Recently Australia is facing an unprecedented crisis, and as family and systemic therapists many are asking: "what is our role". What is our role as our nation labours under the persistent weight of loss and trauma with the catastrophic fires that have ravaged the land? Loss is at the heart of these natural disasters, loss of homes, loved ones, independence, identity, land, fauna and sense of place and belonging. Family and systemic therapists can help people navigate the pathway to recovery.

An inevitable consequence of these recent bushfires in Australia is the "collective trauma", "the shared injuries to [our] population's social, cultural, and physical ecologies" (Saul, 2014). Erikson defined a collective trauma as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared.... "I" continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. "You" continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body" (Erikson, 1976 p.154). Catastrophic fires such as Australia has seen recently echo Erikson's insight into the loss of "we" and as such it is entirely appropriate to conceptualise collective trauma as a family experience. Trauma is "nested in societal and cultural contexts" (López-Zerón & Blow, 2017) and as such family and systemic therapy is ideally positioned to provide a broad and multi-layered response to such a complex need.

Family and Systemic Therapy as a Primary Response Following Natural Disasters

Many people initially focus of survival and rebuilding in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster (Breckenridge & James, 2012). Some families find they are strengthened in their relationships, with heightened gratitude for loved ones and a sense of cohesiveness within the family unit (Caruana, 2010). However, for other families increased stressors can strain recovery to normal family functioning (Botey & Kulig, 2014). Some research indicates that natural disasters like bush fires can have significant and long-term adverse effect on family functioning (McFarlane, 1987). The relationship between trauma and families is a bidirectional one, in which effective family functioning can moderate the impacts of the trauma (Catherall, 2004). In addition to the changes in the immediate family unit, survivors must adapt to the social disruption to their community and alterations in the ways the family interacts within that community (Caruana, 2010). The social disruption experienced by a family following a natural disaster is a significant test for the family (Botey & Kulig, 2014). Family therapy offers a multi-level and broad response to the diverse impacts on people following a natural disaster.

Although there is a growing body of research exploring the effects of natural disasters and the recovery process, there is a focus on intrapersonal impacts and individualised approaches (López-Zerón & Blow, 2017; Wieling & Mittal, 2008). While working through the intrapersonal chaos is necessary, key systemic best practice recommends we move away from individualised approaches following natural disasters in preference for systemic interventions (Breckenridge & James, 2012; Wieling, & Mittal 2008). We do well to recognize that natural disasters are relational events with shared experiences of loss and survivorship and therefore should incorporate a systemic and family response (Figley & Figley, 2009). Indeed "these experiences of mass trauma and associated meanings become part of the systems' (individuals, families, and communities) historical life stories which then impact their past, present, and future" (Wieling & Mittal, 2008). The collective process by which families and communities respond to collective traumas can be the pathway to making tolerable meaning of the event (Figley & Figley, 2009). Breckenridge & James (2012) purport that for effective recovery from traumatic experiences therapeutic supports must be provided at multiple levels.

Family and systemic therapists respond to the individual within the context of their systems regardless of whether they are working with an individual, a family or a community. One of the most significant indicators of recovery

following immense psychosocial trauma like the recent catastrophic fires is family, community and network support (Breckenridge & James, 2012). Family therapists bring overt attention to the impact of stress on inter-member interactions following disaster (such as family and community under-function and over-functioning) and can support people to foster positive relational dynamics in both acute and long-term support (Mendenhall & Berge, 2010).

Family therapists adopt a holistic vision of recovery which considers the mediating role of family and social supports in surviving collective disasters. Such a biopsychosocial systems model that considers multiple and interconnected systems and holds for intrapersonal and interpersonal family processes is the significant strength of working with a family therapist. The family therapist "seeks to help the family establish a unified healing theory that will work for the entire group" (Caruana, 2010). The effects of the recent Australian bushfires will be long lasting, and it is incumbent on us, as family therapists, to make a concerted contribution in the area of providing systemic responses following collective trauma.

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