

Helping men, women and children

Debra Parkinson, Gender and Disaster Pod

Disasters, like the current bushfires in Australia, place pressure on men to be silent and stoic protectors, which makes them reluctant to seek help. What does this mean for families in such terrible times?

Evidence shows that men may fear career penalties if they seek psychological help after disasters. For women, there's an expectation that they will put their own needs last to support their husbands, partners and families who may be traumatised from fighting fires and protecting homes. Some women face increased or new domestic violence and, in a post-disaster context, there is even greater pressure for them to remain silent about it.

For the massive fires across the country over Christmas and New Year, anecdotal reports were coming through early that relationship pressure and domestic violence were occurring. Increased family violence during disasters can be prevented or reduced if community members and health professionals are aware of this likelihood and know how to respond constructively. With widespread disruption to face-to-face services, it is important to remind men, women and children of the helplines available. The 'Disaster is no excuse for family violence' postcard provides a simple four-step process related to family violence and provides information about support services.

It is equally important for community members to wind back expectations and judgements of men and women based on outdated notions of masculinity and femininity. Stop asking men what they did on the day and if they've re-established the home. Stop asking women to be supportive of suffering partners no matter what's happening at home. Stop asking if they're 'over it'. Disaster effects are severe and long-lasting. As one research informant said, 'I don't think you can ever put a pin in and say it's all over'.¹

Saving lives through fire planning with a gendered lens

Gendered expectations (of men to protect and provide and women to sacrifice and nurture) complicate fire planning. Men are frequently expected to defend properties and women often delay leaving properties in order to persuade husbands or partners to leave. The GAD Pod's research into long-term disaster resilience

found children may remain traumatised into their adulthood if they witness this conflict.

Following advice from emergency services organisations and officials to 'Leave (early) and Live' will save lives and will prevent lifelong physical and mental health effects for survivors. Yet, conflict within couples frequently prevents fire planning discussions.

The GAD Pod 'Fire planning with a gendered lens' postcards encourage women and men to discuss their roles in a potential fire. The aim is to create understanding of gendered expectations in emergency situations.

**For more information see
www.genderanddisaster.com.au.**

Men's Helpline: 1300 766 491

Kid's Helpline: 1800 55 1800

Questions postcard:
www.genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Postcard-LTR-1-of-2-revised.pdf.

Facts postcard:
www.genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Postcard-LTDR-2-of-2.pdf.

¹ Gender and Disaster Pod 2018, *Long-term Disaster Resilience*. At: www.genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Vol-1-Executive-Summary-29-Oct-with-references.pdf.