

# What others said about the men

Claire Zara and Debra Parkinson 2013

---

## ■ Introduction

In **The way he tells it – relationships after Black Saturday** (Parkinson, 2012), 30 women and 47 workers spoke to researchers about family violence after the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Drawing from this report, this brief paper contains excerpts from interviews that are predominantly concerned with men in the aftermath of this disaster. These are the words of the workers who observed men, listened to them, and theorised about them, and the women who knew and often loved them. The workers cited include counsellors, recovery workers and emergency services and emergency management personnel. The women are wives and long term partners.

This is a glimpse of what others had to say about the men who went through the bushfires. The men's voices are yet to be captured and it will be of interest to compare how they view their behaviours and responses post bushfire with those who often watched in dismay as they struggled to find a way back to 'normal'.

## ■ Roles and expectations: I am man and I do.

What society expects of men and what they expect of themselves is, for many men, inseparable. The role of protector of family and property drove many men during and after the bushfires and for some, lead to a range of responses and effects that were detrimental to partners, children, and to the man himself.

On Black Saturday, both men and women were faced with the terrible decision of whether to stay or go. The responsibility for decision making, and in some cases not making the decision early enough, or the right decision, had a deep and lasting impact. For some men, their plan to stay and protect the family home, with their family long gone, was thwarted by the speed and ferocity of the fires.

Not only was their own life suddenly at serious risk, but now their responsibility extended to the lives of others. The consequences of these decisions led some men to feel they had failed in their role as family protector.

*...if their plan was to have them away, for the man to stay home and just fight, you know, protect the house from embers, and all of a sudden he's got his wife and children there, and this fire storm rolling—I can't even begin to imagine what would have gone through their heads. The role that they took on that day, not willingly.  
(Recovery worker)*

## ■ Decision making

Men's self-belief and their capability to fight these fires were severely challenged in 2009. Even those who felt prepared were overwhelmed by the enormity of what they faced. Men and women often respond to disaster differently. Men can appear more confident, less anxious and are more likely to minimise perceived risks. For some men

action and activity often trump consultation and information and the likelihood of relying on their own judgement is greater than taking external advice. Having a strong fire plan and feeling well prepared can provide men with a sense of control that does not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation.

When some men delayed the decision to leave, they put themselves and their families at risk. And some women, in the absence of men or confronted with a partner's inability to act, took matters into their own hands, often fleeing the fires with children, neighbours, friends and even pets in tow.<sup>1</sup>

*Men tend to enhanced anxiety, and women maximise a sense of threat, whether it's realistic or unrealistic and men tend to minimise the threat and go into action. They underestimate the risk and overestimate their own capacity. (Trauma specialist)*

## ■ Identity and manhood

For many men manhood is encapsulated in the idea of strength – physical and emotional – and being a good provider. A further extension of this ideal is the notion of 'a man's home is his castle'.

When some men tried to defend their homes at all costs the reason why was not always apparent to their partners. One woman said:

*And why did he put himself at risk? He could have died, I didn't know what had happened to him and here he was defending a house that isn't even a great house.*

An ingrained sense of 'that's just what a man does', and society's expectations, informed some men's actions in a way that was almost automatic.

The stereotype of man as protector and breadwinner gained traction in an already conservative setting, simplifying men's roles to some extent, to meet the basic, observable needs. 'Being a bloke' was, for some, tied intrinsically to meeting those needs and behaving in ways that they identified as manly. This response is evidenced elsewhere, in similar countries, where a return to conservative behaviour and responses has been documented.<sup>2</sup>

Some men took on leadership roles within the community, expanding their position as head of the household into the public space. Others turned to traditional, masculine activities and took up tools to build or clear; or pens and computers to apply for grants and permits. This activity-based response took up most of their time and almost all of their energy, at least in the early days. For many men, this effectively blocked emotional responses and denied partners and families the sort of supports and intimacy they needed. And denied it of themselves.

This hard physical work was, for many men, their overriding response to the fires. From the initial necessity of clearing roads and debris to the mammoth task of rebuilding

---

<sup>1</sup> See Beating the Flames (WHGNE 2011) for accounts of women escaping the fires.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman, S., (1998) Adam and Eve among the embers: gender patterns after the Oakland Berkeley firestorm in Gender patterns after the Oakland Berkeley Firestorm. In E. Enarson & B. H. Morrow (Eds.), The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes (pp. 55-61). London: Praeger.

homes and repairing fences they worked endlessly to restore or create a semblance of order.

Their ability to provide for the family became, for some men paramount. All other possible responses to the bushfires appeared to be subsumed by the physical or logistical acts of rebuilding. These tasks became for some a direct link to both their identity and to their self - worth and anchored each day in a meaning that could be measured. Their role as good husband and father undisputed and in direct proportion to the hours of labour they spent on each task.

## ■ Anywhere but home

This high activity period has an intersection in two main areas; that of an overwhelming sense of responsibility as head of the family; and a legitimate means of avoiding the tremendous emotions arising as a result of the bushfires. Working *for* the family was, for some men, a way of avoiding being *with* the family, and all that might entail.

Men later told of the 'stupid and dangerous' activities they threw themselves into to avoid both their emotional fragility and dealing with the family.

For some men, avoiding facing or sharing their bushfire experience involved seeking out other men who reaffirmed their avoidance response by talking about anything other than the bushfires. This often involved drinking and discussing male related topics or activities, like cars, machinery or computers.

While these interactions helped create a sense of connection, the stark consequences of this repression and avoidance was evident as men started to run out of things to do and the energy to do them. As some men suddenly collapsed from exhaustion, physical and emotional, their behaviour changed dramatically. Their partners and children were, in many cases, simply shut out.

The upshot of extended physical and mental activity impacted on men's wellbeing and affected their health and the wellbeing of their families. The periods of high arousal and high adrenalin often gave way to collapse and feeling overwhelmed and full of despair.

One worker reflected that women also went into this state, but he speculated that because of their other networks and ability to verbalise, the impact was minimised. Family responsibilities, often left solely to the women, also contributed to a possible reduction in the after-effects of the fires.

*They can't drop the responsibility of children etcetera, but the men do. (Trauma specialist)*

## ■ Family violence

Some men's behaviour towards their partner and family further deteriorated, leading in some situations to family violence, as documented in **The way he tells it: relationships**

after Black Saturday Parkinson, D. 2012)<sup>3</sup> where sixteen women recounted their partner's and ex partner's violence following the bushfires. For some it was a new experience; for others it was an escalation of existing behaviours.

Anger appeared the overriding emotion fuelling this dramatic change or escalation of violent behaviour. In some, but not all cases, this was inflamed by an increase in alcohol and drug use. Anger, however, can mask a range of emotions; it can be the one emotion that the man, and society finds, to some degree, acceptable. Emotions perceived as unacceptable in a man can include vulnerability, inadequacy or fear and many men are unlikely, unless encouraged, and perhaps not even then, to discuss these.

Women told of a new or heightened volatility soon after the fires. Recurring themes of anger, a need to control and 'nastiness' arises in their accounts of post bushfire behaviour by male partners. Where there had been past issues of abuse or violence, post fire they became regular and unbearable.

The bushfires were a trigger to some men's past traumatic histories, histories that may had not been dealt with in the past. Men who had, to some degree, managed their lives, started to come apart and old memories were relived. For some, the fires were the tipping point.

*He was a fragile character before, but he was a whole egg. But whatever happened to him through the fires smashed him; whereas as stronger shell might have held, he was smashed, and his moral compass was decimated. (Cathy)*

Some men, confronted by an altered landscape that was physical, social and emotional, refused to see how they, too had changed. Some blamed their wives for no longer being the same.

*They don't know that they're angry half the time, and for some of them they don't think there's anything wrong with giving your wife a bit of a beating around the ears. (Recovery worker)*

## ■ It's not like him

Women were often the first to recognise that their partner was acting in ways that were unusual; behaving towards her and their children in a manner that was not normal in their relationship. As the physical and mental toll spilled over into relationships, women, and often workers, made allowances for this new and at times frightening behaviour, because of his trauma. Women, also traumatised, did not know how to respond and were often unsupported by agencies, which added to the couple's stress and caused tension between them.<sup>4</sup>

Previously logical and decisive men suddenly could not make up their minds; they slept poorly and were impulsive. They spoke harshly to partners and children, sometimes later regretting their words and actions. Women declared this was out of character and workers complied by advising them to be patient.

<sup>3</sup> Parkinson, D. (2012) The way he tells it: relationships after Black Saturday [www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au)

<sup>4</sup> The way he tells it: relationships after Black Saturday (2012) Vol. 4 A Gut Feeling –The Workers' Accounts

Some men acted in ways that stunned their partners. Women spoke of men's 'horrific memory loss' which, for one man led to paranoia and a belief his wife was unfaithful and a family member was trying to poison him. Forgetting family discussions, this man raged that he was not consulted, left out of family matters.

Simple decisions became agonising for some men who kept their partners and families on tenterhooks as they oscillated between making abrupt, authoritarian decisions, to being unable to decide on simple matters. 'Snapping' as one woman put it, occurred whenever her partner felt he didn't have control.

*... I think he either goes to 'I've got total control' and being a dictator and nobody is going to tell me anything, to ... just withdrawing completely. I guess there is an element of both there, but very volatile, very unpredictable, that's been the horrendous thing. It's like living with three different people, you know, you just can't tell on any given day, is he going to be angry today? Is he going to be solemn today? Where he normally has been a fairly balanced person. (Amber)*

While some men worked long hours rebuilding homes or cleaning up, others took on obsessive behaviours. One man started running, and cycling and attending the gym – leaving at all hours of the day or night. He had never done this before. Others spent money 'like we were millionaires'.

Women told of previously business-like, white collar workers losing their sense of personal pride; failing to shave or shower or dress properly and falling into a slipper-shuffling lethargy.

Some men simply did not cope when the initial surge of energy and activity waned and the reality of long waits with little to do set in. Months of physical work, repression or denial of feelings and being home for lengthy periods of time took their toll, straining relationships and, in some cases, causing women and children to be fearful. One worker summarised this reaction:

*When they run out of jobs, the repressive coping doesn't work as well and the symptoms arise, and arise more aggressively than in women. They are very irritable with children and family and start to be unbearable at home. They close down, become cold and very snappy and irritable. (Resident Canberra bushfires)*

## ■ All work and no thanks

Working non-stop seemed both a necessity and a choice. Some men felt their partners and families didn't understand why they were working so hard. Their goal was to provide them with what the men thought the family needed – a new house. One couple who sought professional help for their relationship discovered that the wife's priorities were quite different – she simply wanted to go on a holiday with her husband, to be with him. Workers' informal discussions with men revealed that many felt they were working hard without acknowledgement or appreciation.

The combination of relentless work, unexpressed emotions and pressure in their relationships resulted in at least one gathering where men tearfully shared their

feelings at a public event. Many expressed frustration that their efforts to rebuild were not enough, and their family relationships remained difficult and strained. It seemed the harder they worked for the family the less they were available or willing to connect with them emotionally.

*Conflicts are when guys thought they were doing best for family, but partner [s] wanted guys to relate to [their] kids, and talk about feelings and experiences. But a lot of guys just wouldn't. (Men's counsellor)*

Other men, on the contrary, felt they were not doing enough. Some men having collapsed in state of physical and emotion exhaustion felt unable to fulfil the tasks that needed to be done, their sensitivity to real or perceived criticism contributing further to a sense of inadequacy and failure.

Some men had multiple roles and pressures; sorting out the issues arising from the bushfire that included building grants, clean-ups, maintaining employment and also caring for a partner and supporting the children. These responsibilities, while keeping them busy, also further isolated them.

## ■ No time for a breakdown

Adrenaline-fuelled activity came at a high cost, both physical and mental. Within a fortnight of the fires the first signs of men's distress was evident, and then later at three and eight months. These patterns are known as repressive coping.<sup>5</sup>

As the big tasks were completed workers observed men beginning to break down. Sometimes the men and women would take turns in 'crashing'. Results from a Kessler<sup>6</sup> test (similar to the one performed after 9/11) showed that men were less stressed at the time of the test, but follow-up indicated they became stressed later.

Workers and women told of men bottling up their emotions and running on adrenalin for too long; the upshot for some was extreme exhaustion, physical stress, out of character emotional responses and other PTSD symptoms.

One counsellor described the physical effects of a combination of high adrenalin and extreme stress that hit men in the months following.

*The next wave was eight to 10 months after the fires. The first two waves were adrenalin based. The next two waves were cortisol based – the brain chemical that kicks in after long term stress. Everybody experiences adrenaline – it gives you a sense of wanting physical activity, but after three months of this you can understand your muscle system loses bulk and you maybe find you don't have the energy reserves to do what adrenaline is telling you to do. (Men's counsellor)*

Burnout is a well-documented phenomenon that can occur after a long period of appearing to cope under extreme stress and can involve physical and emotional

<sup>5</sup> Referred to by some as 'Rob Gordon (trauma specialist) territory', the men's activity was often seen by both women and workers as a repression of their feelings or 'repressive' coping.

<sup>6</sup> The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) is a scale developed in 1992 for use in population surveys and was included in the Australian Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (1997) and the Australian National Health Surveys.

breakdown. Burnout can be the result of avoiding emotions which eventually surface in a way that can be frightening to the person and those around them. People suffering burnout can burst into tears for no apparent reason, causing concern to their partners and those close to them.

When a CFA veteran of thirty years was unable to get an appointment for a consultation with 'a bloke to talk to' he burst into tears in the clinic. The follow-up in his home showed he was having symptoms of PTSD (as was his wife).

Physical symptoms reported by men after the fires included: stomach complaints including acid stomach, heart troubles, cramps and loss of appetite. Some felt fatigued with no explanation and some attended hospital for PTSD related chest pain.

## ■ Relationships

Often it was the woman who recognised that her partner was not coping and tried to convince him to get professional help. About six months after the 2003 Canberra fires women alerted recovery workers that their partners were really stressed. They had been working hard to rebuild homes, but now they were showing signs of burnout.

One older farmer attending a men's session after Black Saturday spoke to a worker of not leaving the farm for months except to buy goods. His wife was worried about him and she had made him to go along on the night.

Men behaving in frightening and unfamiliar ways caused confusion with women at a loss of what to do and how to help. This created more stress within some relationships as both partners struggled to come to terms with men not acting in character.

*They saw their men as stoic and to see someone who has never broken down do this is confusing and distressing and the women wonder if they should be helping somehow. But the guy rebuffs that because he doesn't want to add to what she's already going through. (Men's counsellor)*

The roles were not always fixed, with emotional and physical responses changing at different times and couples swapping roles and experiencing various levels of stress at different times. Couples often took turns in crashing. For some couples, this remains ongoing.

## ■ No going back

For some women, the aftermath of the fires brought new strength, opportunities and connections to the community. This post-traumatic growth<sup>7</sup> found negative responses in some men who wanted things to return to how they had been before the fires. This strong desire return to normal may also have been disrupted, not only with the grief and the unrecognisable landscape, but with partners that had also changed, and perhaps, could not be put back the way they were.

---

<sup>7</sup> This is the notion that individuals can experience positive effects following highly stressful or traumatic events.

*...she's blossoming after all this, she's finding herself and she's probably saying and doing things that he doesn't like. He wants to go back to normal, he's not coping with his own fire stuff, he wants to make her go back to normal, and she's not willing to do that. (Recovery worker)*

Other men, however, supported their partner's new growth, independence and connection to community.

## Interventions

### ■ Why won't the men get help?

Concerns about how men would or were coping arose early within the professional community but not all workers felt the same. One worker was surprised at the extent of the community and private worry about the men. Her comments contrast with others, who were at a loss as how engage men with services.

*There was a big effort to get to the blokes because they were all going to fall over, and I thought this was an interesting phenomenon, that so many people were worried about the blokes – and the women were worried about the blokes – and I thought how odd. The services have bought into it, too. (DHS manager)*

One woman spoke to this worker of her strong fears that more (male) deaths would occur as a result of the fires. These fears were echoed by women who heard shocking accounts of friends finding their husbands armed with shotguns, preparing to commit suicide, or feared their partner's mental fragility and what he might do. While women suffered depression and emotional upheaval post Black Saturday, the concern for suicide was centred on the men. The worry about men consumed some women who felt, in some ways, the stronger. It seemed that each new rumour about a death, or attempted suicide, involved a man.

*Every time you hear about somebody it's a man, it's always men, ready to check out rather than face another day. Something's got to change. (Cathy)*

*I didn't want him to break, I didn't want him to die. He was pretty fragile, he was pretty angry and I didn't want him to go and smash his car into a tree or something stupid like that. (Nina)*

At least in the early days after the fires, few men attended professional counselling services. Women were more likely to seek out counselling for themselves and for their children. Generally men simply refused to go, despite their partner's pleas.

Women told of men being fearful they would lose their emergency service jobs if they sought counselling; that the stigma would affect them professionally. Others denied there was anything wrong with them, despite partners and family seeing a different scenario. Formal debriefing, particularly in groups, offered by emergency services agencies was often seen as futile by the men – an unlikely setting for disclosure or sharing of feelings with other men.



## Public heroes

Women spoke of the poor support culture in emergency services organisations that appeared to act only if a first response worker (mostly male) asked directly for help, or was in crisis. They felt that early support and acknowledgement of the terrible experience would go some way towards helping workers who had been in direct line of the bushfires.

The discrepancy between public treatment and response to DSE employees compared to CFA workers was a painful issue for some wives of DSE first response workers who observed that public acknowledgements were focused on CFA volunteers only. DSE workers, by contrast, who are restricted from talking to the media (as government employees) lost an important opportunity to talk about their experiences, or to be praised publicly for their own heroic efforts, or sacrifices.

*I mean it's all about CFA, CFA, the heroes, the heroes. How often do you see a man in a green suit on the television? You'd think that all fire fighters wear yellow suits but they don't... They might have been paid, but they paid dearly. They didn't get one single ticket tape parade. They're not allowed to talk, they are gagged. They are not allowed to talk about their experiences, they're not allowed to go to the media. The media love the CFA guys because they're allowed to talk, they don't even acknowledge the DSE guys. (Cathy)*

This silence between men about their feelings increased some men's sense of isolation and confirmed for some, that denial and repression was the only response. Men's reluctance or refusal to engage with services, or their partners, could be hidden by working hard, drinking or keeping the company of other men in the same circumstances. This was effective, at least at first, for hiding and denying uncomfortable emotional responses to the fires.

This collusion from other males and male dominated emergency response agencies may have contributed, for some men, to the crisis that eventually surfaced.

*... he needed acknowledgement from someone to say 'you know what? What you're feeling every other bloke's denying what you're feeling, they all feel the same way. You need to cry, you need to be soothed; you need to not worry about work. You need to acknowledge and stop and look around you at what's happened rather than just go no, just get on, get on. (Gina)*

This denial and repression of feelings can have severe consequences including illness, and death. Only when workers managed to get men aside and talk with them was the enormous impact of the bushfires evident.

Men told (male) recovery workers of their belief that they would be judged if they asked for help and of their fear of being stigmatised and thought mentally ill or weak for asking for help. One worker, commenting on an effort to engage fire affected men, said:

*... I saw advertised a month ago there was something about 'Are you angry all the time? Come and join a men's self-help group'. They would have all just looked at it and gone 'Oh fuck off, I'm not interested in that'. (Recovery worker)*

## ■ The male domain

While formal support opportunities such as professional counselling and men's support groups were not taken up, at least in the early days, informal activities including pub gatherings, approaches by Red Cross workers on the blocks, and the introduction of male recovery workers allowed men to express at least some of their feelings and concerns in environments that worked for them. Talking to workers in these environments it was not unusual for men to burst into tears, often sharing their experiences with strangers.

In these familiar and comfortable settings, it seemed that men had less difficulty in speaking of their feelings and showing deep emotions to perfect strangers – indeed, perhaps because they were strangers.

Workers found that non-confrontational environments such as the pub, golf or field days were the best venues to approach men. They described the men's preferred communication style as incidental rather than overt, and processed within the protection of a familiar place or activity. Rather than a long dialogue men preferred to speak incidentally, a bit of chat here and there. Traditional male recreational activities such as fishing, golf or participation in a Men's Shed, or activities involving 'a slab of beer' created opportunities for men to open up and talk about their feelings and experiences.

## ■ A drinking culture

For many men, socialising and consolation was found in the local pub. Long building delays and little to do in often cramped and inadequate accommodation lead to and exacerbated relationship problems. The pub offered camaraderie and a chance to escape.

*A lot of heavy drinking went on with men early on, especially around Flowerdale. The socialising happened around the pub and that's where you console yourself. ...you're stuck in a small space, with a lot of relationship problems. Maybe they were there before, and then you add alcohol to that. (Recovery worker)*

At special events, where a slab of beer was put on at the pub some men would open and talk. For some, it was a form of counselling. Being thrown together in temporary living arrangements also contributed to a drinking culture as people shared not only the tragic experience of the fires, but convenient daily proximity to each other, and eventually, not much to do.

*And people were living with other people and when you have people living in other people's houses together ... so you'd be being together and having a few drinks and a few more drinks and a few more drinks, and for some of the men it would be a way of—for some of the men—talking about what their feelings were. (Recovery worker)*

For some men this was a form of counselling that helped them open up to others and share their feelings, for others it merely helped hide them more effectively.

*Men will be miserable but because they drink and if they don't kill themselves, you don't know. (Trauma specialist)*

## ■ Workplace support

Expectations that men behave in certain ways extended to the workforce. Some employers expressed the view that it was only a matter of time before bushfire victims got over it and resumed their lives. This was evident in responses to men who were unable to resume work at a previous level, or showed signs they were not coping or had not 'recovered'. Many workplaces were not understanding, with a clear deadline on sympathy; men were expected to get over the experience and resume working at their prior capacity.

For a man whose primary role has been enhanced by the disaster as being the provider to his family, his burden may well have increased under this external pressure and the added fear of losing his job.

This was not, however, always the case. Where employer sympathy and time to recover was extended to one man,

*... the day the roads opened he was back at work. He chose to go to work the day the roads opened. (Monica)*

## ■ A defining moment

For some men Black Saturday will colour the rest of their lives. The fires, the aftermath, lives lost and life changed forever. One worker described it thus:

*And there are other men that are so traumatised that they still talk about their experience that night of the fire, even now. A bit like war stories, they're war stories. There are people whose lives will be forever defined by that one day. Forever. (Recovery worker)*