

Consequences of bushfire arson: part 3 –psychological impacts

The psychological impact of bushfire arson on victims, firefighters and the community has received little attention. Studies in parallel fields however, demonstrate that perceptions of the cause of a fire impact both on the perceived cost of, and our ability to recover from the event.

An environmental loss is assessed in light of the cause of that loss (Brown et al. 2005). Losses attributable to human causes, particularly illegal behaviour and carelessness, are perceived to be more serious than those resulting from natural events: the latter are more likely to be perceived as unavoidable and 'in the natural scheme of things'. Similarly, the losses from illegal or careless actions are considered more serious than those from economic and population growth.

Studies of both bushfires and residential fires note a link between attributions of cause or blame and how individuals and communities deal with the devastation. Carroll et al. (2005) found that for the Rodeo-Chediski bushfire in the US, blame and a perceived lack of local control or involvement contributed to community conflict and fragmentation, whereas cohesion occurred when residents worked together to rebuild their community. Keane et al. (2002) noted that, irrespective of personal differences and degree of loss suffered, victims of residential fires who did not look for reasons for the fire suffered less psychological distress than those who engaged in blame and 'why me?' questions. Those perceiving a stronger sense of control over the recovery had lower levels of distress.

There are two potentially interconnected factors: how survivors appraise their experiences influences their overall psychological wellbeing, but also the search for a cause may arise from the need to make sense of that sudden and unexpected event, and to establish a sense of control in their environment. Continued focus on the cause of a fire appears to prevent healing and resolution, and is associated with greater distress in the long term, whereas feelings of control in the recovery process reduced distress (Keane et al. 2002).

Most people cannot comprehend why someone lights a bushfire, particularly in adverse conditions, so seeking an understanding of one's own experience via the inexplicable motives of another is difficult. Our inability to fathom such actions, combined with the apparent randomness of the events is more likely to result in feelings of helplessness, confusion, frustration, powerlessness, anger or fear.

Community involvement in both prevention and recovery fosters self-efficacy within individuals and the community, not only lowering distress, but developing a resilience that may enable those individuals and communities to positively deal with future issues or disasters with greater skill. The Community Centred Arson Prevention program adopted by FESA (see Bulletin 31) represents one example of how the community can be involved in the prevention of bushfire arson and reduce the associated psychological and environmental impacts on the community.

References

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