

# Back to basics — holding on to the game plan when the rules and the players keep changing

## The community and the tragedy

Following the initial shock and devastation of any disaster, the recovery journey begins.

Working with the Tasman Peninsula community as they make this journey after the Port Arthur shootings has been an extremely challenging and rewarding experience.

I joined Social Worker Bidy Searl in this job-share position as the Counselling and Personal Support Services Coordinator eleven weeks after the shootings.

The position was established by the Department of Community and Health Services to assist with the long term recovery for the Tasman Peninsula as part of the Port Arthur Incident Recovery Program.

It is difficult to summarise all that has happened during my time in this position, however this paper represents some of my personal reflections of the first fifteen months in the role, including issues both Bidy and I believe are important to share.

I remember when I first heard about the shootings at Port Arthur in April 28th, the question I kept asking myself was, 'how could it happen here?'

The question lingers today as I work with the Peninsula community. What a contrast: the total evil of the shootings and the complete peace and serenity of this place. The beauty and character of the ruins of the Port Arthur Historic Site extend right across the entire Tasman Peninsula.

The Tasman Peninsula is an isolated rural community about an hour and a half from Hobart. It is rich in history and its major industries include tourism and hospitality, agriculture and fishing.

The community has a population of approximately 2200 and has the basic amenities found in rural areas, including its own municipal council, basic medical and health services, and a district high school. The picture of the area is of a sleepy, peaceful, casual part of the world, that positively grows on you. For many of the residents, the peaceful lifestyle is the main reason they chose to live there. To realise that this was not the safe haven of their dreams was shattering.

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The community, just like any other, has its own particular history, social networks, tensions and idiosyncrasies that define its unique character. It has an abundance of strengths and creativity and an amazing ability to care for each other. These characteristics pre-date the disaster and form the foundations for building the recovery.

It is important to consider the degree of trauma the disaster created in the community. Although many of those present on the day of the shootings were tourists and the impact was spread throughout Australia and internationally, the size of this community has meant that each member has been affected at some level.

For example, local people who work at the Historic Site felt the responsibility of caring for their visitors during the ordeal, and now face the scene of the shootings at work every day. Medical and emergency personnel who were first on the scene were local professionals and volunteers. Therefore, everyone is doing their own recovery: as individuals, as family members, as neighbours, as community group members, as a community unit, and as part of the world-wide group affected by this experience.

'What can I do?' 'How can I help?' 'Where do I start?' and, to be honest, 'What have I gotten myself into?' were all questions I asked myself as I began this position.

It is difficult to describe the atmosphere of the place and my feelings personally and professionally after the tragedy. Grief and trauma is personally touching at any time, but to be confronted by it on this scale was consuming. At times the enormity of the event was smothering and the task ahead seemed formidable. It was an environment that easily created a sense of powerlessness, simply because what happened was beyond anyone's comprehension.

## A working framework

To work effectively has required the development of a framework, the two main elements of which are:

- a knowledge of the phases and principles of disaster recovery and community development that provide the theoretical basis for recovery
- the nature and location of the disaster.

It is these factors that make each disaster, and therefore each recovery program, unique. They provide the practical foundations on which a community builds its recovery.

The framework has provided, at the very least, a personal and professional grounding. At most it provided a mutual starting point in the recovery process, for ourselves and the community, that:

- recognises the community as the expert in their recovery and ensures the process is community owned and driven
- provides a structure for reflecting and planning: as disaster recovery is a dynamic, intense and at times chaotic process
- facilitates a focus of undertaking a recovery journey rather than finding a recovery solution.

The functions of the position have been to:

- provide assessment, counselling and referral for individuals and families
- co-ordinate visiting community and health services
- inform and educate the community about stress, trauma and recovery
- liaise with key stakeholders to assess ongoing community needs and recovery progress
- assist with community recovery projects
- provide staff support role to local services operating on the Tasman Peninsula.

## The challenges

This has been a challenging experience as the dynamics, needs and energy levels of the community change throughout the recovery process.

The **first challenge** in delivering an effective service involves developing a working style that is compatible with the

community. The casual nature of this rural community meant that our style needed to be informal and casual too.

'Professional loitering' was a big part of the job. In other words 'just being around'. Much of our work has been done over a cup of tea, in car parks or during casual chats.

Formal appointments were the exception rather than the rule in the early days, and this pattern has continued, to varying degrees, throughout the year. This has required some creative thinking at times when trying to make contact with community members.

At the commencement of our position, the community was wary of outsiders, which was understandable considering the steady flow of counsellors, experts, media and others that had come before us.

We did a lot of networking, both formally and informally, especially during the initial stages, to develop a presence in the community. It was very important for us to get to know the community and for them to get to know us, both as individuals and as professionals. This relationship has evolved over the first year in what we have termed our 'community apprenticeship'. This process has directly impacted on people accessing services. As people come to know and trust us, they are more willing to try the service and promote it as a resource to others.

At the time of the first anniversary there was a definite shift in the community's acceptance of 'outside workers'. I think this shift signified that the community recognised our journey with them through the ups and downs of the previous twelve months. This shift has been personally and professionally satisfying, as it signifies the community's acceptance of ourselves and our work.

The **second challenge** has been developing systems that provide a comprehensive view of community needs to ensure services are appropriate and relevant.

Developing a system that will accurately identify community needs is important in an environment where needs are constantly changing and often conflicting.

This involved constant monitoring and evaluation. Methods we have used ranged from informal discussion with key individuals and groups, to formal needs analysis, meetings and written surveys. Constant face-to-face communication has been crucial.

Messages of need we have received during this process have varied from 'we don't need the service at all' and 'are you still here?', to the belief that the service will be required long term, and that no assessment is required.

During this process we have identified several areas of need in the community.

Firstly, we received constant messages of a need for counselling in the community. However this need was not reflected in numbers using the service. Reasons for this may have included:

- people not recognising their need at particular stages
- reluctance to access mainstream services because of the concept of 'counselling'
- issues around confidentiality in small areas
- lack of familiarity with service providers
- mainstream services not being appropriate to people's needs.

This required creative thinking and stepping outside 'traditional' counselling responses to develop alternate strategies for meeting need.

**'We were also faced with conflicting needs between those in the community and other stakeholders external to the community, including management, political and media interests. This was not always an easy process.'**

Local massage services were contracted to provide free massage. This service was made available to service providers initially, but due to popularity has expanded to include anyone affected by the shootings. The Tasman Camps were set up to allow families to take a weekend break from the peninsula in a relaxing recreational environment. We also provided regular information and education about grief and trauma through community newsletters and flyers.

Secondly, it is important to recognise the needs of local service providers working in this area. Because these people are local and familiar, they have been a main source of contact for people. This has placed incredible strain on them, remembering that they are also affected by the trauma, simply because they live in the area.

These people have shown an amazing ability to soldier on through this process and part of our role is to try to support them. Ways of doing this have included a formal service providers networking group and a weekly staff self-care program.

The heightened sensitivity of people during the recovery process was another

need we had to be aware of.

Initially sensitivity was high, where something seemingly as small as the use of words like 'trigger', could cause distress. This sensitivity continues today, although not to the same extent. Other disasters and violent events spark responses in the community. People's hearts went out to those at Thredbo, and amongst the sadness of Princess Di's death there has been discussion about the antics of the media and the investment they have in maintaining sadness and grief in the headlines.

Workers need to be aware of the increased potential impact that future events will have on people's recovery from their own disaster experience. Planning for potential support during significant events such as the plea hearing, Christmas and the first anniversary has also been challenging, as the need was unpredictable.

Again, the main role for us, during these times was to provide support services. For example, providing private areas for families, answering questions, even things like finding a smokers area so people could have a cigarette without having to stand amongst the media outside the court, all helped smooth these times as much as possible. Emotional support came largely from the natural support networks that people have developed from this shared experience. Ours was a 'safety net' role as people cared wonderfully for each other during these difficult days.

We were also faced with conflicting needs between those in the community and other stakeholders external to the community, including management, political and media interests. This was not always an easy process and we had varying degrees of success. Often we found ourselves the meat in the sandwich, where we were advocating on behalf of the community and educating others about the importance of a community driven process.

In emphasising community ownership, it was important to have a working knowledge of the community, including its pre-disaster resources and history. Through this it is easier to focus on incident recovery issues and to be aware of any needs and agendas that pre-dated the disaster. Our job is to assist with the recovery process, not to create a new and perfect community.

The **third challenge** in our work has been adapting these work styles and systems according to movement through the recovery process.

- Points that need consideration here are:
- although recovery extends over years the process is dynamic
  - each phase of disaster brings with it different dynamics and energy levels

- movement through these phases is transient
- the rates of change in the process differ—although the rate of change for a community is incredibly accelerated by disaster, people within the community are recovering at different rates, and the community as a whole is recovering differently to the rest of the country
- significant events impact on movement through the recovery process.

It is impossible to describe this situation unless you are there, but I think adapting work styles and systems according to the stages of the recovery process is the greatest challenge of all.

The dynamic, chaotic nature of recovery impacts on your role constantly, dictating how directive or supportive your role is. On a given day we could be dealing with people at various stages in the recovery process. For example some could still be in the early stages of recovery, others may want to get on with things and forget the shootings ever happened, and some may slowly be coming to terms with the incident.

To adequately respect and encourage each person's recovery process is quite a balancing act, and at times the only indication that you have the balance right is that no-one is telling you you're doing it wrong.

### Changes during the recovery process

A brief outline of the changes we have seen in the community include:

- the initial shock of the tragedy
- a period of numbness where people seemed on 'automatic pilot'
- followed by people wanting to forget that the shootings had ever happened, (this was the feeling at the time I began the position and energy levels were particularly low)
- a build up of tension preceding events such as the plea hearing, Christmas and the first anniversary, where things seemed to stop in anticipation
- often a period of achievement for passing these milestones, followed by a period of flatness with the realisation that passing these milestones were only part and not the end of the recovery journey
- a slight rise in energy in between these significant events where community activity increased
- an emotional but peaceful day of the anniversary as people came together and supported each other as they reached the one year milestone
- a definite shift after the anniversary with people clearly stating a desire to look

forward to development rather than focusing on recovering from the past

- a sense of a lack of direction, as people were tired, with little energy to search for new directions
- a recent lift in community energy, with many people looking for new directions and new projects that will bring everyone together with a renewed sense of purpose.

Throughout this time there have also been birthdays, anniversaries, etc. that have impacted on people's recovery progress.

Blending these challenges for effective service provision during this process has often felt like an adhoc, 'fly by the seat of your pants' type of role, as needs are constantly changing. This is where the framework provided grounding—reminding us that the sense of chaos was okay.

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### Some lessons

In any working experience, there are valuable lessons that come from the challenges we face. There are some valuable lessons learnt from my experience working in this position.

#### **1. The constant need to promote the need for a community driven recovery**

For a recovery from a disaster like this, there has to be a recognition that the community must own and lead its own recovery effort for any recovery to be effective.

#### **2. The need for teamwork**

While the teamwork we have had during this time has been great and I believe successful, I also believe it relied largely on personalities and the fact that we were all in a 'sink or swim' situation.

Work also needs to be done on overcoming the 'territorialism' between public and private organisations and between professions that can prevent us reaching our potential and effect service provision to the community.

Role clarification needs to occur constantly, emphasising how we can comple-

ment each other. I think social work has equal responsibility here to promote effective team work, and to promote our skills and strengths as effective players in those teams.

#### **3. The need to effectively evaluate what we are doing**

The dynamic nature of recovery and informality of our work style creates difficulty in finding an adequate means of *evaluating* our work. Even though each disaster is unique, there are important lessons and trends that everyone can learn from. To effectively assess what we're doing right as well as what we're doing wrong is important to assist in giving direction to our work and to provide information for workers finding themselves in similar situations in the future.

#### **4. The need to work very closely with the people in the community**

To work effectively to help a community recover requires that you get right in alongside everyone else, both as an individual and a worker.

You face the ups and downs and feel the pain with them, all the while promoting total confidence that they will beat this atrocity. I think both management and ourselves as workers need to be very aware of the investment this requires and the toll that this can take as we saturate ourselves with all the emotions and dynamics of recovery. We must ensure that we look after ourselves with as much energy as we are trying to care for those around us.

### Summary

Working in this position, has been an amazing experience—it is work that energises and excites, and frustrates and exhausts.

The challenges have been thrown out one after another and my social work training has been invaluable in trying to work with this unique dynamic process to the best of my ability. The year has provided as many downs as ups, but each step has given its own rewards.

One positive to come from such an experience is to see human resilience in action.

This community was thrust into this process against their will and in a most horrific way and they are dealing with it in a most dignified manner, using an amazing amount of strength and skill that comes from within. Even during times of tiredness, frustration and anger with the whole process, never once have they given up on fighting for their rights, needs and control over their community and their recovery.