

Thoughts on the Release of the Royal Commission Report by Dr. Rob Gordon

The final report of the Bushfire Royal Commission will be released on the 31st July 2010, and for some people this will be an emotional and possibly upsetting time. The following suggestions come from Dr. Rob Gordon and are based on his knowledge of people's experiences in previous disasters. They may help people to make the findings part of their recovery rather than being pulled aside into the focus of other groups and not primarily concerned with re-establishing a life after such a huge experience.

Investigations and reports are part of every disaster. They provide much needed information about the event and help the community learn from it, which are aids to recovery. But the release of reports and investigations can open wounds, take people back to where they were, be a source of distress, and interfere with recovery.

When information is being released and discussed in wider society, it is valuable for those affected to look after themselves and make sure it does not disrupt their hard work to get where they are in their recovery.

Acceptance: The most important thing in successful recovery is acceptance that the disaster happened. It is hard to bring about and happens only gradually and painfully. It is helped by recognizing how complicated disaster is and how many influences combined to make it happen.

Making Sense: Everyone affected has to make sense of it in their own way. This takes years, but it is central to a good recovery. Making sense means weaving the experience into the pattern of a new, worthwhile future.

History: People have shown the ability throughout history to rebuild lives of value and purpose after all sorts of terrible events. They achieve this by focusing on the future, but holding onto the past as part of their story.

Disruption of Recovery: Recovery can be disrupted by looking for simple answers to complicated questions, simple reasons for complicated events; by focussing on some of the most obvious aspects and looking for someone to blame. Research into recovering from disasters shows people who turn pain into anger and helplessness into blame, find it harder to move on and regain happiness than those who focus on accepting it has happened and building a new future.

Preserving a Recovery Viewpoint: Everyone affected needs to preserve a focus on their own recovery when information is released and inquiries are debated. When the whole community gets involved, many voices join the chorus of discussion. Some people will look at specific aspects, but those affected have to live with the whole. Some people will react with strong emotions, but those affected have usually felt them all before. Some want to trace responsibility for actions to individuals or groups and attribute blame, but those affected know they have to live with the consequences. Sometimes new information may change the way things are understood and lead to new emotions and confusion. All this has to be related to a person's individual recovery process.

Emotional Vortex: The release of further information will involve the broader community again as they were when the initial events happened. They may respond with strong emotions and it will be easy for those directly affected to be drawn into a vortex of emotions that is very different

to the issues they have been working on in their recovery. Observers, bystanders and those who might have been affected easily feel anger, blame and wish for retribution as ways of avoiding the helplessness that every disaster brings to those it hurts. But blame interferes with learning from mistakes; anger interferes with understanding what happened; retribution does not help to find a new basis for life when the old one is gone forever; looking back may interfere with surviving and attaching to a new vision of what life could be.

Participation: After the release of the report, many may want to participate in discussions and follow the debates and decisions. At the same time others will not want to. It is important to respect each others' needs and differences - what each one wants is right for them. For those who want to be involved, keep grounded in your own recovery, finding and progressing towards your future goals; protect yourself from unnecessary emotion and distress about things out of your hands.

Fatigue: Affected people are physically and emotionally tired from the last year and a half and it is easier to lose perspective and get things out of proportion. Things may seem different, there may be swings of emotion, moments of despondency and loss of motivation for recovery. Some may feel so involved they lose sight of their own recovery and become immersed in bigger matters, only to find neglected problems catch up with them when they are tired again.

Looking after yourselves: Some ways of protecting yourself and your family and friends during this challenging time are:

1. Limit exposure to debates and information. Don't go over the same issues when there is nothing new. Think about what is important to you and focus on that. Avoid images of the early events if you don't need to see them again.
2. Make sure you have people to talk it over with who understand or share your experience. It will be a time of ready judgement and opinion by many who have little understanding.
3. Think about how the information relates to your personal situation; avoid getting immersed into community-wide matters while you are still working at your recovery.
4. Keep note of the emotions you feel and avoid or ration your exposure to highly emotional or evocative material.
5. Take time out regularly so you can take your mind off it altogether for a while. This is the only way to get emotional information into perspective.
6. Try not to rush to blame and judgement; give yourself and others time to digest it all and see the whole. The big picture is most realistic because it is the most complete, but it is also the hardest to understand.
7. Eat well, rest, exercise, get plenty of sleep, spend time with friends, do things you enjoy so you stay grounded in your own life.
8. Hang onto the goals of your own recovery. Don't let other influences derail it; people can lose weeks or months of recovery energy. Hard as it may seem at the time, people do survive and flourish again; but it requires time and attention to the details of you own life and the lives of those important to you.
9. If you feel confused, upset, emotional, despondent or lacking in motivation, check in with someone who has the training and experience to help you get on track again.
10. Recovery services are available to all people affected by the fires, they are also available to those who need support at a later stage rather than earlier in their recovery.

For further information, counselling and support, contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, Bereavement Counselling and Support Service on 1300 664 786 or 03 9265 2111. Anyone wanting assistance can also discuss it with their GP, case manager or by contacting the Mental Health Advice Line, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, on 1300 280 737.