

Photo credit: Ngaire Walhout

# THE BEYOND BUSHFIRES STUDY

## – WHY WAS IT NEEDED?

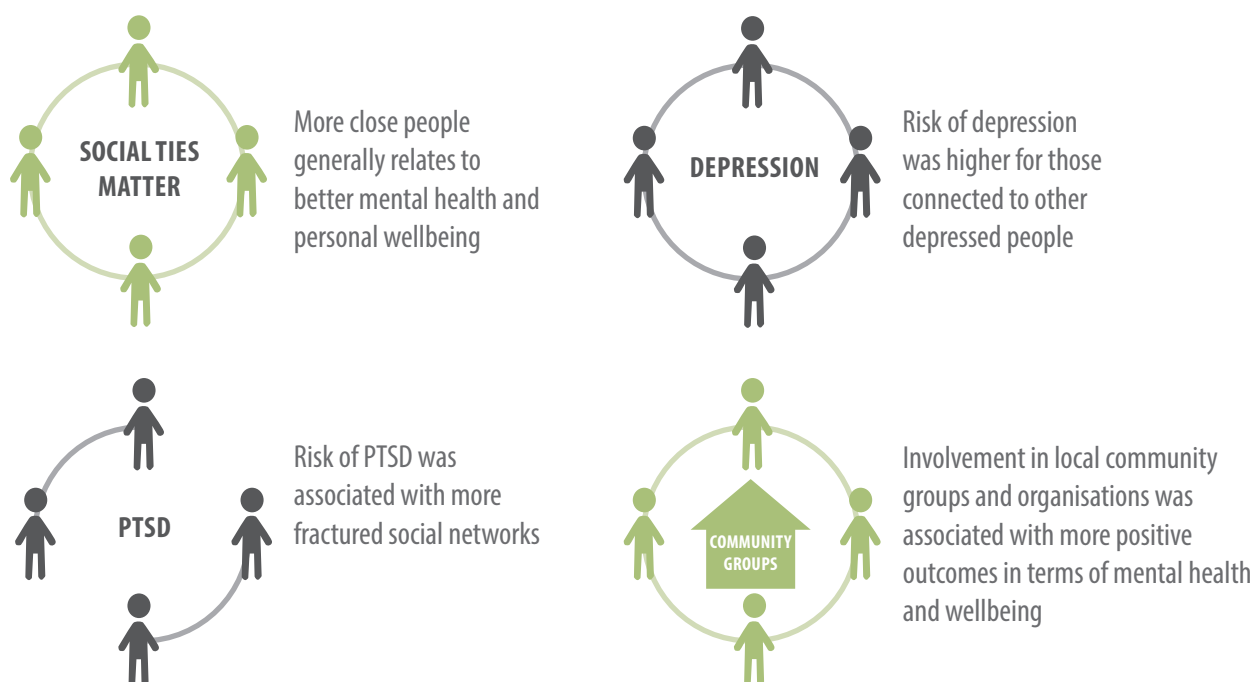
**Previous disaster recovery research which focused on short term, individual mental health impacts wasn't particularly helpful in understanding how to target services to promote the most positive outcomes for individuals and communities.**

The Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery research findings were designed to guide disaster resilience policy and services. The social and community factors impacting mental health and resilience in the **3-5 years after the Black Saturday** bushfires of February 2009 were examined. The **6 year study involving over 1,000 participants** across Victoria was led by The University of Melbourne in partnership with community members and a range of community, academic, government, emergency, and health agencies including Phoenix Australia, Australian Red Cross, Department of Health and Human Services Victoria, Australian Government Department of Human Services, Australian Rotary Health and regional Primary Care Partnerships. Funded by the Australian Research Council.

### WHAT WAS FOUND?

There was progressive recovery from the disaster and the subsequent disruptions at community level over time but there was also evidence of extended impacts on individual mental health.

**At 5 years post bushfires, 22% of people in high impact communities were reporting symptoms of mental health disorders at approximately twice the rate evident in low impact communities and what would be expected in the general population. Social networks made a difference:**



## WHAT WAS FOUND?

Close friends and 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 local community groups.

In communities in which many people belonged to local groups, the benefits extended to other people living in that community. This shows that community group membership is a key factor in establishing and maintaining healthy and resilient communities.

Strong attachment to the natural environment was also associated with increased mental health, life satisfaction, resilience, community attachment & posttraumatic growth.

People who relocated out of affected communities had similar levels of wellbeing 3-5 years afterwards compared to those that stayed, but showed different support service needs.

Further analyses using NAPLAN data showed reduced progress in children's reading and maths 4 years after the fires.

The [Beyond Bushfires Final report](#) was produced to provide a simple overview of key findings. The detailed Beyond Bushfires academic papers published to date can be found here - [www.beyondbushfires.org.au](http://www.beyondbushfires.org.au)



We will be recontacting our research participants in 2019 for the **10 years Beyond Bushfires** study to learn about long term experiences after a disaster.

It will be funded by Emergency Management Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services Victoria, and Australian Red Cross.

## FURTHER INFORMATION



### Professor Lisa Gibbs

Director, Jack Brockhoff Child Health & Wellbeing Program, Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health  
Academic Lead, Community Resilience and Public Health Unit,  
Centre for Disaster Management and Public Safety  
University of Melbourne  
[lgibbs@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lgibbs@unimelb.edu.au)  
(03) 8344 0920  
[www.beyondbushfires.org.au](http://www.beyondbushfires.org.au)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

