

Thinking about recovery

A lot of our disaster planning focuses on preparation before - and coping during- the event, but it's the recovery period that can really test us.

The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience has developed an excellent (and comprehensive) handbook to guide community recovery after a disaster, available at <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/5634/community-recovery-handbook.pdf>

Much of the content of the Community Recovery Handbook is aimed at government and recovery agencies, but there's a lot of excellent information for communities that we've summarised in this resource.*

*We've provided footnotes that show the relevant page of the Community Recovery Handbook so it's easier to find the source material.

What do we mean by recovery?

"Recovery is the process of coming to terms with the impacts of a disaster and managing the disruptions and changes caused, which can result, for some people, in a new way of living. Being 'recovered' is being able to lead a life that individuals and communities value living, even if it is different to the life they were leading before the disaster event."¹

When disaster happens, most people are desperate to get back to some form of normal. Unfortunately it's not always so easy. The diagram shows the feelings we might have at various stages of recovery – noting that emotional adjustment can take years. Communities that are well prepared, and have thought about how they will support each other during recovery, tend to do better than communities that have not done any disaster planning.

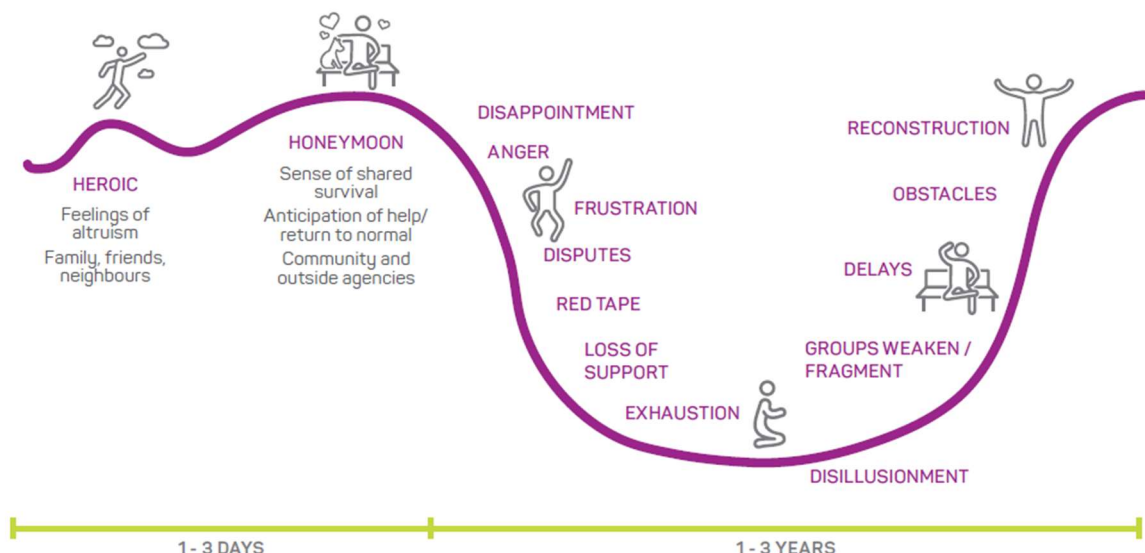


Figure 4 Different phases that individuals and communities might experience post disaster
Adapted from Cohen and Ahearn 1980 and DeWolfe 2000

Community Disaster Preparation

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www.communitydisasterprep.com.au

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¹ Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection: Community Recovery - Page 4

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People are affected differently

We can't know in advance exactly who will be impacted by a disaster, but when doing our planning we should think about who might be affected so that we are respectful of different needs and reactions²:

- People who are directly affected in terms of injury, death, friends or family moving away, and loss of possessions, animals, accommodation or income.
- People who are forced to leave their homes to live (temporarily or permanently) elsewhere who may be disconnected from the support of others who experienced that event.
- Groups with additional or complex needs such as Indigenous people, people with particular cultural, language or spiritual needs, people with physical or intellectual disabilities, the aged and infirm and people with little personal or family support.
- Individuals and groups that suffer secondary effects of disaster—these include neighbours, friends, relatives of those directly affected (whether local or elsewhere), or those linked through businesses or community and social services organisations. This group may also include workers and volunteers involved in response, rescue, relief and recovery.
- Particular suburbs or areas or communities, such as retirement villages or employees of a business closed by the disaster. The affected 'community' may live elsewhere, for example tourists, workers, and people with a shared interest (e.g. horse owners).
- People from interstate or overseas, including recent migrants.
- People who are socially isolated, neglected or marginalised members of the community.
- 'Virtual communities' who are solely or primarily connected via social media or the internet.
- Children of all ages, including young babies: children born after a disaster event can be impacted by growing up in disaster affected families and communities. "Parents spoke of parenting situations they never expected to face. Finding ways to manage the trauma reactions experienced by their children often required new understandings, skills or strategies. Valued aspects of parenting, like patience and tolerance or having the answers in difficult times, were compromised by demands of rebuilding and recovery that were competing for their time and energy as well as parents' own trauma responses. While changes to parenting were often accompanied by feelings of loss, sadness, and at times helplessness, there were also positives in the opportunities to model recovery and resilience for their children." *Beyond Bushfires Final Report 2016*³.
- Business people are often local residents and can experience a double impact if both their home and business have been damaged or destroyed. Farmers and primary producers may also be faced with the distressing task of dealing with dead and injured livestock⁴.

“Men spoke of the pressure for men to recover quickly, and keep working without speaking of their trauma. The image of not coping was censured with the media's focus on 'heroes' and communities that supported each other 'in the true Australian spirit'. This led to men being reluctant to seek help. It was also common for men to self-medicate in ways that were harmful to themselves and others, including the use of drugs or alcohol. Such coping mechanism isolated them from support services and social networks.

Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines Literature Review 2016.

“Disaster impacts are heightened for LGBTI people, as the destruction of home is the destruction of the safe place away from judgement (McKinnon et al., 2016b). The usual procedures to secure residences and rehouse those affected by disaster are accompanied by additional privacy concerns and risk or experience of discrimination

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How do we work with people affected by disaster?

The effects of a disaster on a community are compounded by the nature of the disaster and of the community itself, as well as considerations of human behaviour and relationships and the evolving needs of recovery. The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience suggests that we⁵:

- Be as inclusive as possible in identifying and assessing the ‘affected’ community.
- Recognise that significant impacts can be felt by those not considered ‘directly affected’.
- Remember that not everyone who is affected will live in the same area.
- Understand that people will not all respond or react in the same way.
- Plan collaboratively with the community.
- Tailor and adapt plans to meet changing community needs.
- Identify and work through community leaders.
- Reinforce shared responsibility between all sectors of the community.
- People affected by events, and who have been subjected to severe stress, are usually capable of functioning effectively. Some of their reactions to stress may show as emotional strain. This is usually transitory—it is to be expected and does not imply mental illness⁶.

And look after ourselves and others?

Disaster recovery work⁷ is carried out in an environment that is characterised by:

- Its unpredictable, emergency nature
- The need to provide services in an uncertain and rapidly changing environment
- Application of skills to unanticipated or unprecedented challenges
- High levels of both acute and ongoing stress
- Exposure to direct, indirect or vicarious trauma
- A highly charged work environment and potentially challenging inter-agency relationships
- Exposure to intense emotions, and
- Strong scrutiny of performance (often by politicians, community members and the media).

Achieving community-led recovery may be challenging when⁸:

- Local, trusted community leaders have died or left the area because of the disaster.
- Communities of interest with diverse competing needs are involved.
- Affected individuals are widely dispersed.
- Marginalised or minority groups are excluded from community decision-making processes.
- Some people are more vulnerable than others to the impacts of a disaster.



Family violence increases after disasters⁹

After a disaster, women’s right to live free from violence is compromised. Sympathies tend to lie with the ‘heroic’ men who fought in the fire, leading to an expectation that women will sacrifice their health for their partners and the community. Response and support professionals, when stretched thinly, tended to overlook indicators of domestic violence, or were reluctant to classify the community heroes as perpetrators. Women gave accounts of being told to ‘give it some time’, that ‘he’s not himself’, and that ‘things will settle down’ by those meant to be supporting them in the emergency services, including trauma counsellors.

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Community-led recovery

Community members are the first responders during an emergency, acting to save and protect themselves, their families and their communities¹⁰. As part of this response, disaster-affected communities spontaneously begin their own recovery processes. The role of formal recovery agencies is to provide structured support, communication and coordination to assist these efforts.

Empowering communities to create their own recovery solutions can improve overall social cohesion which is critical to sustainable recovery outcomes.

Disaster-affected people, households and communities understand their needs better than any 'outside' supporters, and have the right to make their own choices about their recovery. The processes used by government and other key recovery agencies to interact with and support communities can impact positively or negatively on the capacity of individuals and groups to manage their own recovery process.

Successful recovery supports the community to move forward by¹¹:

- Assisting and enabling individuals, families and the community to actively participate in their own recovery.
- Recognising that people and communities may need different levels of support at various times and may choose different paths to recovery.
- Being guided by the community's priorities.
- Channelling effort through existing community networks, knowledge, and abilities.
- Building collaborative partnerships between the community and those involved in the recovery process.
- Recognising that new community leaders often emerge during and after a disaster, who may not hold formal positions of authority.

The role of community groups and organisations when working with other recovery agencies¹²:

Local community and social service organisations	• integral to community recovery and likely to be 'first on scene' in terms of establishing initial recovery activities • trusted, local providers of services such as community health, education, housing, drug/ alcohol/family violence programs, youth and family services, etc. • local knowledge, skills and experience • remain in the community over a longer term • may be directly impacted, which can affect service provision, at least temporarily
Local community groups	• integral to community recovery and likely to be 'first on scene' in terms of establishing initial recovery activities • local knowledge, skills and experience • able to connect with and mobilise community capacity • may have pre-existing, community-designed plans for recovery • members may be directly impacted, which can affect the group's functioning, at least temporarily
Emergent groups	• may be from within or outside of the impacted community • generally emergent groups form to provide assistance with one or more aspects of recovery • may include groups who expand their ordinary operations to include recovery activities, e.g. service clubs such as Rotary or Lions • can be a vital source of 'surge capacity' to help manage relief and recovery

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¹² Page 40

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Communication is vital

Communications in the recovery phase should go beyond merely sending information.¹³

There should be a two-way dialogue with the community (see Figure 6). Effective communications provide a basis for important social processes such as bonding between individuals, groups and communities (Australian Red Cross 2010).

The social connectedness of communities is based on communication processes. During emergencies these communication channels can be limited, broken or disrupted. This may result in disaster-affected people receiving inaccurate or incomplete information, and feeling disconnected and isolated for extensive periods of time from their families and friends, existing community networks, and health and social services.

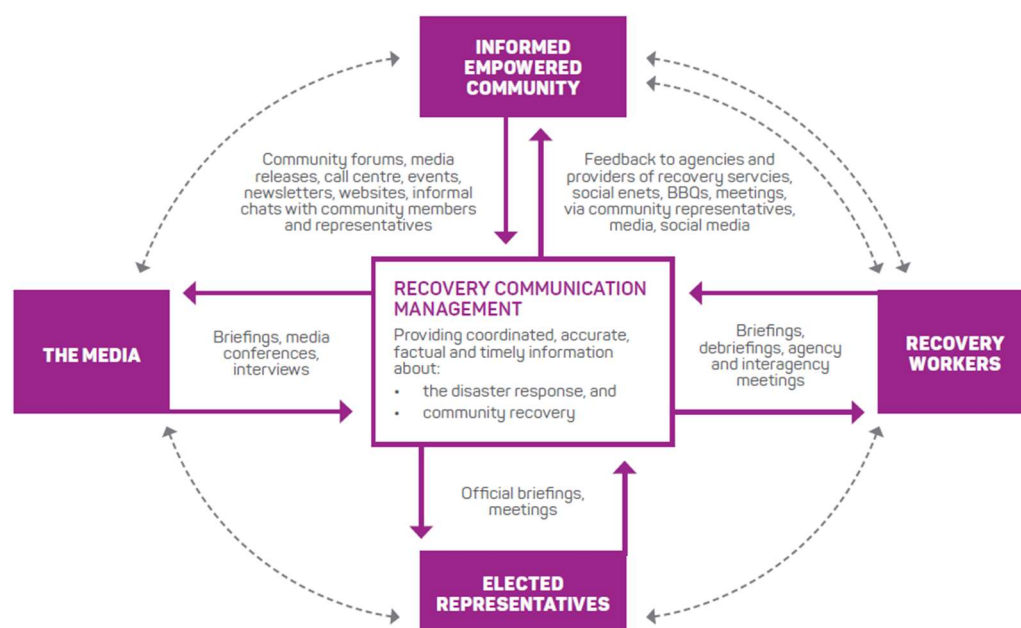


Figure 6 Recovery communication management—communicating with the various stakeholders through various means

People will not tolerate being without the information they need. In the absence of accurate, trustworthy information they will actively seek it out through their own sources, and if they cannot obtain official information they will fill the gap with rumour and speculation.

Informal community information channels are a vital means of communicating with the community, and often people who do not trust or have access to official channels will rely on them for what they need. Rumours and speculation should be actively managed and understood as an important indicator of the community's need for information.

Read the Pinery Fire Recovery Final Report

The Pinery Fire Recovery Final Report¹⁴ provides a wealth of insight and information about recovery efforts and lessons learned from the 2015 Pinery fire – it is well worth a read.

¹³ Page 45

¹⁴ https://dhs.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/57418/2015-Pinery-Fire-Recovery-Report.pdf