

FIRE PROOF



Establishing and maintaining resilient communities relies on a few key factors, writes TARNYA DAVIS.

BEYOND Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery examined social factors impacting mental health and resilience after the Black Saturday bushfires of February 2009. The study, which involved more than 1000 people, found there was progressive psychological recovery from the disaster and subsequent disruptions at community level over time. But there was also evidence of extended impacts on individual mental health. Five years after the bushfires, 22 per cent of people in high-impact communities were reporting symptoms of mental health disorders at about twice the rate evident in low-impact communities.

Friends, family, social networks and community groups were important influences on resilience and recovery. People living alone were at higher risk of poor mental health outcomes, but this risk was reduced for people who belonged to community groups. Community groups were shown as a key factor in establishing and maintaining healthy and resilient communities. Strong attachment to the natural environment was also associated with increased mental health, satisfaction, resilience, community attachment and post-traumatic growth.

It's heartening to hear people discussing the psychological trauma and challenges being faced by those who have lost loved ones, homes and animals and, of course, those fighting the fires. Let's hope the findings from the 2009 tragedy can help us see that beyond the bricks and mortar, the building blocks for recovery come from each other.

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