

Surviving Traumatic Grief

Volume 2 For Families

**A book by family members who are surviving
traumatic grief, with commentary by Rob Gordon PhD**



Sue Evans
Fund for Families



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Front cover illustration by Gracie:

“The fire was a terrible disaster that caused the loss of my wonderful Pa. He was a kind caring brave man that would do anything for anyone, I love him so much and I’m devastated because that traumatic day took the life of an amazing man! I miss him so much and still can’t believe he’s gone, I love and miss you so much Pa x x x x x x x” – Gracie

Back cover illustration by Simone Allen

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Christine McMahon whose son, Haydn, perished in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires and who lost her battle with cancer on 30th December 2011. As a mother, she was keen to see that parents and families could benefit from the advice of the shared experiences of families who were deeply affected by the bushfires. Christine's courage and commitment to writing this book will always be remembered. She was an active member of the committee that produced both volumes 1 and 2 of 'Surviving Traumatic Grief'.





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ABOUT THE BOOK – THREE YEARS ON

In March 2011, an 80 page book entitled ‘**Surviving Traumatic Grief. When Loved Ones Die in a Disaster**’ was produced and launched. It has been widely distributed throughout Victoria, particularly to people bereaved through the bushfires, and sent to Queensland following the serious floods, to New Zealand following the earthquake and to Norway following the disaster there. Red Cross has sent copies to all their offices across Australia. There has been excellent response and feedback.

However a key comment has been that more information is needed for people/parents caring for children and young people who have been bereaved in traumatic and disastrous circumstances, so another volume was planned.

As with the first volume, this booklet is based on interviews held in 2011-2012 with people who tragically lost loved ones three years ago in the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. Health professionals also provide insightful responses to the themes and issues arising from the comments of parents and their children who contributed to this book.

At the best of times, parenting is highly demanding and time consuming, requiring a lot of physical, emotional and mental energy. Trauma and grief are also highly demanding and time consuming. So, as one mother, Carol asks, *“How, when you are so devastated and heartbroken yourself, how do you actually support your child, when you haven’t got the energy, you haven’t got the will, you haven’t the motivation.”*

The ‘answer’ gleaned from the open, honest, heartfelt comments of parents seems to be: you do and you don’t; you struggle and overcome; you fail and succeed; you do it imperfectly, learning as you go and doing the best you can. *“I think that’s what this book is about – lessening the isolation, sharing common feelings so that others*

can feel 'it is okay, it doesn't make me a bad person' ”. (Carol – parent of young adult)

The reality is that families and relationships have a capacity to hold together and survive even when the members are unable to fulfil their normal roles. There is time to turn in, grieve, tend wounds, focus on surviving or just keep things going until it is possible to resume the full engagement. Relationships can continue with the accumulated good will from the past provided a few essentials are not lost. They include communication, routines, patience and the ability to see the present difficulties as leading to a future when things will be easier.

The contributors show what happens, what helps and what does not help to get through the difficult years that follow traumatic grief.

Some of the strongest messages to come from contributors are:

- Supporting parents to help their children is usually the best way to help children and young people
- Professional services should focus on supporting families as well as individuals
- Everyone's grief journey is different
- There is no 'one-size fits all' way to deal with traumatic grief
- It is okay and normal for parents not to know what to do
- Be kind to yourself.

Although there are no fixed solutions or answers to many of the questions and concerns of parents of children and young people who are traumatically bereaved, it is the hope of the Sue Evans Fund for Families and the parents and young people affected by the bushfires who contributed to this book, that what they have learned from their experiences will provide others with support, comfort, hope and the knowledge that they are not alone in their journey.

WHAT IS TRAUMATIC GRIEF?

It could be said that most grief is very distressing and so traumatic. But not everything that is painful is traumatic. Although the word has been widely used in recent years to indicate very disturbing and distressing events, it has a definite meaning. 'Trauma' means *wound, damage, injury*. It refers to experiences involving intense threat, horror and disruption of familiar, trusted assumptions and expectations that formed the foundation of what was familiar and secure. Trauma causes the world and the person to feel injured or damaged in themselves by what has happened. The world no longer seems the same, it is not safe, predictable, secure or familiar.

Trauma means life can never be the same as it was; the person experiencing it cannot go back to who they were. The old world and self are gone; new ones must be formed. Familiar aspects of life can never be taken for granted again; some cannot be trusted and there is the awareness that things could unexpectedly go badly wrong. New beliefs, expectations and assumptions have to be formed that accept what happened, yet allow for hope, optimism and a future with meaning – although a changed one. For this to happen many aspects of the old world have to be re-worked and new foundations formed that acknowledge the tragedy, but do not allow it to overtake everything else.

Forming a new world and self cannot be hurried. They must be built out of the regular routines of the new life that emerge around the changed situation and provide a new predictability, security and trust which gradually forms the basis for a new future.

Grief is when someone dies who is a part of our life and sense of self, someone who is important, has a role and contributes to the meaningfulness of life. It is an acutely painful experience and if the person who died is one of the central pillars of our existence, may initially make life unbearable and it cannot go on. There is usually a prolonged process of accepting that it has happened as the

reality gradually penetrates into the deeper layers of the personality and daily routines are remodelled without the one who has died. Gradually, however, over several years, meaning is rebuilt with those who remain, a new life forms and a future without the one who is lost can be made. The pain of the loss never goes, but happiness is possible again.

Traumatic grief is when a loved person dies in traumatic circumstances. The death brings with it all the sadness, loss of meaning, loneliness of loss. However the traumatic circumstances cause horror and disruption of previously trusted, taken for granted assumptions. The sadness of the death becomes confused or even displaced by the horror of how it occurred. The possible fear and suffering of the deceased are tormenting possibilities that breed in the uncertainty about what happened. There is a hunger for clarity and information to reduce doubt; but often it can never be known.

In **natural disaster**, destruction, damage, community impact and possibly multiple other deaths are added to the trauma and grief. The destruction of houses, environment and communities means not only are loved ones lost, but all of their property and all by which they can be remembered. The destruction disrupts routines of daily life which must be given immediate attention in order to keep things going. New clothes and possessions must be acquired, new places to live have to be found, multiple tasks have to be attended to involving numerous unfamiliar government and other agencies, financial problems loom and uncertainty hangs over everything.

Disruption of normal day-to-day life has to be dealt with and often prevents attending to or even fully registering the trauma and grief. Except for the most intense reactions, they must be repeatedly pushed aside in order to tackle immediate problems. Multiple demands and hassles which will greatly increased stress if neglected, must be managed at the same time.

As a result, after a year or two, as things settle into more predictable routines in the new setting, the neglected trauma and grief return with unexpected strength. People often find that just when they began to feel they were getting out of the woods, the fear, sadness, horrible images, anxiety, guilt, exhaustion, and feelings of pointlessness come back. These reactions are often provoked by hassles and problems interrupting progress towards recovery or by birthdays, anniversaries and other reminders. They can take the form of sudden eruptions of emotion or feeling as though the bottom has dropped out of the interest and enthusiasm for the new house or whatever else is being done.

Such reactions are confusing and frightening for those having them; but they are even more confusing for relatives, friends and community members outside the impact zone. Many are surprised it takes so long to recover. They often use non-traumatic grief or personal crises from their own lives as a basis of comparison. The reality is, however, that non-traumatic crises do not damage fundamental beliefs and assumptions about life and the world. Recovery from non-traumatic crises does not require creating a new world and a new life.

If the loss occurred outside a disaster, however painful the grief, it can be given more attention because the environment, house, property, finances, possessions, mementos of the lost one, occupation, community networks all remain more or less stable and can provide security and comfort instead of having to be urgently and simultaneously recreated.

For all these reasons, traumatic grief, especially after disaster has a unique quality. Reactions are complex, there is no clear sequence or time frame for recovery, since many other issues compete with it for attention. People struggling through this painful journey need guidance, information and the experience of others who have gone before to help them. After all, we deal with everything else in life – the challenges, crises and stages – by knowing what others

experienced, what is normal, how long it takes, what to expect, what works and how they have survived it.

In this book, a group of people who are three years on along this journey toward a new life after traumatic grief share their observations so others may find it a little easier, understand it better and not feel so alone.



THE IMPACT OF TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT ON PARENTS, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Usually when someone dies, you can go to their house, touch the things that they touched, and have things that connect you to them – photographs, personal objects and mementoes. You can visit the area where they lived and the familiar things link you to your memories of them. In that, there is some comfort and something concrete that says “They were here; they existed; they lived”. But after a disaster, the environment is completely changed, and in many instances houses and personal belongings are destroyed. There is a sense of disorientation and little to connect us to our loved ones, to ground us, to anchor us. It’s almost as if their existence was wiped away.

Often survivors have been through traumatic experiences, perhaps even faced death and the images of their own ordeal combined with what is imagined about what happened to those who died. There is the horrific nature of the deaths, how people died and the complication of the unfamiliar and lengthy process of identifying the deceased. At the same time, the event is public, the focus of intense attention and involvement in many new processes and systems. The disaster seems to wipe away the old life along with environment, homes and those who died so that the flow of life is broken suddenly. These are all likely to intensify the impact of traumatic bereavement on everyone, especially parents and their children.

“Traumatic bereavement following a national disaster is very different from other bereavement. Our loss was very public and out of our control. The day before, I had a hectic, busy but happy life. By the end of the next day, my son was dead, our house was destroyed. There was nothing left of my ‘old life’.”
(Carol – parent of young adult)

“Hard, too, when everything’s destroyed. So all those things you might look for to find answers aren’t there – the whole site was gone. It was just all

grey... no colour... no sound, no birds, no nothing... and even the wind you couldn't hear because there's no leaves." (Steph – parent of young adults)

"That's the weird thing – it's like the entire thing just vanished. So much trying to get your head around 'Where is it all? Where did it go?' ... It's like a nuclear bomb site or something, it was ridiculous. And that's what's so hard is that there's nothing... you can't go and touch anything... Is this the house or is it the shed?... I don't know, they all look the same." (Adam – 20s)

"It looked like hell when we drove through it." (Anna – 19 years)

Traumatic bereavement combines the two dimensions of trauma and grief. Although they combine into one experience, there are two distinct sets of reactions which alternate or compete for attention. Although it oversimplifies the problem, the two reactions can be contrasted.

Trauma involves extreme threat to self or other person, loss of control or helplessness and is usually unexpected or sudden. The experience is so intense, the memories and emotions constantly take the person back to the terrible moments of tragedy, which the sufferer often desperately want to forget or avoid, but cannot. The intense energy of the fear and horror is constantly reactivated by the memories, so it is impossible to relax. Trauma returns the person to the horror of the death.

Grief on the other hand, involves death of a loved person and it is the memories of the whole time together, especially good experiences of them that are now missed; it is difficult to accept the loss and there is constant longing for the absent one and painful remembering of the good experiences combined with a sadness and even despair, which may tend towards despondency and lack of energy for the realities of daily life. Grief returns the person to the sadness of the shared life that is lost.

These reactions may alternate slowly or rapidly, overlap or combine and they easily lead to confusion, disorientation and difficulty

managing reactions in people who might otherwise be able to work their way through painful feelings.

It is helpful to contrast some common reactions in families coping with traumatic bereavement.

Traumatic Responses

Trauma involves intense physical responses because it is sudden, extreme and threatening. The final news of the death may have been lead up to by an agonising period of uncertainty; the body reacts to get ready for what is going to happen. There is huge energising of what is required for survival often referred to as “fight or flight”, although the reality is that most people neither fight nor flee, but try to do the best they can to cope with what is required of them. It is better to call it a state of “heightened arousal” that is both physical and emotional. It places body and mind in a specialised survival state.

In heightened arousal, the body mobilises reserves of energy, shuts down whatever does not help deal with the crisis such as feelings of fatigue or pain, normal emotions, clear thinking and planning; and it causes intense focus on every detail of the problem. For some, the traumatic threat includes the danger they were in themselves, for others it is the threat of what happened to their loved ones and their helplessness to prevent it.

Posttraumatic Stress

Posttraumatic stress describes the state of continuing heightened arousal with frequent intruding memories of the tragedy, reactivation of emotions alternating with periods of numbness and detachment. It shows the difficulty the person is having in coming to terms with the event, and may well continue for many months or years if the early stages of recovery is filled with other problems such as happens in disasters.

“Everyone I know has had a life change. We have all been diagnosed with post traumatic stress. Some have overcome this, but a lot haven’t, nearly three years on, including myself.” (Deborah – parent of young children)

“I don’t think it sunk in for about two years. And even now it’s very raw, it’s almost like you’re getting that news again for the first time. It’s post traumatic stress.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

Triggers, flashbacks and bad memories

The distressing memories of the trauma are so intense and emotional that instead of coming back as true memories about something that happened in the past and is over, the intensity makes it feel as though it is happening again, now, in the present and it is not over with. All the original feelings flood back with the memories. These are called “intrusive memories” because there is little control over them. They may be triggered by anything associated with the tragedy or come without warning for no apparent reason, but bring back the feelings of the terrible day.

“The trembling when something triggers your mind, which you might not notice till your back starts to ache and you realise you’re sitting there shaking. Trauma just crops up, whether it’s triggered by a cloud that looks just whatever.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“I get in the shower and start to think about Greg every morning. And there are triggers. Jill will tell you it’s music. I’ll be sitting there and all of a sudden she’s crying. I’ll go over and cuddle her. Sometimes we go to church and there’s a couple songs you know. It just hits us, various things hit us all the time. Whatever it is, things are going to get you all the time.” (Ray – parent of young person)

Any emotion of conflict may be enough to cause the emotions associated with the trauma to break through as though they are always just below the surface.

“When they tested boundaries and we would try to enforce them, they would start screaming; that would trigger off our own trauma and we would do anything to stop the noise.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Sometimes, it is tempting for people to try any method to block out the memories.

“I would often try to numb the bad memories and flashbacks by consuming alcohol.” (Deborah – parent of young children)

The changed sense of the world may lead to spontaneous eruptions of fear.

“I couldn’t even get in a car and drive without hyperventilating and all sorts of things.” (Ray – parent of young person)

Future challenges feel much more threatening.

“We are yet to know how all these young people are going to react when there is another catastrophe, such as a bushfire. It may not be in Kinglake where our family is, but it will be somewhere else. We don’t know how the adults are going to react. I don’t know how I’m going to react if there’s a fire heading towards my school.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“He [my husband] was absolutely shell-shocked [when Ellie left home and it happened very quickly]... He felt like he lost Ellie... He was really, really upset and lost.” (Carol – parent of young person)

It can even be difficult to keep the presence of mind to realise what is happening and the sense of reality may be temporarily confused.

“We were driving from Cape Patterson to Wonthaggi and on the side of the road was this huge bonfire... and I saw it and I tensed up. And I had little Chloe [niece] in the back with me and all I heard was ‘Oh my god!’... By the time I got home, I was a wreck because I’d seen this fire and because of that reaction from behind me.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“About a week after the fires when my son and I smelled smoke, it triggered anxiety and panic in him. He was saying ‘What’s that smoke? Where’s that

coming from?’ I was reassuring him, but inside thinking ‘What’s going on?’ and feeling really scared.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“Warn them [the children] of fire burn-offs, as it can help to control their anxiety levels.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

Shock

The enormity of the experience takes time to absorb and many influences may interfere with accepting what has happened. The mind is so preoccupied with the task, that many other things cannot be done. Shock is when normal functions are disrupted and may last some time or return whenever things become too distressing.

“Everything was a blur.. I went back to a nightshift, and listened to handover and didn’t remember a thing. I thought I was taking it in, but obviously wasn’t. I was just totally shocked.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“...then the weeks of waiting for the Coroner to release our loved one... the paperwork which had to be duplicated each time a new grant was released, the endless interviews with police, the media, those wanting to help. You were like robots going through... the haze of those days.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“I did see some kid... just sitting there looking pale... a blankness about the whole thing, just looking really troubled by it all... because their normality had been taken away...” (Young person – early 20s)

Numbness

At the same time, the intensity of the reactions may have to be shut down to keep going and then the person seems to be on automatic. The emotions themselves also become exhausted at times and all that is left is a sense of numbness where there is no feeling.

“Emotionally I wasn’t there; I was just a robot basically.” (Karen – parent of young children)

Another reaction may be to break out of the numbness by doing something even if unwise or reckless, to reawaken some feeling or sense of being real again.

“I tried to just be strong for my dad and my brother and my sister for so long and then I’d get to the point where I just had to be reckless – to get drunk or do something stupid, just to do something to feel. There was just so many times that I’d just be numb and didn’t feel anything towards my husband, towards my kids – numb, no feeling whatsoever.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

Detachment at the point of death

The direct encounter with death occurs when a person is sure they are going to die and accepts the fact. This acceptance can mean they let go of life and all that belongs to it, and prepare for letting go of it. This is often associated with deep feelings of peace, acceptance, detachment and calmness. The transition occurs in an intense state and when death does not occur, it is often difficult to re-embrace life. It sometimes takes a long time to reattach to the living, physical world and the future.

“We were going to die. I couldn’t fight for them [my family] anymore or protect them anymore so I had to let them go. It’s kind of like relinquishing your life and, as a parent, the life of your children. And then you survive and come out of that room and realise you’ve survived that experience and don’t know how to live when you have accepted dying. It’s difficult to reconnect... We were so distracted and unavailable emotionally for our children. Your body’s still alive, but there is a switch in your mind that’s switched off.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“I felt peaceful, calm, couldn’t feel anything... it was a happy place. I find this a great solace when I think of other families who died, because from my own experience they didn’t die in terror in the end.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Delayed traumatic reactions

Posttraumatic responses can be suppressed during the important material tasks of recovery only to present when there is time to stop, reflect and feel.

“I’ve seen people that I know from the fires now, they’ve built their houses, they’ve built their schools and things are getting a bit quiet and now they have time to think. PTSD has physical, emotional and mental effects. The symptoms include hyperarousal, being anxious, easily startled and irritable, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares, and avoidance, withdrawal, disconnecting, and blocking emotions. There is help. You’re not going crazy. This is normal for what you have been through.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

Grief Responses

The central response in grief is the sadness and pain of the loss which is intense, all consuming and may at times be overwhelming. It leads to a struggle to accept the fact of the loss against the habits and expectations that the one who has died will continue to fill the place they have occupied for so long in life, combined with the wish to reject such terrible information and the deeply held tendency not to believe it. This struggle can lead to various common emotional reactions. In families this becomes complex as each person has their own timing and pattern of reactions.

Sadness and Crying

Sadness is to be expected. Parents, young people and children all cry at times. Some people will want to cry together or alone or both at different times; sometimes people are unable to cry until much later or perhaps not at all. This sadness comes and goes and cannot be predicted or prevented. It is actually an important part of the healing from grief.

“Pauline [my sister] and I went on holidays together. We went on a houseboat. I went up on the top deck and cried and she went into the shower and cried. We didn’t want to upset each other, we didn’t want to let each other know we were crying...” (Karen – parent of young children)

“...when in actual fact we should have been together crying.. I didn’t know she was crying and she didn’t know I was crying; it came out afterwards.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

The sadness and tears may erupt without warning for considerable time regardless of the situation.

“I lost so many jobs because I’d just cry, and you couldn’t go to work and just burst into tears all the time.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

The sadness is always there, even when other things are being done. It has the effect of lowering the threshold for other emotions. Stress, hassles, conflict and other problems may provoke strong emotions and then the sadness spills out, without the person even expecting it.

“When Isaac is stressed about other things, he sometimes bursts out crying about Nan and Pop.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“One thing I’ve noticed with Matt, which never happened before the fires, is that now if he gets really frustrated and angry, he’ll cry, but before he was never a crier... He’ll go and put himself on his bed and cry and you go ‘What are you crying for?’... But I know, deep down, I don’t think it has anything to do with what the fight or argument was over.” (Karen – parent of young children)

Wishful or Magical Thinking

A deep part of human nature is motivated by wishes and desires which normally help us to get what we want and need. Every day is lived wanting things and going after them. The loss of grief is intensely not wanted, so the wish is that the tragedy has not happened and the loved one will come back. Only with the passage of time and many disappointments will the reality finally be accepted.

At every age, but especially in childhood, people are likely to engage in magical thinking, pretend all will be well and the lost ones will return. Sometimes this is restricted to a secret part of the mind which is rarely shown.

“Ben actually had to write a story for Formative Year 8... about something that he felt had changed him. That story was a real eye opener for me. When you read it you think it’s just a story about Star Wars, until you get to the end and the things he remembers about Trey and how he wishes that if you wish hard enough things will come true and he likes to think they’re out there lost in the bush. And he wrote that when he was 14.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“Two years have now passed and deep down I am still hoping for them to show up. Hopefully, they will, so everything can go back to normal. I wish it would, but some things just happen for a reason. The only problem is, I am yet to figure out what that reason is. I miss them all terribly, especially Trey, he would have been starting Year 7 this year. Maybe, just maybe, he might be still alive somewhere out there, wandering the bush trying to find us. Sure, it’s only a wish, but occasionally when someone wishes hard enough there might be a chance that it can come true.” (Ben – 14 years old)

Guilt and Survivor Guilt

The desire that the terrible thing did not happen, that those we love and feel responsible for should be safe leads inevitably to the question of whether we did enough, or could have done something different, or we should have been with them when they died. These reactions cause feelings of guilt and especially guilt at surviving when others did not. These are universal reactions to sudden and traumatic bereavement. They are part of the price we pay for loving others – we cannot accept their suffering without feeling in some way responsible for not helping them avoid it.

Continuing to live when loved ones have died is hard enough, but even harder is the feeling that life goes on without them and even that eventually there may be laughter, joy and interest again. It can seem as though the loved ones have been abandoned.

“One of the things that got me was, after this all had happened and we’d gone through so much, I felt guilty for even having a laugh. I couldn’t go anywhere and enjoy myself. I felt guilty straight away. If we were out somewhere, we even avoided going to some places, it just all seemed superficial because the tragedy has happened. How can you be happy? How can you laugh? How can you do it? I know time marches on and you work through these things .How long does it take... 5 years, 10 years... before we can laugh again?”
(Ray – parent of young person)

“I just couldn’t laugh because... I felt I didn’t have the right to laugh. When I did eventually laugh, I cried hysterically.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“Sally [our daughter] had her belongings, she had her home, but there was an enormous amount of guilt she felt that we had lost our only son and she was still alive. And I think she even doubted her worth in our lives because she saw such grief and sadness within us.” (Jill – parent of young person)

“It is unthinkable that a mother buries her child. Our job as a parent is to provide a safe and nurturing environment. We look forward to our children growing and developing into young adults with unlimited potential to explore the world, be happy, hopefully give us grandchildren. The last time I spoke to my son knowing that he was frightened and likely to die is etched into my heart. Despite many, many hours of counseling, my head can rationalise that there was nothing I could have done to save him, but 3 years on my heart remains broken and I don’t think I will ever be able to forgive myself for not being there to support him in his final hours. If I had the chance to swap places with him, I would gladly do so.” (Carol – parent of young person)

Reactions and adjustments to recovering from traumatic grief

The two competing processes of trauma and grief involve the deepest parts of a person's nature with powerful emotions. Working to accept what has happened, adjust to it, find a way of reorganising the sense of self in the light of the loss and find a new basis for the future without those who have gone, are all profound tasks that take time, energy, mental and emotional attention. Throughout the years of working through to a new sense of future, there are a range of important changes in what is possible both in the sense of self, the ability to keep the rest of life going and in physical health. Some of these reactions are described below.

Tiredness and fatigue

The physical energy required by acute grief and traumatic stress is enormous. It is used up in the pain, tension, emotional expression and powerful forces working in the personality. In the early stage, when it is all so new and shocking, the adrenalin reaction activates heightened arousal and draws on the body's stores of energy to cope with the distress and all that has to be done; but at the same time, adrenalin tends to block awareness of how much energy is being used. The primary concerns are for what has to be done and coping with emotions. Especially when activity reduces and it is a matter of adjusting to the painful reality of the new normality, arousal subsides and the underlying tiredness is felt. The function of the fatigue is to encourage the person to reduce their energy output so they can recharge. Fatigue is an important part of the experience to keep track of energy used up by emotions and distress and to keep replenishing depleted stores. It is important that people in this state rest and restore their energy whenever they can throughout the period.

“What the mind does to the body, physically through tension and trying to carry on a normal life, going out and holding yourself together, can exhaust

you for days, and being so exhausted you haven't got the energy to go anywhere and it takes all my energy trying to get it together some days. But that's okay. It is because what's happened is so sad, so unthinkable, so tiring on your body and your mind... and it is physically demanding to get up every day and try and be what society wants you to be – normal.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“We were totally devastated... I had no idea how physically affected I would feel as well as all the other – the sadness, the physical exhaustion. It affected just the whole journey. I remember sitting on the loo and I wasn't vomiting, it was the other end. I suffered for weeks... I was so unprepared for that. People didn't talk about that, didn't even mention that part. I've got one daughter and she would have been going through similar... That really did shock me on top of all the layers, the other layers of sadness and all the other issues that were happening...” (Jill – parent of young person)

“Kids feel exhausted like we feel exhausted... You need to be able to sleep and you need to be able to have time and not be pushed.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

Protecting ourselves

Another way of making sure the grief is not overwhelming is to make sure that there are not too many confrontations with memories or reminders. The loss is often in the mind all the time anyway and making the connection with things or situations strongly associated with those who have died can cause strong, disorienting emotional reactions that mean not much can be done for some time. Most people find ways of modifying their exposure to memories and reminders which often changes over time.

“I couldn't look at photos.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“We don't live in the fire affected areas and recently I had one visit out to where Greg [son who died] lived – he was house sitting that day, he died with his girlfriend and her brother. I have yet to come up for a really good visit, to just take the steps to recovery, and to really enjoy the areas in the

world that I love so much, stepping into these places that took my son's life.”
(Jill – parent of young person)

“I know for a lot of people they found it really hard to go back to the house that Haydn lived in because they had memories there, whereas I actually didn't in that house... There's a house where they used to live in Greensborough that I could never ever go back into because all my memories with him are in that house.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“I know my parents still go back there quite a lot, but I don't. I don't want to go back there. I mean I go back there every now and again, but it's not my home anymore; it's the place where my brother died, so I don't like being there.” (Ellie – 22 years)

Sleep disturbances and nightmares

Because traumatic grief is such a profound experience, it dominates the whole mind and cannot be put aside in the way most experiences are, in order to fall asleep. Either it feels impossible to let go of it and relax, and it is hard to fall asleep until exhausted; or sleep comes, but the grief and trauma fill dreams which may take the form of distressing nightmares or emotionally draining dreams about the current problems. Although exhaustion eventually brings sleep, it is often unrefreshing and interrupted. Where possible, it is important to try and find ways of relaxing and unwinding before sleep and taking short naps whenever possible can also help to keep going.

“My son is a man of few words, quite a shy child. It wasn't until there was a research project through Monash University and he had to fill out a questionnaire that it came out that he had nightmares and they felt that he just needed to be followed up again. We have a close relationship, but he never told me he was having nightmares.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“I don't sleep. I must dream, but I don't remember dreaming.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“With my son in particular the changes are frequent nightmares and sleep disturbances.” (Deborah – parent of young children)

“A lot of the time I could hardly sleep because I was so emotionally drained. I just wanted to turn my brain off. I’d wake up at 2, 3 o’clock in the morning, wouldn’t be able to sleep.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“I found it very difficult to fall asleep for months and when I did, all I could do was dream horrible dreams about Mum and Dad must have died in the fires.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

Anxiety and worry

Anxiety is fear of what might happen in the future. It appears whenever confidence and security are undermined. Traumatic grief creates uncertainty about the immediate and long term future. It sweeps aside cherished sources of security and predictability, and life becomes painful, alien and uncertain. For a long time it seems as though there is no place to rest or nothing to take for granted; instead, there is a constant adjusting to something painful and not wanted. Anxiety is a constant part of the experience, until eventually, against all instincts the painful reality is accepted in the deepest parts of the self and there is a new feeling about how the future will be.

“We’re trying to find peace in our own body. Since the fires, we’ve had high levels of anxiety. It feels like you’re living with a low grade heart attack... some days you wake up in the morning and it feels like an elephant on your chest.” (Bronwyn – parent of young children)

“My daughter started school. Although she’s done very well at school, she would be extremely anxious if something is not quite right.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

In addition to people worrying about how they will get through the grief, they also worry about family and friends as they see them reacting in their own ways. Anxiety about others is often associated with feelings of helplessness and not knowing how or whether to

talk about what they see. A particular concern is how they will be affected in the future.

“That worries me as well. How is it going to affect him when he’s older? You know, hormones are kicking in and you start to think how is this going to affect him? Is this going to make him go off the rails?” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“The kids were worried about their father because they’d not seen enough emotion. He was very quiet and reserved. He’s not quite the same – he became very remote and distracted and the kids wondered ‘Is Strathewen going to swallow up the dad we knew?’ We’d be speaking about something, but he hadn’t heard. Both our son and daughter wanted to know how we were going. They’d often ask each of us [their parents] how the other parent was going.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“There was lots of that [worry] going on, asking mum ‘How’s dad?’. (Anna – 19 years)

“I did see some kids on a number of different occasions just look very concerned about their parents.” (Adam – 20s)

Separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is the name given to the fear that comes when separated from loved ones and those who provide security and confidence. It often undermines the ability to do what can normally be done when the loved one is there. It can be a heavy burden of worry to children that they are always afraid for their parents’ welfare when they are away from them.

“One of the things we noticed very quickly after the fires was extremely high levels of separation anxiety in both of them.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“My [teenage] son wrote in a Mother’s Day card ‘I love you and hope you will never leave’.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

Anger and blame

The instinctive reaction to something that causes harm is anger and rejection. Anger and blame identify someone or something as responsible for the problem and put the focus onto those people or things. Anger is an emotion that draws the person together and makes them feel strong and ready for doing something, even if there is nothing to do. Blame targets an identifiable person as the cause of the pain and responsible for what has happened. Anger and blame combine to try and counteract the sense of helplessness and having to accept the loss. They are a natural antidote to the disorganising effects of anxiety, which creates high levels of emotional energy for which there is no outlet.

However, anger and blame usually oversimplify complex events and rarely help get through traumatic grief, but can increase the stress, friction and isolation, especially when people blame each other – even if only in their hearts.

“For a long time I had a lot of anger, asking why and blaming everyone.”
(Deborah – parent of young child)

“I was confused at the time. I found it so hard to accept what the hell had just happened... like you’re just so angry because you don’t get it. Where did this come from? How did this happen?” (Katelin – 18 years)

An important and particularly painful aspect of anger is the tendency for people to blame themselves. It is almost inevitable that those responsible for others who die or go through traumatic experiences will blame themselves for having failed in their duties. Self-blame is the price of love, since we want to protect those we love from harm and if we cannot, we naturally hold ourselves responsible. These feelings are not restricted to parents; children feel them for parents and friends; neighbours, friends and even strangers can blame themselves for the death of people with whom they have had contact with.

“I don’t feel like I blame them [my parents], but I want to ask them if they blame themselves. I don’t because I wouldn’t know how to help them if they do.” (Ellie – 22 years)

Feelings of isolation

One of the most painful reactions is the feeling that there is no longer the bond of common understanding those whose support is needed. The essence of trauma is that assumptions about the world are changed and only those who have experienced it understand; while others think they do, often they do not and this is revealed in well-meaning comments or actions which do not hit the spot and increase the sense of being alone. Even among those affected, there are feelings of isolation because a traumatic experience or the loss of a loved one mean something different for everyone involved. Often feelings of isolation interfere with communication among those who need to understand each other most.

“I just think that we have all been through a hellish experience. Everybody’s story is different, but the feelings of isolation, the feelings of separation from the rest of normality have been a common theme” (Carol – parent of young person)

“My children and I have felt isolated, having to start a new life, and a new identity without choice. For me it has been very hard to accept these changes.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“You feel more isolated – that people just don’t understand.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Keeping busy

One of the most important tasks in surviving traumatic grief is to protect against being overwhelmed by the painful feelings and a common way of doing this is to divert attention onto the real world, to take on demanding tasks and get involved with other people or projects that take the focus off the grief. This is an important method and helps people keep a sense of being able to achieve things.

“The biggest thing amongst us... is that we want to be so busy. We want to put it in the back of our minds, busy, busy, busy. Exhausted, go to sleep that night if you can. Get up the next day, busy, busy, busy. Put it behind us, just keep on going... and the house, busy, busy, busy.” (Ray – parent of young person)

“On a pragmatic level there’s probably a few things that probably helped me over the last however long it’s been. One was building a new house.” (Dave – parent of young adult)

“Carolyn and her mum did the Sue Evans Foundation and we were all asked to contribute what we could... I think that has been an amazing thing for all of us, the book and the friendships made.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“My husband’s way to cope was to get involved in everything he possibly could – committees, rebuilding.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“I keep busy doing what I can with our community.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

Masks

The need to cope with everyday tasks, especially doing everything required after a natural disaster, in addition to traumatic grief means wherever possible, people rely on familiar routines and roles to help them. This can mean what is presented to the world and other people may seem to be how they are, but is only a public face and half the story. They appear to be doing what is needed, even cheerful and in control of emotions, but behind it, pain, confusion and distress remain. While this gives a sense of control for the person, it is misleading to those around who easily misjudge their real condition and may not offer much needed support.

“On the surface I am highly functioning, articulate, like a pretty looking handbag, but inside the handbag is chaotic.” (Deidre – parent of young children)



Caption

“There are two me’s and to the public me Ellie will say ‘Oh, have you been strong, brave and courageous today?’ because she knows it winds me up terribly. And that’s the public me. But behind that is a shattered, broken person.” (Carol – parent of young person)

“The kids feel the same as we do. We’ve talked before about wearing a mask and then when everyone’s gone to bed at night you take the mask off and just be yourself. But... just trying to get through a day with people who haven’t been affected at all, it’s a struggle to get through.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“ It’s interesting, we saw some pictures... at the Commission that the kids had done in high school and they were pictures of the mask... I thought it was really interesting that we talk about the mask that we put on so that people don’t see and yet there were these pictures of the teenagers with the masks as well.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I think it’s human instinct to try and be strong at the core. And I think when you’re struggling which we all were in our own way – it’s instinct

when someone says 'How are you going?' to say 'Oh, I'm fine.'. But if you take the filter out you could say 'Well, I'm really struggling because I've just experienced this massive problem in my life.' ” (Adam – 20s)

“People try to ask how you're going and you say 'I'm fine, really I'm fine... Yeah, yeah I'm fine' because you just don't want to have to go 'Well, actually, no, I'm not fine' because how can they relate to you not being fine.”
(Katelin – 18 years)

Regression

Trauma and grief cause feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and lack of safety. The overwhelming nature of these feelings can result in going back to an earlier stage of development which felt more secure. This is called “regression”; children may act younger than they are and return to doing things that they had mastered before. Children who were independent may become clingy and dependent on their parents again, younger children might start to wet the bed again. This can be worrying, frustrating and emotionally demanding on parents and also on the children. But adults can also regress. They may go through periods of loss of self-confidence, needing support and encouragement, having to have help to make decisions or confront difficulties, wanting to avoid responsibilities or acting in ways that are not mature and responsible.

“Isaac was fully toilet trained before the fires and never wet the bed. But he wet the bed constantly after their deaths. It's the body's way of coping, of allowing him to cry and feel his grief; it's a visual way for us to see this little three year old is in crisis mode and that he doesn't know what to do. It was a way of us seeing, he needed extra support.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“A month or 2 after the fires I put my son into short-term day care for one day a week so we could do things on the block. They rang us 20 minutes later and said 'You have to pick him up' – he was lying prostrate, face down on the floor, screaming. Before the fires the children were confident and very happy. We had to take a massive step back to allow them to be as dependent

on us as they needed to be to minimise their stress, although this didn't minimise ours." (Deidre – parent of young children)

"For me, one of the most shocking things was to see my bright, beautiful, independent young woman regress to being a vulnerable child. She was only 19 and her brother was dead, and all that was familiar was gone. We didn't have our home, all her possessions were gone... I had to put her to bed at night. We had to follow the same bed time routines and rituals that she had known as a child and I had to stay with her until she fell asleep. This went on for at least 6 months. She needed that security of what life used to be like – simple and safe. She would say 'Mum, I'm never going to be able to grow up now. I'm always going to be stuck like this.' I would say 'No. You will, there will come a time when you have had enough of this and you will be ready to move on.'" (Carol – parent of young adult)

Tantrums

Younger children have fewer ways of expressing the intense emotional states of traumatic grief. They also feel anxiety, grief, anger, regression and isolation. However, they lack the self awareness or words to communicate their confusion, pain, fear or loneliness. They too may put up masks and try to cope with the routines of daily life, only to find that all the pent up distress comes out at once when there is a small upset, an unexpected change in routine or the frustration of something they want. These tantrums are an important sign of children trying to regain a sense of control in their world. Giving them control in well defined areas helps them adapt to what they cannot be in control of.

"We noticed with both the children, particularly with our 4 year old, that she was out of control, literally unable to manage how she felt so she tried to control all of us. She'd have lots of tantrums and screaming and things would escalate very quickly. We're still working with them, and both are still struggling now." (Deidre – parent of young children)

"With my son in particular the changes are behavioural problems: angry outbursts, withdrawal from usual social activities or playing with other

children, frequent nightmares or sleep disturbances, depression or sense of hopelessness, anxiety about life or the future. He mentions death a lot, losing his father to cancer – he thinks it's normal.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“So many things were given to them and they learned at a really young age, two and four, that they could have anything they wanted and didn't have to earn it. It was very overwhelming for them and, as parents, we didn't have the capacity at that point to manage it; particularly so because we had children who lost everything that was familiar and people were trying to fill a void. And it very much became a learned behaviour for them. In a material sense and in their cognitive development, it's a real problem for us, even now.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Impact on school, university and work life

While activities of daily life can provide a framework of support and help to keep going in the midst of traumatic grief, if they demand too much attention, emotional energy and creativity, they cause overload and become too difficult to deal with. Competition between attending to the person's own needs and those of the world result in either keeping on functioning at the expense of the self, or they are abandoned or greatly simplified to cope with the grief. Often there is a period when the old routine is maintained before there is the realisation that it is too much. Work or study are abandoned reluctantly because they carry the promise of the future or are a way of keeping a sense of being normal and capable. Yet decisions to put grief first for a while, often have the best outcome in the long run. What is hard to accept is that traumatic grief will disrupt previous life plans; but successful recovery is the basis for building a new future and must be given the time and energy required for each person.

“It was an extremely busy time in our daughter Sally's life, and then there was university, the last year of her nursing degree. And she said she had to keep going. I had to wait for her decision. She is the only one who could

make it. She couldn't concentrate, but I really had to respect her decision and wait for her to do that. She had a break, and then went back but reduced her study load. She finished her course in 2010." (Jill – parent of young person)

"That year Callum struggled at school. He struggled to read." (Karen – parent of young children)

"It was a week before I was back at uni. I had big hopes for that year, it was my second year at uni... I was really pumped for that year. The day it [the bushfires] happened, I actually found a house to rent with some friends and then after that it was just like 'Screw it. What's the point?' I dropped out of uni. It was like 'Yeah, whatever, I'll just like work in retail'." (Ellie – 22 years)

"The decision to leave had to be her decision to make and she struggled to make it for ages, and ages. I was so relieved when she made it as I no longer felt the pressure to make her attend lectures. Ellie once said that I must be so disappointed in her now that she left University and I told her that she couldn't be more wrong, after all that she had been through, I just wanted her to be happy. She then got really cross and shouted that she was disappointed in herself." (Carol – parent of young adult)

"My first week of secondary school, Year 7, was nothing like I expected it to be. I knew I would be feeling anxious and nervous, but I did not expect to have this overwhelming sadness and grief to deal with as well. Changing from primary school to secondary school was tough enough without any friends, but to have to overcome such a horrible tragedy was not fair for a 12 year old boy. It happened 2 years ago, I still have many bad memories of that horrible Saturday that happened to change every member of my family's life in a matter of seconds." (Ben – 14 years)

"I had so much hope for my VCE. It's the be all and end all. If I don't get this score my life is over. I suppose it's a bad thing in a way, but I sort of thought like 'What's the point?'" (Katelin – 18 years)

“Yeah, I had the same thing, like “What’s the point?”... I had big hopes for that year... but I dropped out of uni.” (Ellie – 22 years)

“I nearly lost my job... twice now, at the one shop. I had my manager come up to me twice and say ‘What is wrong?... You don’t care about anything. You just have this ‘I don’t care attitude’ and that’s not what we want’... Things like that really make you go ‘Well, okay. I need to think about how much I really value this job or value whatever it is and stick at it’... It’s sort of like a war with yourself – do you let it control your life or do you live with it?” (Katelin – 18 years)

TRAUMATIC GRIEF CAN AFFECT RELATIONSHIPS

Traumatic bereavement brings about changes in relationships – with partners, children, siblings, family, friends, work colleagues, peer group and wider social networks. The demands of coping with their own feelings, trying to keep on top of pain and despair makes everyone focus on themselves. At the same time, each person in the family or friendship group needs support from the others, but no one has anything extra to give. So it is easy for everyone to feel disappointed by the others.

Relationships come under pressure, misunderstandings are easy and the lack of care and emotional communication cause isolation. Small routines of consideration and mutual care get lost; it feels too hard to be polite or thoughtful when you are struggling just to cope with sadness and keep going; and you feel hurt that you are not getting the same care yourself as you give. Friction and impatience build up as people interact in their daily activities. What should give security and confidence can become the cause of hurt and tensions.

Common pain brings people closer together if they are able to keep in mind what they share. Those close to the loss feel they have a common problem, which family and friends less involved do not understand. Sometimes, however, shared pain pulls people apart. No two people react to traumatic grief in the same way. Those who died played a different role in each person's life; each person's emotional relationship with them was different and what is missed is actually not the same, even if the pain is similar.

Good communication is needed to share the differences and realise that even though the sufferings are not the same, they have a common cause; and what is shared is the loss itself. Communicating about feelings and the day-to-day disappointments can bring people closer if each person concentrates on helping the others to understand them and they in turn are interested to know how the person is.

It is not so much solving problems that brings people closer, as understanding. The communication process itself brings people together and is the healing agent rather than what the conversation is about.

Anxiety coming from loss of security and confidence can cause parents to become over-protective of children. At the same time, children who experienced trauma and tragedy, can become over-protective of parents, although it often means taking on responsibility too great for their years. In this way, the stress of working through traumatic grief can result in family members losing their normal family role and taking on roles that may adversely affected them or they may not be able to fulfil.

Children may take on parental roles, looking after their parents, keeping their own needs back and not relaxing and doing what is normal for their age. But this makes it hard for them to get what they need for the various stages of their development and later, they may feel unable to cope with responsibilities. In the same way, adults may change roles and each partner leaves responsibilities to the other; or they protect each other or children from their sadness and cause others to feel isolated and feelings become blunted. These reactions can change the structure of family relationships over the years of the traumatic grief journey.

A further isolating influence in relationships is people not knowing what to say to each other. Friends and family not so affected are uncertain and afraid of hurting those in pain and avoid direct communicating or even contact altogether. It leaves those grieving feeling abandoned and their disappointment encourages them withdraw too. What is most helpful is normal, caring communication that acknowledges what has happened but values them.

The following comments about relationship stresses were made between two and three years after the bushfires.

Family relationships

Change in family relationships is inevitable, but awareness of it can help to make sure it is not destructive.

“In Ben’s story he says he wishes his family could be the way that they used to be. So, obviously, he’s seen a change in us.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“[After the fires] my daughter and family arrived from the UK and we all lived with my son. It was a very emotional and upsetting time for us all, trying to cope with our loss, facing all the things that had to be done, so stressful.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“We had no family around because family didn’t know what to say us, so they disappeared. And then it was too long, and they felt too bad so they couldn’t come round any more.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“We’ve probably become a bit closer.” (Dave – parent of young adult)

Relationships with friends

Many young people who experience traumatic bereavement feel it sets them apart from friends who lack a similar experience. Because of their grief and the life changing experience, it’s hard for them to relate to and feel supported by peers, or for their peers to relate to and support them. Traumatic grief forever creates new, dramatically different reference points by which difficulties, problems and frustrations will be judged.

“What else I found, after something like this happens everyone else seems petty. Little things... to them it’s like the end of the world. So you find it so hard to relate to them.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“You find it really hard to relate to them yet, at the same time, you’re like ‘It’s not their fault.’ But you want to get really angry at them. You’re like ‘What the hell are you going on about that for? Look at what’s happened to me.’ ” (Ellie – 22 years)

Sometimes, there is an awareness of how hard it is for friends to repeatedly try to comfort the grieving one and fail to make it any better. This in turn may lead to a desire to protect the friends from such unyielding despair.

“I think it was really hard on some of my friends. At the same time as you can criticise these people in your life and you have a perception of them letting you down, it’s also important to remember it’s bloody hard for them. It’s hard for anybody when their friend goes through something uniquely catastrophic to them and you’re trying to help, but you don’t actually understand. I was really lucky, my friends understood, but some people just didn’t know how to touch it.” (Adam – 20s)

“I didn’t always talk to my friends about the situation I went through because they had no idea what it was like and how to deal with it.” (Finn – 20 years)

Many young people feel they can only share with a peer who has a similar experience and want to seek them out. However, others feel the last thing they want is to be exposed to someone else’s grief when they are struggling with their own.

“I think also it’s not something that happens every day; it’s not like dying from old age. It’s something that was so unique and so unexpected that you can only turn to the people that [really know] because who else can really relate.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“If they do [say they have lost someone] sometimes you just have to smile and try not to say anything bad... ‘Yeah, it’s like when my grandmother died’... Well, like no... your grandmother was 85.” (Ellie – 22 years)

“It seems a lot harder when you’re younger. At least when you’re older, more of the people you know will have experienced some sort of loss at some point. With younger people, barely anyone I know has experienced any kind of loss.” (Ellie – 22 years)

People grieve differently

Grief is a very individual process. There is no right or wrong way, and people should do what they need as long as it doesn't cause harm. Cultural differences also influence the way people express their grief. Misunderstandings and tension can arise within families and between individuals when they have different needs and ideas about grief, its expression and what is considered acceptable. Some people are more openly expressive, showing and talking about their feelings readily. Others focus on 'thinking and doing'. This can vary within the same person at different times. Sometimes there are moments of normality, such as when children or teenagers play and laugh in the midst of family grief, which can be difficult for adults to tolerate. What stands out from parents' and children's comments is the importance of respecting and supporting each other's journey.

What adults say

"Everyone has their very own grief and journey through it. It's okay for one person to be retreating, another to be wailing." (Steph – parent of young people)

"I've got six siblings and most of them live interstate and... they would come to visit, but they would say 'We're really nervous about facing you; it's hard to be with you'. They were really honest. You know they were grieving too... everything had changed for them too." (Jill – parent of young person)

"I think knowing that I couldn't help my sister at all, sort of helping the people there with whatever skills I had was important for me... to help the community however I could I thought was important". (Stuart – parent of young people)

"We've met a lot of people in Strathewen ... You speak to a number of people and none of their experiences are the same on that day, they're different for everyone. It's the same fire, but how people experience it is quite different." (Stuart – parent of young people)

“My in-laws couldn’t stand being at my place because our kids were being kids downstairs... Their view is ‘You don’t laugh and you don’t squeal and have fun. Everybody should be sad.’ But to us, they’re our kids, that’s how we wanted them to be. It wasn’t that they weren’t sad, they were terribly sad, but it was just the different types of families.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

What young people say

“I think a lot of people sort of have it in their head that there’s always one way to deal with everything, like it’s a procedure... but I think in traumatic times like that you can’t think that there’s only one way. Everyone’s different and everybody finds different things soothing.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“It’s hard to find the balance talking about it, especially with family and friends because everyone sort of goes through it on different levels. You might be feeling that you are having somewhat of a good day and you can cope with it and then someone else might be going ‘Oh, I don’t know what’s going on. I can’t cope today.’ But you feel like if you start talking about it, you’ll fall as well.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“We all had our moments, but I think it’s really important that people respect other people’s journey. It’s always different.” (Adam – 20s)

“I think for me, everyone had a different experience with it, but we all managed to stay together really well. Somebody may be having a hilarious time watching a comedy because they’ve managed to put it on the backseat for a bit, while someone else is having a teary moment somewhere else in the house because everyone deals with it at different times and has their different ups and downs. But I found that everyone was really respectful of each other. I think that the thing is to let people be sad when they feel sad and also let them be happy.” (Adam – 20s)

“Mum and I are very upfront in how we feel, so if we want to cry, we cry. I think for me it was important that Dad just felt comfortable to openly feel how he felt. I don’t think I was sitting here waiting for him to do something differently. For me it was just important he felt if he needed to, that he could

do that, he could feel how he felt, openly. This [home] is a safe place and it's somewhere where you should be able to be open enough to do that."
(Adam – 20s)

"I don't think I saw my dad cry about it. I was wondering whether he was upset... I was doubting his sadness. I knew it probably would have been there, but it wasn't obvious." (Anna – 19 years)

Putting your grief on hold

While grief initially takes over and pushes everything else aside, after a while other important things compete for attention. Where these things are essential for survival, such as physical recovery from injury or illness and are necessary for the future or for maintaining a sense of competence, they may take precedence over the grief. This is not a deliberate decision, but anxiety about what else has to be done pushes grief into the background. The grief is likely to come back to the fore when other problems are resolved, injuries have healed, exams are over and others are celebrating, after moving into the rebuilt house or overdue leave from work has been taken.

It is important to respect these moments and give them the time they need even if they do not fit in with what others expect. Communicating grief when it is present is essential to its gradual resolution. In this way the traumatic grief journey has many twists and turns, going back and forth with a different path for each person.

"Some young people can't grieve at the time, maybe because of VCE or illness. It's important that parents notice the signs that the young person is starting to grieve now and how. The easiest time to grieve is when everyone else is. As parents, it is our role to work out how we can help unlock their grief. A chronological account of the day is important; keeping journals and all the information so that it is available when it is needed by others down the track." (Steph – parent of young people)

"My son, Chris, was 22 at the time of the fires. He came along to the memorial service for my deceased brother and sister-in-law, but was not really

in touch with his feelings until nearly 2 years later, when he suddenly decided he wanted to spend some time in Marysville, where my brother and sister-in-law had lived and died. He found that quite confronting.” (Vera – parent of young person)

Children’s grief

Where grief tends to isolate, communication about it moves the journey along, especially between parents and children. Parents may see the grief not expressed in children or be surprised by unexpected revelations by them. While the hurt cannot be taken away, knowing it is recognised and understood by those closest make it easier for children to bear. Communication itself is what helps. Successful communication makes possible an understanding of how different the impacts and pathways to recovery are.

What parents say

“There is nothing more painful than watching your children hurt. Seeing them really, really sad and not knowing how best to help. You can get drawn into their grief. The challenge is to understand your own grief and to take care of yourself. You can then genuinely help your children without being sad and deeply drawn into their grief.” (Fiona – parent of young people)

“I would want to say to parents not to expect their children to grieve the same way and at the same time as you and to keep the door open to them for a long time after the event, as they may not wish to discuss things until years later.” (Vera – parent of young person)

“When Greg died, it was weeks really before Sally would come up and give me a cuddle. I said ‘Sal what’s wrong? You know, you’re so busy, you’re always going out.’ And she said ‘Mum, what do you expect me to do? You’ve lost your favourite child.’ I thought ‘my goodness’. I grabbed her and said ‘Oh, Sally, you’re so right. I’ve lost my favourite son, but you’re my favourite daughter’. I began to respect and understand her grief journey, too. Her grief journey was quite different to mine.” (Jill – parent of young person)

“She was very much surrounded by a lot of young people from church... But I really wanted to hold my child, my remaining child. No matter how old she was I just wanted to hold this girl and I know it was hard for her to be held by this bereaved woman, whether it’s her mother or not. I was very hard to be with.” (Jill – parent of young person)

“It’s like you were saying you wanted to hold your son and comfort him, but I couldn’t have that. He had a wife and he had his children and I was always the strong one. From the day Peter died I had to take control.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“I don’t want them to forget Trey and Lyric. I don’t want them to put them in the back of their mind and pretend that they never existed, yet I’m still not at a place yet where I can have photos up. One day I will. Ben’s got all his photos on his iPhone and stuff.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

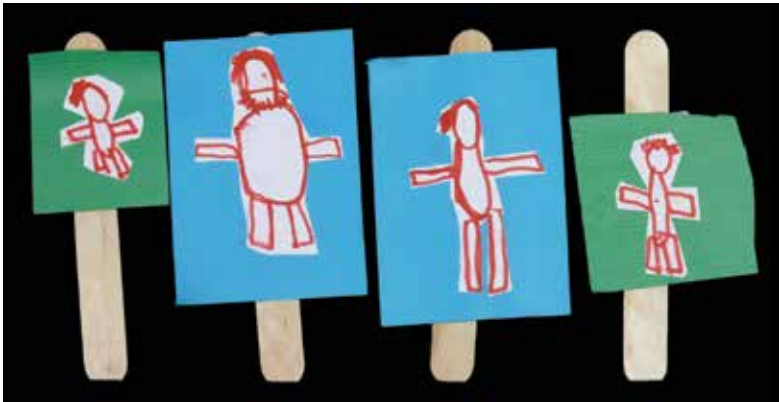
“I was concerned that my daughter didn’t seem to be grieving, but when I would check with her about how she was feeling she’d say ‘But you’ve lost so much more than me mum, you were so much closer to them’. I know she was close to them and try to remind her of that.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“I noticed that when I’d ask someone ‘How are your kids getting on?’ they’d often say ‘Oh, they haven’t really responded much. It doesn’t seem to have really hit them. So they’re still going off and doing this and doing that, going to sports and school and doing whatever.’ But I felt concerned that those kids are feeling something and they’re somewhere on that pathway.” (Steph – parent of young people)

What young people say

“A parent can try and approach their kid and expect that their children are going to respond to them straight away, but it might not be the right way in their eyes. I’ve heard that a lot, like talking with friends and stuff. They all have their different experiences over the years... coming to an acceptance of everything that’s happened. Parents should just be patient and just be there overall.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“As long as the young person’s not doing anything dangerous, like drugs or over drinking or anything like that, then whatever they’re doing to cope is fine. I know that mum struggled a lot with the fact that she loves to talk... and I don’t. I won’t go to therapy or anything like that and she can’t deal with that. Just accept that as long as it’s not harmful there’s no wrong way.”
(Ellie – 22 years)



Caption

EXTRA COMPLICATIONS FOLLOWING DISASTERS

When traumatic grief occurs as part of a disaster, a number of other dimensions complicate an already difficult journey. In disasters many people and whole communities are affected; they attract national and international attention and take on political significance. There are destruction of home and environment, loss of possessions and amenities and disruption of the whole way of life. Grief competes for attention with finding somewhere to live, replacing lost possessions, applying for assistance and replacement documents, negotiating with insurance companies and multiple other unfamiliar agencies.

Disasters involve a collective dimension which attracts the community's attention via the media exposing private emotions. Disasters are felt by the nation and each affected person is also a symbol of the event and the object of interest and sympathy. Loss of privacy is sudden and general and includes media interest, temporary accommodation and intense involvement with other affected people. Exposure to others' situation as well as your own can be confusing, since there always seems someone worse off. It is hard to work out the meaning of your own loss when normal reference points have gone with the trauma. There is so much to do, so many people to interact with, so much is new and unfamiliar that it is hard to find stability and privacy to feel what has happened.

The public nature of grief from disasters

The community significance of the disaster can be supportive and comforting especially in public memorial and anniversary events. However, at the same time it may be difficult to work out how your private grief fits in. The disaster becomes a historical event with many people expressing views about it; official inquiries and media discussion may seem to keep overlooking the personal pain of the loss of particular individuals. It is important for people to find the

balance and ensure they create their own private opportunities to remember.

“If it had of just been a house fire due to faulty wiring or something can you just have imagined the difference it would have made – if you took out the big spectacle of the whole thing and the mass scale. The media, Royal Commissions and Coroners... It’s just important to understand the gravity of it... For a kid, especially, it’s so overwhelming.

...And you walk into one of those rooms [where bereaved people have gathered] and in a way you’ve got so much to do with these people, but in a way they are invading the personal grieving space of your family. And as much as you are sad, it’s like you have to share this grief with all these random people [referring to anniversary memorial services]

...and now this term called ‘Black Saturday’... It’s become a big thing, a day in history, a big circus... It’s quite hard to comprehend.” (Adam – 20s)

Media exposure

Media interest helps communicate what has happened to the wider community. Sensitive presentations give those affected a sense of having their story told which helps bridge feelings of isolation common after traumatic grief. At the same time, it keeps bringing back the worst moments, often by recycled images and statistics and makes it hard to move past the terrible moments of impact. It is important to balance the value of being accurately represented and having your story told with protection from the constant exposure to the media attention and being unable to get away from everyone else’s story.

“That’s the nature of society – to focus on whatever is the headline of the day. In some respects, though, it’s hard when the media go on about it every day in the news and then when they stopped talking about it, it was hard as well. You’re really sensitive to it. missing bodies and lists of names that kept growing and shrinking and statistics. but the media grabbed these number and kept promoting them.” (Adam – 20s)

"I didn't watch too much TV or media." (Steph – parent of young people)

"Protect young children from fire ads when it's coming into the fire season..."
(Naomi – parent of young children)

"...the endless interviews with... the media". (Mary – parent and grandparent)

Coronial and Police Processes

The involvement of police and coronial processes bring an official dimension with procedures which seem impersonal and following purposes far removed from the grief of loved ones. The official need to be sure and follow protocols involves delays that make the whole experience harder to bear. When there are many deceased, identification may be protracted and keep the painful initial feelings alive until funerals can be held.

"...Then the weeks ahead of waiting for the Coroner to release our loved one... the endless interviews with police..." (Mary – parent and grandparent)

"We had been told it would be quite some time before we had our family and we had insisted that we wanted the four all together, we didn't want them individually. So we were prepared to take however long it took to get them all together... We had no idea how long that was going to be." (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

"We had to wait seven weeks for forensics... it's such a complicated process. [It leads to] a lot of speculation – where are all these bodies?" (Adam – 20s)

"Because our son had died in this 'national disaster' he became the property of the Coroner and we had no idea of when he would be given back to us. We were determined to have a funeral service but we just didn't know when that would be." (Carol – parent of young adult)

Delays in funerals

It may be weeks or months after the disaster before funerals can be held. This creates a great challenge both emotionally and how to express publicly what has happened. Normally, the funeral is the culmination of the first stage of the impact and the beginning of adjusting to the loss, but delays may mean a need for other forms of memorial service or commemoration before the return of loved ones' remains.

“It was five months, I think, between the fires and the funeral.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“...The memorials that families like ours organised because there's such a... long time between the fires and people being identified that families did want to have Memorial Services so they could have something.” (Stuart – parent of young people)

“The weeks that followed were agonising, particularly for Ellie and all Sam's young friends. They needed a place where they could come together to talk about Sam, share memories, laugh and cry. It was eight weeks before Sam came back to us. During that time we had spent so much time talking about, crying and grieving for Sam. As a group, we decided that his funeral should not be a sombre tragic event, it would be a celebration of his life, of who he was.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

HOW PARENTING CAN BE AFFECTED

Grieving and parenting is difficult

Parents struggle to deal with their own grief, yet at the same time, they have to be aware of their children's grief. All this has to be done while still trying to meet the demands of everyday living in challenging circumstances; for many parents and their children it is without the comfort, stability, security, familiarity and safety of living in their own home with their own possessions, because they were destroyed in the disaster.

Parents often do not realise at the time, that their own trauma and grief mean they aren't able to be fully available to their children, especially emotionally. Children and young people also express their grief differently from adults, so traumatically grieving parents may not pick up the signs that their children are struggling. It is very important for parents to draw on someone else who is close to their children who can be available to support them. But this does not change the fact that somehow – even in the depths of their own grief – the children want their own parents to connect with their grief and recognise how they are.

One difficulty is that unless parents and children keep communicating with each other about how they change from time to time, the stress of the grief tends to make everyone subside into themselves without realising they have lost contact because they are putting all their attention into coping with their own situation. It is valuable to establish a routine of taking stock of things in the family and checking in with each other early in the traumatic grief journey to avoid a backlog of tension, of feelings of isolation and misunderstanding.

“You try to keep all the balls in the air, you drop them, pick them up again, keep going... You fly through grief by the seat of your pants most of the time.”
(Steph – parent of young people)

“I think, too, as parents maybe you need to tag team a bit, which we did. [It is good] If one parent can be a bridge, keeping their hands out connecting with the kids and connecting with the other partner. I don’t know that we always did it perfectly, but I was always conscious of trying to do that.”
(Steph – parent of young people)

“I found it incredibly hard. When you are so devastated and heartbroken yourself, how do you actually support your child when you haven’t got the energy, you haven’t got the will, you haven’t the motivation? Yet there’s this instinct in you, ... it doesn’t matter how old your children are, ... that says ‘I need to protect this person’ ”. (Carol – parent of young adult)

“You become self-absorbed with your grief. But you still need to be able to maintain decent enough parenting, to be in tune with your kids, notice when they do things out of character, which is hard to do when you are grieving. Others who are close to the children might see what you don’t, so seek their advice and support.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“I just remember thinking that she is now our only child. I knew that this was going to be a defining moment in her life, but I wanted to make sure it didn’t destroy her life and that there would be times in the years after where she would have light and joy in her life, as well as living with the loss of her brother.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

The stress of traumatic grief can absorb so much attention that it is easy to forget things and let them drift. Maintaining the routines of normal life wherever possible can be a valuable support to preserve relationships and the reassuring patterns of daily life until it is possible to stop and take stock of how everyone is.

“From day one I just kept my kids in routine: I sent them to school, fed, clothed them, cleaned the house, but I don’t remember any of it... Little Lachie was two and a half, he didn’t understand, but he dragged me through. He’s what kept me going. He still had to have his nappy changed and be fed. I was lucky in that way, but I don’t remember it.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“You can do everything you can to meet their physical and educational needs, but there’s not much ability to meet their emotional needs. We were so distracted and unavailable emotionally for our children... Your body’s still alive, but there is a switch in your mind that’s switched off.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“Children need their parents – they need someone to give them their parents back. I don’t know how you do that. Parents are so distracted with essentials [like food and clothes] – it takes the loving act of parenting away from parents. Children recognise that their parents are not truly there – they’re jumping up and down for their loving attention and parents don’t know how to do this properly anymore... A lot of mothers don’t talk about it because of the expectations to be a super mother .” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“When they tested boundaries and we would try to enforce them, they would start screaming; that would trigger off our own trauma and we would do anything to stop the noise. So discipline has not been great in the house.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“Through my experience, I felt I wasn’t always there for my children. At times I neglected my responsibilities as a parent. I would often try to numb the bad memories and flashbacks by consuming alcohol. Also lack of sleep, concentration and not allowing myself to accept it had just made things worse. It was like absorbing myself in my own little world.” (Deborah – parent of young children)

“You might think ‘Oh, they seem to be alright, it doesn’t seem to have affected them at all or it hasn’t hit them’, and I think that may not be right because you’re not able to read your own kids because of where you’re at. That’s why sometimes an outside person will look at those kids and think that things are not okay there.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Patrick was about two years old and was affected in other ways through me. He knew something was wrong with mum. He was more challenging to deal with because you can’t communicate and explain why you’re upset. I relied on my husband a lot to do the parenting of Patrick. I was emotional and just

didn't have the patience. I was too exhausted emotionally and physically to deal with a two year old. I've worked very hard to rebuild my relationship with Patrick. Now it's healthy and strong." (Naomi – parent of young children)

"He [our son] told us later that the first year had been horrible for him, as we, his parents, had not really been 'there'. We were in a different, very sad place. Meals etc were also very haphazard that first year and routines did not exist much. However, as parents, my husband Ben and I were paralysed in a way." (Vera – parent of young person)

While grieving parents inevitably will not be able to meet all their children's needs for a time, there is a reserve of goodwill and love that can be drawn on during the traumatic grief journey. It is not necessary that parents put their own feelings aside and meet all their children's needs. What protects them is that family members can acknowledge what they would like to do even if they are unable to achieve it at present. This communicates the important thing, that they love and care about each other and want to help even if at the moment they cannot. This forms the basis for making things right later on.

All parents can do is try their best and keep communicating their love and care to their children and their determination to get through it together in spite of the hiccups and failures. This establishes the baseline of care which will allow everyone to keep in touch with their real motives and not get sidetracked by what they might imagine is going on with the others.

Young people say...

"Parents need to not forget their role as a parent and their duty to... maintain the home." (Adam – 20s)

"I think a lot of kids had their world sort of turned upside down in a way, initially by the actual event, but then by all the [community events] that happened afterwards. All these things, all these different sorts of days, these

chats, these coffees... We were lucky, we could kind of choose if we went to them or not.” (Adam – 20s)

Practical issues

When house and possessions have been lost as well as loved ones, it becomes essential for parents to work out how to tackle the practical tasks of recovery without losing sight of the traumatic grief journey the whole family has to take. It is inevitable that they will focus on one aspect at the expense of the other and then swing back the other way.

“So once we saw that the kids were doing okay, then we started to be able to start doing a bit more and then we went crazy and had to do everything at once.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“One of the hardest things initially was having to turn up to Relief Centres with children in tow to fill out papers, especially young children... Also, trying to manage traumatised children – trying to make them feel safe was impossible. No one felt safe. We didn’t have a home to go back to.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Loss of normal family behaviour

The important thing is for parents to do what they can and what works for them without losing confidence in themselves or their parenting ability. It is natural that many normal aspects of family life will be suspended for a time and everyone will improvise to get through as best they can. If parents keep their overall aims of parenting in mind – to give security and confidence and comfort their children – they will come though it together and not be damaged. When they are able to, the children will be encouraged to resume their development. As long as these aims are being met, the details of how it is done or what normal practices are put aside do not matter in the short term. It is the emotions and relationships that are important rather than the behaviours.

“A lot of what they [health professionals] said made sense, but we couldn’t put it in place. Some advice was ‘When your children are out of control and unable to self-soothe, create a womb-like place for them, a safe place, and give them a lolly pop to suck on to self-soothe.’ When we went back later and they asked us how we went, we said that we used our bed as a safe place for them. They said ‘You can’t use the parents’ bed as a place for them to self-soothe.’ We live in a caravan – that’s the only place we’ve got. You feel more isolated when people just don’t understand.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Guilt

Guilt is the natural reaction to not being able to do what we believe is right or we want to do. It is after all the result of the love family members have for each other that they want to do more, to take pain away, to be available, find solutions and make them feel better. But there are many moments on the traumatic grief journey when this is not possible and we have to be content with keeping them company in their suffering – perhaps with our own – instead of taking it away. This is enough to help everyone get through and parents should take confidence from the fact that being aware of what they want to do but cannot and sharing it with their children helps everyone accept the limitations of the situation and forgive what they do not get.

“Grieving parents can be really hard on themselves, wanting to be the perfect mother, the perfect wife. I suffered from mother guilt terribly and I still do. I used a crèche for respite; but hated that someone else was looking after my kids.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“There were times where I focused solely on myself because I couldn’t cope with anyone else’s pain. Then there would be this terrible guilt when you realised that this younger person, with less experience of life than you, suddenly has had her life torn apart.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“I had a lot of guilt that year because Callum struggled at school. He struggled to read and I had all this guilt because I couldn’t help him because

I wasn't in a place to help him. I was there, I was their mum, but couldn't help in any way except do what was routine because it was like rote, you just did it. But if you had asked me to step outside that comfort zone, I couldn't do it." (Karen – parent of young children)

"I remember Ellie and I were talking with a young mum who had lost her house in the fire. Her husband just wanted to get on with rebuilding and would tell her to pull herself together. Her 5 year old hated it when she cried and would get really angry and say 'Don't cry mummy'. This mum felt this terrible guilt and she said to me, 'I wonder if it wouldn't be better for them to be in foster care for a year or so.' And she said 'I feel so bad and so guilty about saying that' Ellie turned around and said 'Oh, don't worry about that. My mum wants to put me in deep freeze for a year'. I saw the relief on her face... that somebody else had struggled with the same feelings." (Carol – parent of young adult)

Parents may be over-protective of children

The traumatic aspect of the disaster undermines everyone's confidence in the world, nature and life in general. The fact that such terrible events have crashed into the normality of everyday life means it will only be possible to regain confidence slowly as a result of no further disasters for some time. While time is passing, it is inevitable there will be a heightened sense of threat. The reaction to this is to try and remove all threat, danger and everything unpredictable. Even if this were possible, it would mean wrapping everyone in cotton wool and protecting them from the real world. This is a painful time in which parents need to rebuild their confidence in their children and try to balance their anxiety with the children's need to continue to grow in independence.

"I find that if they go somewhere and I'm meant to pick them up and they're not there, or I'm late, I panic – it's 'Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god... but I don't relay it to them'. You know these are very sensible kids. I find it's me with the problem now..."

...I think it's because it's a one in a million chance that something will happen – when you have had something like this [the bushfires] happen, that one in a million chance has happened to you.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“One of the most important lessons Ellie taught me was not to always be the strong one. I felt like I was the Duracell bunny. I was running on so much adrenaline and I had to be strong, strong... Ellie took me aside one day and she picked a fight with me – and I reacted and she said ‘Why do you have to be so bloody strong all the time. Why won't you let me help you?’ She was really angry about it. She said ‘I know that you cry and I want to be there to comfort you and you won't let me’. And I thought ‘Yes, she's right. She needs to know that I am vulnerable and scared too I wanted her to express her emotions and her feelings and to cry and yet I was trying to protect her from my raw emotion.’ ” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“My Mum put on quite a strong front. She tried to protect both me and my Dad from seeing her cry and that just really pissed me off. I'm like ‘Do you think I am stupid or something? Your son has died. I do know that you're grieving. It's not going to break me in half if you cry or you grieve. You don't need to just focus on me all the time.’ ” (Ellie – 22 years)

“It's important for them [parents] to remember not to over-protect. Especially with me being my parents remaining child, their instinct was just to wrap me in cotton wool and be like ‘Nup. You're never doing anything again. Don't leave the house. You can't go out. The world's a dangerous place.’... I was twenty at the time and I was just getting my independence. Just remember that you can't protect them... because you will drive them crazy.” (Ellie – 22 years)

Children may be protective of parents

The love children have for their parents means their reaction to the traumatic events is to want to protect them too. However it is hard for children to understand how to be protective. Often children think if their parents are upset, they have been damaged. They hold

back on communicating their own distress when they see their parents become emotional in response to their unhappiness. They can feel reluctant to be spontaneous with their grief as they fear they are hurting their parents. Sharing sadness is a comfort and it is helpful to establish an expectation that all family members freely express their feelings without having to protect each other. This is helped if everyone does not feel as though they ought to take the others' pain away, because it cannot be taken away; but they can be comforted to go the journey together.

“Ellie is very protective of Dave [her father] now. I was away one weekend and I sent her an SMS to say ‘I’m away and Dad might be feeling a bit lonely’ and she said ‘I’m already on my way. We’re going to watch some nerdy shows together.’ (Carol – parent of young adult)

“Young people carry a lot of anxiety. They test the water to see if you are strong enough or if will you cave in. They tell you a little bit to see if you can handle it, but withdraw if they see it causes you pain.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“[What do children want to talk about with their parents, but don’t in case it would upset them?] Talking about those lost.” (Callum – 8 years)

“There were some things that I held back on because I didn’t want to burden them with too much.” (Finn – 20s)

“By asking someone else who’s in the circle ‘How do you think this person is going?’, you can share with them your observations and also stomp out of you your paranoia... ‘Oh no, I think you’re over reacting, I think that’s normal.’ You can discuss their wellbeing... It’s not a disrespectful thing; it’s almost sparing them... It’s checking in with them without making them think ‘Oh, am I okay? Why are they asking if I’m okay?’ ” (Adam – 20s)

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR PARENTS

Health professionals can offer useful suggestions on how parents can help themselves and their children cope with traumatic grief, but there is no rule book, no one easy solution, no “one size fits all” answer to the many questions and issues that arise for parents and their children. Parents wonder if they are doing the right thing or the wrong thing, whether they should have – or should not have – done this or done that. They struggle to find their own way through this and to find what works for them, their kids and their family.

Funerals and memorials

What parents say

“We had this family discussion about whether we wanted our children to be involved in the memorial service... Each of them said what they remembered about them [family members who had died] and at the time it was very distressing... We played their favourite songs and we finished off by singing ‘What About Me?’, which is a song the kids all used to scream. And then we went outside and with all the kids from Kinglake Primary School, released the balloons and they were happy little kids again [for the time being]... So, my advice would be to involve them.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“The funeral was very, very distressing for me as an adult. The memorial service was upsetting, but the funeral – I didn’t want to go. I mean we only had one coffin so, for a child to see one coffin and know that there’s four people in there... I couldn’t do that to my children because it was distressing for me let alone what it would have done to them.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“My sister-in-law did a course with Dr. Rob Gordon after the fires and she said that what he recommended was for the children all to have a role, and I must say I didn’t do that. I didn’t give them anything to do at the funerals or memorial services and now I wonder if that may have helped them with the grieving process.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“Our children wanted to be involved in some small part of the first memorial service. They made 500 sprigs of rosemary tied with ribbons and asked people if they wanted a sprig. They felt really important to have contributed. At the funeral, we told our son ‘stay with your sister today and make sure she’s fine’. We asked our daughter to ‘keep an eye on your younger cousins’. Giving them some responsibility for another person makes them feel good.”
(Steph – parent of young people)

“It was very important to let Ellie drive that with his young friends. It was really hard for Dave and me to watch because they would all come and sit around the table and they’d all be talking about him and swapping stories about his escapades. Sharing pictures, choosing the music that he loved.

There was a lot of laughter around the table and it was very empowering for those kids, but it was bittersweet because there was also be this chair at the table that was empty...” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“And we found out things that we didn’t know about Sam.” (Dave – parent of young adult)

“I know that at funerals you’d often find young people sitting apart. Older people have probably been to more funerals and they know what goes on, whereas for a young person it might be the first one they’ve ever been to and sometimes I think they don’t really know what to do with themselves. You’ve also got that self-consciousness when you’re 15 or 16 or even younger.”
(Steph – parent of young people)

What young people say

“What a tough first funeral to have to go to where in many cases there wasn’t even a body. I think it was really confusing and very difficult. Death is so hard to deal with on a normal day, but [even harder] when you get people saying ‘Well, we think they were here’ or ‘Their bodies were so badly damaged we don’t actually know.’ (Adam – 20s)

Christmas and other holidays – to celebrate or not?

“I think keeping everything the same for our kids was important because we’d always done things as a family... A lot of people have said they can’t do what they used to do, we kept things the same because when you’ve got young kids you’ve got to do it for them, you’ve got to keep things the same.”
(Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“If you have younger children you can [keep Christmas the same] because you know you have to.” (Carol – parent of young adult)



Caption

Importance of parents getting support for themselves

Maintaining the parental role is difficult on the traumatic grief journey. Competing demands, your own grief, practical problems all mean at times it is not possible to do all that is required. On the other hand many problems that are unique, new, different to anything that has gone before. If parents have support for themselves, they can develop an ongoing relationship with helpers and develop an understanding as a basis for getting help with new things that come up. Support works best when it is not just in response to crises, but is ongoing and picks up and responds to stresses before they develop into crises. It is often easier for someone outside the situation to see what is going on or make a suggestion that is obvious in hindsight. Support with practical problems can often free up time and energy to tackle the more emotionally demanding issues.

“It’s important for parents to get the support they need, otherwise you can’t support your children. You need to identify that you need the help... then you can ask for help and help is there.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“Don’t be too proud to accept somebody’s help no matter how big or small, even if it’s just getting the child to school or something. Accept help from other people. Sometimes other people can support your child better than you can [at that time].” (Karen – parent of young children)

“I would like to say that there is plenty of help, support and people willing to listen... My advice as a survivor is to put a wall up and pretend everything’s ok when it’s not. I am very proud to be Australian, and so very grateful and appreciative for all the support and generosity, It can be overwhelming at times.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

Talking with your children – suggestions from parents

Communication is the essence of relationships and the way support, understanding and intimacy are expressed. Communication between parents and children is the most important resource for the traumatic grief journey and needs to be protected and fostered as much as possible. It may be possible for some families to have regular family discussions, but not all children want to. Communication can be casual, intermittent and woven into everyday activities and still keep people in touch with each other. What is important is that it is comfortable and ongoing rather than that everything is sorted out and solved – which is impossible anyway. Loose ends lead to further talk. If there is an issue that is too painful or you are not in a place where you can listen, come back to it later when you can. Make sure the process keeps going along the whole journey. Perhaps letting the children know something of your own struggles will help them understand themselves, as long as you talk about them rather than just express them.

“Kids are so ego-centric that they think it’s their fault. Talk to them on their level. Make sure they feel loved and special. It’s not helpful if you don’t talk about it.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“Always give honest, simple and brief answers to their questions.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“Just be there for them. Give them the message ‘I’m in no hurry; truly there’s no one I want to be with more – other things can wait. I’ll come over to where you are.’ Don’t look at your watch. Talk about YouTube or a magazine they’re reading.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Nobody wants to be nailed in a corner. Lots of conversations happen while you’re driving or walking or not hemmed in, not while you are sitting down opposite them staring them in the face.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Parents need to have their emotional antenna very sharply tuned to their kids. Ask your kids ‘How are you doing with this?’ If you get the ‘shrug’, a bit of warmth and persistence usually gets through that. Kids seem fine, but young people have lots of concerns: concerned about their parents, how they are coping. If parents can’t have that conversation with them because they’re enveloped in their own grief, you need another trusted adult.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Many people seem fearful of how to speak about it. Young people are so relieved to be able to say it with someone who can really hear it and with someone that they can trust is up for it. Within families, if parents can’t hear it or aren’t resilient enough, then young people need someone who is up for it – counsellors or other family members.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“It may not be you who can help your kids in that way – there are some conversations young people will not have with you for fear of causing you pain.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“There’s no quick fix; it’s important to acknowledge this... Pull the covers off everyone; be brave enough to tell how they really are because naming it’s better than not knowing.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Young people are very sensitive to things that are fair and unfair. Be prepared to take down your mask and have courage. This gives them the courage to respond back. They could think ‘Why should I [the young person] take my mask off, when you’ve kept yours on?’ ” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Parents want to protect them, but you are actually excluding them from the process... and it generates anxiety... Even if it’s messy, just flop it out and deal with it.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Be direct... Young people do better if you give them credit for understanding. Parents not wanting to burden them, everyone keeping their covers on, generates more anxiety.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“I think we need patience and understanding with our older children more than anything.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

Advice from children and young people

“Comfort them, talk to them, be open, spend time together.” (Callum – 8 years)

“Give your child a lot of love and attention.” (Matt – 12 years)

“Try to be as open as possible with your children. Stay open and available to your children so they always feel safe and can come talk to you at anytime.” (Finn – 20s)

Talking to children and young people at different ages and different times

Children’s understanding of what has happened changes with their age and development. It often needs to be talked about from time to time as they grow older and their understanding changes. Young children do not need the same details about tragedy as older children or teenagers, but they all need some information to reduce the scope for them to imagine, or they are likely to come up with ideas that are worse than the reality, whatever that might have been. Facts are always easier to deal with than uncertainties, although it all does not need to be said at once.

“My son was almost four years old. He took my parents’ deaths hard, as at that age children don’t understand death. How am I to tell my son that they [my parents, his grandparents] had died? How do I tell him what happened? How do I soften the blow? We were as honest as we could be without scaring him. It’s important to be honest with children since they are going to find out later anyway, but be selectively honest in regards to their age. We weren’t specific with how they died; for example, we said their hearts stopped beating; the fire was so hot the body couldn’t take it anymore.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“Allow children to ask questions even though it hurts to talk about it. If you’re not able to cope with discussing it at the time, tell them ‘Great question. Mum’s not ready to talk about it now, let’s talk about it later’. I

always revisited it when I felt better so he knew his emotions are important.”
(Naomi – parent of young children)

“He needed to talk about it... We still talk about it now. I tell him ‘I love that you can tell me when you are upset; it shows that you’re remembering them’.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“A lot of things come out at night for children; they’re too busy during the day to think about it. But they’re more reflective at night with one-on-one time; a lot of emotions get talked through at night.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“Keep talking to your kids about it – as they’re getting older they keep processing. They get more knowing as they get older. Think ahead of them – what questions they’re likely to have and how to answer them.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“Just try to imagine the thoughts that were going through my sister’s head as opposed to me; she’s so much younger. And it’s just hard at this age... And even the parents, even mum, she struggled too and how old is she? And she’s had lots of life experiences, too. So, on top of that, knowing that she was confused was like ‘What hope do I have?’ But it helped that mum would always come down to our level or dad would come down to our level and go ‘This is what’s going on.’ Parents do really play a big role in helping you make progress and helping you understand the situation.” (Katelin – 18 years)

Who do children and young people like to talk to?

In the end the most important people for children and young people to talk to are the ones they choose and feel safe with. The more people they can talk to the better, they will get something different from each one. They may or may not be those the parents would like, but it is important that any communication channel be respected. Isolation makes the traumatic grief journey more difficult.

“Friends.” (Callum – 8 years)

“Family and friends who understand.” (Matt – 12 years)

“Friends, a close adult or parent, or they try and work it out for themselves.”
(Jacquie – 17 years)

“You find you learn so much more about a person through their friends and family.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“I found that I could easily talk with my parents about my feelings and thoughts because we had an open relationship. Although there were some things that I held back on because I didn’t want to burden them with too much.” (Finn – 20 years)

“I was fortunate to have a really strong support system. I spoke a lot to a professional counsellor and my parents. I didn’t always talk to my friends about the situation I went through because they had no idea what it was like and how to deal with it.” (Finn – 20 years)

“I liked talking to people who’d actually known him – my friends, his friends, family.” (Ellie – 22 years)

“We [she and her brother] went outside and talked a lot... We would go over the events of the day a lot – because I don’t remember a whole lot from that period... to get it clearer in our heads and get a kind of better understanding of what actually happened,... all the events that happened, who knew what when and when did you realise and all that sort of stuff.” (Anna – 19 years)

“We [he and his sister] chewed the fat a lot... This thing happened today, what do you think it meant? Does mum know about that? Who did mum hear it from?... All that sort of analysing. I spoke to [my sister] a lot but I also had some close friends I spoke to a lot. They were sort of in on everything.” (Adam – early 20s)

“I didn’t really talk to a friend about grief. I still have my best friend and I can tell her about it, but only kind of as a formality... I didn’t really go over it with her,... not like we [she and her brother] did.” (Anna – 19 years)

“They [my friends] asked a lot of questions, as well; maybe that was the difference, because I wasn’t necessarily soliciting it – they really wanted to

know and I was more than happy to tell them. And also I am more of a talker than [his sister]... I just love to talk about things.” (Adam – early 20s)

When children and young people don't want to talk

Health professionals continually stress the importance of talking as a way to help people cope and yet many parents find that their children, especially adolescents, don't want to talk, or don't want to talk to adults. Parents worry that their kids will be harmed if they don't talk about their grief, but talking may be painful and re-expose the painful feelings and only aggravate the difficulties. It depends on how much the child or teenager talked about their personal feelings before the trauma as to how easy it is to use it in the midst of distress. Perhaps it is necessary to help them to learn the benefits of communicating generally and then about less important difficulties before expecting them to talk about the most painful things of their lives.

Many people will find other ways of getting through the difficulties. The recurring message from the young people who contributed to this book is that they will talk about it when they need and want to. Some children and young people who have tended not to be talkers before the disaster, are afraid of the rush of feelings that come when they start to talk and find they feel worse. Others cannot to find the words to explain what is going on inside them. Asking them makes them feel helpless.

What helps get through traumatic grief is communication. But communication is much broader than talking. Pushing children and young people to talk when they do not want to creates further problems, but the isolation is bridged, understanding developed and security built if instead concerned parents try for communication through gesture, play, drawing, acts of kindness than convey understanding, gifts, doing things together or just being together in silence.

What parents say

“I suppose when it first happened I thought was ‘Okay, I want to know what to do. I want to know how to keep my daughter safe. I want to know what we should be doing.’ I read and spoke to people and I got all this advice about how it’s important to keep connected, how it’s important to talk, how groups are important, how damaging it can be not to seek help. Then I spoke to Ellie about it and her response was ‘NO way!’ ” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“I don’t think any of our kids talk.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I find it hard to deal with Matt who’s 12 (he was just under 10 when it happened), because he doesn’t talk. Callum [8 years old] and Lachie [6 years old] will talk about them [family members who died] and will say things, but Matt doesn’t. But he’s not a talker anyway. He’s probably a lot more aware of everything.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“I know with Sally [daughter], she didn’t want to [talk], and she wouldn’t meet with any other fire affected people. Ellie was the first person that she got to sit and talk with in May this year. It took two years... it took that long to encourage her to do this.” (Jill – parent of young person)

“Andrew [son] rarely mentions his dad to me, but I know he talks about him with his family and friends, he probably does not want to upset me.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“No matter how often I try to talk to them about [their cousins and uncle and aunt who died], for my own need as well as theirs, I can’t get the conversation going... They won’t talk about it, but I often wonder deep down how they’re going.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I need to know this [what they were thinking].” (Steph – parent of young people)

What young people say

“I was comfortable talking when I needed to.” (Matt – 12 years)

“Don’t pressure them or push them to talk about their feelings or thoughts too much. Most teens would like some space to deal with the issue.” (Jacquie – 17 years)

“[It doesn’t help when people] bring it up all the time because they think you’re still suffering, when sometimes you just don’t want to talk about it. It’s hard to find the balance, especially with family and friends because everyone sort of goes through it on different levels. You might be feeling that you are having a good day and you can cope with it, and then someone else might be going ‘Oh, I can’t cope today’. But you feel like if you start talking about it, you’ll fall as well.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Parents have to have faith that you know that they are someone you can confide in; that if I really wanted to talk to mum or dad about it you’d do it, because they are your parents after all.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Don’t try and force the issue. Yeah, like they [parents] might need to talk about it, but if I don’t, then I’m not going to... It’s okay to not talk about it... You may not be someone who needs to talk... we deal with it in different ways.” (Ellie – 22 years)

In the end, the most important experience for children and teenagers in grief is to feel understood, recognised and respected for themselves and not to have demands placed on them that reflect the fears and anxieties of their parents or other adults. Understanding can be conveyed in many indirect ways and if they don’t want to talk about their grief or trauma, then make sure that they can communicate about what they do want to talk about and there may be a pathway from that to how they feel.

Even when someone seems shut down and isolated, it rarely helps to try and force them to communicate, all we can do is create opportunities, make a secure environment and encourage them; then we must patiently wait and see what they want to do. Their time of communication maybe much later when they have gained some sort of inner control over their feelings, and it is important that when this time comes, their parents are still there waiting and available.

Giving children and young people space

It is important to be respectful of the different ways that people grieve – including children and young people. It is sometimes difficult to find the balance between being concerned and being intrusive; parents inevitably want to help their children with their grief, so they can go on as well as possible and avoid serious difficulties down the track. But the most important thing is to maintain a good, trusting and loving relationship with children, so that when the time is right, they will feel comfortable to talk with you. Some young people said it is sometimes hard to get space and if they need it a sure way of getting it is to cause conflict.

“I have to say ‘Mum, just leave me alone’.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Give me my space. Leave me alone.” (Ellie – 22 years)

“Door slamming.” (Anna – 19 years)

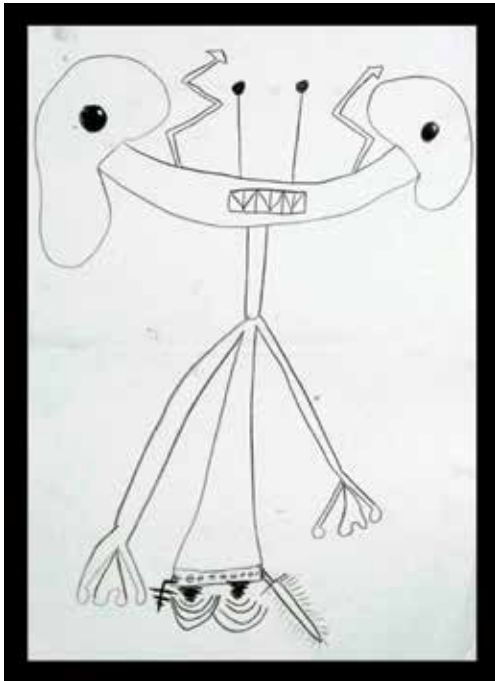
Children and young people may need different things

The impact of traumatic grief is as varied and different as are the relationships with those who have died, the personality of the those grieving and their stage of development. While there are often common problems and typical expressions of traumatic grief, there are many different ways in which it is made a part of their lives and what is needed to get through the journey is very particular for each individual and is likely to change as time passes.

It is very important not to let the fact of the traumatic bereavement overshadow the normal pattern of life. Normally, people have a choice about who they meet and spend time with, and they do it because of something that brings them together. Being part of everyday life, going to the same school or peer group brings the connection. It is not usual to be brought together with others just

because they have had the same thing happen to them. It is also not usual to share intimate and painful experiences with people who are strangers. A good, trusting relationship needs to be built on other shared experiences as a basis for sharing problems.

Parents and other adults need to ensure their worry and concern for their children and teenagers does not push these normal features of relationships aside or make them feel they have to do it to reassure their parents. This makes them feel as though their own needs are overlooked and makes to feelings of isolation worse.



Caption

“My children weren’t given a choice about going to the group. They were just told they were going... and now Matt’s saying ‘I don’t want to go’. He’s at the age [12 years old] that he doesn’t want to go and be with these young kids.” (Karen— parent of young children)

“Same as sending them to school. You just tell them they’ve got to go to school and they go; you can’t do that with older kids.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I started to get phone calls ‘It would be really good if Ellie met my daughter or my son and they could share their experiences’. So I would say to Ellie ‘What do you think?’ and she’d go ‘What would I want to do that for?’ And, in real terms, why would you want to meet a complete stranger? If there is a reason for the meeting – a group weekend away for some pampering. Lots of opportunities to meet others but also the option to say no, I want to be on my own, then sharing your experiences with someone of your own age can be very beneficial.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“Ellie has been for some counselling but she says to me ‘Mum, why would I, if I’m having an okayish day want to go and speak to somebody and bring up all these painful feelings and emotions and then, after an hour, I go out and the rest of my day is ruined?’ Now how do you argue with logic like that?” (Carol – parent of young adult)

Young people say...

“We have to do this for ourselves, find our own way.” (Ellie – 22 years)

“If you try to take some of the formality out of it that would be good. If parents said something like ‘Oh, Jason I think it would be really good if you spoke with Jack because you’ve both lost people in the fires’, it’s like ‘I don’t know that person’. If you make little organisational tweaks that enable these connections to take place without saying ‘Hey, I’m connecting you with somebody’ because people don’t like that sort of forced connecting. The kids are going to say ‘Oh my god. How annoying are my parents.’ ” (Adam – 20s)

“[Our parents] never expected us to be at every [community event]. They said ‘If you don’t want to be there just don’t go’ and we didn’t. We exercised that right and I think that was our sanity in a way, and it also meant that they could go and do what they wanted to do.” (Adam – early 20s)

The recovery process is personal, individual and as varied as the people involved. It is good to offer opportunities and encourage the use of what others have found useful, but in the end if it is to be helpful, it will be because they make personal relationships with those they meet in any setting.

Is it okay for parents to cry in front of their kids?

Normally, direct expression of grief in tears and being sad is a necessary part of the journey through traumatic grief. However, it is usually unfamiliar to be in such sorrow and it is therefore natural to feel unsure whether it is good or bad for other members of the family to be exposed to it. It is normal and healthy to cry when sad, and is part of the bodily and mental adjustment to grief. It is important to make it feel a safe thing to be happening by communicating to the children and teenagers about it.

It is safe to assume that children and teenagers know what is happening for their parents, even if they are crying behind closed doors. Not acknowledging it or expressing it in front of them is a mixed communication about grief and likely to lead to confusion and uncertainty which make it in turn frightening. Not talking may be like saying: “Don’t talk about grief;” “it is wrong or shameful or worse still a weakness to cry;” “I am not showing it because it will damage you;” or other unpredictable personal meanings. This undermines the most important help for the traumatic grief journey which is open support of being together with those who are going through it.

Parents say

“I shared a few tears with him so he knew it’s okay to cry and to be sad and that you can get over it, although I would make sure it wasn’t too often, as they also need to see that Mum’s okay.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“We would just say to them ‘It’s okay for us to cry’...I find that now that they know this, when they see I’m sad, they’re not like feeling that I’m falling in a heap, but that it’s okay.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“Let them cry with you. If they don’t find that space to weep, then you’re creating unfinished business. If they cry, just hold them.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“My children were amazing. They just got used to seeing me crying and they’d just cuddle me.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“I honestly think that what children need from their parents is that they express their own fears. At times I found my children sensed that I was secretly worried, and they would also then keep their worries to themselves. However, by admitting your fears honestly and showing that you can handle them, you send a message that they can overcome their fears too.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

Children and young people say

“[When Mum cries it] makes me sad, upset.” (Callum – 8 years)

“My Mum put on quite a strong front. She tried to protect both me and my Dad from seeing her cry, and that just really pissed me off. I’m like ‘Do you think I’m stupid or something? Your son has died. I do know that you’re grieving. It’s not going to break me in half if you cry or you grieve. You don’t need to just focus on me all the time.’ ” (Ellie – 22 years)

“[When Mum cries I feel] sad, emotional, a heavy weight in the stomach, sick in the tummy. It made me want to hug her to make her feel better.” (Matt – 12 years)

“I hate seeing Mum cry. I remember once when Mum picked us up from school and all of a sudden started crying and me and my sister just looked at each other. We just gave her a hug and just sat in silence with her while she cried... We thought ‘She’s been there when we’ve needed to cry and we’ve needed to talk so now it’s her turn. She’s been strong for everyone else, but who’s been strong for her?’ They’re only human too.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“I’ve never really seen my parents cry apart from that initial time after the tragedy. At the time it was fine that they were crying, but I think if I were to see them crying about it now I would be a little shocked. But I also know that they need to cry to grieve the whole situation, too.” (Finn – 20 years)

“I think it’s easier if they don’t avoid it. My Mum was actively avoiding any sort of grief in front of me and that just made it really a lot worse when she did, because she would bottle it all up trying to be really strong and then it would get too much and... that would be worse for me to cope with than if she’d just let it out in the first place.” (Ellie – 22 years)

“I think it really depends on whether your parents do often cry in front of the children... It wasn’t funny [strange] to see Mum cry because that’s pretty normal, whereas I don’t think I saw Dad cry about it. I was wondering whether he was upset... I doubted his sadness. I knew he probably would have been but it wasn’t obvious.” (Anna – 19 years)

The important thing about expressing grief, even overwhelming emotions, is also to show you can come out the other side and regain control no matter how long it takes. One way of making it feel safe is to refer back to the emotional times when you are feeling better; then the baseline for the relationship becomes the time when you are more in control. It may be as simple as saying something like “I’m sorry I felt so upset yesterday/this morning/just now, thanks for being nice to me I am feeling better now. I think it did me good to let out a few tears. How are you feeling about it?” Being able to talk about your sadness when you are no longer in the middle of it shows the children that it is a mood that passes and is not to be feared.

When you have lost your home and all your possessions

Traumatic grief as part of natural disasters is often associated with the loss of everything the family owns. This makes the process much more difficult. It often means mementos and things associated with those who have died are all gone. It also means coming to terms with grief competes with buying new personal effects, finding somewhere to live and adjusting to the constant change involved in re-establishing a home.

It is not uncommon to find that some aspects of the grief come up with unexpected intensity when the family has finally settled into the new house and things are starting to feel normal again. But for many people, especially friends and family outside the disaster, this is unexpected and confusing and may lead to judgement and the feeling they should be further along the journey than they are.

However, in times of great distress and multiple demands, people have to focus on what is most important and they probably cannot give everything the full attention it requires. Some aspects will be put aside and usually the priority will be given to those things required to set up house and home because without that there will be continuing chaos. But it would be normal not to be aware that sadness has been put aside until it reappears when things should be feeling easier.

“My daughter had none of the things around her that in times of great distress and grief you would think that a teenage girl would do. She couldn’t go into his room or look at all his possessions, or get the smell of him – she had nothing.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“How did it feel when all that was familiar had been obliterated? Our family’s precious and unique items, the irreplaceable photos and memorabilia had told us who we were and where we came from. These things are gone now, but every day something will remind us of all the happy times, even if it can only be in our minds eye.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“Initially the loss of our home seemed insignificant, the death of our son was the only thing we could think about; but living with friends, surrounded by all their photos and the personal things that make a house a home made us realise that we had lost all physical links to our son and our ‘old’ life... Our home had been our haven and as the months went by, we suffered terribly by not being able to hide away there and grieve... 3 years on, we have our own house but it is just a house, it is not a home – it has no soul.” (Carol – parent of young adult)



Caption

Things that worry parents

Disaster and traumatic grief are usually completely outside past experience of families. Parents are often confused and worried about whether their normal approach to their children and young people is still right to be doing. When children behave in ways that might have been considered normal before the disaster, parents worry about whether they should do what they normally did or whether they need to do something different. Parents easily lose confidence in their parenting.

When children and young people show specific trauma or grief responses or behave in ways that are different or unusual, parents don't know whether to respond out of common sense and normal parenting style, or whether there is something special they should do. The fear of not doing the right thing or of somehow making things worse is a major source of worry. It is caused by uncertainty about their normal parenting skills and their feeling they lack knowledge of traumatic grief.

However, what helps children and young people through the traumatic grief journey is the warmth, stability and understanding of their parents; that they can communicate with them as things occur; that their parents are not psychologists but love them and want to help them; that they do not have to get everything right, but they learn from mistakes, apologise and do better as they all go along; that they will be tolerant and keep the children and young people's pain in mind and support them and balance their grief with keeping on with what they need to do.

The greatest help to getting through grief is the loving support of family continuing to be open and available, keeping on being what they were so at least some parts of the world feel stable and familiar. While there are important things to be learned about traumatic grief, they are always against the background of the security of familiar family relationships.

Children and young people need their parents to recognise they are doing what they can and if it is not the best, it is all they can manage at the moment; with help and patience perhaps they will do better later. They need recognition that everyone has their own timing in recovering; they need patience and will communicate or fulfil their obligations when they can. Support and encouragement help them recover, but pressure and worried demands only make it worse.

It is likely that traumatic grief will impact on their development as a whole. This is particularly confusing in adolescence. While they

need to recognise and meet responsibilities as they grow, their ability to do this is likely to be reduced as they struggle with the grief and trauma.

Useful guidelines are:

- If what is happening is unusual and was not part of their behaviour before the disaster, then assume that it is in some way a response to the traumatic grief and see if it is possible to understand what it might mean.
- If they have stopped or are refusing to do what they were doing before the disaster, assume that it is a temporary regression, which means they are going back to an earlier, more secure stage of their development while they get on top of the traumatic grief and if they get help with that, they will resume their normal development when they can.
- If they can respond to the normal demands of their stage of development, it will be helpful to them to do it; but if they cannot, first give them more time and if that does not work, see if what is stopping them getting on with their development can be worked out.
- While grief is painful, what stops them moving through it is often feelings of guilt, fear of whether they are normal or worry about the welfare of those they love.
- If they are being difficult or protesting more than they did before, try to help them work out what they are unhappy about – they probably do not have it clear in their own mind.
- Maintain normal guidelines and standards of behaviour as much as possible but allow more leeway and flexibility in how they will be kept.
- When making demands, confronting problems and setting standards, remember that it is the communication process itself that will often change things by helping everyone get outside themselves and understand each other. So explain, make them aware, show them the effects of what they are doing but allow

them time to think about it and change. It may need to be repeated several times before it works.

- Be confident that if they were coping and reasonable before the disaster they will get back to it when they can. Be patient and don't let current difficulties push who they were out of your mind.
- If you were worried about them before the disaster or there were already problems, then this may be a good time to get some advice from a professional as to whether there is more that can be done.

Parents should do whatever they need to get their confidence back so they can continue to give their children and young people the security they crave.

Is this normal adolescent behaviour or is it grief and/or trauma?

“You don't know what changes it's made in the kids because they change such a lot anyway. I heard the other day that Chloe's teacher was quite concerned about her but she's always been like that. I think she would be like that anyway.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“My mum used to make it as an excuse for everything that I did. Like... ‘Oh, she's just lost her cousin in the bushfires, that's why she's acting the way she is’... I was a young teenager at the time; they run riot every now and again. I was like ‘Mum, yeah it sucks... I'm angry, I'm sad or I'm frustrated, but you need to stop thinking that's the reason I'm acting the way I am all the time.’” (Katelin – 18 years)

Change in normal behaviour patterns

“I guess one of the warning signs that they're not doing okay might just be like they're withdrawn, or not eating enough or eating too much, or that kind of pattern, not sleeping pattern or something like that, over sleeping.” (Anna – 19 years)

Suicidal thoughts and feelings

Thinking that life is not worth living or feeling that death is the only option are not uncommon in the teenage years anyway. They are a reflection of a greater awareness of the world, combined with less confidence about how to get through difficulties. These thoughts often appear when there is a combination of two factors. The first is sadness, unhappiness, lack of enjoyment or worse the feeling they should not be enjoying themselves. The second is isolation, loneliness or the inability to share their most painful personal thoughts and feelings, even if they are spending a lot of time with others sharing more superficial, everyday things.

In traumatic grief after disasters, both of these factors are likely to be increased. The unhappiness of the loss is increased by all the other problems of having lost possessions, house and community. The isolation may come from not knowing how to share the gloomy thoughts, when family members are unhappy and preoccupied with their own problems and having no established pattern of that kind of communication before the disaster.

“I think now more than anything there are different things that cause that feeling. Primarily back then it was because of what was going on, but now there are other things that amplify it. Like, for example, if you feel like you’re going nowhere in life. You get yourself into that negative mindset where you’re just like ‘Nah. Give up.’ ” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Back then it was more because it was too painful to exist; it hurt too much. Now it’s more because things feel pointless. You have your days where you wake up and it’s like ‘I’m going nowhere in life and even if I was, what’s the point because you could die tomorrow. What’s the point of building everything up in life because it’s so short anyway. You just die.’ ” (Ellie – 22 years)

Who do young people talk to when they are thinking about suicide?

It is typical that young people will try to protect their parents and friends from their own unhappiness or suicidal feelings. This only increases their isolation.

“Things like feeling suicidal – how can you tell your parents that? How can you say ‘Mum, Dad, I don’t feel like being here anymore?’ You can’t. You’d break their hearts. Not even friends. You feel the need to protect your friends as well as your family. You’d break your family’s heart and your friends. They don’t want to be hearing that.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Yeah, especially as my parents have already lost one child.” (Ellie – 22 years)

What helps to stop young people acting on their suicidal thoughts?

“I write in my diary.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“One of the things I was able to turn to was to blog instead. I blog anonymously because I’d rather not talk to anyone I know about stuff like that. The difference with blogging is that I do have online friends and people who read my blog and so I’ve got their experiences to draw on as well.” (Ellie – 22 years)

“Maybe for me, helping other people. That you’re not alone. You may feel alone, but when you think about it, you’re not really alone. There are other people who feel the same, whether they admit it or not. But I think, even if you can’t help yourself, help someone else.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“You’d feel like a coward for taking the easy way out... That’s what I mean about the impact your friends and family have on you – they save your life in times like that because the first people you think of when that thought runs through your head is my friends and family.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Mainly by thinking of what it would do to my parents if I wasn’t here. Thinking of just how selfish it would be of me.” (Ellie – 22 years)

One of the most helpful things a parent or adult can do if they see a young person is sad, isolated and lacking enjoyable activities is to consider whether they have moved on from their immediate problems to wondering about the value of life as a whole. It is best to err on the side of asking, even if they are not thinking about suicide, than to leave them alone with their thoughts when they are. Asking if they are thinking about it will never put it into their minds if they were not already thinking about it. This is shown by the typical reaction of a young person who is not thinking in these terms who will say something like: “Of course not! Don’t be stupid! Who do you think I am?” This can then be the basis for a conversation.

If they do not answer, mumble, avoid or change the subject, that can be taken to mean, “well yes now you mention it, but I do not feel I can talk about it.” This can be responded to with comments along the lines of “Well it is hard isn’t it. I know things feel bad but we will work together and get through it. It is not uncommon, but we must see what we can do to help you feel better. I’m so sorry that you are feeling that bad, but please keep me in the loop, I want to know how you are, it does not help me to worry about you, I would rather you share it with me so we can all help each other through this.”



Caption

There are a number of protective things the young person can be encouraged to do prevent them moving from suicidal thoughts to actions:

- Express the thoughts outside the privacy of their own mind. It does not matter how they do this to begin with; any form of expression will begin to open things up.
- They are helped by any form of sharing the experience, not feeling alone, breaking the isolation of their private thinking, knowing others feel the same way, realising others get through it and feel better.
- Any form of connectedness that works for them will be protective by reducing the isolation that leads to questioning the meaning of life.
- Finding some form of enjoyment or pleasure with others. Enjoyment and happy experiences create a feeling of connection and meaning which weaken suicidal thoughts and feelings.
- Making plans that are looking forward to the future, having reasons to feel optimistic or hopeful of better times. This includes the confidence that people do recover from traumatic grief even if it takes time.

WHAT HELPS PARENTS, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to helping families cope with grief and trauma. Things that help one person don’t help another. However, even if it is a matter of trial and error to find what helps, there will be things that make the journey bearable.

“There’s no definite answer. Every situation is different, everybody is different, their characters are different, and their personalities are different.”
(Ray – parent of young person)

“Every child is different in how they deal with it.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“Everyone’s different and everybody finds different things soothing.”
(Katelin – 18 years)

Practical support is valued

After a disaster, families certainly need practical support. The offer of practical support is a tangible demonstration of caring, and it is very helpful for people to know others are thinking of them and wanting to help. Finding out what practical help is needed and providing it is a powerful way of communicating that they are understood and valued. It is often more valuable than words. It is important with young people who do not find talking easy. The following are some of the things that people valued highly.

Meals

“I’m just thinking about the people who cooked for us in the very early days.” (Stuart – parent of young people)

“In the early days people would cook and bring us a whole meal, everything. So things like that were really good. It meant that we had nourishing meals.”
(Steph – parent of young people)

“It was friends that fed us, friends that made us cups of tea.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I was very lucky I had a lot of people who supported me and fed me.” (Katelin – 18 years)

Help looking after the kids

“On the Sunday [the day after the fires] we were in a state of shock, and I had every TV and every radio going trying to find out what was going on. Our neighbour just came over and he goes ‘We’re taking Matt.’ This was before we knew [our family members had died]... He just took him over to his house and I didn’t see him all day and didn’t have to worry about him seeing all those images, whereas Callum and Lachie were just that little bit younger and they weren’t interested in the TV. So if somebody offers support, let them.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“[It was helpful] having people around you who could put in place boundaries and maintain them with the children because we weren’t able to do so.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“What I would have liked to have happened and it didn’t – and I don’t know how it could happen – is for the first month to have someone from outside the family to come in and be like a nanny, someone you don’t need to worry about. The parents are trying to do the normal day-to-day routine things and at the same time trying to make sense of what happened and to be there for the children. For the first 12 months we didn’t have much interaction with the children.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Accommodation

“One thing that was helpful, particularly when you’ve lost your home and your base, is to go to another place that’s familiar to the children. We stayed with very, very close friends who they knew and trusted and who could support us all. It gave the children a sense of safety. It gave them some familiarity when everything was completely changed and disrupted and nothing around them was familiar.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

How family members and friends can help each other

Emotional support is vital. It can come from people within the family and outside the family. For children, their parents are their most important source of support, but this can be complicated when the parents are traumatised and grieving, and they feel unable to attend to their children's needs as they usually would. During times of sadness or emotional exhaustion, just being present or doing simple, undemanding things can maintain the feeling of connectedness and care. If there is nothing else that can be shared, then share the helplessness, sadness and regret and that will help keep everyone together. It may then lead on to something else.

Partners

"My husband has been my rock." (Carol – parent of young adult)

"My husband stepped up." (Naomi – parent of young children)

Parents

"After a traumatic event, it is important for parents to give extra time to their children and do extra things to reassure them. It is also a good idea to take time to talk with your child to help them share their feelings about what has happened." (Deborah – parent of young child)

"Parents are important... and kids need parents more than ever." (Deidre – parent of young people)

"It's important that kids feel loved and special, even more so when people who are part of their family have been destroyed so tragically." (Naomi – parent of young children)

Children and young people say...

"[Things parents do that help]... spending time together... showing how much they love you... doing special things with you." (Callum – 8 years)

“[Things parents do that help]... being with you during the hard times... talking about what had happened... not hiding things.” (Matt – 12 years)

“At the start your [parents’] comfort is good. You can turn to your mum or turn to your dad, and just have that conversation ‘How’re you going? Is there anything I can help you with? Is there something you want to talk about?’ Just their support is great.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“The first thing mum said to me when it happened was ‘I’m so sorry that this happened to you when you’re so young’, because parents want to protect their kids as much as they can. They want to make the world out to be this happy little place for as long as possible before you truly realise how hard it is.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Parents are always a supportive base to go to. If they too have gone through the same thing as you, they will be able to give you a more mature perspective on the situation. When I talk to my parents (mostly my mum), it’s when I’m feeling overwhelmed by life and I talk to her about my issues. She helps me to see through it and to come up with strategies to perhaps stop becoming upset again so easily.” (Finn – 20 years)

“I feel that we were really lucky with our parents... maybe they didn’t know what to do, but they did a bloody good job of winging it... I don’t think we were exposed to any massive errors in any of it, at all.” (Adam – early 20s)

Family members being together

During times of crisis, families can feel the need to huddle close together, creating a sense of safety and providing support to each other. Young people who have already moved out of home might return to live at home for a time or young people who have planned to leave home, might decide not to after the crisis or – at least temporarily – delay their moving out. Sometimes, the best thing for everyone might be to drop other plans and just be together. The most damaging thing in the traumatic grief journey is to feel alone. Children can often use this as a cocoon and put aside their grief for a time and play in the protective atmosphere of togetherness.

“I think what was important for us as adults, as well as for the kids, that we did stay together as a family. We brought all the kids together and we put them in the room downstairs with the play station on, which is what we always did when the kids were all together, except there were two kids missing and they were quite aware of that.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I’d send my kids to school and then pick them up from school and go straight to Pauline’s so the kids could be together... because that’s what we thought was important for the kids. to have that time with someone else that understood what they were going through.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“We recoiled back into a very small, tight unit; we needed to be together. Our son had been living and working in Perth for a few years, and his instinct was to come back home. I personally felt having him back was really important.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Spending time with family.” (Callum – 8 years)

“Spending time with family. Talking about those you lost.” (Matt – 12 years)

“I think the world shrunk a bit, but it needed to, I think. And it was important that we were in the same house, I think, to deal with it. It was good. I stayed at home for about 12 months [but eventually] I had to move out again, I couldn’t stay there forever. A natural progression had to happen.” (Adam – early 20s)

Friends – the right ones can be helpful

“I think it’s very important to have the right type of people around you, to come to you, and to talk to you... to have the right advice and the right comfort.” (Ray – parent of young person)

“What I do now to help me cope is to go and seek out a good friend... I don’t hesitate now, if I need somebody, I go knock on somebody’s door and say ‘Hey, can I come in for coffee?’ I was very lucky I had a lot of people who supported me.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“I’ve got a good circle of friends. I love the people I work with. They’ve put a cookbook together, they’ve raised so much for the charity [The Sue Evans Fund]... and they’re always thinking of different things to do. I’m just very thankful I’ve got that support.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“She [daughter] was very much surrounded by a lot of young people from church and their school community... Both of them [daughter and son who died] had gone to the same school and church and so all their friends gathered at home and that was wonderful for her, even out in the garden, they’d be there for hours. It was part of their journey too, and they needed to be together to share.” (Jill – parent of young person)

“I had some close friends I spoke to a lot. There were sort of in on everything. So I could call them and talk and... they really wanted to know and I was more than happy to tell them... I just love to talk about things.” (Adam – early 20s)

Cuddles

“...cuddling them, so much can be said without words... not speaking, just hugging... lots of cuddles.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Eventually I got a dog and I couldn’t wait to get home and cuddle her.” (Jill – parent of young person)

“[What helps you feel better?] Cuddles.” (Anna – 20s)

Maintaining normal routines where possible

Getting back into normal routines helps provide predictability, security, and a sense of continuity, normality and safety for kids and parents. One of the difficulties in a disastrous event, such as the bushfires, is that as much as parents try to keep things as normal as possible, it is not going to be normal. Things are going to be disrupted, things are going to be changed, especially for those who live in the areas directly affected by the disaster. Even if their homes are intact, their community is in chaos.

The value of routines is that they are familiar and do not have to be thought about. They are a source of comfort and security. If the old routines cannot be recreated, then it is important to think about how new routines can be created by working out how to do things and then trying to repeat the same things each day in the new situation. If the family is moving from place to place for a time, routines can still be created around bed time, meals, spending time together and taken from one place to the other. In time they become reassuring routines.

What parents say

“I found my children benefited more by me keeping up with their usual routine and making things as normal as possible. This can help a child feel more secure and safe.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“Make it as normal as you can for children.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“Trying to maintain some of the constants was really important... trying to implement some sort of semblance of routine when things were chaotic.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“From day one I just kept my kids in routine – I sent them to school, fed, clothed them, cleaned the house. They had [set rules] and that’s what I think kept their lives fairly normal.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“You just tell them they’ve got to go to school and they go – you can’t do that with older kids – but the routine helped them.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“My youngest child started school and it has been very good for her, it has given her a sense of security.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

What children and young people say

“I was in school at the time so I was still in routine. I still had to get up and go to school every day... It was something to do because I know if I’d had to

have stayed around the house I would have been consumed by thoughts..."
(Katelin – 18 years)

"I found having a routine was helpful." (Ellie – 22 years)

"Why I coped so well is because I feel like my normality was maintained; I think it's so important... I mean, you lose family members and that's horrible, but then to lose your own lifestyle as well is hard, I think. And for kids, too, they rely on their parents providing a [stable] lifestyle." (Adam – early 20s)

"Maintaining your life, doing the things you normally do, doing whatever is normal. Not stopping your normal routine is important I think." (Adam – early 20s)

"My kids have kept me going"

"You have to cope – you don't have a choice; you have to look after your kids." (Naomi – parent of young children)

"When we eventually came out of our shock, we realised that we had to move forward for the kid's sake and we had to do something so that the kids could see that we were all okay." (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

"My kids have kept me going, they're 15 and 17. At least I've got an excuse to get out of bed." (Carolyn – parent of young people)

"Little Lachie, at two and a half he didn't understand. He's what kept me going. He still had to have his nappy changed and demanded to be fed. He dragged me through a lot of it, I think." (Karen – parent of young children)

"If I have a bad Saturday perhaps because I'm tired and a bit teary, I think 'Get to netball, get to netball, get to netball'. That's my coping strategy, to spend time with the kids." (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

"My kids were little, I had to take them to school, I had to take them to swimming and basketball. I couldn't disrupt their lives." (Karen – parent of young children)

Support from others affected by the same disaster

Traumatic bereavement from a disaster is outside the normal experience of most people, and it is common that those who have been through it find their friends and family outside the area do not understand no matter how they try. They easily say things that overlook some aspect of the trauma or losses and this can be like a jolt that creates feelings of isolation, misunderstanding and even irritation. Explaining it can feel too hard. Speaking to others who also have been affected by the event and who therefore have a greater understanding of what you have been through, can be an important support for people of all ages.

“Speaking to other people who have experienced the same trauma can help.”
(Deborah – parent of young child)

“Ellie did meet another young woman whose brother had also died in the bushfire and luckily they had lots in common – music, fashion, Harry Potter! They had quite a long conversation about the events of that day and about each other’s brothers, the similarities in their lives, their annoying mothers!”

It was good for both of them to talk freely about their loss without worrying about the other person’s reaction. They both had tattoos of their brothers’ names on their wrists and of course it’s not usual to have your brother’s name on your wrist. So, when Ellie had it done, it made her talk about Sam because everyone would go ‘Oh, is that your boyfriend’ and she’d go ‘no’. And they’d go ‘Oh. Ex-boyfriend?’ ‘No.’ ‘Who is it then?’ ‘My brother’... And then it was ‘my dead brother’. Sally had had the same conversation many times.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“Being with other people who understand can help”. (Matt – 12 years)

“The only thing that really helped me was talking to people who were directly involved in the situation because they were the only people who really understood how you were feeling...”

The thing that everyone’s got in common is that they’ve lost something or someone in such a traumatic way... And I think also it’s not something that

happens every day; it's not like dying from old age... It's something that was so unique and so unexpected that you can only turn to the people that can relate because who else can really relate... The most [other] people can say is 'I'm sorry for your loss' ". (Katelin – 18 years)

Support groups

Support groups provide an opportunity for people to meet together in an informal way to support and encourage each other, knowing that although they may have come from very different walks of life, they have had a similar experience. There can be an immediate sense of being understood because others have trodden a similar path.

In groups it is possible to hear from others about how they too are struggling with the same problems, doing the same things, losing it, avoiding things, feeling tired, despairing or frightened. It breaks the isolation and makes it feel as though these are not “My weaknesses or problems, but our problems that are part of the traumatic grief journey” and this carries with it the feeling that it will eventually pass. There are usually separate groups for adults and children.

Groups can be very supportive, but they do not suit everyone. Some people feel that the last thing they want is to hear about others' problems when they have enough of their own. This is usually a sign they are still trying to get on top of their own turmoil. The time when groups are particularly valuable is when people are trying to put their pain into some sort of context, when they are looking for what others have been able to do and when they are trying to find a sense of community with others in the same situation.

“The group first helped me start getting help for myself because when I stayed in the room I realised that other people got tired, and other people slept, and got angry and I wasn't the only one in the world that things like that happened to.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“Certainly in the beginning the group was useful from the point of view that it did make you realise that other people are going through the same thing, but maybe expressing it in different ways.” (Dave – parent of young adult)

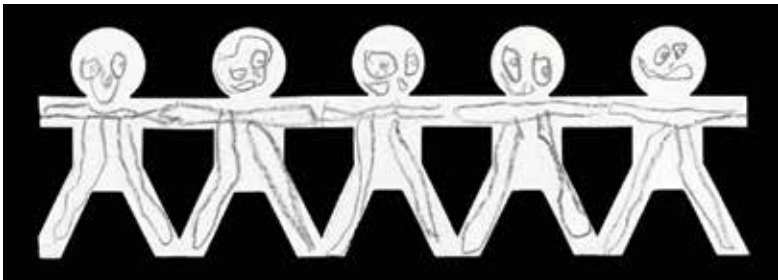
“I totally agree, being together in a group where you have like minds can be good.” (Jill – parent of young person)

“I just value being in a group with people that can understand no matter what you’re discussing, just to be with others that understand. You feel more at ease to be able to laugh and smile because we all understand what you’ve gone through. It’s okay to laugh and smile in this group.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“I strongly recommend any help that’s offered such as support groups.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“The groups are great to have, but it doesn’t change anything. It’s still tough. There’s a lot of advice there, there’s a lot of things that we can think about, but it’s always going to be tough.” (Ray – parent of young person)

“I put the kids into the grief group so they could be with other children that understood what they were going through outside of our family. No one else understood what they were going through... Lachie, he’s 5, can’t wait to go to the grief group. ‘Can we go to the Grief Group tonight?’ He just loves to be there, but I don’t think he really understands why he’s there, whereas Callum [8 years old] does.” (Karen – parent of young children)



Caption

Community connections and other support networks

Being part of a community, having a place, being in multiple networks that combine to support different parts of life help keep a sense of being an important and valued person even when everything else is in doubt. Increasingly young people are using social media to connect with others. Everyone who has a role in the lives of those on the traumatic grief journey can help them along by doing what they normally do, but adding a few words or gestures to show they are aware and want to help.

“Parents are important and [after a disaster] kids need parents more than ever, but it takes a village to raise a child. In a crisis, they need more than just mum, dad and two kids.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Matt’s swimming teacher would just give me a hug as soon as I got in the water and then carry on as if everything was normal. And all the kinder mums were supporting me too.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“I was very fortunate that I work for the Department of Education. A memo came around to say if you were directly affected by the fires you were deemed to be at work even if you weren’t working, which meant it didn’t matter how long you were off, you got paid. Very few people know that that’s what the government did, but I really appreciated that.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“After the bushfires I lost my husband Peter. It was amazing how people came together... We’re all getting along with our new normal life as well as we can with the support of many, many people... I think the connectedness of what we went through and being able to meet all these people has just been invaluable.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“Every Thursday in Strathewen we have a barbeque night in summer and a soup night in winter – it’s fantastic. People get together and have dinner. It’s nice to be in an environment where although hideous things have happened to all the people there, we can be ‘our normal’, which in any other context would be completely abnormal – you can just be.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“Knowing that I couldn’t help my sister [who died] at all, I think that helping the people [who were impacted by the fires] with whatever skills I had was important for me. I thought it was important to help the community however I could.” (Stuart – parent of young people)

Helping ourselves and each other to express grief

Grief comes in waves and cycles. If it cannot be expressed, it is held in, creates tension and isolates the person. There is a traditional view which makes people afraid of expressing grief or of grieving people. It may be fear of making it worse, not knowing what to say or how to react. But those who grieve want to feel they can express it, be understood and supported. What is needed is the same thing as with other feelings: to listen, empathise, help the person express themselves and continue to accept them. They do not need to be reassured or made to feel better – they know that is not possible. They need to be kept company in the midst of their grief and to be able to share what they are going through. That is enough to make them feel better. Anyone can do this if they don’t try to do more than they can.

“I found grief can sneak up and get you, however you have to grieve; if you don’t, it comes out worse like a volcano. You need to grieve to help your kids. I didn’t want to get upset; it’s so horrible and painful to have to grieve.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“I think for us what we kept trying to do was to make sure there was plenty of time whenever anyone was at a point in their grief, where it was sort of peaking a bit or needing to be expressed.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“It’s horrible and it’s mind blowing and it’s everything that you could ever imagine, so you’re allowed to feel the way you feel, but you’ll live, too.” (Kerriley – parent of young people)

“It’s alright not to feel okay, it takes time – I’m still trying to move on. I just want people to know it’s okay to feel the way they do and to be so kind to

themselves and teach their kids too; it's so important." (Deborah – parent of young child)

"A way of coping for me was going into professional mode: to stay calm, clear headed, be the nurturer, hold all the threads together. People cope better when they have a role. My husband documented everything." (Steph – parent of young people)

"Allow children to express their feelings and reactions in different ways." (Deborah – parent of a young child)

"It's important to teach them life skills – that grief is normal." (Naomi – parent of young children)

"If I find one of my kids is sad, I'm like 'It's alright to be a little bit of everything, it's alright to be a little bit angry, a little bit sad, a little bit happy. It's not alright to be sad all the time. You can't let that take over your life.'" (Kirriley – parent of young people)

"The kids cried readily – I always encouraged that; it lets it out." (Steph – parent of young people)

"I want my kids to know that's okay to get anxious, sad or angry and that there's nothing wrong with them and that they can, when they feel stressed or something, ... breathe into that and concentrate and it will pass. Or cry – it might hurt so much, but you're allowed to do it, and feel what you feel. It's normal to react to things that have happened that are so traumatic." (Kirriley – parent of young people)

Young people say...

"Expressing your feelings is so important, even if you don't want to talk about them. It's not good to bottle them up inside." (Katelin – 18 years)

"I'd wake up at 2, 3 o'clock in the morning, wouldn't be able to sleep. Right, let's go – just punch, punch, punch a punching bag." (Katelin – 18 years)

"It was one of the best investments I got to let out anger – I got a punching bag." (Ellie – 22 years)

“If you’re angry, go for a run, listen to really loud music... punch a punching bag... Watch a sad movie if you just want something to cry to... or really sad music.” (Katelin – 18 years)

Counselling

Counselling provides a safe and supportive context in which people can talk about their grief and find assistance to cope with their losses. This is especially important when there is no one else to talk to or there is concern about not burdening others in the family. The process of explaining to someone what it is like, often helps to step back from things and get a perspective on them. Sometimes putting things into words – perhaps for the first time – can help with thinking and finding new ways of seeing them. Counsellors can also help to assess whether the recovery process is moving along as it should and if not to try and pinpoint what might be holding it up. Providing information about grief and trauma are key aspects of counselling following a disaster.



Caption

“I strongly recommend any help that’s offered such as grief counselling.”
(Deborah – parent of a young child)

“Counselling has been supportive. I go to counselling, each of my children sees someone and so does my husband.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“I still get counselling. There are times when you need to go and you need to speak. This will be with me my whole life.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“He was having trouble settling into school... He wasn’t happy and we were very fortunate that they had counsellors and he used to see a counsellor every week. He acknowledged to the counsellor that it was what had happened to his family that was the basis of his sadness and that’s why he was having trouble fitting into the school.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I organised counselling for Isaac because he had a breakdown at school recently when they talked about grandparents.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“I spoke a lot to a professional counsellor.” (Finn – 20 years)

Having information can be helpful

For a lot of people it’s really important to find out as much information, facts and figures as possible to help them try to understand what has happened. As one young person put it, “It’s almost like trying to complete a puzzle”. Although you won’t have all the pieces, you’ll start to get a better idea of the whole picture, of what happened. This helps people to make some sense of something that doesn’t make sense at all. But not everyone needs that, not everyone wants to know the details.

There are two sorts of information. The first is about what happened and why things turned out the way they did. This helps to reduce the scope for imagination which can be a major source of distress when things are imagined as worse than they actually were. The

second is information about personal reactions to traumatic grief and how to get through the recovery process. This can help give confidence that others have been through it before and so it will pass and in time life can resume.

Sometimes when young people ask questions and want to know more information about what occurred, parents can be over-protective and can inadvertently shut them out, leaving them with many unanswered questions that they will fill in themselves, not necessarily accurately.

“Getting to know people out in that area and hearing their stories was important to me, knowing the facts of what had happened, talking to people about what their experiences were, and just trying to get a picture of the events and of that day. I don’t think anyone has the complete overview of what happened, even now.” (Stuart – parent of young people)

“I had every TV and every radio going trying to find out what was going on” (Karen – parent of young children)

What parents say about providing information to young people

“Two and a half years after the fires, our son coincidentally met the person who actually found the bodies of my brother and sister-in-law. He said that that was a comfort to him, as he found out that they had died extremely quickly and would not have suffered.” (Vera – parent of young person)

“I’d tell [my son] how it was and what we were experiencing, what we were doing at that stage. He was an adult anyway, so it didn’t seem that there was anything that we wouldn’t share with him, if he wanted to know about it.” (Stuart – parent of young people)

What young people say

“I really appreciated the openness of [my parents]. I think what was really important to me was transparency and not hidden information. Dad was great... if I wanted to see something, a photo, a report, a fact, a sheet, a

website Dad was always good at sharing that. I really craved information. Not a brick wall or none of that 'That's adult business', just an open sort of circle. There was no attempt to hide. If you wanted to know, you could know. I was a young adult though and some parents might have decided that's not appropriate." (Adam – 20s)

"It's almost like trying to complete a puzzle really... it's like everyone has a small piece of information. No one person understands everything, but when you put it all together you can pretty much find out exactly what happened everywhere, at every moment." (Adam – early 20s)

"Best thing we ever learnt – we went to one of the forums and we heard about traumatic grief and that what we were going through was normal. To hear that... wow it's okay to feel like this." (Karen – parent of young children)

"I used to find anything I could that was written for grieving young adults and I would just leave it in the living room, if it disappeared into her room, then I knew that she was taking at least some of the information in." (Carol – parent of young adult)

Creative expressions of grief

Sometimes it is difficult to find the right words to adequately express grief, and other forms of expression may be better to tap into our innermost thoughts and feelings. Creative ways of expressing grief can be helpful for children, young people and adults – such as music, poetry, memory boxes, drawing and painting, writing in a journal, photo collections, craft activities and so on. One of the hardest things about grief is the feeling of helplessness – doing something often helps. Any form of expression is helpful and each way of doing it allows different aspects of the experience to be expressed. Creative expressions are particularly important for people who are isolated from others or have difficulty using words to describe what they are going through.

“I was trapped in my burning house on Black Saturday, holding my precious two year old son Sam, thinking he was too young to die. After losing my home and everything that was important to me, I felt a deep loss of identity. One aspect of this was my lost artwork. About 18 months after the fire, I made myself paint, with the help of my little boy. We painted side by side. I felt like I had brought back something of mine from the ashes.

Another purpose of my new painting phase was to express some of my feelings about the fire. Sometimes I just couldn't put into words the many thoughts and feelings I had of the fire and its effects on my life since. These paintings gave a glimpse into my soul. They have also helped me heal that little bit more.



Caption

Sam experienced so much at the time and afterwards, seeing his parents so distressed for so long. He constantly talked about the fire, asking. 'Where did the big fire come from? Why did it come? How did it start?' Every day he asked these questions. He drew and painted the fire a lot. He could talk pretty well for his age, but he didn't have the verbal skills to express everything in his head.

Sam expressed himself on paper about the fire for maybe two years or more, gradually slowing down when we moved into our new home. He is now five and a half, very happy and now likes to paint rocket ships and space stations." (Sonja – parent of young child)



Sometimes his father and I would start to draw a nice picture of our old house, and then suddenly Sam would grab a red crayon and scribble lots of red fire all over the house and say "house burn down" then would be very sad.

"It was kind of a story in a film clip. I used this really beautiful song I knew and my best friend was in the film and it was like all the grief was coming through." (Anna – 19 years)

"'Theraplay' with the children has helped them make very small steps. My husband and I take it in turns so they have a relationship, time and experience with both parents. They play games with their parents that help them regulate their arousal levels and help them learn to accept their parents nurturing them and being in control." (Deidre – parent of young children)

“My family was directly affected by the bushfires. On the first day back in temporary schooling, my then Grade Prep daughter drew a picture of our old house. The roof was vibrant with the colours of the rainbow. I remember crying for her loss but also with tears of pride that she could still see the colours of the rainbow. Inspire your children and they in return will inspire you. ‘A rainbow comes after rain.’ ” (Simone – parent of young child)



Look after yourself so you can help your children

The basic rule of first aid is to look after your safety first before you try to assist someone else. One of the safety instructions on aeroplanes in an emergency, is for parents to put on their oxygen mask first before assisting their child. You can't be of help to anybody if you are not in a condition to do so, not just physically, but also emotionally and mentally. Yet parents can feel an enormous amount of guilt for looking after their own needs. If parents don't look after their own needs then, sooner or later, they are going to run out of

the internal resources necessary to look after their children's needs. So how do parents manage this balancing act?

"I found myself having to be deliberate about what I'm doing, putting boundaries up, making sure... I get to bed early... It's really been very much about me me me... having to look after myself." (Jill – parent of young person)

"Seven months after the fires, I had a newborn to take care of as well as my two sons under the age of four. Knowing my parents had died tragically, increased my risk of post-natal depression, so I made my husband aware, I was at risk of depression, maintained visits to a psychologist, and spoke to the midwives and doctors during the pregnancy. You need to use your supports. Sometimes you don't feel you need them, but then grief can sneak up on you." (Naomi – parent of young children)

"At some stage I came to the realisation that no one can really protect you. Parents struggle themselves, so how can they help their children when they can't even help themselves?" (Katelin – 18 years)

"You have to become self-aware, read yourself and listen to what your body tells you... get support so that you don't lose it with your kids or your husband." (Naomi – parent of young children)

"I learned over the years to read [how I'm going] – that I'm tired, I feel like a drink, I'm just so emotional or I'm going to cry. You need to be able to read your feelings, and it's okay to feel those things. People and especially kids, need to know that." (Kirriley – parent of young people)

"How do I look after myself? According to my psychologist's report, not very well. I think I hide behind humour and I hide behind being very proactive in trying to get things done probably to the detriment of my grieving." (Carol – parent of young adult)

"I hadn't put any of my kids into childcare [before the fires], but I put Lachie into family day care for one day [a week] in 2010 because I needed to. I needed that time for me and I didn't feel guilty about it." (Karen – parent of young children)

Exercise

"I love to exercise. Once I started to feel stronger, taking that first few steps out of bed and getting going everyday was really helping, to take myself for a walk... I've been doing boot camp and it's been amazing." (Jill – parent of young person)

"I am a huge advocate of Yoga as one way of taking care of yourself." (Fiona – parent of young people)

"Exercise has helped with my recovery, and trying to look after myself" (Carolyn – parent of young people)

"Go for a walk." (Steph – parent of young people)

"Exercise helps... go for a run..." (Katelin – 18 years)

Relaxation

"I go to a chiropractor to release tight muscles." (Steph – parent of young people)

"I get massages because so many times I've been sitting there and I'll notice my back starts to hurt and I'll realise that I'm just sitting there like a rock." (Kirriley – parent of young people)

"For the first two years, until we managed to get the house to a point to move into it, we were running faster and faster and couldn't slow down. People would say 'You've got to take a day off, slow down, stop for a minute'. But I needed someone to not just say it, but physically assist us to do it." (Deidre – parent of young children)

"I teach my kids relaxation breathing exercises, whether it be for now if they're sad or anxious or overwhelmed or for when they're adults. I teach them 3x3x3 which is when you breathe in for 3, hold for 3 and breathe out for 3 and you do that 3 times." (Kirriley – parent of young people)

"When I see my kids getting stressed or needing something, I'll book them in for a massage or give them a massage. I want them to learn when they

are older, how to be kind to themselves, when they are feeling vulnerable. ”
(Kirriley – parent of young people)

“With our son, one thing that settles him down is warm water – I put him in a warm bath or a warm shower. It really helps him, it grounds him.”
(Deidre – parent of young children)



Caption

Pleasurable activities and something to look forward to

“I found it helpful to read. I would read a sad book, then a funny book, then an insightful book. I remember not finding the funny books very funny at first, in fact I cried. One day I did read a funny book and it was okay.”
(Fiona – parent of young people)

“I did a huge amount of cooking and for me that was a bit of a meditation. In my family food is love... It became really important to me, I think,... I was making sure we were having really healthy meals and putting a lot of love into them; slowing right down, so cooking things properly, going back to old recipe books, making nice things, tons of soups... We came together as a family at the table again.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“We’ve tried to make sure that the kids have something to look forward to. That’s the reason we took them to Disneyland at the end of that year because I wanted them to see that there’s still some good things in life, there’s still times when you can have fun.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“Listening to upbeat music... reading... funny movies... eating copious amounts of food. My family would get together and everyone would bring food – and everyone would just eat, sit and talk all day... comfort food. Everyone was just happy eating.” (Katelin – 18 years)

Alcohol and drugs

Many people use alcohol and drugs for a short time to try to ease their pain, however it is not wise to do this for a long time.

“I would often try to numb the bad memories and flashbacks by consuming alcohol.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“Drinking at home on the deck, if you’re going to have a drink, is probably the best place to do it... you’re not going out or driving or using public transport. You’re sitting home safe.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“On a pragmatic level there’s probably three things that probably helped me over the last however long it’s been. One, building a new house; two, drinking copious amounts of alcohol and three, taking prescription drugs – not any others.” (Dave – parent of young adult)

“I fell in a heap and somebody told me to get some drugs, which I did very reluctantly because I thought I didn’t want to be perceived as not coping. And then I found out that lots of other people were taking drugs and I thought ‘Well, it’s not just me’.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I think a lot of people are on drugs to help them through. I’ve just gone off mine after two and a half years. I couldn’t even get in a car and drive without hyperventilating. So I’ve just gotten off them very, very, very slowly; so far, so good. And yes, the alcohol, the wine, whatever the case maybe, that helps a bit... but we’ve got to watch ourselves too. We’ve all had tremendous losses. It’s affected us obviously so much and we can abuse ourselves, too.” (Ray – parent of young person)

“My friend ‘scotch’ – best mate I ever had, which sounds bad, but it was really helpful for us [me and my sister].” (Adam – early 20s)

Humour

“One of my coping strategies is to wind him [my husband] up mercilessly and to use black humour.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“It’s our family’s black humour that makes one of our favourite shows on Foxtel which is a program called ‘Destroyed in Seconds’. It is just films of catastrophes, things blowing up... Ellie and I cannot watch enough of it.” (Dave – parent of young adult)

Religion, faith and spirituality

“I suppose people take on many things to help them through something like this. There has been a couple of important things in my life. One of them is being a Christian. Jill and I have drawn on our faith in a big way as we questioned a lot of things, but that’s definitely one thing that has helped us get through this time.” (Ray – parent of young person)

“The spiritual support has been helpful. Three of my family members who died have all visited me since they’ve passed, so that’s given me some comfort knowing that there is life after death.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“About a month ago, [my daughter] went to a psychic and, whether it’s right or not, she’s had so much help. She’s got laughter in her voice now. She’s telling me all sorts of things... The woman didn’t know who she was or where she came from, but that has helped her more than anything else.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

Ways of remembering

Following a disaster it is possible that there will be problems finding objects and mementoes if there has been a lot of damage and loss of property. The things that people do find can have special significance. Other ways of remembering can be created that will give comfort to relatives and friends and will help people feel close and connected.

Mementoes

“We collected bits of melted glass and broken plates from the block and put them together in picture frames. But we were not ready to do it until now.”
(Steph – parent of young people)

“I’ve got a locket that I wear that’s got their picture in it, the four of them, and my children gave me an angel to sit on top of the locket and I often just touch it. We don’t have very much of theirs at all because we lost their house, everything. All I have is pens and pencils from their school and, thank God, we’ve got something of my sister.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

Photos and family movies

“There were some home movies of the kids when they were little and also of [family members who died] and it’s very lovely to have it. We’ve only looked at that recently as we felt it might be a good time now to look at them to see [my sister] mucking around with horses and doing all those things she loved doing.” (Steph – parent of young people)



This is my Nanni and Pa with an apple tree before that terrible fire happened. I feel so sad for what happened to Pa and I wish he had never died.
Love you and miss you Pa – Corey

“My son is really precious about photos that I would find of him and Jon together because they were very close. He has put some of the photos on Facebook.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“My grandson had to find every photo he possibly could so he could put them on his iPod and carry them with him.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

Sharing memories and stories

“You know what I found helped... just talking about funny memories. That’s what’s so good about talking to people who know that person who died, is those funny stories... sometimes it’s sad to try to remember the bad things they went through, but I think when you’re thinking about someone as a person, you have to pick out the good things. Knowing you can have a story in your head and just laugh about it and be able to say ‘You know, they really lived their lives to the fullest.’” (Katelin – 18 years)

Tattoos

“I got Haydn’s name tattooed on me.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“I got a tattoo of my brother’s name. It’s his signature. That way he’s always with me. He’ll be with me when I go to weddings.” (Ellie – 22 years)

Staying connected with loved ones who have died

“We blame Debbie for everything that goes wrong in our lives – if we can’t find anything we blame her. I lost my locket with their pictures in it and I panicked, but then I thought ‘It’s okay, if Debbie wants me to find it I’ll find my necklace’ and you’ll think this is crazy, but I looked around the car and couldn’t find it. I was about to give up and I said ‘Deb please help me find this,’ and I walked around the other side of the car and something shone at me and it was my necklace.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“My son’s dummy went missing the Easter after the fires, but we just told him Auntie Debbie took it. He accepted it – he’s two and a half. She gets blamed for quite a lot.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“The kids talk to them. If things go wrong they say ‘Trey come and help us’... which can take you aback a bit, but the kids do talk to them.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I found it good to be at Christine’s and Haydn’s and spend some time in his room and reflect on things... because that made me feel closer to him.” (Katelin – 18 years)

Creating a family ritual or ceremony

“[Soon after the fires] we asked the kids what they would like to do to say farewell to Trey and Lyric and they said wanted to have a party. We asked them where and the kids said let’s go to what they called ‘Trey and Lyric’s park’. We went there and they had a party and they played on the equipment that Trey and Lyric had played on and they spoke about them. Then they all had balloons and they all said goodbye to Trey and Lyric as they let the balloons go. So the letting go of balloons became part of a family thing for us, which it hadn’t been prior to that.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“Every birthday my kids now get balloons and we write a message and send them off. It’s a routine every birthday and it’s something that helps. I do it at the cemetery and then I come home and do it again with the kids. And it’s something that really helps the kids, I think. It’s something tangible.” (Karen – parent of young children)

WHAT PARENTS, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FOUND UNHELPFUL

Because our society does its best to arrange things to that traumatic grief is a rare event, there are always many people who have simple, misguided ideas about what will help. They are always there are have to be understood and managed. Sometimes it is best to be quite clear about what you need or don't need and not to hesitate to ask people for what you want from them.

What some people say

“One thing I found challenging was people saying ‘Let us know if there is anything we can do.’ They are better off saying what they could do to help, for example cooked meals would be helpful. ‘I would like to help you by doing this or that’; offer practical, helpful things, be specific.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

‘Moving on’ or ‘getting over it’

“‘Moving on’ is not a helpful concept. It glosses over the reality and does not help to understand what happened. Try not to push your children to move on, rather try to understand what happened, what is happening now and what they need. It was not helpful for me to hear others say ‘You are doing so well, you must really be moving on.’ After only a few months this is not possible. People may see this as the case, meanwhile you are hurting like hell inside, they do not know your reality and any form of empathy is lost.” (Fiona – parent of young people)

“I still get that now, but actually you never get over it. You learn to live and breathe again and not be so exhausted all the time. Some days you just notice that you're okay and you smile and live and love for the cherished ones you've lost, who would want us to do that.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“For me, the concept of ‘moving on’ is somehow awkward. I never understood it. It implied a forgetting of the past and forgetting what happened. You can’t do this. You try to understand the past, what happened and how this can work in the present.” (Fiona – parent of young people)

“In terms of the school community, because there was only one other person in the school who had any connection to the fires that we knew of, it was horrifying to us to hear people say, ‘Oh, that was 3 months ago or something’ and it wasn’t that long after the fires.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“I’ve had a conversation with someone who asked me ‘Well, isn’t that all over now?’ ” (Stuart – parent of young people)

“In the wider world people presume that you’re over it and I was being told that was all done now that we had had the funerals.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“I was wearing a yellow ribbon on my school jumper and the guy I was friends with at the time, he was saying like ‘Oh, what’s the ribbon for?’ and I was ‘Oh, it’s bushfire stuff.’ This was probably like in May or something of the same year and a few months had passed, but I was wearing it every day for months since the fires... And he was like, ‘Oh, wasn’t that like ages ago and you’re still wearing it?’ ” (Anna – early 20s)

“I look at my response to the New Zealand catastrophe and Japan and if I had somebody who was affected, I’d probably say the wrong thing, too, because for them rebuilding has not finished. For us they are not in the media anymore, we weren’t affected by it so it’s off our radar, but it’s still a massive issue for them. That’s the key, it’s going to be a massive issue for us forever, but when it starts to drop out of the media and all that sort of stuff, society moves on and it’s hard when society moves on, but you are still affected by it.” (Adam – early 20s)

Praising children for being ‘strong’

“One of my children appeared to be doing exceptionally well after the fires. Everyone kept heaping on the praise – ‘You were so strong, you were so

helpful, you were great.' Suddenly, Crash! As parents, we could try to avoid saying these things early on. Saying them gives the child no room to say how they really feel, because everyone has seemingly done the feeling for them."
(Fiona – parent of young people)



Things parents do and say

"I found that being absorbed in my own grief was not helping my children at all." (Deborah – parent of young child)

"In most things in life, we have to find our own solutions. So, if going to see a counsellor ends up being the right thing, it will only work if you have decided that you need to see a counsellor... as opposed to someone going 'I think you should see a counsellor' That word 'should' is not very helpful. It's more about 'you could' and 'what if'; perhaps putting it a bit more tentatively so it always has to remain in your control and your decision." (Steph – parent of young people)

“Telling them off because their behaviour may of changed certainly doesn’t help.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“There were lots of kids just being taken around to whatever functions, memorial meetings or whatever was going on. Parents didn’t want to leave them at home so they [the kids] were just kind of like ‘I’m so tired and not interested and stuff’. They had a right to be there, but no one was giving them any attention. I think the key is just that the kids could not exclude themselves from that. It was a very adult environment.” (Adam – early 20s)

“Bringing it up all the time because they think you’re still suffering when sometimes you just don’t want to talk about it.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Harass you to talk about your feelings. Overly discuss the loss – just shut it.” (Jacquie – 17 years)

“The first thing that springs to mind that would drive me crazy – and I have a feeling would happen a fair bit – is that whole ‘Don’t tell me how to feel thing.’ ‘Don’t tell me how to feel ’is probably something a lot of young people will feel. I hate being told how to feel...I think that would just be such an issue – parents trying to sculpt their children’s response to something.” (Adam – early 20s)

Family focussed and individual services

Services provided by professionals are often only for individuals. However, there is a need to recognise the impact of a disaster on the family and family relationships, and to provide support and services which will assist the whole family. People need to be able to choose what is best for them.

“Initially there was no help for families; a lot was directed at individuals. That’s what they knew how to do, to work with one individual and not a family who has been traumatised. Help shouldn’t be only directed at each individual, the family is a dynamic [entity] and also needs attention.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

Counselling and groups may not suit everyone

“He [my son] had been offered counselling at TAFE soon after Black Saturday, but had one session and could not see the point of continuing.”
(Vera – parent of young person)

“There was some suggestion of a young people’s group that I spoke to my daughter about and I’m sure I would have mentioned it to my son, but I know my daughter wasn’t interested in going.” (Stuart – parent of young people)

“There was some kind of young people’s group that my parents were suggesting to me and I just couldn’t imagine that happening. I was seeing a therapist at the time anyway so I was talking to her.” (Anna – 19 years)

“For me, I think those massively contrived things, such as groups, don’t ever really work. That really simple linear [rationale] ‘you’re young, they’re young’ [doesn’t work].” (Adam – early 20’s)

“Just respect that it’s not the right thing for everyone” (Anna – 19 years)

“There are a lot of offers for counselling and stuff. It just didn’t ever click with me as just the right thing at the time. I think maybe the formality of it. I recall there were counsellors at the back of the room. It takes a lot of balls to go over there and say ‘Hi, I’m wanting some counselling’; that formality, that formal barrier.” (Adam – early 20’s)

“I tried counselling because I was in year 11 when it happened. I did school counselling. It was the first thing I thought to do, just talk to someone, maybe someone whose not directly affected by the situation who will have some sort of logic. But I realised it wasn’t for me and that the only thing that really helped me was talking to people who were directly involved in the situation, because they were the only people who really understood how you were feeling.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“I’ve suffered from depression since I was 17, on and off for years before it [the bushfires] happened. I’d been going to counselling for my depression because that could be easily fixed. So my view of counselling was that you

go because it's easily fixed but you can't fix it [grief/death]. I didn't really want to talk to a complete stranger and it be like 'Okay, I'm going to talk to you and you have no idea who I am or who my brother was. It's not going to bring him back so why talk to you?' ” (Ellie – 22 years)



Caption

GRIEF AND TRAUMA CAN CHANGE PEOPLE

Crisis, grief and trauma can change people in many ways. What once was important may no longer be important to you. Your priorities in life, attitudes to life, and what you believe in or no longer believe can be challenged and undergo changes. You might feel that you are no longer the same as you were, but might not yet know who the “new you” is or who you will become. Sometimes the changes can be life enhancing and bring about post-traumatic growth and sometimes they can be life detracting, making life feel less than it was. Many parents and young people struggle to find meaning and a new direction in their lives, to discover who they are now, and to firm up their sense of identity.

Yet many who have been through terrible trauma and grief have found that after many years they can look back and recognise that they have grown and developed, perhaps even outgrown the world view they had before and have a perspective that few share in the normal community. When you have been through an extreme event, it takes years to find how to make it part of your life so that it adds to its value and makes the future more meaningful.

Changed perspectives

“I would say that we as a family, parents and child, have all changed our priorities. We focus on what is important and are more inclined to chase our dreams, even if that means we risk our safety.” (Vera – parent of young person)

“It really does add a lot of perspective to your life and a lot of value to your life... it makes you look at the bigger picture. I found that, more than ever now, you value family so much more because you realise that no life is guaranteed and you need to value the lives and other people that you love before it's too late. I mean, heaven forbid it's too late, but do you know what I mean, every minute counts.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“Before it happened I had a lot of pressure on me, because I was the one my parents had all their hopes for me to go to uni. But now it’s just like ‘We just want you to be happy... You just do what makes you happy.’ There’s no point freaking out over the small stuff anymore.” (Ellie – 22 years)

Goals

“After the heavy grief, if there are things you’ve wanted to do, do it. It makes you a better parent to follow your dreams. It helps to rebuild who you are.” (Naomi – parent of young children)

“Your children’s ambitions, particularly if they are in their late teens, may seem to change after traumatic grief. There can appear to be a divide between pre-fire ambitions and post-fire ambitions. As parents we don’t need to see this for better or for worse. It is just a change. The challenge, as a parent, is to accept the uncertainty and the possible changes.” (Fiona – parent of young people)



Caption

“Our son is passionate about fire fighting now. He has a job where he is involved in putting out fires from time to time and he says that is his favourite part of the job. He is applying to work for the CFA.” (Vera – parent of young person)

“I’m not even studying. I finished school last year and I’ve done nothing... It’s like ‘What am I doing with my life? I have no idea... Where’s it going? What’s my purpose here?... I’ve always been ‘I’m going to do it for Haydn, do all the things he didn’t get to do.’ He was due to start his TAFE course a week before he died. He had been so lost in life and then all of a sudden he was like ‘...I’m going to do graphic design, start my own business, I’ve gotta do this TAFE course.’ He didn’t get to. I need to find my purpose in life, I need to leave my print.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“I think as time goes on I’m getting harder on myself because all my friends have graduated uni now and I’m at the point where I’m like ‘Okay. Well, what am I going to do?’ It’s been how many years now? I dropped out, went back for a bit, dropped out again and it’s sort of getting to the point where every now and again I stop and think ‘What the hell am I going to do?’ ” (Ellie – 22 years)

Self Identity

A person’s sense of self gives them a personal identity which they present to others in the way they react and helps them understand who they are. It includes how they fit into the world around them, what they and others expect of them and how others are part of their life. A person may include in their identity that they are a parent with four children, a spouse, a network of friendships, a job, hobbies, a home filled with mementos of past experiences, a usual way of being with others and goals hopes and ambitions for the future.

When the disaster causes the death of a child or spouse, loss of home and mementos and the person is unable to continue to work, they have lost many elements of their previous identity. As time passes,

they find there is a gap between the idea of themselves they had before and who they are now. They may no longer be a spouse, parent of the same number of children, have no house or mementos, cannot be a friend as they were before, feel unable to participate in hobbies or work and cannot relate to their previous hopes and goals.

As time passes, they either feel more and more confused or begin to change their idea of themselves. It is realistic to realise their family is no longer what it was, but they also have to adjust who they were to what they can do now while they are on the traumatic grief journey. Perhaps they can no longer work, keep up with friends or pursue hobbies.

As they rebuild they have to accept their life is different. Then they start to realise that they are changed by what has happened and cannot go back to the plans, hopes and ambitions of the past. Then there is often a period of asking ‘who am I now?’, ‘what is important now?’, ‘what do I want?’.

This is called an “identity crisis” and can be frightening and confusing if people do not give themselves the time they need to accept what has changed and rebuild a new idea of themselves and their future based on what has happened and what they now are.

“When you are grieving you lose your sense of identity”. (Naomi – parent of young children)

“One of the hardest things I found is accepting the new person that you are, and that you can’t be the person that you were before, because that person doesn’t exist anymore... I have trouble accepting that I can no longer be the rock [for my family].” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“I suppose one way of looking at it is that two and a half years on, even if it hadn’t happened, you’d be a different person now any way, but you don’t know exactly in what way...” (Dave – parent of young adult)

Changed roles

A person's identity also includes what sort of roles they play in family, groups and community. Roles are ways of acting, patterns of activity, responsibility and tasks that are understood by others and fulfil their expectations. Roles divide up tasks, tackle problems and coordinate people's activity with each other. In a family, roles of parent, child, husband wife, who solves the problems, who provides the comfort all settle out so that everyone knows how the family works. Other roles include friend, teacher, neighbour.

The distress of traumatic grief may prevent some people from fulfilling aspects of their roles for a time. Roles may change. Sometimes the roles of who does what between a couple change because one partner can no longer provide comfort to the other, or cannot get organised to deal with problems. The roles of parent and child may change, and children often shoulder parents' previous responsibilities when they are too distressed to do things.

This can be confusing, especially if no one realises how things have changed. Temporary changes are often a matter of the family surviving as best they can. However, sometimes people take on roles that interfere with them developing a healthy identity, for example by accepting more responsibility than they can cope with; or they may become locked into a much narrower role than they want as they start to pick up aspects of their life that they have dropped earlier in the traumatic stress journey.

"I struggled a lot actually. Pauline used to be the rock in our family. When the fires hit Pauline fell apart and I had to step up for a while; I didn't like that. I didn't like having to be in charge because nobody else could cope. I tried to force her to be the rock again." (Karen – parent of young children)

"Young people can feel useless and unnecessary – they can't get involved in insurance etc, if they don't have a particular role, they may feel disempowered. A role is a protective factor: they feel needed, that there's something they can do. Let them be involved as much as they want to be." (Parent of young people)

It is important that as people get further along the traumatic grief journey, they take time to think about how things have changed for them since the disaster occurred. While this is not possible when surviving and coping are the only things that count, knowing it needs to be done means it will come to mind when there is spare energy. Traumatic grief requires people to form a new sense of personal identity if they are to successfully resume their lives. Both their life and they themselves will be different; so sense of self, what is important, goals, purposes for the future and what they spend their time on have to be adjusted to express what has been learned.

In the same way, roles and the part people play in their family and community need to be reflected on as these are likely to be been improvised in order to get by. But the changes probably happen in small steps and may end up with something that is going to cause further frustrations and problems. It can start by thinking about how relationships are, who does what, whether the balance between children and parents, or between spouses feels right for everyone. Then talking it over, getting everyone in the family to say how they feel about it provides a chance for everyone to be influenced by each other and gradually move towards a more satisfying arrangement.

This work is largely a matter of communicating about the traumatic grief journey and how it has affected everyone. If this can be done at various points along the journey, it helps everyone realise how far they have come and to decide if the changes are good or not. Working out how to express what has been learned from the trauma in daily life and relationships is one of the most important ways of promoting posttraumatic growth after such tragedies.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT LIFE

Interviews for this book took place around three years after the bushfires, and people reflected on their experiences and how their lives have changed as they went along the posttraumatic grief journey. Because of the magnitude of a disaster, people will inevitably be profoundly impacted and they will be changed. Often, though the changes will not be evident until well down the track.

“The level of chaos is less over time.” (Deidre – parent of young children)

“There’s still a lot of stuff unresolved.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“Life does go on. I can’t say it’s great. Some days are more bearable than others.” (Carol – parent of young adult)

“Still waiting for some light at the end of the tunnel, but at least I feel now, after two or three years, that that light will probably appear. But I don’t know when.” (Deborah – parent of young child)

“I think things change every day and one day you’re feeling okay and the next day you’re not. And I don’t think it’ll matter how many years it takes, I’ll still feel the same.” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“I’m on a journey. I see life differently now and I am in the process of finding out who I am and where I want to be. I still have my good days and bad days, but most days are good.” (Carolyn – parent of young people).

“I’m still here and I can smile without bursting into tears most of the time.” (Katelin – 18 years)

“It’s something that never goes away, but it’s something that now I can read – if I’m getting tired or if things are getting too much or if I’m emotional. And I know now that it’s okay to be that way.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

How we live now

Often in coming to terms with grief, there is a struggle between not wanting it to have happened and not wanting the gaps it has left on the one hand and getting involved in life again even though it is not the same on the other hand. Sometimes it can seem disloyal to go on with things when those who have died can no longer be a part of it.

But many people who suffered traumatic grief have found that in the end, the meaning of life is in living it. Going on with life, remembering those who died, weaving them into its purposes and expressing what has been learned combine to make them part of the future. They often find comfort in the thought that the best tribute to the dead is to live a creative life.

“Memories after all, can be sweet if spoken of with love and understanding, what we have all had to endure in this traumatic and sudden event has left us all so hurt but not broken in spirit. If we have come this far, hopefully so can you!” (Mary – parent and grandparent)

“They would want us to go on with our lives.” (Ray – parent of young person).

“Try to live along the way. It’s been a hard road, but we all have to survive for those that are not here and who would want us to, and want us to be happy doing it.” (Carolyn – parent of young people)

“My father said ‘Life is for the living and you must keep on living. You can’t stop.’... I’ve thought to myself, and Jill and I talk about it, ‘What would Greg want us to do?’ He would say ‘Get out there and live life! Go out to this party or go there.’ He wouldn’t want us to be in a corner crying and being upset all the time. He would say ‘Nah, get out there and do it.’” (Ray – parent of young person)

“I try not to dwell on stuff because you can’t.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“We focused on what it is we can know versus what we can’t ever know, and learned to be at peace with it.” (Steph – parent of young people)

“It’s all about getting on with our lives.” (Pauline – parent and grandparent)

“They’re at that age where they can make choices and they have to live their own lives. I’ll often say to Sally ‘They’re your choices. Obviously, you’ve had an incredible experience, but don’t base your life on that.’” (Jill – parent of young person)

“Nothing can change what has happened. We have to live each day to the best of our ability. You have to make the most of every day and that’s what it’s come to now. No one is ever going to forget what happened. You think about it every single day, every minute of every day but we have to live... And just because we’re living and enjoying ourselves doesn’t mean that we’ve forgotten them, which I think is very important for the kids to know.” (Karen – parent of young children)

“It will always be there and you’ve got to try and live and get through; go day to day and you will get through it. It’s just going to take time.” (Ray – parent of young person)

What children and young people say

“Don’t dwell on the bad times, think about the good times.” (Matt – 12 years)

“Sometimes it’s sad... to remember the bad things they went through, but I think when you’re thinking about someone as a person, especially reflecting on their lives, you have to pick out the good things; I think that that’s something that really gets you through.” (Katelin – 18 years)

TEN YEARS ON... COMING OUT OF THE FOG!

“It is like coming out of a thick fog, my life is starting to open up to the possibilities that I thought were closed to me. I don’t feel so fearful of what lies ahead, I am wanting to feel the sun on my face and enjoy life... I feel more hopeful. I didn’t believe before this, that things could really be OK.”

(Kristie, 12 years old at the time of the bombing, was injured and a witness to the horror of the bombing and aftermath, her Mum and sister were killed.)

In October 2002, 202 people died in the bombing in Bali, 88 were Australian. Ten years on after the Bali Bombing Julie Dunsmore, the Coordinator of the Bali Trauma Recovery for New South Wales Health writes:

Many of the young people bereaved by the Bali Bombings are now young adults. Ten years down the track their stories and that of their families mirror many of the experiences of young people bereaved by natural disasters such as bushfires, cyclones, earthquakes, floods and hurricanes.

What young people who suffer a traumatic bereavement have in common, is having to navigate a way through their shattered world, at a stage of their development, that is already fraught with huge change and challenge.

The Long Haul

Ten years on, the roller coaster ride of emotions and reactions continue. Overall people say something has shifted and it feels like there is more hope for the future. Some talk of love being a bigger part of their life. Many are again strongly connected to family, and have ‘pruned’ their friend lists, needing to conserve their energy for those who matter. Most attribute their ‘getting through’, to the love and support of others. The presence of negative social support impeded recovery. Family members’ critical comments about the

length of time taken for recovery, seems to stand in the way of recovery for those with post traumatic stress disorder.

Bereaved young people have said that they not only have lost someone they love in such a tragic and unexpected way, but they, in effect, then lose surviving adults to grief.

“I was so mean to my parents. I hated seeing them so distraught. I just wanted a magic wand to make our life what it was before. I would scream at my mother about nothing, I wanted to shake her out of her grief. I would stay away, party to forget, which wasn’t how I was before... I felt that I wasn’t ever going to be enough for my parents... I so wanted to ease their pain. They have been remarkable, slowly over the past few years we have found a way to care for each other.” (Bereaved sibling)

Adolescents and young adults when dealing with life stressors need someone around them; someone who as Andrew Fuller an adolescent psychologist says, ‘has more options than they do’. Young people have said that having an adult who is a little more separate from the trauma, someone who can be in a type of mentor role, was very helpful. Continuity of that adult over all these years, whether a counsellor, teacher, chaplain or other caring adult, was also seen as important. They had someone who was a witness to their story. They often likened the role to that of a personal trainer. Many young people recount that in the initial years after the bombing, they pushed loved ones and friends away as a means of dealing with the chaos, and fear of closeness.

Ten years can bring with it a testament to survival and endurance, ‘I’m still standing’. It also can highlight broken dreams and former life expectations. Some talk about the lost years. They watch their peers doing what young people do, forging a career, relationships, travelling, creating a home of their own, a life. They talk about the great sadness of not having their loved one around as they go through life and what the person who died missed out on.

“I kept asking what is my purpose? Then it came to me I really wanted to study something that I could use for good. But I wanted to be active and out there. The ambulance service was perfect” (Bereaved brother early 20s)

Those who have experienced traumatic loss can get stuck in the trauma. Some shut down, some push others away, some get angry and rail at injustice, some use drugs and alcohol to numb the thinking and the pain and some are busy, busy, busy fearing time and space to reflect on what has happened.

“I used drugs and alcohol to forget and it worked for many years but the cost was I wasn’t really living. I also was a pain to be around, I was getting angry at everything and was missing out on being a good father to my young kids and a loving husband to my beautiful wife. Since I have been off the drugs and having counselling I have been able to grieve for my sister and my relationship with my wife and parents is so much better, I have been exercising, getting good sleep, having massages... I don’t feel so useless.” (Bereaved brother late 20s)

Ten years on it is not simply a measure of resilience or bouncing back but endurance. We have seen from other disasters how it is the wearing down of resources and energy that leads to emotional and social difficulties. What people say helped was having someone stand by them, having a group where you belong, knowing you are loved and feeling that your life has value, that you can contribute and that your contribution is appreciated. So many have said that it is vital that they are included in the decisions that will impact their life, and that they are part of the solutions. Above all they want a voice.

Young people said their world had been turned upside down. Many struggled with anxiety and the emotional injury from the traumatic bereavement affected their concentration and focus. Often they described this as brain fog and a sense of just going through the motions being on automat. The trauma led to a chronic state of high alert which affected sleep, concentration and ability to problem solve. The exhaustion had an impact on emotions with many saying they had a short fuse or they had lost interest in and enthusiasm for

most things, including school or study in general. Many could not see the point in applying themselves to study or work. They describe how they became adept at putting on the mask. Some reported that friends grew tired of hearing about their pain and sadness.

Remembering

Remembering ceremonies, rituals and activities provide opportunities to come together and support each other, and a chance to honour the memory and legacy of those who died. Increasingly over the years, remembering celebrations have become particularly important to the younger family members, particularly bereaved siblings and friends.

“We now come together for a reason and in the spirit of fun and laughter. We do the City to Surf run in memory of... but for a charity. That’s what he would have liked. Time has let us in our minds, be further away from how he died, now the focus is on a celebration of my brother’s gifts to all of us. We feel so blessed to have had him in our life.” (Bereaved sister mid 20s)

Readiness to seek assistance

“What use is counselling it won’t bring the dead back and it will only stir things up”.

Many young people sought help only when they had reached a crisis point. They spoke of the many masks they used, and the lengths they would go to, to avoid the pain and memories. Drugs and alcohol featured in their coping strategies as did risky behaviour. The provision of a pro-active service whereby we followed families up and gave them opportunities over many years to access services when they were ready has been a life-line to many people. Continuity of service providers and “top-up” sessions were reported as vital to their ability to embrace life and still honour those that died.

“It was my time, I was feeling so desperate. Telling my story, being able to talk about my brother, share funny stuff, look at photos get some strategies, process stuff... The relief that it wasn’t too late. Yes I had lost all those years in the fog but it wasn’t too late.” (Bereaved sister)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of the greatest difficulties of the traumatic grief journey is the intensity of the distress, sadness, trauma and disruption. There are periods when it is not possible to function, when there is no sense of a process, where the future looks as bleak as the present. Then it feels as though the journey will never end, it will always be like this. Each person has their own time frame for the journey. Sometimes, the effect of traumatic grief makes people feel alone and it is easy to feel despondent, that there is no future, that it is too hard.

Intense emotions wipe away the sense of time and replace it with the present pain which seems to stretch out as far as you can see into the past and the future. In that state it is hard to see what progress has been made, hard to imagine feeling better and impossible to expect being happy.

Yet the sense of time comes from moments when it is possible to step back and reflect, from understanding a little of what is happening, from communicating with others and being part of a process where people support each other and show how things do gradually change.

It takes longer than anyone wants, and much longer than anyone who has not been through it would have expected. But it does change and recovery does happen. No two people have had the same loss and everyone has different issues to deal with out of the disaster. The people who have contributed to this book show how the journey that no one wanted to make can be done and is helped by hearing about how it has been for others.

“I have survived and, yes, it will always hurt and we will have our bad days, but slowly we smile and laugh, not all the time, but without the guilt and tears... It’s a long road, but it is us who keep their memory alive - we are why they still exist.” (Kirriley – parent of young people)

“The grieving and the realisation of what occurred on Black Saturday is still with us all, but with the support of family, friends, individuals, support groups and organisations who have stepped forward to assist us, we can see there will be a brighter tomorrow, but it will take time, support and patience.”
(Mary – parent and grandparent)



RECOMMENDED READING

Helping children and young people cope with crisis: Information for parents and caregivers

http://www.redcross.org.au/files/Helping_Children_and_Young_People_Cope.pdf

After the Emergency: A book to help kids cope with emergencies

http://www.redcross.org.au/files/Emergency_services_after_the_emergency_kids_booklet_20110609.pdf

Red Cross website: www.redcross.org.au/

SOME USEFUL CONTACT AGENCIES

- Australian Red Cross (National) – (03) 9345 1800
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) – 1300 767 299
- Centrelink (National) – 13 6240
- Country Fire Authority (Victoria) – (03) 9262 8444
- Eastern Access Community Health – 9871 1800
- Emergency (Fire, Police, Ambulance) – 000
- Beyond Blue (National) – 1300 22 4636
- Headspace (National) – (03) 9027 0100
- Kids Help Line (Victoria) – 1800 551 800
- Lifeline (National) – 131 114
- Mensline (National) – 1300 789 978
- Nurse On Call (Victoria) – 1300 606 024
- Parentline (Victoria) – 13 22 89
- Post Trauma Victoria – 9496 4138
- Relationships Australia (National) – 1300 364 277
- State Emergency Service (National) – 132 500
- State Government Departments of Human Services and
Department of Health
- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (Victoria) – 9265 2111
- The Compassionate Friends (Victoria) – 1800 641 091
- The Office of the State Coroner's in your state

WEB ADDRESSES

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network
www.earlytraumagriev.anu.edu.au

Australian Red Cross
www.redcross.org.au

Beyondblue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
<http://health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/child/index.htm>

Centrelink
www.centrelink.gov.au

Department of Human Service Victoria
www.dhs.vic.gov.au

Headspace – Australia’s National Youth Mental Health Foundation
www.headspace.org.au

Kids Help Line
www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline Australia
www.lifeline.org.au

MensLine Australia
www.menslineaus.org.au

Queensland Government Emergency Services
www.emergency.qld.gov.au

Relationships Australia
www.relationships.com.au

Skylight Foundation
www.skylight.org.nz/

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
www.grief.org.au

The Compassionate Friends
www.thecompassionatefriends.org.au

The Dougy Centre for Grieving Children and Adolescents (USA)
www.dougy.org/

Victorian State Emergency Service
www.ses.vic.gov.au

Winston’s Wish Charity for Bereaved Children
www.winstonswish.org.uk

SPECIAL THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributors

27 people were interviewed for this book. There were mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, young people, teenagers and children. Names of some contributors are included, but pseudonyms have been used for those who have chosen to remain anonymous. The age of the children and young people was their age at the time of the interview.

Dr. Rob Gordon is a clinical psychologist who has worked for twenty-five years with the Victorian Government to assist communities after disasters and has been worked with the emotional aftermath of the fires. He has added valuable commentary throughout the book which provides a way to understand the range of experiences.

Julie Dunsmore, a psychologist, is the Coordinator of the Bali Trauma Recovery for NSW Health. She has written a contribution from the perspective of 10 years 'down the track' with traumatic grief.

Project worker

Leigh Ford was the project worker for this book. Her diligent work, compassion and insight has been invaluable. She arranged interviews, gathered the opinions and experience of the people who contributed, identified themes and quotes, wrote some text, and produced the first draft.

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SUE EVANS FUND FOR FAMILIES



Sisters do not come much closer than Sue and Carolyn. Their photo portrays their kinship, friendship and love. They shared their lives and their dreams. Their hearts were sufficiently full as to look to the needs of others.

Sue, Carolyn's sister, tragically died in the Black Saturday bushfires in Strathewen, along with Sue's partner, Bob, Sue's son and his two mates. Sue and Bob owned the pet shop in Diamond Creek for nine years and were well-known and well-liked in the community, and gave so much of themselves. The bushfires were the worst in Australia's history, and have had a devastating impact across Victoria.

Sue and Carolyn were going to start a charity together before the bushfires. To make their dream a reality, Carolyn has taken the baton alone and is following through on their planned dream – Sue Evans Fund for Families.

Carolyn said: "We would like to be able to help the community in this way, in memory of Sue and her beautiful family".

To date we have raised over \$40,000. Our first priority was to produce the book, 'Surviving Traumatic Grief: When Loved Ones Die in a Disaster', which was launched in May, 2011. Our fundraising enabled us to give away over 3,000 books to bereaved people in disaster affected communities in Australia, New Zealand, Bangladesh and Norway. The feedback from this book has been overwhelmingly positive, and we felt there was a need to produce a second book with more of a focus on children.

Our second priority was to establish new well-being groups for parents to reduce the incidence of Post Natal Depression. These groups have been established in the northern suburbs of Melbourne.

We are working towards setting up a healing centre in the Diamond Creek area.

To give to this worthwhile cause, for book orders, or for more information about the Fund please visit www.sueevansfund.com.au or contact Dr. Carolyn Westall 0400 292 410.