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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

Horrible fires have devastated a large portion of Victoria. More than 80 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 stressful situations.

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 music, 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.
- Disastrous 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 psychological and/or mental scars.

Traumatic incidents can also have a vicious 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 media news 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

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 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.

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. Risk avert rotation if needed.

Use the ritual of organizing 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.
- Difficultly doing simple tasks or problem solving.
- The ‘100m stare’, an inability to focus in close.
- Impulsivity, extreme anger, argumentativeness, violence.
- Expressions of futurity, 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.