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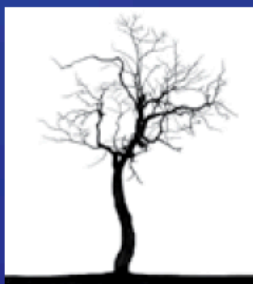


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Community Broadcasters live on the frontline



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Community broadcasters live on the frontline

By Trina McLellan

Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma

Horrific fires have devastated a large portion of Victoria. More than 60 per cent of Queensland is under water. Some townships will be cut off for months. Rural, regional and suburban communities are dealing with disturbing and distressing news, things that may threaten the very fabric of those communities. And community broadcasters live and work on the frontline in every instance. The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma's Trina McLellan looks at some of the challenges broadcasters face and offers some timely tips for self-care.

There is no doubt community broadcasters provide essential information before, during and after disaster situations. They may also find themselves dealing with individuals and communities that have been traumatised by an event that may have threatened or cost lives.

While most people are resilient and, in time, cope pretty well with trauma, some will bear quite raw scars and some of these people may even themselves be broadcasters.

Long after the media 'big boys' have been and gone, the reality is that community broadcasters will still be living and working alongside the people most directly affected by what has happened.

The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma (www.dartcentre.org) encourages those who interact with victims and survivors to understand the dynamics of human responses to trauma and to discover ways to better handle such atypical stress themselves.

Ultimately, community broadcasters can play a valuable role in passing on this knowledge to help their peers and communities get back on their feet.

The aftermath of a traumatic incident or natural disaster can disconnect, dislocate and/or distress a community, with many individuals searching at once for information and help. At the same time, services can be affected, suspended or overwhelmed.

Typically, community broadcasters excel at such times, some providing direct coverage, others facilitating useful conversations and still others providing a welcome respite for communities in the form of musical, talk or other programming.

However, if broadcasters are not properly prepared – with a good understanding of the impact of trauma on individuals and communities as well as useful self-care tips – there can be additional and unwanted impacts on themselves.

Encountering trauma in our communities is sadly not all that rare. Consider for a moment some of the following

very real incidents faced by Australian communities in the past year or so:

- Sudden, violent or tragic incidents can prove particularly difficult for locals, especially if the victims are well-known, as in the Victorian bushfires.
- Destructive storms, floods, landslips, fires, murders, motor vehicle accidents and criminal violence account for many hundreds of fatalities each year in this country. Community broadcasters can play a special role in helping an affected population come to terms with a traumatic incident, marking it in sensitive, respectful and constructive ways.
- Fires, whether or not started by individuals, present dangers to all in their path and can exact a considerable physical, financial, emotional and psychological toll on individuals and communities. After a fire passes and the damage is assessed, people begin rebuilding but the process can be drawn out. How community broadcasters respond to the various challenges that arise can make a difference to everybody's resilience and recovery.
- Unfortunately more common, domestic violence and motor vehicle accidents touch individuals and communities, especially when the victims are young or well known.

Community broadcasters will realise the trauma of what has been experienced may linger and, over time, community bonds may be strained or even broken.

Community broadcasters can play a vital part in this post-event phase and beyond. If they go about their work with a strong understanding of how traumatic stress affects individuals, including themselves, they can avoid adding to - or even help diffuse - some of that impact.

The Dart Centre shares strategies for dealing with such ongoing periods of stress. It also encourages peer support among those on the frontline. Of course, it needn't be a major incident or even one with mass casualties that results in people being traumatised.

Experts warn that motor vehicle accidents and incidents involving children are the most likely to leave deep physical and/or mental scars.

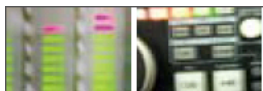
Traumatic incidents can also have a vicarious affect on those who respond afterwards, especially in smaller communities where victims are often known personally. And community broadcasters may also be emergency services volunteers, which means their exposure to the incident may be more direct than others may be aware.

Additionally, high-profile traumatic news – especially where there are mass casualties – can ramp up external pressures on communities, drawing strangers and a large media contingent from afar. Sometimes the news media can arrive in very large numbers.

Communities can find the sudden appearance of so many news media, complete with all their equipment, hard to deal with on top of their tension, worry or grief. Usually, though, community broadcasters will typically enjoy a special position of trust.

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Self-Care Tips



Major incidents, though, can also have a considerable ripple effect on communities that will continue on in the weeks and months afterwards, sometimes long after visiting news media have gone.

Community broadcasters can help make their listeners more aware of safety, support and other relevant issues. And they can help communities rebuild a sense of normality.

Living in a community besieged by national and/or international news media after an unusual crime or especially newsworthy incident can be a rather strange experience.

There may be lengthy police investigations, protracted court cases and speculation may be rife at home and elsewhere.

In the face of all that seriousness – and sometimes silliness – community broadcasters can help ground audiences and reinforce regional strengths and bonds. They can provide light and shade.

It's also possible that incidents elsewhere may touch locals or visitors directly – or vicariously, drawing them back to past experiences.

At these times, community broadcasters can be sensitive interviewers, can rally support and point to appropriate services.

Catastrophic disasters play heavily on the spirit, resilience and fortitude of communities. Particularly for isolated communities, their sense of isolation may be magnified. After the initial shock is over, this may lead to feelings of abandonment, justified or not. Broadcasters in such communities may even be victims of the disaster themselves.

This is why the Dart Centre encourages broadcasters to network and support one another and to access valuable resources before, during and after a disaster.

Where a traumatic incident plays out over days or weeks, communities can struggle to make sense of

it all. It can be surreal and, at times, disturbing. It can test even the closest of friendships.

Thankfully, community broadcasters are not constrained by the usual strictures of mass media. They can, and do, spend more time allowing their interviewees to express their thoughts and reactions. But doing so can be challenging.

Violent crime – especially where lives are endangered or lost – sends shockwaves through communities and erodes the population's sense of safety.

Community broadcasters not only provide light relief at such times but can also reassure audiences of the strengths and services that the region offers.

Media themselves are not immune from violence or threats to human life. They often have to move from scene to scene of devastation or track gruesome cases for long periods.

Community broadcasters can help audiences understand that a little better and, at the same time, share with their listeners some healthy coping strategies for such stressful times.

Sometimes a horrific incident will change the fabric not only of a community but also of a nation. In such instances, locals flock to community stations to be reassured that help is on its way.

In the days and weeks after, community broadcasters can shoulder a particularly heavy load. While their own reactions must be dealt with, community broadcasters may also be called to draw the community together, to distract it from the horror – or the endless questions of a big contingent of fly-in/fly-out news media from around the globe.

Knowing how to stay safe is vital. ■

See over page for some self care tips from the DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma.

Before a potentially traumatic task

Talk through possible emotional risks with your station manager. Take them seriously.

If you plan to go out in the field, agree with your colleagues and your family how you will keep in regular touch, particularly if difficulties arise.

Consider having a mentor, someone who has done such a task before, who you can talk through your preparations, concerns and give you handy tips. This is possible if you maintain strong social supports and peer networks.

Frame crises as challenges from which you can learn. Maintain an optimistic outlook as well as a positive view of yourself because what you do is both important and worthwhile.

Remember that the telling/reporting of trauma matters to your audiences, your interviewees, experts and authorities and yourself.

Ensure you are very familiar with any equipment you take out in the field with you – malfunctions or not being able to record at all will compound an already stressful situation.

Looking after yourself when interviewing traumatised people

Understand that distress in the face of tragedy is a normal human response – not weakness.

Most people will recover soon enough

Ensure proper eating, hydration and sleep. All these can affect your judgment.

Get some exercise if you can. Even a walk helps break down 'stress chemicals' in the body.

Take breaks – and encourage others to. This assists the integration of material and enables clarity.

Acknowledge your feelings. Understanding feelings informs your broadcasting and helps you process your own traumatic reactions.

Talk to others. Take time to reflect on what you or your interviewees are witnessing and how you are responding. If possible, talk about it with colleagues. Share your thoughts.

Make decisions in the moment and don't ruminate about 'what if's'. Reassess later if necessary.

Don't look at grotesque images too long. Similarly listening to distressing sounds should be kept to a minimum.

Look out for others in your team.

Know your own limits. Request rotation if needed.

Use the ritual of organising your equipment at the end of each day/shift as a 'de-stress' mechanism.

In the field or when doing these tasks – watch out for:

Disorientation or 'spacey' feelings.

Difficulty doing simple tasks or problem solving.

The '100m stare', an inability to focus in close.

Impulsivity, extreme anger, argumentativeness, violence.

Expressions of futility, helplessness, terror, fear for one's own life, shame.

Physical or mental exhaustion.

Flashbacks to earlier traumatic experiences.

After a difficult task is over

Diffuse with someone you trust. Choose a good listener. Don't bottle up feelings.

Monitor for delayed reactions – they can catch you by surprise at a later date.

Maintain normal routines and activities, but slow down. Look after yourself.

If distress continues beyond 3-4 weeks seek professional assistance from a health care practitioner who has trauma training.

To learn more,
ask the Dart Centre for
Journalism and Trauma –
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