



Banding together

While many of us are reeling from the ecological scars left after our country's recent disaster, former New South Wales Deputy Premier and mental health advocate Carmel Tebbutt stresses the urgency of also safeguarding the mental wellbeing of those who have suffered.

TOPPING THE LIST of trending search terms for summer was the phrase 'fires near me'. I am not surprised. Like so many others, I downloaded a popular app to get the latest information as I prepared to drive through fire-affected areas on my recent holiday break. However, I wasn't prepared for the sheer intensity of the alerts flooding my phone minute by minute as New South Wales burned through its worst-ever season. It gave me just a tiny insight into what it must be like to live in a bushfire area, constantly watching and waiting, deciding whether to stay or go, and the terrible anxiety of not knowing what you will find when you come back.

The only risk to me was disrupted holiday plans. What must it be like when your home, your community and your livelihood are at stake? And yet for so many, that is exactly how they spent their summer while more than 18 million hectares burnt across Australia, nearly 3,000 homes were destroyed and, tragically, more than 30 people died. Distressing images of the destruction wreaked by the fires are seared in our minds. But so too are extraordinary images of firefighter's heroic bravery, communities supporting each other and the generosity of strangers.

While not through the fire season yet – climate change means the fire season is starting earlier and finishing later – thoughts and actions are now turning to recovery. There is so much that needs to be done to address the economic, ecological and emotional havoc caused by the bushfires, and we know from 2009's Black Saturday fires that mental health must be front and centre in the reconstruction effort, both immediately and in the longer term.

It is critical for people's mental wellbeing to quickly re-establish normal activities as much as possible. The Australian and state governments have announced funds to help with the clean-up, get

businesses back working and infrastructure repairs, and these activities will benefit people's mental health. Governments have also recognised the need for trauma counselling, funding for additional Medicare and headspace psychology services and are deploying teams of mental health clinicians.

Six months to two years down the track is a time of real difficulty, after the immediate shock of dealing with the fires has passed. As people realise their lives will not just go back to normal, feelings of stress, anxiety and depression can increase. Disasters like bushfires also produce a high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can take years to recover from, so support needs to be there for the long haul.

Previous fire tragedies have taught us the importance of recovery being led by communities rather than imposed from outside, and we need to make sure resources are directed to allow this to happen. Professionals have a valuable role, but family, friends, workmates and local networks will be more important in helping people get back on their feet. Community mental health organisations, with on-the-ground knowledge, connections built over decades and a strong understanding of trauma and mental health recovery will be an essential part of this process.

This summer of fires touched everyone in some way. For many the impact will be longlasting, and we can all play a part in helping the towns and regions hardest hit rebuild emotionally as well as physically.

Carmel Tebbutt is the CEO of the Mental Health Coordinating Council, the peak body for community mental health organisations in New South Wales. If this article causes distress, speak to your local health providers or contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or BeyondBlue on 1300 224 636.