

NSW Bushfire recovery to focus on community mental health support

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New South Wales coastline. Photo: Shutterstock

By Sarah Liversidge

New strategies focusing on community empowerment are needed for mental health recovery in bushfire affected communities, according to a government researcher in NSW.

The researcher, who works in bushfire recovery in the state's south, said community members had identified a need to support each other around mental health.

"The best way to work with that is to upskill people to notice stuff going on with their mates, their families and community members," he said.

The researcher said his team were supporting community members to ask each other "probing questions" beyond "are you ok?".

He said prior to coronavirus, community members had been building relationships with mental health services.

"The recovery process had started, community service providers were in there...then COVID came along and went 'nup'," he said.

The researcher said coronavirus restrictions caused services to close and disrupted the relationships that people had started to build with them.

"Disaster recovery is a lot about engagement, so services were building important relationships with people, but COVID put a stop to that," he said.

The researcher said while mental health clinicians are “effective”, there is still stigma in the community around engaging with them.

“Community members are very reluctant to talk to people they don’t know and don’t trust, particularly around mental health stuff,” he said.

He said his team were working with community members and service providers to “build a whole new relationship” with each other.

“We won’t change the stigma this week, but...we can have program ready service providers deliver community education and community upskilling programs,” he said.

The researcher said community members were experiencing stress and anxiety that will be “ongoing and long term”.

“There’s going to be a lot of people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder,” he said.

The researcher said there were also “really good things” that had happened in the community.

“Volunteers have come here who have no skin in the game apart from wanting to help people that have gone through the bushfires,” he said.



Photo: Sarah Liversidge

Gabrielle New, a Melbourne psychologist specialising in trauma, said coronavirus could be the “tipping point” for people experiencing mental health issues in bushfire affected communities.

“When you have a build-up of stressful things, something can typically be a tipping point and that’s what coronavirus could be here,” she said.

Ms New also said it is important to recognise people's strengths in times of adversity.

"The idea of resilience is very important in trauma recovery," she said.

"They are not just victims; they are people who have survived. It's important to look at things from this kind of strengths perspective."

According to data provided to the royal commission into the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires, the total area of bushland burnt across Victoria and NSW was the largest in 19 years.

5.3 million hectares of land and 2439 houses were lost in NSW alone.

33 Australians died as a direct result of the bushfires and a further 450 died from associated smoke inhalation.

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