome to our Bushfire Response Program webinar for today, 'A roadmap to recovery 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'll notice that you won't be able to use your mic or webcam. Today you are in 'listen only' mode and this is just due to the large number of attendees that will be online today. You'll be able to ask questions using the Q&A function that you'll see at the bottom of your screen and we have some of our lovely colleagues who will be able to answer those today. We'll have quite a lengthy Q&A section at the end with the presenters as well so please do feed through your questions as you go.

I would like to acknowledge that I am meeting on the traditional Country of the Kurna people and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge the deep connection the Kurna people have with the Land and the Waters of this country. I also want to acknowledge the lands in which our presenters are meeting on today, the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Wurundjeri People and Boonwurrung people of the Kulin nation. And welcome to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples joining us today.

So before we get started today and get into the content, it's really important to take a moment to remember that when we're talking about mental health in any context including community trauma, that it can affect us in different ways.

So today our panelists will be talking about their own personal experiences of bushfires. Additionally you'll come with your own unique experiences as well. So if there's anything that's covered that raises any uncomfortable feelings for you. Really do tune into your self-care strategies. And also at times it might be good to take a bit of a break knowing that we are recording today's webinar and you can watch this at a later date. But if there are any ongoing concerns that arise as a result of this presentation please do access to wellbeing tools from the Be You website. As well as your employee assistance program and their support services. As you can see on this infographic here there's also a variety of different services and supports that you can contact. And you'll notice and we'll be putting different things in the chat as we speak. So you'll notice some other services that are popping up there as well.

So this is our third of a series of webinars presented by the Be You Bushfire Response Program and hosted by Emerging Minds. We're really excited to bring this content and presenters to you today. This is a series of webinars that have been focused on the 13 priority areas which we've been supporting

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through the Bushfire Response Program. I'll go over the program in a little bit in a moment. But I just wanted to say hello to everyone that's out there from those regions. And thanks for joining us today.

And we also wanted to welcome the other educators who are joining us from across the country, particularly those that are joining us from areas which have been recently impacted by flooding over the last few months. We hope you're doing okay and please do tune in to your own self-care needs as we explore this topic.

You'll see the three really clear learning objectives for today. We're going to look at supporting your understanding of key factors which influence recovery following a bushfire; we'll look at the key approaches which can support a learning community as part of bushfire recovery and really focusing on the educators' role in supporting children and young people as part of bushfire recovery.

So just to say a little bit of context about the program. The Bushfire Response Program is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Department of Education Skills and Employment. The focus is on delivering mental health support to schools and early learning services which are impacted by the 2019/2020 bushfires. So the program is led by Beyond Blue as part of the Be You initiative and the delivery partners Early Childhood Australia, headspace and Emerging Minds are also involved.

And as you can see by this image here, we've supported around 400 learning communities. And an essential component of this program has been the Contact Liaison Officers. We want to say hello to the all the Contact Liaison Officers (CLOs) across the country. But we really wanted to say hello today to everyone joining us from the regions the CLOs have been supporting. The CLOs' role has been focused on providing direct support to schools and early Learning services in these regions. So a big part of their role has been providing trauma support and guidance information and workshops. Looking at service mapping in the region's as well as recovery planning with those learning communities.

Part of the program we've also linked with stakeholder and service providers who have been providing recovery and resilience activities in the community. So as we move towards July 2021 learning communities will begin to transition from the Bushfire Response Program over to the Be You National Mental Health Initiative. So these learning communities will have access to ongoing supports through a Be You consultant. So if you are in a learning community and haven't yet connected with Be You, it's a free online service and there will be some targeted events as well as your very own Be You consultant.

So it's my pleasure now to introduce today's presenters to the webinar. I'd like to introduce Lisa Gibbs, Janette Cook, and Michelle Roberts. Welcome. Hi. So before we get into each of your 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. And we might start with you Lisa, if that's okay? So as a researcher what's drawn your interest into the area of bushfire recovery?

[Lisa Gibbs](#)

Well I'm a public health academic. And so our focus is on the social and environmental influences on health and wellbeing. And of course disasters are such an extreme context and it's really important to have a look at what are the factors that we can influence that might promote the best outcomes possible.

[Ben Rogers](#)

Yeah, thanks, Lisa. I'm looking forward to hearing your perspective today. And Janette, you were the Principal at Middle King Lake Primary when the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires impacted both the school and the community. How has this shaped your work in this area?

[Janette Cook](#)

Yes, when I started as Principal at Middle King Lake in 2007. So I was there for a little while before then and right up until I retired towards the end of 2014. So I was in that role when Black Saturday hit and in the ensuing years when our school community was rebuilding.

Ours was one of the three small Victorian schools to be totally destroyed on Black Saturday. So it has had quite an impact on my life I guess from that time till now.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, Janette. Yeah, you have a really unique perspective that I'm sure the audience are looking forward to hearing today. So thank you. And Michelle, welcome. As an educator and psychologist tell us a little bit about your experience in the bushfire recovery space.

Michelle Roberts

My experience goes back to the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983 as a first year out teacher. Where I was able to observe and be part of the ongoing impacts of the bushfires on my students and it was a secondary school that I was teaching at. That probably catapulted me into the fascination with working in the disaster context and with school communities to assist their recovery. And in the last 30 odd years I've continued to work in the disaster areas and other areas of adversity as a psychologist, as a school psychologist and also working in community before, during and after disasters.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, Michelle. So thanks to Michelle, Janette and Lisa. I'd really like to extend a big virtual welcome from the audience to you today. So welcome to this webinar and we'll start the presentation off by hearing from Lisa, so over to you Lisa.

Lisa Gibbs

Thanks Ben. So I'm starting off just talking about some of our research findings in this space. And just want to I guess as an important reflection that even though today we're focusing on learning communities, those learning communities are part of the broader community, which is also really disrupted and impacted by whatever disaster event has occurred. And I'll be drawing on research that we conducted in the 10 years Beyond Bushfires study, where we followed people and communities and worked with them for 10 years following the Black Saturday bushfires. And because of their generosity we've learned so much about what happens.

And I guess, you know, one of the features of post disaster communities is the really significant changes that are occurring and continue to occur in the years after these events. And while people are extraordinarily resilient in what they can cope with and adapt to, there is no question that we see an increased risk of people experiencing mental illness following these events.

And in fact when we have a look at how that tracks over the 10 years after the event, we can see in this image here that in our highly impacted communities the incidence of mental health problems is typically more than twice as much as we see in communities where there was low or no bushfire impact. That actually extended for well 10 years afterwards and is really alarming. And that's why we really need to think and understand how we can make a difference here.

One of the findings we had was that contributing factors to these kind of prolonged experiences of poor mental health, were those really important disruptions that do happen afterwards. So where people have experienced a loss of income, or loss of accommodation, and often they'll experience a relationship strain or breakdown. That's where we see that they've really been having difficulty getting back on track and can develop symptoms that are consistent with a mental health disorder.

But what is encouraging is that there are also things that make a positive difference. And one of those is involvement in local community groups, we found that was clearly coming through as a protective factor. And when we monitored that up to five years afterwards that was a consistent finding. And in fact in communities where many people belong to community groups the benefits extended beyond those individuals who were group members to others in the community.

So in communities where you have a high level of group involvement we see positive outcomes. And that doesn't mean everything's rosy and fine when everyone comes together because it's a difficult time and people get tired and frustrated. But there do seem to be real benefits from coming together and looking out for each other.

And why this is important to the school environment is because the school is a community hub. It is a place where people come together. And it's a place where people connect with other groups like the netball club and the cricket team and so on. But when we also had a look at learning outcomes for students it really alerted us to the longer-term implications of this sort of exposure.

So as you can see in this image here we followed students in Victoria who began school the year before the Black Saturday bushfires. And looked at how they were tracking academically in grades 3 through to grade 5 and found that they weren't progressing as at the same rate as you would normally expect compared to their peers.

That doesn't mean that that's all the students but this was a pattern we were seeing for this group of students. And indeed when we followed them through to secondary school to year 7 and 9 and we looked at their academic scores, they were on average behind their peers in every subject.

And of course this is way down the track in terms of their schooling and so it may be that parents and teachers are not making the connection from that disaster event in 2009 to their schooling eight years later. And that particular cohort of students were our year 12 students last year who completed school in a year characterized by bushfires and the pandemic. So we've really got to look out for these students and where they go next.

But the encouraging thing is that these educational settings are really health promoting. There's an opportunity within those settings to make a difference. And while we're still developing evidence about the best way to deliver and design these recovery programs. There is international evidence that school-based programs conducted by trained teachers or other professionals in the school can make a difference in promoting mental health outcomes for children and teenagers.

I guess one of the challenges for school leaders is making the choice of which tool, which program that they should be delivering in their schools. And often they're presented with all sorts of options, who knows where to start? And so the Department of Education here in Victoria commissioned us to develop these tools for principals or school leaders that are really just designed to be a checklist. So you can go through and go, okay, within our school, what sort of program might we be needing? And how would we want it to be delivered for our school community?

And then there's a matching tool for the program providers to say this is what we offer with our program and this is how we would deliver it. So you can just do a quick check what the school is needing and what the program is offering to help with that decision making. And I believe that the link to that [appraisal tool](#) has been put in the chat box because it is available for anyone to use.

So I'll probably leave it there. That's really just a bit of a teaser for the sort of research that we're conducting. But really the focus in our research and how we interpret the findings is very much informed by the discussions that I've had and my colleagues have had with Michelle and with Janette and others who are out there in the field. And I'm sure they will be able to provide the context for the research that I've just presented. So over to you Janette.

Janette Cook

Thanks Lisa. I just wanted to start with a little bit of the thinking behind that [appraisal tool](#). It was developed to support schools in making decisions about which programs they could link into. After an event you can be absolutely overwhelmed with offers of support and some of those people are quite pushy and sometimes even just land on your doorstep. So the Principal and the leadership team take on the role of being a filter for programs to let into the school. So the [appraisal tool](#) offers the chance to get a bit of breathing space before making a decision.

So the provider needs to provide the evidence that they've got their police checks and any previous work that they've done with communities after a disaster. Things that can be time consuming for schools to follow up. It also makes the provider really reflect on what elements of the program they're offering. And we want to ensure that any outside supports given to schools are actually going to have a positive effect on our young people and not be causing harm.

So these are the aspects that learning communities and educational settings take on after a disaster. We're always really good at focusing on the academic learning and the wellbeing of all of our students. And increasingly I think all of our staff as well. After the bushfires was a real shift in need to put increased energies into the health and wellbeing aspect. In order for us to be able to maintain that focus on our academic learning.

We introduced additional creative opportunities for the students to express themselves. So lots of opportunities to do art, music and writing. And we also increased opportunities for relaxation and mindfulness to try and alleviate anxiety.

I think as teachers and educators we're really good at looking out for others, we are able to see when somebody needs support and provide that support for them. And we also act as a dissemination point I suppose. We're able to point families into the direction of organisations that can help and provide that vital link in the communication chain.

As staff I don't think we're as good at looking after ourselves with self-care strategies. We know how important it is and we're pretty good at insisting that others take care of themselves and follow that advice but we're probably not as good as implementing those strategies for ourselves.

The Children and Disaster Advisory group came up with six recommendations that have been included in the 10 Years and Beyond Bushfire report. And I just like to go briefly through those.

The first one was to provide intensive support programs for staff prior to students returning to school. I think it's important for the Department and agencies to check in with staff. To find out how they're going and what their situation is and what support systems they might need to put in place before the students come back. Also to start preparing for how the students and families might be presenting when they come back to school and how best to support them.

This support needs to be delivered at regular and key intervals. Nobody's in the same place at the same time. And each setting even if they've gone through a fire at the same time will have different needs and need those things at different times.

The other thing I think is really important is that support is able to be provided by the same personnel. It's really important for students, staff and families to receive consistent messages, but also to be able to be given the time to build trusting relationships. So they don't feel that they need to go over their story multiple times.

As I said the support needs to be tailored to the particular needs of the individual settings not all settings will be the same. And if the same program is delivered on mass it can be very alienating to be treated as if we do have the same needs as others. Like students we can only take on the information that we're ready to take on and especially when we're stressed so it's important for that to be individualized.

That same consistent message and support for the families, whether it be early childhood, childcare or in maternal health or in schools is really vital and needs to be provided in a setting that is comfortable and with parents feeling supported. Those programs for parents again need to be individualized and I'd include aspects like support for parenting but also self-care because sometimes we forget about parents and self-care as well.

It's important to have continued monitoring and touch base with each of those settings on a regular basis and to monitor current needs. Often students and staff will be travelling really well and then six months down the track or a little bit further some will start to fall in a heap and will have different needs. So it's important to

continue those sort of checks and especially at times like leading into anniversaries and other events that might present as triggers.

I think it's important for the Department to be flexible with timelines for school compliance. School communities won't be in a clear headspace in the first or second year after a major event to do justice to developing things like new strategic plans.

And then another, the last recommendation was to appoint additional staff and volunteers for extra administration. To assist with various tasks that you did not know we're going to happen. You get inundated with donations that need to be sorted. Students need support and could be presenting with additional needs or delayed academic or social growth and this can happen in various times.

And also the staff that needs support for their welfare needs but also their physical needs. It took me a while to accept having a support person to help me with bills and phone calls that I wasn't able to make. So sometimes we think we don't need these things but in order to do our jobs we do. That additional staff also around the classroom will help teachers meet students at their point of need. We can never predict when a student might have a meltdown or what's caused a trigger. So those are the recommendations that have been included in the 10 Years and Beyond Bushfire report.

Over to you Michelle.

Michelle Roberts

Thanks Janette. Well I guess having heard from Lisa and heard from Janette there's some points that they've made that I'd like to pull out and draw your attention back to. The notion that support for staff before students is an important one and it comes from the original work by Naomi Baum in Israel. Unfortunately poor Israel is struggling at the moment and there'll be opportunities to keep on supporting school communities through the current discord that they're experiencing.

We often see schools getting back together and starting after a disaster as the first important milestone for returning to some sense of normality and that it's seen as a mental health intervention in its own right. But if staff are still grieving, distressed, hyper aroused and unable to be fully present it's not going to be the success that we hope it would be. And so I really want to reiterate that it's very important that we ground our staff and give them an opportunity to settle before we asked them to settle the students that they're working with.

The other point that resonated with me was that sometimes all the services that are offering their support and converge on school communities can be a secondary adversity in themselves and lesser use the term a disruptor. And I know from 2009 many of the schools in the end refused to let outside organisations in their schools just because it kept on interrupting what they were trying to do with the students. And what was going to allow them to get into a routine that was matched to the students needs at that stage.

And of course, the long-term impacts of bushfires, we're 18 months in the journey from the Black Summer fires. And we've had the interruptions of COVID and a host of other things occurring in that period of time. We know that there's adverse impacts on academic learning in the short and long term.

In the short term I often see it related to executive functioning skills, working memory and struggles to hold in mind and concentrate. And we can see the compounding effects of that for children as they move through school. So they were the learnings that came from Lisa and Janette's discussions that really sat with me.

So when we look at research to practice and we look at the clinical and the educational perspective, we're looking at the impact of adversity. And we know there's impact on learning, we know there's an impact on the developmental trajectory that that child was on. And whether it was normative or not, it was their trajectory and how they were going along their path of development.

It's especially evident in the zero to four age group where there's so much rapid neuro development happening, that it's not hard to bump them off that pathway that they're on. And for all our early educators

the mindfulness that we need to have to try and support the children in getting back on the pathway of what we see as healthy and well development.

The challenges of all the other adversities and disruptions that Lisa referred to are really evident. And often they're the things that when I work with students they say to me have been the biggest challenge for them. It's the change in home, the displacement from their environment, their family home, the change in the family culture, the financial stressors. The difficulty of Mum and Dad coping with their own situations, and the inability to be able to stop the pain that they're witnessing in the adults around them, that can trigger children and make them feel particularly unsafe and concerned as well.

So those secondary adversities need to be considered. And when I'm working with students in schools I actually map with each student or with each class what are some of those challenges. So the factors which influence recovery following a bushfire include things like being able to restore a sense of psychological safety and physical safety for those students. To give them a sense of predictability and routine with just enough flexibility to be able to allow whatever happens in the day to meet the needs of the child.

And Janette can I'm sure talk with you about students who had breakdowns in class, staff who were distressed and had to leave their class. So predictability is important but it's not always that easy to achieve. So we keep on trying to bring it back to a safety for students and staff and to provide opportunity for calm, meaning making and always promoting the sense of future and agency for our students and our staff.

With timelines and expectations, we always want to use a developmental lens to measure what it is we're seeing. And we've spoken a number of times today already about the monitoring. And one pediatrician spoke to me about the skill pediatricians have which is surveillance. It's a bit of a spookier term than monitoring but what we're talking about is, you know the child not just in one point of time but over a period of time. And that allows you to gauge how they're traveling at any point in time and what additional supports they might need.

So working with educators in learning communities, we need to help everyone feel psychologically safe and comfortable. And for the educators themselves, we want to speak about being professional in their professional self as well as their personal self. For some educators coming to work is a welcome relief from the drama in their own home and environment because often our educators experienced the same disaster as our students do. And sometimes it's great to leave it at the door of the classroom and go in and be the teacher in control and know what you're doing, sometimes that's a real challenge to achieve.

Calming hyped arousal systems is really important, soothing and calm. And I always like to talk with teachers about the behavior changes that they're seeing in themselves in their classes. And to help them understand what that's about and how they can manage them. And how they can help to soothe them and how they can help to get everyone back on track so that they don't feel that things are out of control.

So that psychoeducation and contextualization of the changes is really important for teachers, the students and the young children and the families. So you're really quite an advocate for the young people in your charge. And you are the conduit to explaining to the people in their families of what you're seeing what they're seeing and why it's likely to be and what they can do to help support their child.

It's quite an onerous responsibility sometimes to realize what a difference schools can make to mental health outcomes. And we don't carry that responsibility lightly. I know. But that whole relationship that we have with students is such a valuable foundation for moving through this big adversity that they've experienced and giving them strategies to cope with it.

So being trauma informed has been something that people in the last 18 months when I've gone into schools to work with them, they've said don't mention trauma, we don't want to talk about trauma. We don't want to talk about the bushfires, there's been drought, there's been floods, there's been a pandemic and there were the bushfires.

And so we need to broaden it out and put it into a strength based way of talking about it. But that's a challenge because we also need to acknowledge the adversity, not everyone only wants to focus on how

they're moving forward. So using language is really important in this area. And using language that matches the culture of the school, the people that you're working with and how people are making meaning of what's happened to them is vital.

So whether you're talking about resilience, building strength, building post traumatic growth, trauma adversity, it's acknowledging that there have been significant challenges and that we can build on existing strengths to be able to move forward with it.

So tips for providing informed support is to make sure that you yourself are balanced, calm, grounded, have the support you need to do the work that you're doing. To be trained in your knowledge around what adversity means for developing children and their families. And to take opportunity to continue to participate in webinars like this, that just remind you to build on your existing knowledge and skills, or perhaps help you see something that you hadn't been aware of before.

Some of the really effective tools that we have in our toolkits are ordinary magic. They're compassion, it's being hopeful, and having strong solid, respectful relationships in which children and their families can feel safe to speak with you and to bounce ideas off you. And then for you to be able to have the capacity to contain what you're hearing. And that can be really tough. If you yourself have been through the same adversity it might trigger anxiety and distress in you. But to be able to hold and to listen respectfully and to deal with what's coming your way. Or to be able to say I had a similar experience and it upsets me but I'll bring in my friend and she can help you, is a really important strategy to have as a plan B for yourself.

And of course to know what you can do and what you can advise and what the referral pathways are in your school, whether it's the consultants that are coming in that you've established professional relationships. Whether it's the wellbeing staff within your own school. Whether there's a teacher or a member of staff that, that student has a strong connection with that you can link them into as a support. They're all very practical tools that you have in your toolkit all the time.

So there are lots of challenges for us in learning environments as educators. We have that dual role of being a survivor and impacted ourselves. And often being asked and expected to provide psychosocial and mental health support to our students and often their families as well and even to our colleagues and peers. You can't escape it, you're immersed in the trauma of the reactions that are going on and it can be hard to be bathing in that day in day out.

And so as Janette said being very mindful of your own wellbeing is such an important thing. To take a step out every now and then to do nice things for yourself to get rid of the high levels of adrenaline and cortisol in your own system. Because that will also impact on your ability to use executive functioning, working memory to remember the word you wanted to use when you're teaching and even to remember the content that you were going to use.

So self-care is a key to keeping yourself, where you want to be a professional. Sometimes there's a failure to acknowledge the needs of educators. Janette in the Children Disasters Working Group, highlighted that we speak in terms of the machinery of education and learning centres keep on rolling on no matter what's happened. We're in NAPLAN stages in schools at the moment, I'm not sure what's happening in the early learning centres at this point in time. But there's always audits and accountability and reviews and budgets and all of those things. It's very hard to keep the day-to-day business happening while you're also being asked to do this additional work. And it's important that you reach out for help or you say slow it down if that's what you need to be. And you take a breath and you look at where your priorities are and where they need to be to keep things going as well as they can be.

Sometimes educators feel that they aren't skilled enough and they don't have the confidence in their own abilities to work in this space. And I want to remind you of that term, ordinary magic because you all have that skill set. You will have the relationships, you all know children and what's normative development and when it's not feeling quite right. And you know that when something's not feeling like it is as it should be that speaking with a trusted colleague or one of the wellbeing staff, or one of the mental health consultants that are working in your school is really important.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Michelle. Thanks, Janette, and Lisa, as well. And I welcome you back now for our Q&A. And we've got lots of space now to answer some of the questions from the audience and to dive a bit deeper into some of these areas. And I'm just reflecting Michelle on that ordinary magic that you mentioned at the end there. And these kind of daily approaches and interactions that make a big difference.

One of the audience members that we have here today comes from an early childhood perspective. And Lisa you touched on your research and I'm just curious about what your research shows around that early childhood space?

Lisa Gibbs

There's still a lot to learn there Ben. But my greatest concern coming from our research and others is it tends to be an overlooked group at this time. We did an analysis of recovery funded services that were delivered in the four years following the Black Saturday bushfires and there were ones that were particularly for children and youth and the preschoolers and the lower primary really there was hardly anything been delivered for them.

And you know I think it arises for a number of reasons and I'm speculating here but I think it arises because people aren't quite sure how to help that group. There's less known about what can be done there. But also there's often an assumption that because they're little that they'll forget and like if we don't talk about it and we don't deal with it they won't retain it and won't be affected by it. And we do know that that's not the case. And in fact even little ones who are born after the event show the impacts of being born into and growing up in a trauma affected family and community. So I would suggest the research is pretty clear that we need to direct our attention to that age group.

Ben Rogers

Yeah really interesting Lisa. And Janette I know with your school there was an early learning service connected there. What are the thoughts that you have around that?

Michelle Roberts

Yes Ben unfortunately I have memories of the childcare setting being the last that was rebuilt, the last that was set up. Which was really unfortunate for those children but also had a huge impact on families because parents couldn't return to work as well. The preschool and the maternal health started to be built before any childcare, so it was a bit tricky. But I can see over time that things are improving in all of these areas. I hate to say disasters follow me but I was around an area that was flooded in the 90s and there was no support for schools. And again at the start of 2000 in a bushfire area and there was very little support for schools. So I'm pleased to see as a result of the University of Melbourne research that hopefully we're moving in the right direction.

Ben Rogers

Yeah thanks Janette. Michelle one of the things that you've touched on is the toolkit for educators. And you know, this idea of ordinary magic in the day-to-day kind of support that can assist children. For those educators listening in today, we've got early childhood, primary and secondary perspectives, what are some kind of key things that they could take from this webinar around that area?

Michelle Roberts

If we think about early childhood as our starting point the [Birdie's Tree](#) suite of resources is really spectacular in providing opportunity to I guess set up a context for children to talk about what their experience is. And as Lisa said for a long time we overlooked the experiences of those preschool age children.

Thinking that we didn't want to raise it just in case they hadn't noticed the fires occurring and the anxiety and stress which of course is a furphy. Of course they're feeling unsafe and frightened and taking their measure from the adults around them. We don't give them an opportunity necessarily to express what impact that's had on them.

And so providing reading and discussion opportunity in a safe way is really important. Monitoring what's happening to that child and how they're expressing their responses often that's somatically as well as behaviorally. And then looking at whether or not having a quiet conversation with that child because if you do it more publicly sometimes it triggers the other children. So you want to be protective and psychologically safe, but you need to get a measure of that child. So ordinary magic and tools in your toolkit are about building on the existing relationships and knowledge you've got and then personalizing it to that child. So that if they're being extraordinarily quiet and withdrawn and before they were boisterous and an extrovert.

Andrew Fuller's just put his book out on the 'A to Z of Feelings' and he talks about 'innies and outies'. And that always works for me because working with little children I think about belly buttons because they love belly buttons. And there's 'innies and outies' and those sorts of belly buttons. But there are the children who are withdrawn and hold it in and lose their social confidence and competence in the long-term. And then there's the children who go the other way and can suddenly become outrageously difficult to manage in the classes. And they're often identified as having behavior problems and being naughty. But our everyday tools encourages us to dig a little deeper, approach with curiosity and approach with a trauma informed lens. Is this related to something like the fires? Is there something going on at home that I'm unaware of? Whatever it is this child's communicating that they're dysregulated and they're not coping?

Ben Rogers

An interesting question from the audience that flows on to this Michelle, which I'll start with you and Lisa and Janette and actually have some thoughts as well. And it kind of flips it into this idea of what are the signs that you know a child is recovering? And the other aspect to that was related to, do you have an estimated timeframe for a school to recover from a bushfire? So we might start with that first one, Michelle, and then move into Lisa and Janette.

Michelle Roberts

I'd love to have that crystal ball around timelines. You know from my experience over the 30 years the sixers seem to be really powerful. We see shifts in how people are coping at the six week, the six month, anniversaries of course, and six years. I don't know why I'm sure there's an amazing theory but it plays out time and time again.

For schools and recovery and timelines it really is very dependent on a lot of factors. So when we talk about adversity and trauma responses, we talk about it in terms of what the external or objective factors of the event have been. So was there a sense that the fire was really horrific, you were stuck, you witnessed to things? What was your appraisal of it the subjective and those two things the objective and subjective influence how you then go on from that point of view.

So it's very much whatever individual or community experiences have been and what was in the community before, during and after. You know some communities who have struggled for a long time have lots of good strategies that are protective and know how to manage the system get back on their feet. Some communities that have never had any adversity to speak of really struggle with that.

So how do we know if a child's recovering? It's when they go back to looking happy, engaged, able to ask for help when they need it, in that general developmental range that you would expect and hope them to be. And when they're taking calculated and thought through risks that are safe, but a bit tantalizing and a bit of an opportunity to take a new step into new learning. That's what I see as good mental health in the child. And that's what I would see as a sign of recovery.

Ben Rogers

Yeah Lisa. I'm interested to hear the question that was on top of that one, the estimated timeframe for a school to recover. And Janette, you know naturally you've experienced that as well. What is the research showing us around this?

Lisa Gibbs

Look it's a really important question. We're seeking funding to be able to analyze the data in a way that would enable us to answer that question. So in terms of school communities, I can't give you a precise answer. But I totally support Michelle's suggestion.

And certainly from the 10 years Beyond Bushfires study, what that generated was a recommendation in our recent report that when you're looking at recovery in a community from a major disaster, there should be a general understanding that, that there needs to be a five year recovery plan. And that you know different services will might transition in and out at different points.

But it takes years. What we need to be mindful of at the moment of course is that this wasn't a single disaster. People have been exposed to multiple disasters and the particular features of the pandemic response of course resulted in remote learning, reduced community connectedness, which is a protective factor. So I would expect that that will slow down the recovery process.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Lisa. Janette?

Janette Cook

Yeah, Ben, it's how long is a piece of string really isn't it? You know people go through different recovery stages in different timelines. And sometimes they revert back. And I know that I just hated to hear comments like, 'that was two years ago you need to move on'. Or I'm picturing a time five years later, when the staff were becoming exhausted because they had been holding it together for that time supporting students and families. And I was worried about staff welfare and that I was told 'it's five years to move on and what do your literacy numeracy results look like?'.

So it is, it is very tricky. Just if we're talking about some of the data coming through. Once we got our five year trend data for our English online results, which is a start of the year assessment in Victoria. It began to show that the students after the fires are coming into school with a much lower level of oral language development. And so that is an indicator of the number of years it's going to take to develop those things to help them develop their language so that they know that there are more emotions than happy and angry. That oral language is supporting academic learning but it also has a huge impact on the social learning as well. That if they don't have the words to say things like 'excuse me, it's my turn on the slide now' and so just push, there is a whole lot of social learning as well.

Michelle Roberts

Ben can I jump back in around that because I had the opportunity to catch up with some of my students that I had in 1983 that were year 9's at the time of the Ash Wednesday bushfires. And every time there's another something similar, it retriggers, they go back and have deep conversations about it. They reflect on how it changed the person they thought they were going to be to the person that they are. And I think it's always important that we keep in mind recovery of a school community or recovery in any way, is a new normal. You don't go back to being as you were because you've had such an experience that it's added and there is a thing of post traumatic growth. And a number of those young people say 'I was going this way, now I'm going this way'. And in fact, it was 'I learned so much about myself and my family and how I can manage in tough times', for example.

I also wanted to draw attention to the fact that we see a lot of delayed responses. You know we're only 18 months at this point. And I see a lot of people who are coping and doing really well. And I've seen people at that point who 2, 5, 8, 10 years, suddenly get exhausted and say, 'you know what, I'm not coping as well as I'd like anymore and I take it back to when I was in the fires'.

So 5 years is a really good goal to start for. And I'd love to see opportunity that then we can tailor it to need from 5 to 10 and as we go on. Particularly with our younger children who are developing and changing rapidly. Because every big sensitive period of growth and development, they'll have new learnings and new reflections on the experiences they had and it'll have a different meaning at a different time for them.

Lisa Gibbs

Ben I worry when we have these conversations with people who have been recently affected by disaster because I'm sure it must be, you know just awful to hear about the long haul. But at the same time people tell me that it's validating that it's helpful to hear that it's not them and it's not because they're not doing a good job. This is a thing that happens and it's a shared experience and if it is getting too hard, pay attention to that and engage in those self-care strategies. Because it's important to look after yourself and to recognize that this is really difficult and support is often needed.

Ben Rogers

Yeah, thank you, Lisa, Michelle, and Janette. I feel that we could continue to dive into a full presentation looking at some of these topic areas. And one of the things that I think is really crucial tool for the listeners today is the appraisal tool. And something they can use that it's tangible, that's scaffolded and guiding them to decision making during what is often a quite stressful period of time. And I guess for those that are just starting to use that tool, Lisa what guidance did you have to them to using that for the first time?

Lisa Gibbs

My guidance would be to realize that it's meant to help and it's not an extra job. And so use it in the way that's useful for you. It's probably a good idea to read some of the intro stuff, but if you know, if you don't have time and you're feeling fuzzy just go to the checklist. If there's a section in the checklist where you think oh for goodness sake I don't know, it's not an exam, don't worry about it. Just leave that bit blank, you know it's really just to give you a support in thinking through some of the issues in the decision making.

And it's also potentially a useful document to have when you're having a discussion with someone else. There's people from the Department, there's people from Bushfire Recovery Victoria or other support agencies who might be quite happy to sit down and work through it with you. So that would be my key message just to go, it's meant to help, not to make things harder, use it how it works for you.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Lisa. And Janette there's a question that's come through for you around it's great to hear about you suggesting around the departmental leniencies in regard to school regulations and school improvements. And just any practical tips that you could give to leaders within learning communities to take those steps.

Janette Cook

It's tricky isn't it, because they're our bosses and perhaps they'll think that I'm not doing my job if I don't get these things done. But we were in a situation where we had to do our strategic planning the year after the bushfires. That was when the date was and that's just what we had to do.

I know I got into trouble for not having my performance plan in on time. But you know if you're doing the job you don't have time to write about it. So it is tricky. Some of the people in the Department above us are more empathetic I guess than others but I think it's important to be honest about the workload that you've got and what you're doing. And look am I really going to do this because I'm just going to tick the boxes for compliancy or do I really want to make it a working document so it's going to help us?

To have those discussions that if it's just for compliancy somebody else can do that for you. But you know if it's something that's really going to help your students or families and your staff move forward then it's going to be a working document.

So it may sound airy fairy and people will come in and say you should have had those plans in last week and I don't have all the answers to those sorts of things. But I think it's very important to be honest about 'I can't do that I'm already doing this'. Or I used to sometimes say to others that I never say myself, 'I've got this amount of time I can do this, or I can do that, what would you like me to drop off my to-do list?'.

Ben Rogers

It sounds like that communication, but also openness around what are the key tasks that you're working on at the moment and prioritizing the ones based on needs.

Janette Cook

And I think a lot of people don't realize until they're in your shoes the extra jobs that you have to do that are imposed on. You know, if they're not in that situation they wouldn't know that those things have to be done so keep a tally of them and make sure you feed them back.

Lisa Gibbs

And I would hope that by putting it as a recommendation in the 10 years Beyond Bushfires report, that people can point to it and go, you know what, these are really official recommendations backing up what I'm requesting. So we're trying to help give people the leverage to achieve those outcomes.

Michelle Roberts

You know, Janette do you remember we talked at the time about retired principals coming in and partnering and doing the busy work so that you could do the relational work? And I know that can happen informally. And I know some Department of Eds around Australia have looked at formalizing that and have brought in buddy principals after large scale disasters as a way of helping with that administrative load and the predictable load that comes. So my fingers are crossed that we can formalize some of those things over time. And I think seeing this time, a lot of states and territories education departments have brought in tutors to assist students to do some catching up and have some intensive, that they are starting to see that there needs to be additional resources to help schools to do the busy work as well as the relational and recovery work.

Janette Cook

Yes, and as long as there's not too much paperwork that just adds to it.

Ben Rogers

We've got time for one more question today. And thank you for all this depth of explanation. And there's lots of chat function questions coming through, which is a good sign that the audience are really engaged in this topic and interested in it. One of the key things to finish on is maybe for you Michelle but also for others. What would be one key message for educators to share with parents around supporting their child and family? It's a big one to finish.

Michelle Roberts

One, you give me one, seriously, when have I known to be able to stick to one of anything? Goodness me. So I'll have one or two. And I would say parents lose confidence in their ability as parents and they lose confidence in setting boundaries for children. So to be supportive of parents in understanding that predictability and known boundaries are important safety mechanisms for their children. So it's okay to keep on saying 'seven o'clock to bed'. And it's okay to be saying, 'I'll be picking you up at this time'. And if you

can't get there, you let them know, because it's important parents know that kids need to know that you're going to be there.

So teachers can be reinforcing key messages around predictability, psychological safety and routine. And if parents are going to lose it that they take themselves outside the space they're living in and have a few deep breaths and then come back in. But to understand we're all human and that you can repair, you can repair these things. So that was more than one but I got lots in quickly.

[Ben Rogers](#)

Thank you, Michelle. Thank you, Lisa and Janette. You know, it's been a really insightful discussion today. And just on behalf of the audience we thank you for not only the participation today but just the work you're doing in the field and continue to do in the field. So we thank you for that. And for those that have tuned in today there's a lot of questions we didn't quite get to. So we'll do our best to send that out as a bit of a resource pack. There will be some resources we will attach including links to the [appraisal tool](#) and other things as well. So thank you very much and yes, stay tuned for more information from [Be You](#) and the [Bushfire Response Program](#).

TRANSCRIPT END