



The way he tells it

Relationships after Black Saturday

Vol. 3 The Landscape of my soul — Women's Accounts



WOMEN'S HEALTH
GOULBURN NORTH EAST
challenging inequity, embracing diversity

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. PO Box 853, Wangaratta, Victoria, 3677.

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Introduction

You never get the forest you just live amongst the trees. (Beth)

Each of the 29 women who participated in this research is living amongst the trees. Each faces the challenge of every new day, seen through the prism of 9th February 2009. Together, their unique experiences, so richly described, begin to expose the forest.

Our common aim, as research participants and researchers, is to throw some light on what happens to women during a disaster and in its aftermath in Australia. The personal is, indeed, political. Each woman's story of individual struggle is much more than that — their circumstances dictated to a large degree by the expectations society has of men and women.

This report differs from most, perhaps, in its immersion in relationships. We begin with recollections of the 7th February, 2009 - the day that began a never-ending journey for those involved. The women's words give a sense of the labyrinth of relationships underlying events and emotions. Our focus then moves explicitly to the effect of the day and its aftermath on those relationships.

The research of WHGNE seeks primarily to hear the voices of women and the style of this report foregrounds the women's words. They speak forthrightly and eloquently, calling for little interpretation.

Our interviews were held in the months around the second anniversary of Black Saturday. The grief of bushfire survivors was palpable two years on, and it was grief for a bigger loss — when everything changed instantly and permanently. One woman said, 'They'll have an event, and they'll remember those who are dead, but they won't profile the bigger loss'. A recovering landscape with sprouting trees and new houses won't eradicate a changed sense of self — personally and professionally.

'The Landscape of My Soul' is a line from Dr Kim Jeff that eloquently captures what women describe in this report. It will always be a changed landscape for survivors of Black Saturday.

Experiences of Black Saturday

The scene

It went pitch black, everywhere you looked there were flames, and I said, 'This is what hell would be like'. (Gaye)

It just went dark, really dark and the noise, it sounded like a jumbo was landing on you. (Rosie)

If you've ever been to a war zone you'd understand what it was like. Not just the mental and chaotic energy of everybody, but you're driving along and there's powerlines down everywhere, trees everywhere, people, so many cars just banged into trees, another car banged into that car, a car up a ditch—most of them still had bodies in them—people were having accidents in places where you'd think, 'How did they have an accident?'. They're five feet from a house and six cars all banged into each other all burnt, and bodies, and you think, 'There's a house there'. And then you know why, because you couldn't find your house which was two feet away ... and that was the scene all the way into Kinglake. And then you get into Kinglake and it was crazy town, just crazy ... The chaos in town of course was like what you'd see in people fleeing wars, not just sitting quietly in refugee camps, but running away from the war with bombs going off behind them. It had that kind of feeling about it. (Michelle)

It was chaotic. I saw a guy run a cop over because he was trying to get through, and they wouldn't let him through. The cop was all right. You know, he reversed up and then just floored it. The cop stood up again. We left not long after. It was just madness. (Tess)

One woman spoke of carrying her camera tucked into her bra strap so she could take photographs every few minutes. She felt the need to document her extraordinary experience because she didn't think anyone would believe her. She was not alone. Many spoke of disbelief at the enormity of the fire and tragically bizarre sights — flames like skyscrapers, familiar neighbourhoods destroyed in minutes, bonfires everywhere, neighbours' houses literally exploding, blueberry orchards alight, birds dropping from the sky. And tragic sounds.

I reckon it was going to 38,000 feet—this huge cloud, literally you're a small person and the cloud's just going like this over you and you can see flames up into it, and then gradually of course you start to hear explosions and you hear that sound of the train ... we can hear our neighbours screaming. It's just terrible. (Michelle)

You didn't know what was going on with your neighbours ... you could hear them yelling, you knew while they were yelling they were alive, but this massive old gum tree not far from the bloody house exploded, and I'm thinking how the hell are they going to bloody save themselves in there? (Gaye)

Women who left in convoys spoke of enduring regret at not being able to stop for people walking at the side of the road fighting smoke and falling embers. The bumper to bumper traffic had to forge on as one with the firestorm close behind. One car stopping would endanger all behind. Such logic, however, barely dents the anguish of driving past adults and children, unable to help.

You've got to flee. And we see people — their car has broken down on the side of the road and you just feel, 'Oh, should we stop? No-one is stopping and we have to keep going in the traffic and what's going to happen to them?' You could see from the side there was fires and smoke and flame and it was dark. (Jenny)

The drive out was fraught with times of zero visibility — smoke so thick that women spoke of driving by memory. Or terrifying visibility — enormous fireballs catching up in the rear vision mirror. Blocked roads forced some of the women to take roads they knew to be dangerous at the best of times — winding, flanked by sheer drops or solid bush. And Black Saturday was the worst of times. Powerlines were down, trees on fire, cars forced to drive over burning logs, sometimes overheating and sometimes, too, low on petrol.

It was like an atomic bomb had gone off here. The clouds were like orange mushroom formations and it was getting lower by the minute. (Annie)

I'm in a Commodore and it was overheating because I was driving over burning logs and burning both sides of the road and the alarm was going off saying, 'Engine hot, engine hot'. 'Oh, shit, I hope it doesn't burst into flames.' (Rosie)

The immense loss of wildlife meant the next day was silent, and absence of traffic intensified the isolation. Venturing out, survivors faced another dimension of trauma as they viewed evidence of the death and destruction wrought by the fire.

On the Sunday morning we drove up into Kinglake to see. It was like a set of where a nuclear war happened, you couldn't believe what you were seeing. (Rosie)

It was terrible. There were horses stuck on fences, there were animals over the road, there were people in the cars, there were houses upon houses upon houses that we knew, friends. We recognised cars from friends who had crashed and didn't know whether they were alive or dead. (Annie)

What he saw made him throw up. (Jenny)

Normality

Equally disconcerting was the abrupt thrust back into normality. One woman called it 'mind-blowing'. Another, 'alien'. One woman's son described it as going through a doorway into a different world, like Alice in Wonderland. Normality confronted survivors once they stepped out of the car into the main streets of unaffected towns, or into shopping centres. The normality was stifling and bewildering, causing them to want to flee yet again.

It just seemed we'd gone from this hell and chaos to suddenly having this order, perfect climate controlled, everything. It was weird. (Jenny)

The family [my son] was with tried to distract him and they took him to Bunnings just to do something, and he said he felt like screaming at people, 'Don't you know what's happening? Why are you behaving so normally?' (Kate)

Some carried with them the evidence of their traumatic survival.

He got to Greensborough blackened, blood over his shirt, with my two dogs with nothing to hold onto them, and went [to go into the] shopping centre and the security guards told him to go away. (Erica)

Surreal Images

All of a sudden I saw a rabbit go from a burning pile of something in our yard—our wood heap—and it was on fire, the poor bloody little rabbit was on fire, squealing, and as it shot off and went into the paddock the rabbit caught the paddock on fire. The fire was going anyway in the paddock, but the rabbit just ignited it where this mare and foal was. (Andrea)

We got to Yea and it was like entering the twilight zone. People had already set up on the nature strips, there were horses, animals, cows, dogs, sheep, goats, cars were a kilometre down the road queued up for fuel, the Red Cross was set up—how they knew I've got no idea—it was just like walking into the twilight zone. (Annie)

We were watching the firies lifting up the power lines so buses and ambulances and things could go under and it was strange, there was one little kid on the first bus who waved at us so we waved back, and then everybody in every seat on the bus, and the next, waved at us. They were all waving, it was just incredible. (Kate)

Deciding to stay or go

Australia has had a bushfire preparation policy of 'stay and defend or leave early' for decades (Haynes, et al., 2008). It was well researched, based on evidence. Black Saturday changed our understanding of bushfires. Its rage was impenetrable. Those who had a firm fire plan and were exceptionally well prepared to stay and defend, and with decades of experience of living in fire prone areas, reflected on their confidence, which was never meant for a fire with the ferocity of the Black Saturday bushfire.

I was quite confident, almost cocky. We were prepared, but I never thought... (Michelle)

One participant experienced Ash Wednesday as a child, and was urged to leave early by her mother. Others wanted their children out early. For those who did not evacuate early, decisions to stay or go on Black Saturday were made in the context of little or no formal information. They were made by intuition, or through fear,

I started to feel panicky ... so I ran up and got my stuff in the car and tried to get the dog, and then I just left. There was nothing to say what was happening but there was something that was just wrong. (Sonia)

A lot of that is my instinct that I have warnings about certain things and I have for years ... I feel the vibrations, that's how I connect with everything, it's all vibrational. Yes, and tone. (Andrea)

For many who left, the impetus often came when the power went off — and the phones with it. And for some, the incentive was more direct — they could see flames.

All of a sudden that wind change had happened and black smoke just came rolling down our hill ... and at that point it was full on 'go', you know, the adrenalin kicked in. He screamed at me and he said, because the car was packed, the dog was in there, he said, 'You get the fuck out of here'. I said 'Not without you'. (Jenny)

Or for people who understood something about the fire fighting system, the trigger was almost like code.

Nobody knew [the extent of the bushfires but] when he'd said to me that Edward had to leave the tower, that's when I knew, 'Shit, we've got to go'. (Holly)

A common reason to stay was fear of inadvertently driving into the fire.

I drove up to the corner to see what was going on and the fireball was coming this way and exploding. (Di)

I said, 'I'm just going to get the kids and get out of here'. He said, 'Where are you going to go?' Good point. We didn't know which way to go. ... We heard there were fires [in all directions] so really there was nowhere left to drive. (Madeline)

'We'll stay and defend the house'. That had always been our plan [but] I had this flee instinct, and said, 'Maybe I'll take the kids and we'll go', and we both looked at each other and thought, 'No, it's too late'. (Ruth)

Wrong information or no information

The women lamented the absence of official warnings about the approaching bushfires. Most turned to the radio or the internet, in particular, ABC radio and the CFA website, only to find no current or accurate information. Even when the information was correct, it was posted or broadcast too late to be of use. Power outages forced reliance on batteries or car radios and ipods.

We had been listening to the internet and radio and, truth is, everything we heard was the wrong information. (Celia)

The CFA didn't seem to know anything about it. (Sally)

There is nothing on the CFA website except that there is a spot fire down at [one road], so I thought, 'What is [he] going on about? Maybe he is just overreacting'. (Karen)

As we know when it was going over our heads the radio said it was still in Kilmore. (Sally)

The media didn't know what was going on. We were getting calls from our friends saying Marysville was gone. We knew before the ABC even said it was under threat. (Vicki)

We got home, checked the internet, and it didn't seem too big, bad or monstrous, and we thought it was a fair way away. And during the afternoon we could see the smoke and we were wondering how close it was, but the updates weren't there. (Kate)

I jumped in my car and I still could not acknowledge what was happening because the website said it was in Wallan and I was stupid, relying on that and relying on the radio. Surely if there was anything in our area, surely there'd be something on the radio. Surely they'd come around with the siren ringing like they did in 2006. (Andrea)

The first idea that we got that we might be under threat was my son's then girlfriend ... rang screaming over the phone, 'Get out, get out, it's coming, it's coming, we've got to get out' and we're going, 'What are you talking about, we haven't heard anything to back this up' and the power was still on so we checked the CFA website and there was nothing on that, nothing to be concerned, but within only 10 minutes we started to realise that the smoke was coming this way and it was starting to get darker and then the power went off and I thought, 'Oh, this can't be good'. (Rosie)

[My husband] was on the couch watching videos and I said, 'Oh shit. [A friend] has just lost his property.' I googled it and mapped it ... I kept getting on and seeing what was happening. All of a sudden, it said, '[One road], small but safe, [another road]— small safe'. I thought, 'This is really weird. How can you have a small safe fire in this type of weather?' (Libby)

You're listening to the radio going, 'Oh, it's at Wallan, it's at here, it's at there', and then all of a sudden they were saying, 'The fire's at Whittlesea, the fire's at Strathewen' and you think, 'Shit!' ... And then you're hearing reports of more people being killed and the news is becoming more chaotic. (Michelle)

It seemed that even police, fire-fighters and other emergency service workers were not informed, and were not in place to assist people trying to escape the fire.

People were just then starting to realise — including our police and our CFA — the trucks had been sent off the mountain, so they weren't even informed of any impending danger until it was on the doorstep. (Rosie)

There were other tourists standing in the middle of the road when I was leaving, looking at the smoke coming, just standing there, and there were no cars driving around, no police, no SES, there was no one. It was dead, it was like a ghost town. (Shelly)

In some cases, warnings did get through, via DSE or fire brigade workers phoning or calling into properties. Others were able to access expert information through social connections workers. One woman's neighbour was a fire ranger who showed them a map and suggested they had about two hours and should go. Another had a sister in the CFA command centre. Sometimes, friends and neighbours living far away heard, before the locals, of the approach of the fire and its ferocity. One had access to a scanner and phoned to warn her daughter. Another's neighbour had a 'mate from the CFA who radioed through the CB'.

All our news was coming from people that we knew in the community, people ringing [our workplace], friends of friends ringing in. (Shelly)

Ultimately, subsequent decisions were made on the run, taking any option, as roads were blocked or cars stalled.

So the kids saw the fire coming down the hill in Yarra Glen, and with no direction from the police—they just said, 'Turn around and head back'—we turned around and headed back. I stopped at the intersection heading back to Kinglake and a few people pulled over as well and said, 'Where do we go, what do we do?' So I rang some friends in Healesville and they said, 'You can't get through, the road's blocked'. I couldn't get through to my husband and so I went back towards Kinglake and didn't make it into Kinglake. (Erica)

Relief camps

When women made it to relief camps, sometimes with children, sometimes with partners and sometimes alone, they found another version of chaos. Relief workers were coping with people needing food, water, bedding and shelter, as well as medical supplies and access to toilets. The Red Cross centre was initially established to feed the fire-fighters and had, suddenly, a more urgent and unanticipated influx. The CFA, too, found their task had expanded. The scenes were of unreality and distress. People were in shock, often separated from family, seeking safety, and news of loved ones.

We went down to the CFA building where they were just out on their feet, they had no idea where the fire was, what had happened, what day of the week it was. (Carla)

Outside these more public settings, people did what they could to help, and survivors of the fires found the normal rules no longer applied.

I got stuck in Yea, so I stayed in the caravan park with these complete strangers, who ... fed us that night. The next morning I went to the supermarket, I said I'd go and get some food and I left my eldest with them. I mean I don't even know them from a bar of soap but I just left him and took the young one with me. (Erica)

Finding out what happened

Women spoke of listening to the radio and turning to newspapers to understand what had happened.

[My friend's] pager constantly went off, 'Mother, two kids, trapped in home.' All these addresses — we knew where all these people lived. 'Elderly lady, looking after grand kids trapped in home.' 'This person trapped, can't get out. Needs assistance.' But there's no one up there to help. The last pager came through at 5.30 that morning. (Libby)

We didn't know what had happened. Everybody else sees it on TV ... You don't know when you're in it, you just live through it. (Jenny)

Having physically endured Black Saturday, the days and weeks that followed were characterised by seeking out friends, family and neighbours - telling and hearing of tragic deaths and of survival.

People just 'metted and greeted' and told stories, and we grieved because by now we heard about people that had died. We were trying to put families together and connect people. (Annie)

Afterwards there was no power, you couldn't get around easily, you were in daze and in complete shock finding out every hour of the day about other people who had died, who couldn't be found. (Yvette)

People died. And every day was a new revelation of people who had died. (Di)

Just trying to find friends and what had happened to people. That still goes on. I heard only six or seven months ago [about an acquaintance] I wondered about him and thought he'll be fine, as you do [but he] and his partner died ... 15 months on you still hear of people. The one thing I will never forget is ... an old guy [who] was frantic showing a picture around of his friend that he couldn't contact and he, like, rushed up to me and was going, 'Have you seen this lady?' and was saying her name and I'm like, 'I'm really sorry but I haven't' ... I'm just always wondering whether he found her or not. (Sally)

Indeed, hearing the stories was both a burden and a celebration.

My experience is that everybody just wanted to greet you, nobody could take on any more stories, they'd had enough of their own. You know, 'G'day but don't tell me really'. (Beth)

Relying on mobile phone technology

Mobile phones provided an essential, though unreliable, communication method when landlines were not available or the power was down. Many women sent and received texts and calls warning of threats, passing on advice, and checking on each others' safety. The capricious nature of mobile phones in mountainous areas was frustrating as the signal came in and out. Battery levels, too, depleted and lack of power meant it was difficult to charge them. For some, the incoming texts and missed calls were another source of stress.

You can't get onto 000 or anyone, and we lost our towers so we lost our phone. Over the next few hours we could get texts through but that was about it. (Sally)

I could get range on the mobile but then there was no power and I had 246 missed calls and messages from people. In a way you could say it was wonderful that people would care but it was an absolute problem and even when I texted to say I'm ok, they would text back and say, 'Where are you?' and they couldn't get that it was limited. I charged it at the generator at the [store] but the system was overloaded. (Sonia)

The mobile networks were jamming so we were not getting much reception. Every now and again when we did the frantic messages and phone calls were crazy. (Rosie)

After the terror had passed, women spoke of texting or phoning friends and family and at times, having to drive to get reception or to recharge batteries in order to do so.

On the Saturday the fire came through, and on the Sunday I went through my mobile phone text messaging every single person I knew who lived up here ... to see if they were okay. (Annie)

One of my main concerns was to try and contact our son ... we had to drive until we got the signal on the mobile because that was the only communication. (Kate)

Unexpected masculine behaviours

Some women spoke of being shocked by their partner's response in the life threatening Black Saturday fires. Some were frustrated by their partner's inaction during the fires and annoyed by the need to take action themselves. Perhaps this annoyance springs from the reality that it is generally women who do the double shift of paid work and unpaid home and caring work in the subconscious belief that in such dangerous circumstances, they will be looked after by the man in their lives.

I don't know what the hell he was doing, but he wasn't bloody doing anything. So I'm up there with the dogs and he came back and he hadn't got any water, he hadn't done anything ... In the end, I got sick of it and said, 'Well I'll go', so that's what I did ... He should have gone out there, but I don't think he had the guts to be honest with you. (Gaye)

One woman had a brace following a major operation and was not meant to lift, yet was left to prepare for the fire with her son. She described her husband leaving their property to drive off the mountain even though the fire threat was high and she and her son were left alone to fight the fire.

My husband ... decided to go [off the mountain to his workplace] probably around two o'clock in the afternoon. He and my youngest son went to go down but they were turned back at a roadblock, so my husband found another way down. My son was there saying, 'We've got to go home, there's a fire coming. We've got to be with Mum and help' ... I don't know why, but he just did a whole lot of unnecessary stuff and [then] couldn't get back up any way he tried ... Apparently he got my son to drive him across as far as Yarra Glen and back with the fire on both sides of the car and things like this ... they were avoiding roadblocks, going around back ways to go down ... Apparently the car was coughing and spluttering because it couldn't get enough air ... He came in the driveway tooting the horn ... and I'm, 'No' because ... if he didn't leave in the first place... (Kate)

Some of the women told how their husbands denied that there was any danger, and drove away from the family homes despite pleas for them to stay. The women faced accusations that they were over-reacting in asking for men to stay home, or prepare fire fighting clothes and equipment, and one drove alone to get petrol for the fire pump.

We were together, my sister was there, I called him all day and asked him to come home and he's like, 'Don't be silly' ... He made it home I think 10 minutes before they actually shut the road. (Sally)

He said, 'You're being stupid' and I said, 'Okay, could you just get [the pump] out?' I'm not an alarmist person, I drive on empty cos I kind of like the thrill of will I make it or won't I, I'm not a very cautious person [but] I had everything ready and he was a bit, 'Oh you're being this, you're being that' ... I said, 'Go to the front gate, have your wallet ready, leave it open, I haven't got time to jump out' because of the dogs, you know ... 'You leave the gate open for me, I'm going to the garage', and he was standing at the front gate with it shut, just standing, and he was like he had no input from anything, it was like he was frozen or something. And I swore at him, and I think I said, 'Is there something fucking wrong with you?' which was really cruel I know but I had to snap him out of it. (Andrea)

Another woman recounted that her partner took her young son (his step son) with him in his car — without her knowledge or permission - as he drove back up the mountain and into the fires.

Poor Tom (not real name) still can't go in a car that hasn't got a lot of petrol in it cos he freaked out on the day. He thought [they] was going to run out of fuel ... And at the same

time, that's what gets me, it's not the fact that they literally nearly died three or four times just by getting caught up in stuff and making split second decisions, it's the fact that he didn't even have to go there and didn't have to do it that makes me cross ... They tried to save a few people and couldn't, and they pulled over and tried to get a guy out of his car but they couldn't, it exploded and caught on fire, and it was all a bit traumatic. (Angela)

The most astounding incident was where a man saved himself first, then his two small children, leaving his wife and step-children unprotected in a life threatening situation, escaping with fire on both sides of the road and falling embers.

I'm looking at this man and going, 'You shoved us in the back [of the utility]?' ... He was inside ... he put himself before the kids and that's what got me ... I said to him recently when things blew up, I said, 'Mate, you could have stuck all four of those kids in the front... and you should have got on the back with me ... He used to often say that he would be good in an emergency ... it went to this look in his face like, 'You don't count as much as me'. (Sally)

Meeting expectations of masculinity

Some women described the protective measures taken by their partners, from guiding and monitoring women in the house while frantically putting out fires outside to shielding them from seeing bodies or witnessing other distressing scenes. Sometimes it was weeks or months before the men even told their partners about the anguish of what they had seen. Sometimes circumstances or their role as fire-fighters meant men were prevented from being with their families.

[He has] a lot of guilt that he wasn't there helping me that day. He's taken it pretty hard that they couldn't do anything that day. He couldn't do anything because of the enormity of the fire. (Holly)

One woman was amazed at her husband's ability to think fast and plan with uncanny awareness of what would be needed. He prepared the property so they could leave, packed the chainsaw and locked up in case of looters. In contrast, she spoke about her own panic, her ability to think clouded by urgency. The next day he organised with other men to go back and check on the property and neighbours.

I'm wandering up and down the house, it's only a very small house, thinking, 'What to take, what to take, what do I take?' So he came in every now and again and gave me directions, 'Pack an esky, put the bottles of water in the fridge, take what's important to you'. (Jenny)

Another woman told how her husband worked 'madly' to save the property, interrupting his staggering efforts in moving cattle and putting out spot fires in choking, blinding smoke, to come back to house to reassure and advise her and the others sheltering there. A third woman compared the striking difference in her reaction to her husband's. She said he had obsessively prepared the south-east of their property, where she had been convinced the fire would approach from the south-west. After clearing and moving, he came inside. The fire did come from the south-east and 'jumped the house', as he had anticipated.

He went out to just fight the fire, like there were trees near the house, to put them out, and I was just frozen. I sat in my chair like a dog in a car watching him, just expecting him to drop dead from the smoke or be burnt and I was just frozen, I couldn't do anything other than just go from room to room and watch him. (Michelle)

Another couple saved their house and family through working as a team, with the woman working on the inside of the house, and her husband facing the flames, embers and smoke on the outside. After fighting for 'such a long time', at one stage, he came into the house saying he could not do it anymore. She said she forced him back, citing their small grandchild on the couch inside. The selflessness of his actions is remarkable.

Women alone

Table 2 shows that 13 women were left alone to care for children and bring them to safety. Even when men were physically present, sometimes women were alone with this responsibility.

When the car stalled, he just collapsed. He got out of the car and sort of went into the fetal position ... I just looked at him and I said, 'We've got four kids, we don't have time for this, get up'... I had one kid not breathing properly and his sister was trying to take care of him and she had broken her collar bone and I don't know whether she reinjured it by carrying him. My husband ... was just in too much shock or whatever...then he just went total into like he was in control and knows better and went in the lead and actually didn't see anything else happening around him... He didn't see that Jamie (not real name) wasn't breathing. He didn't compute at all, but he had to be in the lead and about fifty paces ahead of everyone. (Sally)

Often, women drove out of the fire alone.

I'm driving about 30km an hour because you can't see, I've got the pup, four gallons of water and a woollen blanket and [my husband] had said, 'Now if you get in a wall of flames on the road drive through the bush'! (Beth)

Even when not forced into fight or flight, women alone were vigilant and frightened of what was to come, acutely aware of their responsibility to protect their children's young lives. One woman told of a friend who hitched the caravan to the car and put the children to sleep in the caravan then sat up all night watching. Another had her water tanker filled and attached to her 4WD facing out from the carport, with the keys in the ignition from the start of February.

Women whose husbands or partners worked for council or emergency services were definitely on their own as these services struggled to cope.

Some women felt quite betrayed with their husbands off helping other people. Not one person in the CFA in [one town] went home to their own house, they all lost their own homes. (Beth)

A lot of families are hurt that they weren't there to help, even though it's a big responsibility for us. The women had a big job that day ... [My partner] and I have never spoken about if this happened, what would I do? It was never an issue. We never had a fire plan. You thought he'd be here. My fire plan was him ... I thought I would have his help. (Holly)

Strong, capable women in the disaster

The women showed clarity of thought in the most life-threatening situations. They planned ahead, anticipated problems and solutions and drew on knowledge packed away to get around seemingly insurmountable problems.

The only thing I could think of was that in 2006 the fires came through the Glenburn area and there were bare paddocks where it had burnt out, plus they put in the pipeline so I knew there had to be a flat spot, maybe even a tunnel ditch, which we could shelter in, so we drove there. (Annie)

I checked on that plume of smoke every 10 minutes, I took photos of it and all our photos we used in the Royal Commission; my husband gave evidence there ... If the power goes out you don't have power for your pump so you need your generator pump, your petrol driven pump. So I said to my husband 'I don't think it's full enough, what if a fire does come from embers or something, I should go up to the garage and top it up a bit more before they shut. (Andrea)

He got to the fire station and rang me ... 'Lib, there's hundreds of people here' and I could hear [a friend] screaming, 'We're going to die, we're going to die.' [My husband's] saying, 'Lib, we're dead, we're dead. We're gone.' I said, 'No you're not. [There's a] generator. They've got a bore out the back, Go and find it. There's tanks out the back.. Go there and find it. Tell me when you've found it.' (Libby)

Incredibly, anticipating their own deaths in the bushfire, two women thought to advise police.

I thought 'I don't know who knows we're here and I thought someone needs to know'. So I tried to ring 000 and I couldn't get through and so I rang a police number ... anyway I said to her what my name was and where I lived and I said, 'Look I just need you to note down somewhere that there are six adults and two children at this address' ... I wasn't saying to her send someone to come and get us I was saying I just wanted her to note that we were there and how many were there because it wasn't just us. (Rosie)

When finally she got through to someone on triple 0, my daughter who was now in [organising] mode had said on the phone to them ... 'All right, no, no, that's alright, I know you can't get to us.' There was something she said that let me know that they couldn't do anything - 'they' meaning Emergency Services. She said, 'We just need to let you know to look for six people', and I thought, 'She thinks we're going to die'. (Andrea)

After the fires — loss and demands

For most, the day after Black Saturday was surreal. The immediate and primary reaction to the bushfire was shock from its intensity and the reality of all that had happened. Then awareness grew of the depth of loss and the extent of damage to the landscape. For some, the 'high alert' stage continued for days and up to six weeks.

It was 8 weeks after the fires that I got woken up at in the morning by my local fire brigade because my creek was burning again. Tree stumps burn underground for months. The people [in one area] which didn't quite burn were on high alert for the next six weeks to save those couple of hundred homes down there ... Everyone was under constant threat. There were houses burnt down a week later. Because people had gone out and all of a sudden the house was gone. It was constantly burning. (Libby)

Loss

From hours into the Black Saturday bushfire, people began to hear of friends and neighbours and children who died. The first reports seemed unbelievable. But the reports kept coming. On a daily basis, the women spoke of learning who had survived, who was missing and who had died in the fires. And the suicides that followed. Funerals were held, bringing more sadness, and more guilt when women couldn't go, couldn't face it. All of the women in this research lost friends, relatives, neighbours or clients. One spoke of the sad death of a loved childcarer and the effect on her children.

No women who lost immediate family elected to participate in this research.

Women spoke of hierarchies of loss. There was a sense that people's experiences and losses were being ranked. And some felt that differentiation had resonance, one woman asking how she could feel good knowing people had died or lost family members.

All I saw was my place burn and that's nothing, that's nothing. But to know when I'm sitting there watching my place burn, that my friends were dying is another thing. (Sally)

Survivor guilt is well recognised. Guilt if you had a house, if you still had an income, if all your children survived, guilt if you weren't there on the day or if you stayed away in the recovery period. The complexity was described by one woman of encompassing layers upon layers of feelings and emotions.

One woman spoke of a long period of being on fire alert, of seeing everything through a veil of exhaustion. Although the fire stopped 500 metres before their house, the property was strewn with dead birds and fallen trees and dead vegetation. Their source of income was gone, yet, in the ranking, they were okay. No loss of life, no loss of house.

Some of the things that have been said to me subsequently, 'It's alright for you. You weren't burnt out'. I mean, the resentment of some of the people that other people weren't burnt out. It has divided people because when some of the income started coming in there were financial value judgements being placed on, 'How much did you suffer?' (Carla)

Even losing family was ranked:

He was here but he never understood what it was like for me or some of the people dealing with it, and a lot of his group thought [unless] you lived there and you lost your house and family [...then] you should not be affected by it. But people are. (Shelly)

The reaction to a burnt-out home varied, with one woman dismissing it out of hand.

I know I've lost the house, I know what it feels like to not be able to go home, but I tell you what, how quick you can fill a house full of crap and feel like home again. I do get that its irreplaceable some houses and they're beautiful. I just think, 'Oh my god, suck it up, suck it up. It's a house, some people have lost people, that doesn't even compare'. (Sally)

Some women found losing their home a source of great sadness — a loss of memories, family history, even identity. The bricks and mortar were bound up with values and relationships. They remembered why they settled there and the plans and dreams that led them there. They had built the homes themselves or with partners, they spoke of solar panels and ideals, and gardens lovingly created and tended. For some, the family home had absolutely vanished.

When we got to our property we had space suits on and it was 34 degrees — it was very hot. There was nothing left, nothing left at all. There were no tears, even prior to that. It was just nice to be there and the kids would search for something but there was just nothing. Nothing for us to salvage. (Vicki)

It wasn't the Taj Mahal but it kept the cold and the rain out for 25 years ... Whatever else went wrong in your life you could come home and look around and think, 'I built this'. (Gaye)

For these women the destruction of their home meant loss of the lifestyle they valued. The fires — at least temporarily — took away their purpose and future dreams. Some spoke of why they decided to live in Kinglake or Marysville or Flowerdale or any of the small towns in the region. Country life allowed freedoms like walking dogs without leads, pushing prams without cars speeding by, family recreation opportunities — caravans, boats, pools, horses. Some had history, some had plans, at varying stages of fruition, all stalled or stopped by the fires.

I can still picture everything as it was, and I know growing up I spent heaps of time there, just roller-blading around and doing what kids do, playing footy and things like that. I just picture everything as it was. (Shelly)

Changed landscape

Only five of the women had moved away from their town at the time of the interview, although some were unsure if they would stay. A great sorrow for most of the women was the loss of the landscape they loved. Whether the forested mountainous landscape or their own small gardens, the landscape had changed. Women spoke of resenting the vistas or houses or lights that they did not see before the fires burnt their treed landscape. The once familiar landscape was now foreign and an unwelcome reminder.

The trees. The trees just don't go away. They just don't go away. I don't know how long till we can't see the black trees and I know that reminder, that constant reminder, has moved people off the mountain. (Sally)

Even now trees are dying and splitting, we expected a lot more to come back after spring but they just haven't. (Nicki)

There are parts of the landscape now that are changed forever and I can't bear to look at those. There are places I don't like to go because people died there I can't believe it all happened ... In my lifetime I may not see it looking as beautiful as it did before and that is quite depressing. (Yvette)

The commute from home to work was a daily reminder of all that had happened. One woman likened it to a graveyard.

You would be in Yea looking at semi-green cos we got a bit of rain, and then you'd drive through all the burnt bush, and then you get into the burbs, and it was like you went through three headspaces by the time you got to work. And you knew on the way back you had to go through that bloody head space again. (Gaye)

The 'headspace' was all that happened from February 9th. Even when people physically survived, the mental and emotional toll changed them.

Yes, you change enormously, it's hard to describe. (Michelle)

My life's really different now, and what I did before and what my passions were before, I'm finding them again and they're coming with me on this journey. (Andrea)

Demands

Even an event such as Black Saturday does not alleviate the demands on people to keep up with their responsibilities. They are expected to keep on going despite urgent demands in every direction. Finance was a major concern. Eleven of the women interviewed talked about the burden of rent or mortgage payments to them and their families. For many, their income had been affected by the fires — whether employed or self-employed. In the short term, the focus was on re-establishing where they would live, or replacing cars or waiting for roads to be reopened. Finances were stretched as people tried to organise accommodation, sometimes paying the mortgage on damaged houses while renting another place. A dual demand was income production while trying to work on their homes or restore fences or shedding to properties, or help neighbours get on their feet.

He stayed up here the whole time. I knew he was really, really traumatised and I said to him, 'Don't you worry about work. I'll earn the money, you need time to really process all this and maybe get some good counselling and get yourself through, so I'll find the money for the house. You have time off and do what you have to do to get yourself through this without adding more stress.' (Libby)

Insurance claims were not necessarily easy, with some having to settle in court, and payouts not always covering the costs of rebuilding or repairing. Bureaucratic requirements for grants, insurance and council permits, too, were onerous and time-consuming.

Women with children had to re-arrange their children's schooling as schools had burnt down and bus routes no longer feasible. For some women in our study, lack of childcare prevented their return to work, especially as children were in a particularly vulnerable state after experiencing the disaster or its effects.

Income was affected in the longer term through workplaces burning down. Farms, businesses, hotels, offices, health premises and industries were all affected. Those who had been employed casually found it harder to pick up work after extended periods away. Both lack of interest in work, and overwork emerged as symptoms of distress.

We heard that 19 of the women thought they would die in the fires (see Table 2). Mental health issues slowly emerged, preventing a stable return to work for many and affecting relationships.

Table 5: Job loss, Occupation, and Lost home

Lost job after fires	Occupation	Lost home
No	Health professional	Yes
Self employed - OK	Natural therapist	No
Not reported	Hospitality worker	No
Not applicable	Unpaid community work	No
No	Paid community worker	Missing data
Placed her (own) business on market	Self employed	No
Yes	Para-professional	No
Not reported	Professional	Yes, rented
No	Family business	No
Stress leave then lesser position	Senior health professional	Yes
No	Transport industry	Yes
No	Studying and part time work in allied health	Yes
Not applicable	Family business and now new job	No
No	Disability worker	No
Not applicable	No paid work	No
Studio burnt, had to hire office	Not reported	No, lost home office
Workplace burnt, some delay in resuming	Administration	Yes
No	Health professional	No, lost business
No, retired and now farmer	Retired, farmer	No
Yes	Childcare	Yes
No	Therapist	No
Yes, lost farm income	Farmer	No
Yes, employer's place of business burnt	Therapist	Yes, forced to move from rented house
Unable to continue study	No paid work	Yes
Yes, used leave until forced to resign — unable to resume high level job	Senior health administrator	Yes
No	Shop supervisor	No
Not applicable	Unpaid community worker	No
No	Health professional	No
Needed to resign to emotionally support children	Para-professional	Yes
5 Yes 1 Left study 1 Left to care for children 12 No 4 N/A 6 not reported		Lost home 11 Lost own business /office 2 No 15 Missing data 1

Longer term manifestations of grief, loss and stress

The experience of Black Saturday was so extreme that 19 of the women thought they were going to die. The human reaction to such intense threat is the focus of much psychological study. In describing their own reactions and that of their partners, the women spoke of abuse of alcohol and drugs and suicidal thoughts. Both partners tried to deal with the unimaginable burden of what they remembered. They tried to regain their sense of self in whatever ways they could. Men, too, turned to alcohol and drugs and a kind of hyper-masculinity emerged, alongside mood swings, suicide ideation and, above all, denial of any problem.

Where people had a history of trauma, Black Saturday brought it all back.

Some women had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or depression and most spoke of feelings of anxiety, panic, hopelessness, lost interest or inability to function at some stage. They conveyed a sense of inevitability about 'falling in a heap' and knew they had to live through these bad times.

You can't happy yourself up, you've just got to go through all the crap ... Nothing's going to be good for a while. (Gaye)

I was low. Very low. Nearly every woman I spoke to said the same thing. (Karen)

After a week I went, 'Oh, I should go back to work' and I just sort of started like nothing had happened and I went back to work ... But then things just unravelled. (Michelle)

At times, some questioned their own sanity:

I felt at one stage it was a psychotic thing where I asked this of the counsellor, 'Sometimes I think I did die and I think we all did die and is this is a whole different reality where we don't know we died?' So that is a psychosis, I know that. I don't feel that way anymore. (Andrea)

I had terrible nightmares, and we woke up one night and I said, 'I don't know if I'm dead or alive' and for months couldn't really assess whether I had died and whether this is death, or whether I was alive or it was a dream. (Annie)

One woman spoke of barely sleeping, instead having a movie playing over and over in her head of the whole experience. Another's husband slept only two hours a night for months. Understandably, ability to concentrate was very low and even remembering small tasks was challenging. There was no capacity for complexity. This affected partners and children too.

Last year was a wasted year for her, school wise, she couldn't concentrate ... the teacher wrote she didn't complete the year but it was understandable after what happened. (Vicki)

He could not take any other thing other than what he had to concentrate on. If it was something as simple as washing his hands, all other input was too much. (Andrea)

Alcohol and drugs

A convergence of factors led to a sudden and apparently widespread reliance on alcohol and drugs in the aftermath of the fires. The impact of the fires, compounded by major life stresses – unemployment and homelessness – perhaps led to this reliance. It is unsurprising given the general societal acceptance of alcohol in Australia, particularly in times of stress. Its acceptance

is clear as alcohol was generally included in community dinners, and initial recovery meetings were held in the local pub in one town each morning – with alcohol service

The way alcohol presented as a problem changed as time progressed. In the week after the fire, more men than women remained or returned early to fire-affected areas. Without the tempering effect of women, some men were getting together and drinking to excess. Two women spoke of returning to their homes to find them turned into impromptu pubs, complete with drinking men.

My house was turned into a pub, it was a mess, there were things everywhere, not just ash stuff but cans of food stuff and things that were just being handed out ... there were five guys ... all pissed as newts ... There was a lot of free booze. (Jenny)

[My friend] lived in this street with a lot of men who were really, really traumatised. Women were traumatised, but the men really started to drink. My friend was having people rock up at the door at all times of the day. They were drinking in the street. They were getting together as blokes. (Di)

After this initial time, when women and children had returned, both men and women were self-medicating with alcohol and drugs. One woman said excessive drinking was widespread in households in the first six months amongst groups of men, and for some women.

The alcohol probably is therapeutic in some ways as long as they don't become alcoholic ... I do know a couple of times after drinking, a few of the blokes would cry. There are a lot of women drinking too, including me. I got to a stage where sometimes I was having to drink to go to sleep (Di)

They turned to alcohol – the ladies turned to alcohol. (Janet)

Other women spoke of their husbands' problematic drinking.

Every time he drinks before lunchtime I'd say, 'It's not even lunchtime'. Sometimes at 10.00 in the morning. Did he used to do that before? Oh, hell no, hell no ... he admitted to me he's a closet alcoholic. (Jenny)

And he just started drinking a lot more, a lot more. I thought he drank a lot before [the fires], I think it doubled ... it just went out of control, and I think it peaked around December or January, just every single day and night. (Yvette)

So he was drinking, throwing himself into work, but being completely ineffectual ... then they eventually pushed him out and it was all very acrimonious and in the meantime he was angry and irritable, drinking. (Karen)

Everybody could see that he changed, they could see he changed at work and that he was not coping, that he was drinking and that he shut down. (Emma)

Link between alcohol and violence

For some men, alcohol changed their personality, endangering those close to them.

So you've seen a personality change in a way? Yeah, and it's purely alcohol that's brought that on. (Jenny)

I mean he has his good moments and he can take one mouthful of alcohol and that's it, he changes ... Probably the worst [times] are when he's been with other guys, yeah, it's like a drinking session or something, I don't know. (Yvette)

He did go through a stage, but it didn't last too long, fortunately, because he got angrier when he was drinking, he's much more volatile. (Sally)

Drug-taking

Legal drug taking was spoken of as almost universal and women joked about putting anti-depressants in the water. Some people combined alcohol with medication, and possibly with drugs. Taking drugs, whether legal or illegal, did not appear to have the same link with increased aggression that alcohol did. The kinds of problems from this were easier for women to handle. For example, one woman explained that her husband's prescription drugs reduced his ability to function, thereby adding to her workload in handling all the required bureaucratic processes after the fires.

And [my partner] was on opiates and unable to vocalise post fires, so I did that, and that would be normal for me to do most of that. He did nothing. (Karen)

One woman spoke of her husband smoking dope every day from about 11am, although such regularity was not common across the community.

[He had] a lot of grief, and not the sort of personality that could deal very easily with it. He self-medicated, I think, with marijuana and alcohol. (Emma)

Our place was a refuge. And so everyone who'd lost their homes would come, and pretty much most afternoons and evenings I'd be cooking ... I just remember cooking, cooking, nurture, nurture, and you know wine and cigarettes and dope and everything just became the evening afternoon pattern for quite a long time. But for him it became very much earlier in the morning and a lot more reliant and a lot more a coping mechanism. (Madeline)

It's becoming really difficult in some areas in the community because so many people you know have deteriorated and have turned to substance abuse and even now that's upsetting, it's heart breaking. (Libby)

Whereas alcohol seemed to contribute to men's aggression, marijuana tended to calm things, taking a medicinal role.

I'd notice because his smoke time had gone up so high by a certain time of the day he would be calm and he'd be relaxed so from dinner time to bed time we could sit down and have our dinner together and talk normally and it was all good, all relaxed. (Madeline)

After the sleeping tablets weren't working he started smoking dope every night to go to sleep, which he still does now. Because that's the only thing he can find that puts him to sleep properly and he doesn't wake up with an after effect. (Libby)

Sadly, one woman's daughter turned to drugs almost immediately after the bushfires and this exacerbated her vulnerability.

I saw a lot of drugs and [my daughter] was given money from bushfire relief and she ended up with nothing and ended up selling drugs and it became a murky story because everyone

honed in on her. They all knew, and the person who was supplying all the drugs knew she had the money. She spent \$8000 on drugs. (Sonia)

Hypermasculinity

Women described a kind of hyper-masculinity displayed by their partners both during and in the aftermath of the fires. The atmosphere on the day of impending disaster seemed to excite some men, who took themselves and sometimes children, into the danger rather than away from it. Women described their partners as wanting to do something and feeling frustrated. They seemed to take unnecessary risks.

He was in his own space ... It wasn't like an emotional state, it was like he needed to do stuff, he felt like he needed to help and be a fire-spotter and do this super hero kind of stuff ... He goes, 'Can't stay long, it's a big day out there, something big's happening' and, 'Don't worry about it now, rah rah rah'. All like, 'We won't tell the lady what's going on cos she'll just worry'. (Angela)

He was facing 40 foot flames, he was jumping into the flames, he was right there, he was in them. One or two times [the kids] had screamed out, 'Dad' because he was so in the zone of fighting the fire, he was in the fire. (Madeline)

He rang me back and said, 'I've just bumped into the coppers and two guys from the fire brigade and I'm going to help them to clear the roads down the [name] Highway. I said, 'How dangerous is it?' He goes, 'Fucking dangerous as anything'... The cops went with them for about a kilometre and said, 'This is too dangerous – we're going back' and they turned around and went back into town. He was with two young guys ... they had no water, no nothing [and] they just kept cutting trees and trying to drag them off the road. (Libby)

In the weeks and months after, men speeding and driving cars recklessly seemed commonplace. Some men sought out the adrenalin rush through motorbikes. One took up martial arts and became obsessed with heavy metal music. The women observed these behaviours with concern for their children as well as the safety of the man.

[He's] very immersed, he's training cage fighters in MMA [Mixed Martial Arts]. So I didn't feel very comfortable with that. He was also getting into heavy metal music with imagery of death and that's fine because I listen to a bit of that, I listen to very dark music but he was exposing it to the children. (Karen)

It was like boys' own adventure. ... Well he seemed to be in his element. He's in charge, he's got guys there and they're having, like I say, a boys' own adventure, putting out fires, having a few drinks, they've got the generators going. One exploded and burnt his arm. He needed medical attention. (Jenny)

You'd drive down the mountain, even now, and everyone's an idiot up here now. They speed down the mountain, push you along. You see cars three feet away, I have to pull over. (Di)

I remember thinking to myself, 'My God, if the boys weren't in here I don't think he would care if he'd write us off [but] because his sons were there he probably won't'. But it was like being with a sixteen year old hoon really, in the car just being really reckless, and I've heard that from a few ladies that their husbands have gone through this really reckless driving stage, where they are speeding and just really reckless. (Sally)

This same man appeared to have a sense of indestructibility. He said nothing could happen to his children when he was with them, despite displaying irresponsible behaviour, including keeping his two young children out until the early hours of the morning.

I said, 'It's not like you're invincible' and his first reaction, he said 'I am'. (Sally)

Another version of hyper-masculinity came through a sudden freedom in spending money on expensive men's toys from a family budget under extraordinary pressure. There was no negotiation with their partners, and when called to task, the men asserted their right to spend the money they earn.

He did the 'I never had these things before so I want them now'. So he went on this buying-motorbike campaign, bought the dirt bike, bought the road bike ... The motor bikes are now for sale, and yes he wants ... a boat ... There are women doing that as well but I think the boys buy big ticket items like a motor bike, where the women buy an expensive handbag, but at the end of the day the women are still making sure the kids are fed and clothed.. (Erica)

Since the fires he has bought a Harley, a trail bike which we owe nine grand for, I don't know how we're supposed to do that. He wanted a pool table, he wanted a \$15,000 trail bike, and I said we can't do that. (Leanne)

He came home with a cycle for \$3,000 ... and two days later showed up with a plasma screen ... and \$600 has gone out to Snowgum ... and I'll say, 'Mate you can't be spending money like that' but he will turn around and say he's the only one working and he earns all the money he can do what he wants. (Sally)

Psychological wellbeing

As social researchers and writers of this report, we have no qualifications or practice knowledge in mental illness. This section reports the words of women, some of whom live with mental health issues and some who work as health professionals. Women would use terms their counsellors or psychologists had explained, for example, 'de-bonding', 'narcissism', 'paranoia'. These terms, and terms like 'depression' and 'anxiety' were used in a colloquial, conversational sense rather than as diagnoses and we repeat them here in the same way.

What is inescapably true, is that Black Saturday was traumatic to those who lived through the fires. For some - perhaps many — survivors, it will remain raw and traumatic.

Yeah, it was a day. But I know that for people who are traumatised from this, that have lost their friends or even seen horrific stuff, that's going to feel like yesterday to them, for the next 10 years. People don't get that. They think that they're going to get over it and its going to be ok. But it's not. You learn to live with it, you don't get over it. (Sally)

Women related how they changed after the fires, becoming more and more introverted, from society and from their partners.

I became deeply, deeply introverted in the period after the fire. More and more and more avoided things, avoided talking about the fire, basically it just didn't happen. And that made me sick eventually, but that was my response and it probably suited [my partner] too ... Anything emotional he will just shut it out. It's too overwhelming to him, can't deal with it so it just doesn't exist ... It makes it impossible to relate to another human ... We just became more and more and more this isolated little couple, and our property's isolated so

that helps it. (Michelle)

I feel like I've got chains wrapped around me at the moment. I've got all this stuff in my head but I don't know how to process it or put it into action ... I used to be quite a social bee, but I prefer to be by myself a bit now. It's just nice and quiet. I just want to be alone. (Holly)

One woman described the concept of de-bonding, explained to her by her psychologist.

A de-bonding experience, that's how it was explained to me, is where you face your death and you reconcile to your death, and in the process of doing that de-bond ... from close emotional ties, like your wife and children. It's a way of becoming OK with imminent death. (Emma)

Nineteen women felt close to death and 17 believed their partners thought death was imminent. Some women stated that this would have to have had a negative effect on their relationship.

Even if you don't admit it to yourself intellectually, in a way you've kind of said goodbye to everything. And it's just occurred to me that actually one of those things is that you say goodbye to one another ... [and that] is certainly going to be having an impact on how we feel about one another. (Carla)

Two women spoke of being very fearful that their partners would commit suicide, based on innuendo and suggestion, and statements of life not being worth living.

He had said I might top myself but never, 'This is how I would do it ... and from threats, but he didn't have a true suicide plan, just suicidal thoughts. (Karen)

Another two women called the police when their husbands actually attempted suicide. One woman knew of three suicide attempts amongst her husband's crew and suggested it was commonplace.

That's what I'm hearing, 'I walk in and I see that my husband is going to kill himself, and I snatched the gun away'. This is what I'm hearing from friends ... 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. (Emma)

In fact, when conducting an interview with a worker, she was interrupted by news of a friend who had committed suicide. She said there had been three suicides in their community just in recent weeks.

One woman felt her husband became less patient and quicker to judge because he had to face his mortality, and suggested his thinking became distorted.

It's because they're against him, because he's done something and they've found out about it and they're getting back at him. Or I'm doing some relief work, so I'm doing the relief work so I don't have to be near him. It's really paranoid. (Kate)

Another spoke of her husband's behaviour after the fires as very different from before. His moods ranged from being in total control to complete withdrawal. In rebuilding their house, builders would contact her, saying he was having a bad day. His loss of memory, for example, of conversations, led to feelings of paranoia. He accused his step-child of trying to poison him and his wife of having an affair. He wanted to involve police with what he thought were suspicious telephone calls. He became obsessive, running at all times of the day, then cycling day and night, then fanatically going to the gym.

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. (Sally)

The mood swings affected another man in a similar way.

He'll just come in and start talking to me... like a seven or eight year old child. Like you can be engaged in an activity and the kid will come in and go 'Mum! babble babble babble'... and then the next day they come home and they're in the shit because they've had a crap day and you go, 'Hello' and they go, 'Humph!' and like a 14 year old they go to their room and that's it. So I have those two people that I live with. It's like living with a child. (Michelle)

Previous trauma

The aggression in that family reached the point where my husband's brother at 12 or 13 years of age took his father by the throat and was going to stab him over a game This is the fear I have because of the anger my husband has in him. He had a very traumatic childhood. (Leanne)

What he does is he externalises so he doesn't look in and see what it is that makes him depressed in terms of his own self esteem, he just looks for a quick fix that is external to himself. (Karen)

Some women spoke of their own or their partner's experience of trauma before Black Saturday, suggesting it was implicated in ongoing struggles in recovering from the fires. They spoke of layer upon layer of assault to one's being. If people appeared to be functioning well and seemed to have overcome previous trauma, the fires disturbed any semblance of recovery. The women referred to their partners' histories of traumatic upbringings or tragic incidents in childhood, or childhood sexual assault. Some had felt helpless as a child, some with abusive alcoholic fathers. One had wartime trauma as an adult in the military.

The women, too, had suffered in the past. Beth spoke movingly of the death of her baby (See Box 1), and Bec of her mother's murder. Trauma from previous bushfire experiences was a further stress.

When I was 14 our house burnt down so it's triggered a lot of stuff from then, the smell's triggered a lot of stuff. And then my Mum. So I know what that feels like, to be totally shattered. [The fire has] triggered me where I couldn't even think. (Sally)

Box 1:

For one woman, her memories of the way she coped with a previous tragedy helped her deal with the threat of Black Saturday.

First I want to tell you that when I was 22 I went to pick up my second son and he was dead already from cot death and I started to panic and I already had one boy who was 17 months old and I started running around picking things off the mantelpiece and wailing and then I heard a voice say to me, 'You're only making things worse, what's the point of that? He's going to be six feet under for the rest of your life Beth, why are you carrying on like a banshee?' So I said to his father, 'You clean him up' and I said to the ambos, 'That's a ridiculously large stretcher he can be carried', and I had a good look at him and felt him and he was still warm and so when [we were told], 'You're going to have a wall of flames headed your way', I felt like I did when I found [my baby] dead, but I thought, 'What's the point?' So I went and called the animals and when I told Bull he was late as usual, I felt calm. (Beth)

The interviews presented a strong picture of counselling either not sought or not successful and a resurfacing of previous, unresolved trauma. Past trauma lay under the surface, ready to be revived and exacerbated by the bushfires.

Various experiences from the past that had been traumatic and that we'd dealt with before all sort of came in together, and suddenly you're finding yourself immersed in this background of traumas from the past, not necessarily shared ones either ... It's almost as though you revisit previous emotions where you felt out of your depth, that's probably what it is, all of those circumstances where you feel helpless. (Carla)

He's had a history, got a bit better but never really dealt with anything and it all just got worse after the fires and after repeated losses. (Karen)

For some, the new trauma has led to introversion, withdrawal, isolation, and denial of any problem, and for others, to increased aggression or symptoms of mental ill health.

I think that for both [my sister] and her partner ... there is now a post traumatic stress issue on top of whatever there might have been before the fires. I feel that because he is harbouring so much that it all becomes too much and his [violent] responses are now more dramatic. (Yvette)

Emma describes the effect of the fires on her husband:

He was a reasonably fragile character before, but he was a whole egg. Whatever happened to him through the fires smashed him. Whereas a stronger shell might have held, he was smashed and his moral compass was decimated. (Emma)

Relationships

It appears that both family violence and relationship breakdowns have increased in fire-affected regions following the Black Saturday bushfires.

Marriages are just breaking up like you wouldn't believe. And the thing is even my friends who had very grounded relationships have struggled, like professional people. (Annie)

Most of the mountain is divorced now. Or if they're not separated they're nearly there ... We could easily start a dating agency up here. It would be huge! Yeah, or a singles night or taking a singles bus trip off the mountain once a month with everyone that's separated. You'd need about 20 buses. (Libby)

Counter arguments to this, again only anecdotal, are that the only relationships breaking up were in trouble before the fires. There is little evidence from this research that this is the case.

Do you think of the fires as the turning point where he changed so much that this relationship is lost ?

This is where I need more time to just sit and think. It was really interesting, on Monday morning, the anniversary morning, as soon as I woke up that morning I burst into tears. I went, 'Fuck You Fire. You've just fucked everyone over big time'. Because you look at the road that you and everyone that has travelled over the last two years and you think, 'That fucking fire, you fucked everyone over big time.' Yeah I would put it down to that because pre fires everything was going really really well and he was determined never to be on drugs again and he was doing fantastic. And he was doing really really well. Everything was happy. Everything was going really really well. And then the fire hit.

Secure relationships affected by violence

When undertaking this research, both health and community sector professionals and community members asserted that if there was an increase in marriage breakdowns in the aftermath of the disaster, it was only in relationships that had previously involved violence. However this research shows that to be untrue. Even secure partnerships suffered under the weight of so many pressures post-bushfires.

One of the participants, well placed through her profession to see the extent of individual struggles and relationship difficulties, reflected on why this might be happening:

It's a huge, huge percentage of relationship break downs. I can't give you an exact percentage but I can certainly say that it seems to be that there are more people that I know that have had difficulties and breakdowns than people who are cruising and doing really well, and even the ones who are still together are shaky - because it strips back all the perceptions and all the things that we put around us. Any relationships that were having trouble were hugely exacerbated but ... there are certainly relationships that I know directly, that were doing quite well but are hitting rocky ground because of the fact of being stripped back bare. People are questioning who they are, where they're going and their place in the world. (Madeline)

If you look into marriages and post traumatic stress, it doesn't have a really high survival rate. It really doesn't ... I know a lot of relationships have folded. (Sally)

Although some relationships were strengthened by their experiences of the disaster, others were in crisis - and many were broken, even when couples stayed together. As well as the long list of pressures on adults after the fires, children were disturbed and anxious, and decisions about where to live post-fires divided couples and sometimes set children in opposition to parents. When interviews were held close to the second anniversary of Black Saturday, nine of the 29 women had separated from their partner and those still together were struggling. Some were working on reviving their relationship, and others were biding time while the children were still at home.

Reasons for relationship difficulties

The reasons given for relationship breakdown seemed to vary and were sometimes ostensibly unconnected to the bushfire. Yet women made the connection to the underlying trauma wrought by the fires and to the huge stresses people were carrying as a result of Black Saturday as reasons for relationship difficulties.

Emotional absence

It's the biggest thing I've ever been through, the biggest challenge to our marriage we've ever been through. I knew we were fighting about everything, and we never used to fight. Everything was just so hard ... I was angry because he wouldn't address the problems and I couldn't live with them. (Andrea)

Women spoke of wanting 'him' to be there and he wasn't. As individuals, people were not travelling well, not coping with the trauma or the daily pressures. It seemed that, barely able to keep their heads above water, they could not emotionally support their partner. The urgency for action during the fires and in the recovery period meant practical matters took precedence over emotional needs.

I think it's been over nearly two and a half months since we've been together. There's nothing. I feel like there's a wall between us ... We're not close anymore like we used to be, that might be me as well, but we're just always tired and busy with the house. (Holly)

Women spoke of not talking together as a couple about their reactions and feelings, of being tense and uptight with each other and of conversations getting 'quite rough' because neither one was balanced. One woman spoke of being tearful and overwhelmed and being told by her husband, 'No, don't cry, you have to be strong'. She stated that he could not tolerate her feelings of devastation. Another woman suggested her partner would not let her talk about the fires because it reminded him of his own experience which he did not want to face. For many couples, neither partner had the resources to help the other.

People are going to say more stuff than they normally would because they're tired, exhausted, traumatised. (Sally)

Our fuses are very short. A lot of what we say is unedited ... You've got all the responsibilities, and you can't handle anybody else's needs. You know, if [she] would start whinging to me about something, 'I can't deal with your problems, if you're feeling unwell with your injury or whatever, I can't handle that'. I've just managed to tread water myself. (Carla)

The first ... weeks after were really hard. Everything just fell apart. It seemed like we couldn't really talk to each other about it. It was like my feelings were burdening him because he had his own feelings. (Ruth)

I remember feeling so sad and depressed all the time but [my husband] wasn't really tolerant of that. Even now if I say something that he thinks is negative, he doesn't like that. (Ruth)

I could feel him going down the tube and I could just feel us becoming more and more isolated within ourselves, but not even a pair of isolated people, two isolated people, and I just thought I could get on with things. (Michelle)

For many women, it was a conscious decision to put aside any attention to emotion simply to survive day to day, a decision encouraged by their partners. A strong theme was the reluctance of men to acknowledge any kind of problem.

He covers things up, him and his family, it's all deny. If anything's too hard or painful, it didn't happen – deny, deny. (Andrea)

He was sort of in denial and he would say, 'Just get over it, just get on with it, don't talk about it' ... So it got to the point where I would just clam up ... I was tired all the time, I would come home from work and there would be tension and then he would just announce, 'I'm going to bed' and he would go and then I would feel more relaxed ... So I felt like we were growing apart. (Rosie)

Any time someone came over and was talking about their story, which people need to do to vent it and put it in its place, he'd walk out of the room. So I couldn't tell him anything. (Angela)

It was hard to even talk about it because everyone wanted to know and after the first couple of times you just—I mean every time someone asked him, they'd go, 'Wow, how did you go through that?' and he'd just go, 'Oh, it wasn't too bad'. That was it. He never ever spoke about it ... and then I'd think, 'You were just about dead'. We really thought he'd be dead when we got back here. (Tess)

[He would be] just silent, or just go, 'There's nothing to talk about, I don't have any feelings about this'... I think he's in a complete world of denial ... 'Nothing wrong, I'm fine, I've dealt with it' was his view. (Michelle)

He'd just sit there and it was sort of like, 'Now it's my time watching TV' so I wasn't supposed to talk, and then he'd go to sleep in the chair most nights. And I just thought, 'Well stuff it, I might as well go and sleep down in the bloody shed with the dogs cos this isn't really a relationship any more'. (Gaye)

One woman who has lived with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for 20 years helped explain why men were often reluctant to discuss their traumatic experiences or even to listen to their partner.

I was scared, I suppose, to talk about trauma. It's something that people don't want to feel, and I always felt there was something wrong with me. I've only just realised that I'm normal for what I've been through in my life. So I didn't want to talk about it because it made me feel – and he made me feel – like there was always something wrong with me. (Sally)

Ultimately, however, this lack of attention damaged relationships.

[You think you will] deal with the emotional side later. Well the later didn't happen for a long time and we were actually, at one point, beginning to get a bit panicky, saying, 'Well these chemical pathways, are they permanent chemical pathways? Because we're tired of being fucked up, let's just get back some normality'. (Carla)

Well my husband said that the fire just didn't affect him.
I don't think that's true.

Why not?

Because we're getting divorced. I don't see how any human being could have that experience and be unaffected, emotionally unaffected, by it. He just said, 'I was fine, I just got on with it', and I said, 'Alright, you thought that might be your experience of fighting the fire on the day, but what's happened to the town, and the way it was living here?' Any human being is going to be affected by that and I think that he's just completely shut down. (Michelle)

Blame and accusation

Those who faced the fires together inevitably reflected on that and drew conclusions. One woman looked back with pride, seeing their work as a team. Her partner looked back with anger, feeling abandoned. Yet the anger did not come easily. It festered under the surface while she struggled to understand what it was she was feeling. For many survivors of Black Saturday, feelings that emerged in the time immediately after were un-named and unaddressed. For women, anger is not an acceptable emotion, so angry women sometimes repressed this emotion.

Our view of our experiences was quite different. I thought how well we'd functioned together, and she came away with feeling that we had separated ... It took weeks and weeks and weeks to get to actually understanding it, but she was angry. (Carla)

Amongst the great toll of the fire, there was a mass loss of confidence – physical, emotional, and psychological. What had been certain was no longer so. People were on short fuses and stress meant the care normally taken to not offend was absent. Accusations went both ways as partners blamed each other for action or inaction, courage or cowardice, competence or ineptitude.

One example of this 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' is given by Beth, who spoke of being unfavourably compared to other women who physically helped with fighting flames, while her contributions in the home and on the property were not recognised. She said she was considered 'worthless with the fires' by her partner. She recounted her conversation at a counselling session:

'Counsellors, this is my favourite photo' and the whole spot is blank. I said, 'Where's [my husband] taking a photo of me going into town to do the shopping? Going into town to look after the animals? That's the photo that nobody took. I got no thanks'. (Beth)

In contrast, where women were visibly and energetically working at the community level, criticisms were levelled at their lack of attention within the home and the relationship.

There's a bit of resentment with him thinking I should have been more helpful to him. I knew that he was there and I had to do my job which is what I know how to do best. I save people's lives ... (Di)

But it was all my fault. If I wasn't such a bitch he wouldn't need to take drugs. And he wouldn't need to do bad things to support his drug habit if I was more supportive ... [It was all] 'I'm not getting a chance. You did this. You destroyed my life'. (Libby)

It seemed the demands to be everything to everyone after the fires were felt by men, too. Women spoke of feeling neglected as their partners attended to community needs, resulting in greater fragility in the relationship.

He'd say that he was doing everything for everyone and he would go off and it would almost be a relief to me that he left. (Ruth)

Holding the baby

I sat there in my driveway with all the burnt out stuff around me when the Child Support Agency told me that he was not going to support, and I said to myself and I said to the support people, 'I'm all my kids have, the onus of responsibility of everything, to educate, to feed, to guide, to socialise, I have three lives that are completely dependent on me for every single need' (Annie)

Disaster is referred to in the literature as holding a magnifying glass over all that is good and bad in a society. An article after the California earthquakes described how a very advanced, sophisticated and apparently gender equal society quickly reverted to sexism (Hoffman, 1998). Men grasped the opportunity for a public presence and women were relegated to the private sphere.

The interviews with women after Black Saturday revealed the same tendency, and the new demands brought on by the disaster revealed unfairness in relationship responsibilities.

I was thinking about my relationship not so long ago, and there are women who have men as the primary bread winner [and although] he's not very available to do all the domestic things at least he brings the money in... Or there are the women whose man isn't earning so much money but is very available around the home and for the kids. And I thought, 'Well I sort of get the worst of both worlds, he earns not much money, and I do all the primary bread winning, and he's not here and I do everything'. (Karen)

Men seemed to be free to choose if they would extend 'help' with the care of their own children. Men returned to work or not, and chose to look after children or not. They chose how much of role to play in the home and in their children's lives.

Suddenly we lived in the city, and he could get a taxi and could go out at night and do all those bachelor things. I remember I was 36 weeks pregnant, and [my partner] said he was going out for something, and I said, 'Please don't drink, we might have to go to the hospital' ... He didn't come home until one or two o'clock, and when he did he was drunk'. (Karen)

So he was at work, and then on the weekends, 'Don't bother me, take the kids away, I want to work on the pool, I want to do this, I'll go for a bike ride'... Yes, it was all on me to buy everything, find a place to live, do all of those activities. So [the baby] and I, he went everywhere with me. (Erica)

And particularly when I was in such a state where my whole support network had gone, the crèche, the school, my friends. I had nothing. I needed him to be here to help support me and help me raise the kids while everything was happening, but he didn't. (Annie)

That freedom to choose is not granted to women.

As the wife in the situation, or the mother, you do not have the luxury of saying, 'Oh fuck it, I'm sick of this, someone else do it – because the buck stops with you'. (Holly)

Women get together and cry and hold each other then go, 'Righto girl, back in the game. There you go, you had your little sulk, we love you, we understand, we've all been through it too, go make dinner'. (Emma)

Women's return to work, especially considering the impact of the fires on the children, relied on stable and loving childcare arrangements, and this was the case regardless of the occupation of the women. In two couples the women held better paid and more senior jobs than their partners and both still had to assume primary care of the children in the emotional and physical, absence of their father. One woman was a senior health professional and another was a senior administrator before the fires and both had no choice but to give up their jobs in the absence of supportive fathers and in the absence of supportive workplaces.

And the kids had issues and I carried all of that, and so that put big issues on our relationship in terms of I felt I couldn't fall over. I wanted to fall over but if I fell over there was no one else around to pick that up, and I've said that to him ... he wasn't doing anything domestic-related or supporting the kids or otherwise. (Erica)

There were problems before, but they kind of receded a little bit and things had been going a little better since he had changed his job, although I was putting up with a lot of dodging of responsibility. Such as, 'It doesn't matter if I don't earn any money because you do', 'Doesn't matter if I go out because Karen will do it all'. (Karen)

I said, 'As parents of these kids we need to be able to do things and we need to be able to shelter the kids from it, so I need you to help me. You look after the kids this time and I'll look after the kids the majority of the time'. And I couldn't return to work because I had no childcare and the schools hadn't reopened, so I said to him, 'If you work four days, let me go to work one day and that way I can keep some sort of income coming in so that I can keep paying the mortgage'. And anyway he never did that, so I was unable to get back to work. (Annie)

Perhaps the key difference in how people experienced the trauma and the aftermath of the fires lies in the fact that our society expects women to care for children — no matter what. This same expectation is not levelled at men.

Men and work

Work is a defining characteristic of manhood. The stereotype of the man as breadwinner, as flawed a concept as it is, is still fixed in our imagination. The bushfires left a path of destruction and a workload that overwhelmed most affected by it. There was no shortage of unpaid work in clearing and rebuilding. Paid work was another issue. For some, the fire had literally destroyed their livelihood both in a material sense and psychologically. Attempts to find other paid work were thwarted, too, by demands that were excessive for traumatised people with no concession for easing in to a full-time workload. There did not seem to be options for a gradual return to work that would support physical and mental recovery and growth of confidence through paid work on a part-time basis.

He had 20 years of tradie stuff in his shed – \$150,000 worth of tools and equipment. Everything was in the shed. All that went. He was angry and frustrated about that because he couldn't go to work even if he wanted to... He wasn't thinking properly, he couldn't get his head around, he couldn't make decisions, couldn't pay his phone bill, couldn't do anything ... [He] did go and apply for a position [and was told he would] have to work six days a week. Seven in the morning until six at night' ... That was the start of the deterioration of mental health of the men up here. They were more or less sat back and told, 'You're too traumatised. You can't do. You're incompetent. You can't do anything'. (Libby)

He lost everything in his garage – all his manhood he lost ... Men, they are the protectors and providers of family and head of the family. They lost it that day. The fires took control. (Leanne)

One woman spoke of her husband's self-employment, saying he let the business go, avoiding business trips and losing clients. It was as if he had an aversion to anything that might be a problem. This normally organised man, had a room full of scattered piles of papers and refused to open bills. Another man who had a strong work ethic before the fires lost interest and seemed unaware of his absence from the workplace. The women felt their partners' inaction was symptomatic of depression.

He'll still say that he missed very little work, but there were three or four months where you kind of go, 'Are you going today?' And it might be 2pm in the afternoon and he'd go in for an hour. (Sally)

I'd say he lost his mojo. He was a very driven person beforehand. He's lost that drive. He was always first out of bed in the morning and he had to be gone to get to work. Well, that's all changed, he doesn't have that drive anymore. (Janet)

Three spoke of their partners' sudden disinterest in hygiene, one man not showering all week.

It's just got the feeling of the way a little boy would live if he'd been sent to live on his own, like he'd leave all his plates everywhere and his cups, and you know the way little kids live, they live like dogs. (Michelle)

He was not getting dressed, he was flopping around in slippers. He used to dress so very clean, well shaven, very business-like, took a lot of pride in things. He'd slop around, wouldn't shower, wouldn't shave. (Andrea)

It started to bother me was he was having a couple of showers a week in the beginning but by the time I left he hadn't even had a shower all week. (Gaye)

More commonly though, men were overworking. Overwork was a necessity for some – in terms of income and re-establishing homes and communities. It was also used as a way to restore normality to life by burying the fear and horror associated with the fires.

I know trauma, I've known trauma for 20 years ... [Back then] I just didn't stop. I got to the point where I'd make a million things a day happen because I didn't want to stop and think and I could see him doing that. I could see that was why he went to work. (Sally)

Paul was working—that's right, working, working, working—he worked 18 days straight round there, he had gastro but he still went to work ... Six o'clock in the morning, he'd get home about seven or eight o'clock. (Gaye)

At first it wasn't really good, he just wanted to keep working and didn't want to stop ... They just work, work, work. (Holly)

[He] did the instrumental grief thing, 'I must be doing, I must be doing. Sitting around with kids is not where I want to be. If I'm not at work, I want to be up cutting trees' type of thing. (Erica)

His boss had told him that he could take as long as he needed off, but the day the roads opened he was back at work. ... At that stage we were still being told to prepare for evacuation because the fire could turn around and come back. (Kate)

His only symptom is he works ... he went to work in that second week, I don't even know if we had power on. We couldn't sleep because you had to keep getting up to check things weren't on fire. (Sally)

Affairs

While the sense of not coping at all did not allow for sensitivity to others' needs, a lack of routine added to the strain. Some looked outside the relationship for emotional support or for diversion from reality through flirtations and affairs — both real and on the internet. It was simpler to seek emotional support and sympathy from new people, particularly people who did not have the weight of their own struggles with an experience of Black Saturday.

He was incredibly distant and unresponsive the whole time. He began to communicate with a woman on line during this time, and proceeded to have an affair with her. (Emma)

The woman my son had the affair with went through the fire too. Her husband is devastated. (Di)

By that night I was convinced there was an affair happening and I was totally devastated ... He said later on, 'We weren't getting along and she's just so easy to talk to'. (Rosie)

One woman told of her husband's interest in his virtual life on the computer. Conversations were about the life events of people neither of them had ever met. Real life interactions were neglected to attend to the internet. It emerged that his interest developed during the period she was struggling with post traumatic stress disorder as a direct result of the fires.

[When I was] overwhelmed with post-traumatic stress, I lost interest in my horses, lost interest in everything and also couldn't focus, couldn't function. That would have been very disturbing to [him], I'm sure, but he was incapable or was becoming perhaps distracted by his little [Internet] friends. He just let me go off, basically. (Michelle)

Closer to divorce

Chasms seemed to be widening between couples. People wondered about the point of staying together, and sometimes rationalised staying together for the sake of the children. They needed to provide a stable environment for children after the tumult of their experience of Black Saturday.

They jury is still out on that. I guess I have my concerns, I mean you ask me that two months ago and I would have been talking to a lawyer, and I am finding out some legal things as I go ... If I did choose to go that way it will bring another host of issues, so I'll just try to, you know ... and like I said I'm probably not ready to deal with the whole host of things and neither are the kids. (Sally)

I know I would not have put up with the last two years of abuse if it wasn't for the kids and thinking predominately that their dad being there for them was more important than not. I know my psychologist would say, 'Everyone knows that the kids are happier if the parents are happy'. I know, but I don't know. The kids are big kids — 14 and 15 — they're at the age where they're making big decisions about their manhood. (Madeline)

Two women had requests from their children to stay.

I hadn't said anything, but it was one of those days when I thought I can't do this anymore that's it. OK, I'm shooting baskets with [my son] and he says to me, 'I can understand why you would want to' and he didn't finish his sentence, 'but please don't leave we've been through enough'. (Sally)

Well they say, 'We know that it's hard for you, we can see that, and we don't want it to continue but at the moment we're not set up enough to move out so when we move out you can move out, Mum'. (Kate)

I'm very worried that, because I've subjugated my own needs for that of my children and my partner that then I might not suffer some delayed other PTSD. I have a few little twigs of things that happened over summer when I saw smoke or smelt smoke. Or depression, and I think I'm skating along by the skin of my teeth from anti depressants to be honest. (Karen)

The holiday that families could access through the Bushfire fund allowed for reflection, and some spoke of this as a critical time for deciding about the future. Three women described the forthcoming holiday almost as a light at the end of the tunnel but when it actually happened, their partners' behaviour confirmed ongoing problems.

[I thought] it would be great to be having a holiday but the first few days would be so stressful. [He] would be so picky. (Ruth)

I thought we could just chill out as a family, and he was like a caged tiger. And he so didn't want to be there, and he found if he had to actually deal with his children for 24 hours a day. He couldn't deal with that, he just got angry. (Karen)

It was supposed to be the biggest holiday we ever had, and pretty much the moment we landed ... he just started flipping, doing strange things. We went for a big bushwalk. He kept getting really cranky with [our son] ... He was raging, hassling him, pushing him, yelling at him. The whole walk was just — this is just the first hours we spent [on our holiday]. (Madeline)

Another spoke of her friend:

A close friend whose husband ... fought the fires, saved the house but lost everything – half way on a holiday, he said, ‘I want to leave you’, with the kids in the back seat ... This came out of the blue, she couldn’t believe it. She said it was a holiday from hell. (Sonia)

I *t probably would have gone on forever the ways it was. (Sally)*

And at another stage:

I think that finished us, but we were going to break up one day or another. I think the fires made us so tired and angry at each other. We couldn’t think straight and just got really angry and that finished it. So, yes and no. I don’t think it would’ve been quite as bad as it was if we weren’t so traumatised. (Sally)

But when his reaction to the fires was to turn to violence, this simplified her decision to leave.

When it got so aggressive it was easy to say, ‘You cannot come home anymore. This has to end’. (Sally)

Relationship violence

Extent of the problem

I know one of our biggest problems at the moment is domestic violence I’m aware of specific families that I always keep an eye on. (Libby)

In this research, 16 women contacted WHGNE in regard to their experience of violence from their partners since the fires. For nine women, this was a new and disturbing trend. For a further six women who had experienced some level of violence before the fires — sometimes many years earlier or as a once only occurrence — it sharply escalated in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. Only one reported a similar level of violence before and after, and at the time of the fires, they were separated. These 16 women referred to the stability of their relationship prior to the fires, seven reporting a stable, non-violent relationship. (Table 3 from Vol. 1 is repeated below.)

From Vol 1: Table 3 Characteristics of the 16 Relationships with FV present

FV present after fires	FV before fires	Woman frightened of partner?	Stable non-violent relationship before
16 Yes	1 Yes* 9 No 6 escalated	15 Yes 1 Missing data	7 Yes 6 No 2 Separated 1 Missing data
	16	16	16

*Violence caused separation before fires, partner returned after fires when woman was vulnerable.

Description of family violence

The sensitivity of this research prevents the inclusion of each woman's account of the violence she experienced after the fires. However, the following quotes give a sense of it, without compromising their anonymity. Each quote is from a different woman.

I could see he was so angry, so angry ... and he pushed me onto the floor, like I'm a fairly strong person, bang on the floor. I got up and then he just pushed me and pushed me and pushed me, and I mean he was seriously scary ... and then he physically pushed me, my head opened the front door, and then he pushed me onto the ground and it was just like—you know— doesn't sound bad, [it was] shocking. I don't know if they were cracked or they were bruised but I would say they were bruised cos bruising is more painful, four ribs and the sternum, and I was on Voltaren and Panadol Osteo for two months. I couldn't turn over in bed without—and I'm not a sook—I can't explain what it was like trying to get out of bed. The movement! Oh, man! Anyway what happened then, I think he locked me out of something ... And I tell you I mean it, if he'd been drunk I'd be dead. You just knew he was paying out on you, on everything.

I knew, I just knew in my bones that he was going to react. And being alone with him I was fearful ... because when he would rage it would just go on for so long and his voice is so loud and he's nearly six foot four and he would tower over me and yell down at me, 'ARGGHH' like a lion. Like he is. Were you afraid of him? Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely ... He actually pulled the hand brake on [when I was driving] on that road when we broke up.

You couldn't appease him ... he'd scream. The goal posts just kept changing ... He was a very intimidating person because he thought he was highly intelligent and he would just use words and twist words around so that no matter what you said, no matter how clearly you said it, he'd find some way of turning it around ... a couple of times he actually did – a push, a shove and a hit sort of thing.

Well that night he started punching his fist into the car when we got home, and then he was so drunk that night he could barely stand, so I think he threw his bottles at me a few times down there. He tried to hit me but he was so drunk I just dodged him ... I feel like it's just – I'm on borrowed time.

Apparently [my son], who is seven, says to this man who he has never met, 'My Dad is really mean to my Mum'. The poor man is going, 'What?' They both told me, [my older son] said, 'I don't know if [he] should have said something today' and I said, 'What did you say?'. And [he] goes, 'I just told him that [Dad] is mean to my Mum every day. Every day he is just so mean'.

He would yell and scream, push and shove, abuse, mental abuse, tell me how shit I was and how I ruined our marriage.

He started shouting, 'Aren't you grateful, I've done all this work'. And he had a meltdown really. There was a lot of shouting at me, and at anyone who would try to speak to him – me, the kids. He would get like this [making fists] and he punched a door and made a dent in it. I was a bit afraid. The kids were. They'd get upset and they'd say, 'I'm scared of Daddy when he gets like that'.

He stood up, put his hand on my neck, can't remember which side, and he blocked my airways ... [He did that]until I desperately lunged for air. He wouldn't have killed me. So I landed on my knee on the slate breaking my knee cap in two.

Then a week and a half after the fires, he was verbally abusing me at my home, pushing and shoving me and not letting me walk out my back door and hit me and choked me and things like that.

After I had the death threat [from him], because then I was living in this house that I didn't know, and I had things happening to the house, people knocking on the door. I was too scared to open the door. I didn't know if someone was going to be there about to blow me away. It sounds like you were quite frightened of him at times. I was. I thought he was going to lose it.

Initially, [my son] didn't want to leave me alone – ever – because he thought he had taken on the role of protector when nobody else was there. He was very angry at his father—this is the son who stayed with me ... If I could get over my fear I'd leave [my husband].

I've never seen the aggression in him. That anger was absolutely not my husband ... You could hear the frustration and anxiety in his voice ... And his eyes and his face, the anger in his face, he's exhausted and pale but the anger in his face is what scared me ... I've spoken to counsellors and the CAT team and people I trust said, 'You can't do it anymore, he's so aggressive to you, we don't know what he'll do'. I was in a situation that if I left him, I was afraid of what he would do, and if I stayed with him I was afraid of what he would do.

We were carrying a sleeper because we were trying to make my son's sand pit, and he was verbally abusive and I got very angry and I just dropped the sleeper and it bounced and hit him and I was like, 'Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry' because I didn't mean to hurt him. And he turned around and his fist stopped very close to me and I think since then I've been very anxious about what he could do. I think our relationship was difficult because he was abusive and very controlling.

I begin to see a cycle happening, where he is fine, reasonable, remorseful, he is wanting back into the relationship, and then flies into a rage of colossal scale over something that would seem reasonable, or at least excusable...Every time he gets into a rage he is more abusive and more hurtful and more likely to threaten violence ... [When he came to get his things from the house] he is sending me these text messages...'I just pissed all over the bed'... I'm really scared, even with his brother I'm really scared.

The women spoke of the effect on them. Again, each quote is from a different woman.

You lose yourself.

I just can't believe it, I am just so sad that it's come to this, so ... it's like he died. It's like I'm a widow but the corpse is still here to beat me up.

I ended up getting out of the car ... and not wanting to come back.

I mean I'm getting on with it I suppose – I'm feeling quite overwhelmed, honestly, and I would quite like to crawl into bed and cry.

Oh, it's horrendous ... it hasn't been an easy couple of years.

It's just a lot to take, on top of a fire.

Just with the fires, I think everything just caught up with me personally, the violence, leaving my husband, dealing with a young baby and his brother. I lost all confidence pretty much and I just fell apart.

I tell you I'm pretty tough but I was really, really scared living there for the next two days. I had a crowbar near one door, I had a hammer near the other door, and I had the doors locked ...and I'm not joking, I'm not easily scared.

He just raged at me and yelled at me and banged the table. And I was just shaking like a leaf, as soon as he starts yelling. I used to cope but now I can't ... I became like a cat on a hot tin roof ... I felt completely broken.

Fourteen women referred to anecdotal evidence and spoke of increased family violence being common knowledge in the communities.

There are so many people who are being affected after the fires with domestic violence, and so many women who aren't able to seek help. (Kate)

One girl, I ran into her I think it was between Christmas and New Year, and she had a big black eye ... just a girl I knew whose husband works with [mine] sometimes. (Tess)

Why women won't speak out — and why we won't listen

Family violence has always been a taboo subject. It is only in recent years that the work of women in the women's health, sexual assault and family violence field has resulted in mainstream social marketing campaigns and more open community discussion. At an individual level, discussion of a partner's violence remains fraught as women feel disloyal and sometimes, misguidedly, to blame. This is the man she loves, the man with whom she shared a home, a life and often, children. Traditionally, a man's home was his castle - and remnants of these beliefs pervade our society and legal system (as detailed in previous research by WHGNE, 'Raped by a Partner' and 'A Powerful Journey').

The complicity of society in upholding a man's right to rule his kingdom is strong in the everyday. In the aftermath of a disaster, it is stronger.

If a woman in normal circumstances cannot report family violence, the chances of her reporting her husband after a disaster are reduced further — because he is suffering. And, critically for this study, if she does seek help, the complicity of society prevents any action to protect and support her — because he is not himself as a result of the trauma.

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. I know how real people are, I've learnt that lesson. People just think, 'Nah, they won't do that' but people do do that ... I hid his keys a couple of times because he was pissed or just angry. (Sally)

Indeed, another ten women made statements that showed compassion for their partners despite the violence.

And he said like initially after the fire when we were staying with the neighbours he could see flames when he was trying to go to sleep. I think he actually suffered more. (Gaye)

I knew he was suffering ... God only knows what happens in that poor little head these days. (Madeline)

[H]e actually was a bit vulnerable and I felt sorry for him, and I thought, 'Is this the real person? ... I view him as being unwell, rather than just being a callous bastard like somehow there is a difference there.' (Sally)

Weeks and months after that, I struggled to get [my husband] good mental health... He had a history of depression, alcohol abuse and I was highly concerned for his risk of post-traumatic stress disorder ... I didn't want him to just see anyone ... I wanted him to see somebody who was good, so eventually I found him a professor in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ... here's me spending hours and hours and hours trying to find a psychologist ... (Karen)

I'm encouraging him this whole time to see a counsellor, 'Please go and see a counsellor... please go and get some medication...and please cut down on the drinking...' Encouraging him doing what I can, trying to bring his friends from about the place into the home. (Emma)

He's never said but there's been so many other different people treating him for it that there's no doubt that that's what he has, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Plus for him he had a traumatic upbringing and it triggered. So he had lots of triggers, lots of triggers. (Jenny)

They were up to their eyeballs in stress and horrendous stuff. It would have been very difficult for them, even as trained people, to have to deal with the fire, the injured and burned people and the death. He's been exposed to that ... I feel that because he is harbouring so much that it all becomes too much and his responses are now more dramatic. (Yvette)

I think the fires turned him back into a soldier and that's why he barked at me. All his soldier stuff, which he told me about when I first met him and he used to cry about ... it all just surfaced and he's never had counselling. (Beth)

He was not coping and things like that – he was having his own mental problems, and I was quite compassionate towards him and encouraged him to come back as well, silly enough. (Shelly)

We are soul mates. We made our marriage vows, for better worse, richer poorer, sickness and health. He's helped more through my problems and I'm there for him now cos he's admitted he's fire-affected. He's very confused, overwhelmed and I don't know which way he's going to turn. (Leanne)

Anger rather than tears

According to Western definitions of masculine behaviour, anger is more acceptable than tears. Black Saturday was an assault on a massive scale. Everyone in its way was changed by it. The women described instances they felt damaged their partners. One man told his wife he was physically ill after seeing horrific things.

Another woman said her husband went looking for friends and found bodies in their burnt house. She said she found out through his mate and she knows of other things but he won't talk about any of it. Others, too, saw remains of people, and mostly, took 'a while' to tell their partners. Women explain the lapse of time by wondering if it was to protect their feelings or because the men were having trouble dealing with their experience and couldn't verbalise it without emotion.

Some of the women had partners who were fire-fighters, at the front line of an unprecedented disaster. Their training would not have been adequate preparation for what they had to face, and the sight of injured and burned people. Community members, too, witnessed these sights. The stress of that day and the following weeks of high alert must have been intense, as were the months of the recovery effort afterwards.

So the boys have been through quite a bit and it's just hard, and of course afterwards they don't know how to deal with stuff and anger seems to be the easiest way to deal with the fear. (Angela)

You're looking at someone who's been through a holocaust, doesn't know where they're going to live, got a wife who's hysterical, and everything's difficult, like council makes it really hard for people to get their lives together and then you move back into a street where all the houses are burnt down and maybe 20 people have been killed in that street and you know them all. (Di)

I think the trauma with him had just made him – I think that's how he showed his emotions ... he just got a bit angry ... (Sally)

Her partner was a firefighter and had been part of the massive fire fight. They would have been in the front line (most people were fire-fighters or not) and seen the most horrendous of things. He had been part of a very traumatic situation. (Yvette)

My husband ... stayed to fight the fires. He experienced significant trauma during that event, including fearing that he was about to die imminently and very painfully, and suffered a debonding experience as a result of that ... Oh yes, the lack of acknowledgement. They are the professional fire-fighters, it was their job to stop the unstoppable. They bear the grief and the loss and the guilt and they had all those people die, and we knew them all... I went to 24 funerals ... The whole community is traumatised, but the DSE boys silently bear the guilt of it because they were the professionals. This is their mindset ... they feel like it was their job to stop it, they feel they failed, and they feel their friends died because of it. And I could see him reliving those moments, where he could have done something differently and saved a life. (Emma)

Women made the connection between the men's experience of Black Saturday, their feelings of anger, and the seemingly uncensored way they expressed that anger. Where there were indications in the past for some women that their partner might be capable of violence, the fires seemed to dismantle the capacity to regulate behaviour.

It's in him – and what's happened since the fires is, there seems to be no control on his emotions. He's just completely reactionary, when once he was able to moderate or there was at least some kind of understanding to his rage and anger. There was some context. Now there's no context to his rage. It just seems to be completely random. (Madeline)

For other women, this lapse manifested as a mask falling from their partner's face, as they sensed another person emerging, or perhaps the real person. One spoke of seeing glimpses of a dark chauvinism, another of some inner turmoil, and yet another of a callousness becoming apparent through his post-fire response to her depression and to the death of his mother.

He could be a really cold, cold bastard ... Actually this is the thing, it's like I'm seeing this side of him that I never knew existed ... it's almost like a 360, this person you've gone from loving, you start thinking, 'I don't even know who you are mate'. (Gaye)

So I really don't know what's going on with my husband except that the person I married has disappeared, or the person I married was actually this person and [now] this person has emerged. (Michelle)

[This] is something that's been in him for a long time and I never really made the connection ... After the fires I could clearly see that ... I'm not even saying boo to this guy and I'm not hassling him [or] doing any of these nagging things that you could sort of say that's why he's angry ... [He was] just taking it out on the person that he could and I was the strong one and I kept thinking, 'Better me than the kids'. (Madeline)

Black Saturday appeared to present these men with an excuse which some men used as explanation for their destructive behaviour. And, indeed, for not working or contributing positively to the family.

He says, 'I nearly died, so I should be able to ', which I can understand, but it took me months and months to work out that I nearly died too ... He would get angry, every emotional response became anger ... it just kind of gave him permission, because if anyone said anything to him or said to me, '[He's] a bit harsh' or 'He's a bit short' he can say, 'Yeah, well I've been through this and I'm a bit rah rah rah'. (Karen)

A lot of it was very embellished ... it was more like he was able to be a bit more outward with his behaviour, his moods and stuff. Whereas he would hold it back if we were in front of people normally, he really embraced the whole, 'I can be an absolute prick to everybody and I can get away with it because I can say I've been through the fires and I'm traumatised'. (Angela)

Angela herself became angry at the way her community excused her partner's behaviour.

You don't want to upset [him] because it just gets big. Do you know what I mean? ... At what point do you go, 'I'm sorry but your behaviour is bad and I'm pointing it out to you', instead of going, 'Let's not say anything cos he'll get upset'. So he gets away with being rude to people because he's unapproachable and people feel intimidated. (Angela)

I think [my sister's] friends may be aware of a certain level of abuse in the relationship, but it may be that like a lot of people it is considered part of the stress that follows such a traumatic event ... There is an acceptance that there are relationship pressures and breakups. In a general conversation with some women at the local bakery one day, the comment came up regarding breakups and 'fights' where police were called. It was accepted that it was just because of the fires. I felt that this was not ok, to just accept it. (Yvette)

I think everyone put up with stuff they never normally would have put up with. I know a lot of the call outs to the local police in the first 12 months weren't reported ... Everyone was just looking after each other and they all knew it was the fire impact. (Libby)

When I spoke to friends about it [severe physical violence], they would turn a blind eye to it and say, you'll sort it out. (Shelly)

The fire took all of our boundaries away, too, so that was interesting for the first 12 months because everyone would accept bad behaviour - even up to now. Bad behaviour was acceptable. (Libby)

Women seem to be an easy target if they voiced any concerns about their own situations and actually spoke about violence from a partner.

I tried to talk to his friend who was monitoring things and at one stage he said, 'You stupid bitch, don't you know he saved your life the other night?'; I'd say, 'Hang on, fires are doing that, he's just an auxiliary and I've been told to go on with my mindless menial domestic tasks of feeding everybody'. (Beth)

The silencing was managed by individuals and media, and any public discussion of negativity censored.

I wrote some articles for [the local newspaper] and they were heavily edited, anything that said [for example] when I wrote about the Couples Night over here, [I wrote] 'It was sad to think of those couples who were, for various reasons, unable to attend' and they read into that, 'dead or separated'. So all they published was positive. (Beth)

Even in relationships not marred by violence, men who were previously easy going and happy changed and became angry. Women spoke of walking on eggshells, and becoming angry themselves.

Well because he'd gotten, in a way he was sort of a bit angry ...and was being critical and so, more and more, I felt like I couldn't talk to him and didn't know what was the right thing to say, whether something I said was going to make him snap at me. He was never violent towards me and he would never be. (Rosie)

I have learnt now not to ask what's wrong because he yells at me ... I am always on edge ... everything I say or do is wrong ... I'm not going through violence at all, but I don't like the way I'm being treated from some people. I have experienced it before and I won't again. I'm not frightened, I'm not scared for my safety. Just angry. (Holly)

I just think, 'Fuck off! Stop bloody going on about something that's finished with for God's sake'. This is not my normal self and so we're having to deal with that side of things. (Carla)

Erica described the change in her husband from being known as 'Happy Sam' (not his real name) to being short-tempered and wanting perfection from her and the children and from his employees. She described his manner with them as 'quite brutal', and this was new, since the fires. His parents witnessed him smashing his own equipment in frustration. In the community, the change was even more obvious. She recounted a disturbing incident when the family had been eating at a sidewalk cafe and saw a minor car accident involving someone else's parked car. Sam asked the young driver and his friends to leave their contact details. When the young people realised it wasn't Sam's car, they asked why he cared:

And [he] just snapped. He just jumped out of his seat—he didn't even realise he knocked the table, he knocked the kids out of the seats, we lost our dinner—and he jumped up and just sort of went into this gentleman's face and started yelling and screaming about, 'It doesn't matter if it's mine or not, you've caused damage, that's not the right thing to do'. And I could sit there and know where this is from, this was about our property and he was very angry, and I was concerned he was going to start a fight. Now my husband's quite tall, this gentleman wasn't as physically of similar stature as my husband but he was a local and he had friends around the area and we're here with our kids, and fortunately one of the other girls sort of intervened whilst I was picking the kids up off the floor and I just packed up and said, 'We're going' and hopped in the car ... When I said, 'Do you realise you knocked Jimmy

(not his real name) out of his seat onto the ground, you knocked the table over and the food on the floor?’ he didn’t know. And he didn’t believe me. And it was only because the kids told him without me being there that ... he realised. (Erica)

Women, too, were angry, noting their tolerance levels had changed. They felt on edge, with raw emotions, and knew this to be a common occurrence.

The first session we did, the therapist asks to put down how you felt you were. Some people felt that they were bruised ... still hurting from what was going on because they were really knocked about and are still in the healing process. They were angry. One said she wanted to kill her husband. (Janet)

I *don’t care what he does, because part of me also goes, ‘I wish he’d die, I wish he’d drop dead. Please have a car accident today’. And I have that feeling strongly. I just wish he was dead ... ‘You should have died on the fucking day’. That’s part of it, and, ‘I was there that whole day wishing you weren’t dead and now I wish you had died’.*

What does he say to that?

I haven’t said it to his face, I’ve started a whole series of drawings to come to terms with the transition from life to death, and they’re all called ‘I wish you were dead’.
(Michelle)

One woman told us of her own anger that resulted in a physical fight with a neighbour over the events of the day, despite her intention to just sort out the disagreement verbally.

So I rang [my husband] and I told him ...what happened. And he asked where the kids were and I said, ‘They’re with me’. And he said, ‘Drop them off ... and take your wedding rings off’. I said, ‘I’m not going to get into a physical fight with her, I don’t want to but I am going to go and talk to her’. (Nicki)

Breaking the taboo — in safe places

Some women sought help to cope with depressed, angry or violent partners from their peers at support groups, and spoke there about what is taboo in everyday settings with friends, family, church or mainstream health providers. In these settings, women felt safe to talk about the relationship stresses reaching breaking point.

I have women coming here who have been abused physically, and my friend — they’ve been married 20 years and he assaulted her and she had to get a restraining order on him. (Di)

[What about the men?]. Oh they’re all fucked ... We were seriously talking about one of the women putting anti depressants ... in her husband’s coffee. Every woman in our support group is affected in some way and is not getting help. (Karen)

We’re doing the six sessions [of group therapy] ... It’s very interesting to see where the different women are ...One said she wanted to kill her husband. So that marriage has broken up. (Janet)

Changed identity and status

Women spoke of reassessing their entire lives — where to work and where to live and who to love — even decisions about how many children to have. Everything was suddenly up in the air. The wreckage and tumult brought by a disaster is clear in a physical sense, and the emotional upheaval is just as profound. The women spoke of a complete shake-up of their lives and values as they strove to get back on their feet. It was not just a case of putting material things back together and back in place. Relationships and sense of self had to be rebuilt — one way or another.

So everyone's in that sort of self-assessment time, but at least we understand each other (Annie)

I don't think he'll ever be the same person. I don't think any of us will ever be the same people. It puts that different perspective on mortality and the importance of things (Erica)

He questions his career a lot these days. We both are, and what we're going to do after this house is built. We don't know what is going to happen in the next six to twelve months. I've got all these ideas in my head but everything's just in shambles at the moment. (Holly)

Some expressed the same sense of re-assessment, but as something they had now moved through to a new state of freedom and certainty.

So it's rearranged our priorities and things that used to be important no longer are. Our kids and our life are what are now important, not work, and all the other things we used to think were. (Nicki)

I want to do all of the good things, and I don't want to be rich, and I want to give to my community and I work a lot for my community. That's what's important to me now. (Andrea)

Previous disaster research has found that disaster can, indeed, be a force for positive change and present an opportunity for wholesale restructure, both at an individual and community level. The over-riding sense from the interviews was one of ongoing, intense and multi-layered struggle. Yet some women felt inspired by the struggle and felt that they were better people for having gone through the Black Saturday bushfires.

I have more empathy for other people, a heightened awareness for things, much more compassion and patience for other people. I used to be quite intolerant of people I considered to be intellectually inferior. I'm not mean, I would never be mean to them, but I'd just go 'I'm not interested in you', just in that really offhand arrogant way. I don't really feel like that anymore, now I've got more compassion for everybody, it doesn't really matter. So a lot less judgmental. It's lovely, it's been like a real opening. (Michelle)

Some did, in fact, speak about a renewed involvement in the community, and a new relationship with their community. At a basic level, they knew more people, made friends with people they had previously lived alongside but hadn't really known. They felt more connected through becoming active, for example, through arts programs for children or mental health. Two women believed they had greater standing because they chose to stay on in their towns, persisting with their businesses to try and help re-establish their community and help individual people through the services they offered. They were taking yet another financial risk in trusting the community would support their businesses and gained a new respect for that.

Some women, men and children felt empowered by facing death and surviving the fires.

One woman said the disaster had strengthened her relationship with her husband and that her family is now closer and stronger ... We had to do things we thought we'd never have to do in our whole lives. I stand up for myself a whole lot more now, and for my family, and I'm not afraid of saying how I feel. Before, I was meek and mild and would go with the flow, but it's made all of us a lot stronger. (Vicki)

Both my older sons, my 14 year old and my 15 year old were out there fighting with mops and buckets and spades and rakes. They came out rather empowered because they faced the mortality ... they fought the fire. To them it was an empowering thing. They've come out quite strong. (Madeline)

One woman spoke enthusiastically about her new studies in psychology and her future plans to work with people.

I feel like I'm going to be the person I should have always been. (Michelle)

For two women, there was ambiguity in their changed status after the fires. One feeling empowered, yet carrying great sorrow.

I feel somewhat broken-hearted but at the same time I feel empowered and strong as well. It's like I've got my life back finally and his problem isn't my problem anymore. (Madeline)

Another woman reflected on the past 20 years and her struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Before the fires, she felt excluded and misunderstood by her community. Now the whole community is suffering and she feels more a part of it.

I feel everyone got me for the first time in my life. Because I was always the one who was a bit out there. I would say things or I'd let my man sleep with other women because life's too short ... he's only got one life here. People never got me. They thought I was fucked up or wrong or crazy but, I don't know, to me that's how it should be ... You wouldn't wish them to understand. I could never wish anyone to go through what I went through... just to understand me ... I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Same with the fires or the floods. (Sally)

Another two women told of a new place in their lives for organised religion. One observed her husband's secretive conversion to a cult-like organisation which concerned her because of his vulnerability after the fires. For the second woman, it was a more positive influence as both she and her husband began to attend a Christian Church and were helped by this involvement.

And I'm going, 'Since when did you become a ..' and but he is just so vulnerable ... and they can see that. (Sally)

We were starting to realise that the Christian groups are starting to help us and be with us and we've ended up becoming one of them. That's made the very biggest change in our lives and in Michael's life and to stop his drinking and get control of himself and to have respect. (Jenny)

Women spoke of the loss of control they felt, as did their partners. First, the fire swiftly removed any illusion of control, and this was followed in the aftermath by a loss of credibility and decision-making power. People were thought of, and talked about, as having 'fire-brain'. They felt patronised.

All of a sudden, after the fires we had no control of our lives. It was taken away completely. People were making decisions for us and it was a position we had never been in before. (Vicki)

When we were outspoken it was almost like being patronised. 'Now, listen to Rob Gordon, you're almost through that stage now, and you need a holiday, dear'. You fit into this package and when people were worked up about industrial estate, they'd say, 'Don't worry about it' and we would think, 'Hang on, you're completely going to change our community'. (Celia)

It's in little factions, some are not so good. It's always has been a bit like that I think but there's this incredible group of forward thinkers. I mean we're a community of scientists, bricklayers, artists, doctors, psychologists, authors and bludgers, everything. We've got a lot of really smart people and the authorities treated us like we were all dropkicks. (Andrea)

We had a massive loss of confidence. Fatigue will make a coward out of anybody. (Carla)

Essentially, women spoke of being identified as a Black Saturday bushfire victim, and they resented that limitation and the set of assumptions it conveyed to others.

You become a person that went through that bushfire. That's what you've become. That's your identity. Not so much now, well we are, but that's your identity. You're one of those people from Kinglake. (Gaye)

We have all chosen not to be looked at as fire victims any more. My children hate that label. They hate me saying I come from [this town]. They just want to be them again and not that fire victim. (Vicki)

Support services

Within a week, the towns affected by Black Saturday were inundated with help through the rapid response organised primarily by government, church and the health and community sector. Local people were overwhelmed by the generosity of people and the support they received. The help offered was practical, monetary and medical. Equally prioritised was mental health, and women spoke of counsellors and church staff being 'thick on the ground' in the early weeks. Many noted that a great comfort was simply talking to people who had been through the same disaster.

It's true that just talking to others who have been through it is a tremendous help. Talking to people who haven't — well you know what? They don't get it. (Yvette)

I actually went to the same counsellor twice and it just didn't — I had a friend at work, so I'd done a lot of, yeah, conversations. That's been my counselling I think. (Janet)

Case managers

It is clear that when people were allocated a case manager they found helpful, it was enormously valuable. Nine women spoke about how valuable their case managers were, stating they were really helpful, one was 'absolutely brilliant', another 'fantastic'.

It turned out my case manager was a mental health counsellor, so it all worked out real well. The third one we had, that was. (Sally)

We had to chase it up a few times but eventually we were given a case worker who was an absolute star, and we've become close friends with her. She was absolutely wonderful and

practically bullied us into chasing up some of the things that we should get, and bending the rules to enable us to get some of the things because we had nothing. (Carla)

The delay in being assigned a case worker — or the lack of eligibility — was of great concern to some women — adding to the burden of pressures.

Did they give you a case worker? No...I think that's wrong really, because I had nothing, I was paying rent that was way above me and I lost my job and I had nowhere else to go [because of the fires]. (Shelly)

We were told we can all have case workers so when ... we said, 'Oh, we need a case manager' ... she said, 'I've got to place orphans. You are not a priority'. We were told that! 'You are not a priority. (Jenny)

I remember my first case manager saying to me, 'We're winding up now and you're probably low priority for another case manager', but I pushed to get another [one]. (Karen)

It was interesting, because I was also trying to get a case manager at that point, and when I did they said, 'Oh you found a place?' and I said, 'Well yeah, but I could have used your help a week ago.' ... I didn't get one until late Feb/early March, and I rang the day it was announced because I'm a [health professional] and I know that case managers can be very helpful. (Karen)

For many of the women in this research, the process of getting and keeping case managers seemed fraught with difficulty, and the high turnover was almost universal amongst them. One woman had nine different case managers, one after another.

Another case manager who was wonderful, and we lost her because she had too many clients. (Vicki)

He's had three different case managers ... and he won't ask for anything. He's not a very demanding personality. (Janet)

Other women had less than satisfactory experiences of case managers:

I guess in my situation we had the case managers which I don't think we benefited from, I think I've had nine ... And some I never even met, just over the phone. Some were from Perth living in hotels in Box Hill. (Erica)

[I didn't have a case manager until] about two or three months after. I think I got found in a crack and they went, 'What are you doing without a case manager?' (Angela)

There was one good one at the beginning but she was only there for about five months. It took us six months to get a case manager. It would have been about July/August before he got a case manager, so the crucial time was sort of gone and he didn't fit the criteria because he got off his backside and got this new business going ... I don't know ... what the setup was with the case workers ... whether their loads were too big or they were just inexperienced. The delivery of service standards I didn't think was particularly good ... obviously the scale of what happened in that incident was huge and it is hard to manage those sorts of things but being able to access good staff for those sorts of things is crucial to people's recovery. (Janet)

One of the women suggested a better option would be for a case manager to be assigned to each family rather than each individual. Her personal experience shows the range and effectiveness of case managers.

Every family should have been part of one case manager. We had three. Scarlet, me, Josie (not real names). We all had one. Scarlet's case manager did nothing, Josie's supplied the counselling but no practical help, and mine did everything. (Sonia)

One of my case managers, I've had three bush fire case managers and I'm getting my fourth today, one of them was helpful ... Because I think a lot of them come from those church groups and they're not actual professionals, they haven't had enough training ... They are quite variable in their effectiveness. (Karen)

Basically, there was just a phone number ... I know in the early days there were men who did ring and they didn't get a call back. They needed someone to talk to, and for some people, that's a big thing to admit that. So a friend decided to ring and register to see what would happen if they would call back, or say, 'Oh, we can see you in two weeks'. No-one called her back. (Celia)

Yet there was recognition that this was a demanding task – to manage the competing needs of so many people in the highly volatile context of this unprecedented disaster.

They have tried really hard, all the services. I was not aware of all the services before the fires, so was quite impressed by the support that has been there. It's been a massive learning curve even for the services. (Vicki)

Counselling

Counselling was provided for bushfire victims from State and Federal Government funds and from donations through the Victorian Bushfire Fund.

Most of the women sought out counselling for themselves and their children and many tried to persuade their partners to take it up. There was a strong sentiment that counselling was a significant help to most women. For many it was ongoing and essential. Some spoke of counsellors going out of their way to help, and indicated that the counselling they received was what made the difference in overcoming difficulties.

The counselling is very helpful, just to work through problems and set goals for myself and problems with my kids, helping them pretty much as well. (Shelly)

I said, 'He just can't do it after work ... so they started coming on a Saturday to see us ... And that's how we got through it, they were wonderful. (Beth)

Counselling was offered and still is. I have taken advantage of it. Dr. Rob Gordon was doing group sessions and [VBAF] has provided professional counselling to any family that wants it for no charge. In the early days, the Salvation Army and every second person walking around town was offering counselling. They had an official badge and you could just sit down and have a cup of tea with one of them. (Yvette)

Several women wondered about the qualifications of the many 'roving counsellors' in the first weeks (and they were in fact, personal support staff or volunteers, for example through the Salvation Army or Red Cross, rather than qualified counsellors). The women who wanted counselling were generally able to access it, although working through the system was not always simple. As with case managers, the high turnover of counsellors and health professionals led to people having to see different counsellors in quick succession, leading to frustration. Sometimes people simply gave up.

Case managers were meant to be able to refer you but that didn't seem to work ... You talk to various people and they say ... there is unlimited counselling available to bushfire-affected people, but I'm struggling to access that and I'm a health professional. (Karen)

We had to chase [the local service] very hard for it over many weeks, and got two very nice chaps who actually came from a marriage counselling/marriage violence background so they weren't able to contribute on the fire side of things because they were in shock themselves We were going through all the baggage things and then they finished up and we had this other lady ... I only saw her twice unfortunately, because she actually had trauma training and she has a gift. I was so upset that we just got started with her and she had to go. And this new guy came along ... I thought he was unprofessional ... and he was supposed to be here this week to see [my partner] and he hasn't turned up and he hasn't contacted her in a week either. (Carla)

The other issue, particularly for men, is the stigma that some feel is attached to seeking counselling or other psychological help. This reaction is complex and rooted in established norms of what being a man means. One woman noted that counselling was available and lamented that her husband refused it.

It's a case of lead a horse to water but can't make them drink. There's loads of services [for staff] available through the DSE, but you have to be willing to do it. I've seen a counsellor, my children are all in counselling, and there was so much counselling available. (Emma)

Just talking to others who had been through the bushfires was often a great source of solace for some.

It was comradeship of people who got together who'd had such a huge loss – and I don't think that even if a counsellor was standing there right there and then, that's who they would have lent on. They would have lent on their mates and the close-knit community. We know what happened and that's why when the others came in it's like, 'You don't know what happened'. (Di)

Church

A great advantage of Church based services was the lack of paperwork! Women spoke of all kinds of practical and monetary assistance organised by the various Churches following conversations about what was problematic in their lives. They could give money to people 'who didn't have to fit a box'. The women spoke of Church based groups from Buddhists to Anglicans to the Salvation Army — all providing a unique service. The Red Cross door knocked to make sure people had what they needed in the early weeks after the fires. One woman spoke of becoming a Christian because they were the only people to help them in their time of need and because of the genuine friendship she and her partner found there. Another valued the human approach of the Uniting Church and observed members of the Church quietly noting who amongst the community seemed to be not travelling well and then doing practical things to help.

And then he just organises for someone to come and cut the wood for the person. (Michelle)

He was a born-again Christian fellow ... That's made the very biggest change in our lives and in [my partner's] life and to stop his drinking and get control of himself and to have respect. (Jenny)

It was only the Buddhist community who came to help me out. (Di)

[The] pastoral worker [here] for the St Mary's church, she's been more value than 10 case workers. She actually goes and sees the people and knows what's going on and helps people and does it discretely and it's not like you have to go and apply, 10 sheets of paper ... just finally giving people what they actually needed. (Janet)

Informal partnerships between case managers and Church employees were formed to provide essential help to people that otherwise could not be found.

[Our case manager] attempted about four different organisations to help [and] nobody was able to help. Between our first case manager and CentaCare they've come up with the funding to help us rebuild... so we can actually get access to our property. (Janet)

In the early days, community meals were supported across the fire-affected communities by Churches, the CFA, Global Care, the Red Cross, Salvation Army and local people themselves. The army set up mobile kitchens in the first weeks to the great appreciation of people struggling to live in damaged properties – sometimes without transport, water or functioning kitchens. Community meals provided a place for people to get together – as well as taking the pressure of trying to cook meals in temporary or shared accommodation. Indeed, the community dinners seemed to fill a need for people who would not access other formal services and offered a gentle, step-by-step way back into socialising.

At the Church, they had a big tent, 300 meals a day. Once that had to stop, it continued with a Friday night meal. That was really good and a chance for people to get together and support each other. (Celia)

Okay, the one thing that we did do was the community dining. We never stopped that, that food and sharing food with people became very, very important and even though we would go to the dinners and not really socialise it was just nice to be with people. Like I'd just like to go and sit in a corner and just be around people and then we'd leave ... you sort of got to know people in a very non-confrontational relaxed way cos you're sort of eating together. And then I started to cook and help them cook, and so you're chopping vegies and over that time you just start to open up. That is a very valuable thing, I can't emphasise how valuable. (Michelle)

Somewhat controversially, the community meals were stopped after approximately two weeks to prevent 'a dependent community' and to ensure there was no negative effect on local businesses. The recommendation to VBBRA that meals provided by the army be ceased apparently came from some local people, but it was a recommendation that was vehemently not shared by all.

VBBRA

The women appreciated the flexibility of funding received from VBBRA. The Bush to Beach retreats, funded by VBAF, coordinated by VBBRA and organised by local women, have been a particular highlight for women, as have programs run by the Firefoxes.

And then finally I received an email through the Firefoxes here, and they had a boot camp start up and so I put my hand up to join the boot camp and I did a six-week program at the gym. It was great. (Annie)

I went to the retreat at Lorne and that was wonderful. I realised [our town] was not the only area affected. It was massive, where the women had come from and that I wasn't going crazy there were others in the same boat as me. That was wonderful. You got the feeling the people were trying to help. (Vicki)

The Army

The army, too, was exceptionally welcomed by all. Their presence seemed to bring comfort to the fragile communities. Everyone who spoke of the army spoke in glowing terms. They were on the scene quickly at makeshift camps and set up tents and beds, then stayed to work on supplying water, and help with fencing, bridges and meals. The practical help extended to emotional support that seemed more acceptable to men than formally speaking to counsellors. The unquestioned masculinity of the army officers gave credibility to their assurances. One woman spoke of an army officer reassuring her husband that his emotion was understandable given what he had been through.

Those first few weeks after the fire, when the roads were closed ... the army came in and started cleaning things up and providing meals, and people really felt the generosity of Australia and the whole world. It was like a big hug. (Ruth)

The day the Army came to Kinglake was a wonderful day for me. It just felt fantastic. We were in such chaos, everyone was running around like chooks without their heads ... and it was great to have people show up and just follow orders, you could see somebody in command and somebody else saying 'Put up a tent' and people didn't go 'Well I don't think that tent should go up like that blah blah', they just went 'Yep, put the tent up'. 'Put the food out' ... And they just served food and just said, 'What's yours, love?' and that was it. You know, nobody sort of said, 'And how are you today?' and stuff, cos you just wanted to punch people who did that for quite a long time. (Michelle)

The army were pulled out after two weeks. Research participants were told this was to return to normality and prevent the communities becoming dependent. It was apparent, though, that this was an unwelcome decision. No-one wanted to see them go. One woman commented:

Well we had the Army come in soon after but some dickhead in town decided 'No, we need to get back to normal, it's inflicting against local businesses', and sent the Army away. And we went 'Don't go, we need you'. The only person who helped my husband initially was an Army captain who came as a counsellor, and it was pretty thrilling to have a guy in camouflage in your kitchen. A guy in uniform anytime! ... There he was this guy who said to [my husband], 'Mate, I've been in Iraq, I've been in this, I've been in that, this is every bit as crappy', and he made [him] feel like how he felt was valid and he got such a lift from that. (Andrea)

Childcare

Another practical and essential service was the provision of childcare - both for parents and children.

Luckily on the Monday, the 9th, I took [my child] to day care. The director of my day care centre lives in the [valley], and had it not been for the wind change she would have probably lost her home, so she 'got it'. She was really great. They helped with [my son] and if it hadn't have been for day care, he'd be a lot more traumatised than he is. (Karen)

My maternal health nurse ... said, 'There's nothing, there's nothing I can access that supports me as a mum with a preschooler', and we started talking and they had the capacity to divert some funds to set up a group ... it was about bringing people who lost their homes together, who had preschoolers, so we just started meeting. The ladies they had looking after the kids were fantastic and very flexible, so if the kids were upset they'd just bring them in and do an activity in wherever we were sitting. (Erica)

System failure for women affected by family violence

Lack of accurate statistics

During the worker interview component of this research (Vol 4), we were advised by VBRRA that the case management system was established to deal with a range of needs, including family violence, as they were aware that family violence was likely to increase after a disaster.

The Victorian Bushfire Case Management System (VBCMS) began only days after Black Saturday, on 13.2.2009 and involved the coordination of 74 Federal, State and Local Government and non-government agencies. It was overseen by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and aimed to provide a case manager for up to two years to every fire-affected household. The DHS evaluation of the system reported that by June 2010, 5506 households had been allocated a case manager — 2,211 of these in Murrindindi and 379 in Mitchell Shires (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, pp. 28,30).

The objective of the VBCMS was to ease access to the plethora of services, grants and information available to people; to strengthen the capacity of traumatised people over time; and to contribute to a reduction in the stressors affecting people through their recovery. (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 2)

In the two years since the Black Saturday bushfires, DHS case management statistics show that in the Hume region there were only nine cases of family violence recorded by case managers (statistics provided at interview). The Hume region covers a fifth of the State and includes 12 Local Government Areas including Mitchell and Murrindindi and the fire-affected shire of Alpine. The explanation suggested for this incredible figure of nine cases of family violence in two years of case management is that case managers would have been sensitive in how they chose to record the presenting issues and would have recorded the main issues. The low figures are likely to reflect the taboo many women faced in revealing their partner was violent towards them. Many case managers were not qualified to work with family violence, and it appeared that family violence was not recorded at a broader systems level across existing and new services after Black Saturday (Parkinson, et al., 2011).

The case managers didn't even ask about it [family violence]. All they wanted to know is what people needed. (Di)

They didn't all have the exact same training. The case managers [were not] asking the question about domestic violence at any point ... The same with children who've been abused, no-one asks. People are suspicious but they don't ask. (Sonia)

The DHS evaluation reports that it may not be possible to achieve the recommended target of Bachelor degree qualifications in a health or human services or related field for all case managers in a massive disaster like Black Saturday. The qualifications of case managers fell well short of this target:

A survey of case managers in June 2009 found that just over half (53%) had completed study in a relevant area. Some 36% of case managers were qualified social workers, nurses, occupational therapists and psychologists; another 18% had qualifications in fields such as community, welfare, family and youth studies. Of the case managers who had not completed study in a relevant area, 20% had qualifications in a range of other areas including law, science and arts. (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 50)

In its evaluation, the 510 respondents were asked how satisfied they were with assistance from their case manager in 27 different areas from counselling to mental health to accommodation, banking and childcare. There was no item for family violence (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 45). The report includes a section on the special needs of vulnerable groups but women experiencing or at risk of violence are not mentioned.

The case management and disaster recovery literature indicates that there are certain population groups that are particularly vulnerable following disasters. The literature points to people with pre-existing vulnerabilities including people with disabilities, children, the elderly and individuals with limited English proficiency. (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 65)

Local workers, too, were frustrated by the lack of accurate statistics recorded by authorities.

I had this discussion with ... DHS yesterday...I said, 'Can you please explain to me where your stats come from?' She said, 'We get them from all over'. And I go, 'No you don't because I know from Centacare you haven't got any off them and they've got six counsellors and they're fully booked and you haven't got their stats'. (Libby)

Police and Legal responses

The actions of police regarding family violence in the aftermath of Black Saturday have been described by some community members as appropriate and sensitive to the circumstances of men who had been traumatised by the fires. Yet, this cautious approach means police data may be incomplete, given the accounts in this report that family violence incident reports were not always made by police despite their attendance. A second issue is the question of whether family violence was informally relegated to a low priority as demand on policing increased following the disaster. This research suggests that police may have had a greater tendency to excuse the men's behaviour because they knew the man and the stresses faced by Black Saturday survivors.

Some welcome this approach as sensitive and sensible, fearing the effect of a police report or criminal charges on the health and wellbeing of already scarred and suffering men. Further investigation into family violence after disaster is warranted and should include recommendations for preventative and punitive measures that are sensitive to post-disaster conditions.

Our stated position is unequivocal — that women, too, were survivors of Black Saturday and it is not acceptable to expect them to suffer further assaults because their partner is not coping.

[Police not charging] has been really good. I mean it probably isn't good for some people and in really highly physical violent relationships it wouldn't be good. But it was good for the community because people were behaving and doing things that they wouldn't normally do, out of not knowing how to cope, like drink driving... Local coppers would come up and say, 'Settle down' and they'd talk to them and they'd try to sort it out and refer them to different services but they wouldn't write a report on it which was really great. I thought it was really great because ... they were doing a lot of community building at the same time ... They're great blokes and they're very supportive like that – because it was just creating secondary trauma again. They know all the locals really well and they know it's not their normal personality. They're not going to charge them for something because they know it is going to exacerbate their condition ... Knowing it could send this guy over the edge and then commit suicide, or this family environment is going to be heaps worse off because you know he's going to go to court and be fined or put in jail. As a community we all work with these families but statistically it doesn't show. (Libby)

In addition to ethics approval received from North East Health and Monash University, WHGNE applied for research approval from the Victoria Police Research Coordinating Committee (RCC) and the Victorian Police Human research Ethics Committee (VPHREC) in order to include Victoria Police in this research. The RCC declined to approve the application, stating there were 'a number of reasons for the decision, including that the participation of members was not supported by local and regional managers'. We were invited to submit a revised application addressing a number of issues including: 'The Committee suggests the recruitment draft flyer for women

be altered to be neutral, to allow for a more representative sample of participants. Specifically removing or altering question three 'Have you experienced violence since the Black Saturday bushfires'. Resubmission would have meant omitting the two key features of the research which is that it was about women and about violence. (Victoria Police RCC did allow our research into partner rape in 2007. It was well received by Victoria Police and received an award from the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2011.)

The response of police to family violence after a disaster is complex. An understanding of what guides police action after disasters is essential to future planning. We would urge further research into this.

Six women in this research had police involvement. Table 6 gives a summary of what happened.

Table 6: Police response to family violence for six women

<p>Yvette</p>	<p><i>[My sister] said a neighbour or someone must have called the police. When they arrived, the police were told that everything was fine [so nothing happened]. This was a case of severe and ongoing family violence.</i></p>
<p>Tess said police attended two hours after she phoned, and a day or two later contacted him about his alcohol problem rather than the violence against her. She has never received a follow up call from police or from Family Violence services referred by police.</p>	<p><i>I think it must have been just before Christmas I called the cops at one point. I called 000 and it took them two hours to get here. I mean I was scared, I wouldn't have called them otherwise ... I went to the police and then he didn't even know that they'd come because he was in bed, it was blown over by then. And they told me they were going to ring in the next few days or something to see how I was. I never heard back from them at all ... But then he [called me and] he said to me, 'Oh, the police called me and asked me did I want counselling for my alcohol problem' - cos he had no idea that they'd come—and I said, 'Okay, what did you say?' and he said, 'I said how did you get my number and I haven't got an alcohol problem'.</i></p> <p><i>But I thought that was a bit—I mean they knew he'd gone to bed ... I was scared stiff.</i></p>
<p>Annie said the police laughed at her when she showed them a death threat in a text from her ex-husband.</p>	<p><i>After I had the death threat, because then I was living in this house that I didn't know and I had things happening to the house, people knocking on the door, I was too scared to open the door, I didn't know if someone was going to be there about to blow me away.</i></p> <p><i>What was the police response with the intimidation?</i></p> <p><i>He laughed at me.</i></p> <p><i>Why would he laugh at you? Did you show [the death threat text] to him?</i></p> <p><i>Yes I did.</i></p>

<p>Gaye called the police. They attended and advised her that they had known him for a long time and he was a good bloke.</p>	<p><i>The police made him go, I stayed in the bungalow. It wasn't good. And the dogs were locked up and the police gave me, I think, till Tuesday to get out .. And you knew that this is it, there's no going back here, this is it, we're finished. And then of course you've got the time to work out whether you're going to get him charged,</i></p> <p><i>And the police were helpful?</i></p> <p><i>No, no they weren't helpful at all actually ... No, they were very chauvinistic about it all ... They just weren't helpful. It was like, 'We don't really want to know and we've known [him] all his life... He's a good bloke.</i></p> <p><i>Was there a report?</i></p> <p><i>No, I don't think so, and that's what ... my case manager said, she said, 'When there's been a report of domestic violence they've got to do something about it' ... No, they didn't do whatever they were meant to do ... [My case manager] is very professional—and even she concluded that they were dick heads. And that was that. And then [the police officer] rang me when I was in Seymour just to follow up, and I thought, 'Yeah you've been given a bloody rah-rah-up from the big boss'.</i></p>
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<p>Emma said police came quickly to her ex-husband's suicide attempt and put him in custody, but he texted her all night with death threats while he was in police custody.</p>	<p><i>I call the police. He goes back and he locks the door. I'm afraid that he's going to hang himself, I know it's going to take the police 10 minutes to get there and I know that he can die in three ...So I'm banging on the door, I'm screaming out for whoever there is, somebody to come with a bar and help me get this fucking door open because my husband is going to kill himself. The police arrive. [My husband is] aggressive, he's hostile, swearing, he's out of control, he's drunk out of his mind, he's so off beam. He says he's not going to do anything while I'm at the scene, so I go a little further away and let the police do what they need to do. They get him into the car, they section him under the Mental Health Act and they take him... While he is in police custody, he texts me that I will die from his hands ... if he every sees me again he'll punch every tooth out of my head and it continues, it continues all night. I think eventually his phone goes flat. He calls me the next morning, 'You filthy whore... How could you do this...' It's all recriminations, all nastiness, so I am genuinely worried at this point that he is going to make good on his threats, I'm worried for me and the kids.</i></p>
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Shelly

couldn't get police to attend on a number of occasions. She put it down to them being busy on important fire-related issues. When they did attend, they failed to attend court for his breach of the Intervention Order.

Then a week and a half after the fires, he was verbally abusing me at my home, pushing and shoving me and not letting me walk out my back door and hit me and choked me and things like that. I rang the police, they came, he admitted it, they arrested him, and the police said to me, 'He'll be going to court again because he just breached the intervention order. We'll speak to you tomorrow', which never happened. And he ended up going to court and the police didn't even show up there at all.

So the police didn't testify?

No...

I should have put a complaint to the police for not going to court ... if they had done their job properly I would not be in this mess now ... They never told me [why]. But speaking to my [police officer] friend ... she said they were very busy, they were all dealing with the fires ... Apparently I'm not that important.

You said you contacted the police four times for breaches, what kind of conversation did they have with you about it?

One of the police officers ... suggested to move to Rosebud, he said, 'A lot of single parents move to Rosebud, you should go down there'. My mum was there and heard all that.

So where are you at now with your ex?

I have to see him every week. The court basically downplayed a lot of the violence and he actually has to come to my home to get the kids now, and I said all along I want a public place and I can't do anything about it. I've spoken to the police about it and they said 'Sorry love you can't do anything about it. '... Legal aid could not represent me because my ex had used legal aid in the past.

... It's funny because the first time I reported the domestic violence to the police, the police attended and it was 2am, they would have to have been called from their homes. They were badgering me, saying most women who go through something like this just turn around tomorrow and withdraw, and they didn't want to do anything. These were two male police officers. They were not very helpful. They were pretty negative about it ... The police said we can't do much about it, we can't get him out of the house, even though he was drunk, and he was violent. They left him in the house and I left, I was safe at my mum and dad's. The next day he rang me and said I'm going to trash the house. I rang 000 and I said what happened, and they said there are no police officers to attend. Next day I went to the doctor, to the police station, made my statement and then went home and the house was destroyed. I spoke to the main officer that was dealing with it and he said, it's his house as well, we can't do much about it ...

[Regarding his lack of care with the children] They caught him, but they gave him a warning, they didn't fine him, because, from what I understand, and also knowing a police officer, they need to get the locals' trust, they can't be too hard on locals. Yet, I've got a young child jumping all around in a car seat! .. I said I definitely need [an IO] after today. [The police officer] said, 'Are you sure about that? It's going to really affect him'.

The health and community sector

Women seeking help with family violence were ultimately not well served by the health professionals they saw. When women did break the taboo to speak about their partner's violence, they felt disloyal to their partner, and sometimes felt reprimanded by the person they confided in, which effectively cut off seeking support from other people. Some women feared they were just complaining and wastefully accessing services that others could more justifiably benefit from. In the aftermath of Black Saturday, they felt that others were so much worse off. This misconception was, surprisingly, reinforced by one woman's counsellor.

We are so fortunate and have and all this kindness and generosity. And how can I complain about anything? (Ruth)

I said, 'You must get sick of people and their sob tales' and she said, 'You're pretty well off, I know ... couples that are so badly damaged there's no hope for them, and their kids are damaged and everything's a total mess. So you and James are comparatively easy'. (Beth)

The comparatively easy situation was one where Beth's partner choked her, only dropping her when she was gasping for breath, and breaking her kneecap on the tiled floor. It is clear that few case managers had any knowledge or understanding of the dynamics of family violence (Parkinson, et al., 2011) and the women's accounts told of some case managers, counsellors and psychologists inadequately responding to signs and even direct requests for help.

He was getting very angry at a situation and then he would jump to another situation and get angry at that ... So they sent a psychologist to the home, he answered the front door and, 'No, no, there's nothing wrong, everything's wonderful' and the psychologist went away. (Kate)

I rang [his counsellor] and said, 'Listen, you need to know it's not all rosy here, he needs help, he's angry, he's scaring me, this is not healthy for a baby, not for a [child] to be around, it's not right'. And then as soon as she started talking to him in the next session he comes home and goes, 'That was my final session, she says I'm doing really well'. And it's like, 'Yeah, I know mate, yeah sure'. (Angela)

He's under a psychologist at the moment, which he loves ... He saw him yesterday and I said, 'Did you tell [him] that you're back on the drugs?' [smoking dope] and he goes, 'No, why would I tell him that?' (Libby)

Generational change in how we raise boys and girls seems further away now than for the last generation. The conservatism of the 21st century has seen a move towards more rigid gendered roles than in previous decades. With more extreme weather events caused by climate change, disasters are already a more frequent occurrence. Acknowledging that men are overwhelmingly reluctant to seek help for any personal problem, physical or mental, the women considered the inadequacies of the help their partners were offered — or not offered.

The very male cultures in the CFA and DSE undermined successful interventions. Where debriefing was offered, it seemed that men had to reveal to others that they were seeking help, and this was seen as a weakness, at least initially.

There should have been help straight away, not six to eight months later, when they put their hand up for it [which is] only when they are at the point that something bad is going to happen. It's a very tough manly man thing [in that organisation], and it was seen as a

bit of a stigma, not so much now, but it was. They had all these group counselling sessions. Guys aren't necessarily going to open up to a group of guys. (Holly)

Everyone has to do it so they're not stigmatised. He kept saying 'If I go and have counselling I'll lose my job.' It's so crazy, but he was crazy! He was not thinking straight. In that processing, in that malfunctioning process that was actually the case. He would lose his job if he sought help. And he just didn't want it anyway because it was just too hard. (Emma)

In the broader community, too, efforts to engage men have not reached these women's partners.

I don't know how to make it more accessible. They've tried, they've done the talks at the football club. Because there is this mental illness in the men and children ...I don't know how. You need to ask the blokes how to fix the blokes, don't you? (Karen)

It's largely come about because men don't talk about what they're going through, they keep it all in and they're in denial and I don't know how you get someone like my husband particularly, and there's plenty more like him, to talk about it, to go and see someone to talk about it [...] he just won't. He still hasn't been to see anybody professionally ... he won't even go to a GP. He absolutely refuses to come to any, and I have begged and pleaded for him to come to any counselling but he absolutely refuses, no way. He tells me he's alright and then only, Thursday, some friends of ours from Queensland called in that we hadn't seen since before the fires and we were sitting down and starting to talk about it and he just had to get up and leave. He got up and went outside. He's always saying, 'I'm fine, I'm fine.' (Rosie)

'It's alright to talk about it, but sometimes they've got to actually follow through'

Counselling seemed to be offered as the panacea for all. However, women and children living with a violent man need more. As Tess said, 'It's alright to talk about it, but sometimes they've got to actually follow through'. When women were able to overcome the silencing by a complicit society and voiced their concerns – to friends, family or health professionals – it was sometimes useful, and at other times, added to the damage.

There was unspoken yet enormous pressure not to be 'disloyal' and not to speak about men's violence for all the reasons of what they had been through, and how heroic they had been, and how they were acting out of character, and it was just the alcohol and they were depressed or feeling suicidal. Despite this, some women had the courage to speak about their partner's violence and to ask for help. Even then, women were not heard on this topic.

Vignettes from eight women follow. They show that when women went to family, they were ignored, accused of over-reacting and blamed for not caring well enough for their men. Friends and work colleagues did not want to get involved and sometimes fearful of violence or confrontation themselves, leaving the woman unsupported and making excuses for the man. Sometimes, women just kept trying to get help from different people, different services. The women told of health professionals failing to follow up on initial conversations, and willing to drop the issue if the man denied any violence or pass the woman on to some other service. Ultimately, many women gave up. One woman, after finishing our interview, said, 'I'll get out of here in a box', revealing her level of fear and surrender.

Ruth found counselling very useful and was about to begin joint counselling with her husband. She told her husband's family of their relationship troubles and she said they witnessed his changed behaviour on a family camping trip but they felt he was throwing himself into his work

and dealing with it in his own way.

Gaye told her friends at her two workplaces. She regretted telling one workplace because their reaction was to be fearful that her partner would attack them. The other workplace offered good support and counselling.

I told all my friends, I told them at work, I told them at [my other workplace], I think that was a stupid thing to do ... I don't think that helped. I probably shouldn't have said anything to them ... I think they thought that [he] might come down and belt the crap out of me [there], and [the boss is] only about this big. (Gaye)

Angela told friends who were reluctant to come around because of the tension. She said she felt unsupported because they did not want to upset him and excused his bad behaviour. Although her partner stopped his sessions when Angela told his counsellor about his violence, her own counsellor was helpful and gave her referrals to Family Violence services.

Karen sought help with family violence issues from her bushfire support group, her case manager, and her Maternal and Child Health Nurse, who phoned with Family Violence contact numbers. The group facilitator was preoccupied with her own situation and didn't offer to help. When she told her partner's family, they suggested she was over-reacting and not caring for him properly. She spoke to her counsellor:

So I said I was frightened, and the counsellor ... said to me in front of [my partner] 'Are you frightened physically?' and I said, 'No' because I wasn't about to say yes in front of him because God knows what would have happened if I had said that. And she never followed up, she never phoned afterwards until she heard, when we were due for our next appointment, that we had separated, and I got my bush fire counsellor to call her. We played phone tennis and then I gave up. (Karen)

Sally had a quick turnover of three different case managers and phoned a leading disaster psychologist. 'He talked to me for two or three hours on the phone because he didn't have any room in his case load ... so we've tried a few ... We have tried just about everything.'

Beth told her counsellor, during a joint session, that her partner blocked her airways and broke her kneecap. He denied it and it seemed the counsellor thought others more deserving of help. She then told her partner's friend, who proceeded to be verbally abusive to her. The best support she received was a conversation with a casual acquaintance.

Shelly had good support from her parents who shared their home with her and her children for about seven months on and off. She was refused a case manager. Her Family Violence worker was unable to provide effective assistance and wrote a case study for publication detailing the ways the system had failed her.

Tess wanted help to leave her husband after his violence escalated after the fires. She called a DV service and spoke to two different workers.

They were really nice, they took all the details, and I told them stuff that I'd never told anyone, I really let it all out ... And so it came out in the conversation with Berry Street [that I was going to see a new bushfire case manager], and then it was like, 'Okay, you should tell this case manager about all this' and I said, 'Oh, I don't know her, I've only spoken to her on the phone, I don't know her, I don't know if I'd feel comfortable'. 'Well, see how you go when you go and see her' and whatever ... I didn't feel comfortable talking to her. That wasn't her focus ... I never said a word to her ... I really felt like the last one, the case worker, I felt sorry for her because it was just dumped on her and I'm not sure what her qualifications were or whatever.

So they didn't put you on to a domestic violence worker?

No. I think the two that I originally spoke to ... were, I only spoke to them on the phone but they didn't offer for any counselling or anything.

And they didn't help with any accommodation?

No, as soon as they knew I was about to see the bushfire case manager it was like passing the buck. That's what it felt like ... I think it was a lot more than what she'd signed on for as a bushfire case manager. That was sort of the end of it. It felt a bit humiliating,