

Tips from a bushfire survivor

Canberra woman Liz Tilley and her husband John Flannery and children Patrick, now 13, Conor, now 11, and Rosie, now eight, lost their home in Warragamba Avenue, Duffy, in the January 2003 firestorm. They moved back into their rebuilt home in August 2004. She has penned the following 'tips', based on her experiences.

As a survivor of the January 2003 firestorm in Canberra, my heart goes out to those who have lost loved ones, homes, pets, and a lifetime of memories in the tragic Victorian fires.

As I sit watching TV news coverage, with my heart racing and my body shaking slightly as I remember the fear, the flames, the heat, the smoke and the knowledge that I would probably not get out alive; I also remember in the days, weeks and months after the fires what support we needed and valued. The victims of the Victorian fires are coping with the loss of homes, possession, pets and property as well as trying to cope with immense grief.

A great relief effort is one that is based on the experiences of previous disaster situations, and yet, after the Canberra bushfires, we were so often "re-inventing the wheel". I just can't bear to see those victims in Victoria not benefit from what we learned in Canberra.

While the aid agencies will swing into action to do what they do best and the State and Federal government will put their disaster planning into action, how can the Australian public, and the Victorian Relief Effort, help in the best way possible?

What the surviving victims need, both in terms of donations, and physical and emotional support comes will come in phases. Of course, the first weeks after the fire, in the immediate post trauma phase, these needs will be different from what they will need in six, 12 months or two years time.

So, for what it's worth, here are my tips for a "great" relief:

Notes to the general public:

Donate cash.

Every little bit counts. If every person in Australia donated just five dollars, imagine what a difference it would make.

Basic essentials.

Please only donate things that are new or of good quality. Don't slow down the relief effort by having the team receiving the donations in Victoria have to sort through linen, clothing or manchester that is soiled, torn, buttons missing or otherwise damaged in any way. Better to donate one item that is new or in good condition rather than several things that you don't wear anymore because they're too out of fashion, have broken zips or are stained. Similarly with bed linen, towels, blankets etc, only donate what is good quality or new.

Think of all the things you need every day -- pyjamas, toothbrush, toothpaste, face washer, soap, toiletries bag, deodorant, hairbrush, comb, shampoo, clothes suitable for work, casual clothes, belt, shoes, socks, watch, hair ties, wallet, handbag, keyring, hat, sunscreen, etc. These people have nothing. While they will receive immediate assistance in the form of cash and gift vouchers from charitable organisations for major retail outlets, I remember that every day there was something I needed and didn't have. Within the first few days we needed notepads and pens just to deal with the paperwork and the insurance company.

Needs change over time, as people move into temporary accommodation they will need cooking utensils, pots, pans, plates, cups, bowls, kitchen knives, furniture, TVs, beds... the list is endless.

Cold weather will come in another month or two and winter clothes will be needed at this time -- warm tops, coats, hats and scarves. Blankets, electric blankets and heaters will also be needed. I distinctly remember the day the weather suddenly turned cold in Canberra and no-one in the family had a warm top to wear.

Kits.

If you're thinking of what else to give, put together a first aid kit for the home, or an office kit (containing sticky tape, scissors, notepads, pens, stapler etc), or a toiletry bag (with toothpaste, toothbrush, nail scissors, shampoo, etc), or a make-up kit with make-up, eye make-up remover, lip gloss, mascara etc), or a hair care kit for a child with a brush, hair ties etc, or a sports kit for a child (drink bottle, hat, lunchbox, sunscreen, soccer ball), a kitchen kit (mixing bowls, cookbooks, cooking utensils, a good sharp knife, etc.), a tool kit (hammer, nails, screwdrivers, hacksaw etc) -- these will be much appreciated.

Make something.

Some of our most treasured items are the ones that were made, with love, by complete strangers. The quilt that was one of the hundreds that arrived from all over Australia, the hand-knitted rugs that my children like to snuggle under in winter. If you make jewellery, make a few pairs of earrings or a necklace. If you make toys, make something for the children who have lost theirs. If you knit, make a winter scarf. If you sew, make some table placemats or a beautiful table runner. If you're an artist, paint a picture or frame a drawing.

I still find it incredibly moving that people cared enough to put time and love into making something that has now become a new family treasure for us.

Grow something.

Those that remain, and those that decide to rebuild, face a blackened, denuded landscape. If you live in within reasonable distance of the bushfire area, pot some seedlings and start growing some vegetation to help rejuvenate the gardens that were lost. Contact your local nursery, land care or conservation group to see what vegetation is drought resistant and/or native to the area. In Canberra, a very successful Garden Regeneration Scheme was set-up by volunteers and in the two-year period after the fires, they helped many, many people re-landscape their gardens. To see green, to see new growth, when we returned to our rebuilt home, was not only beautiful but gave us hope that we too could recover.

Kids.

My three children were young at the time of the fires, so I remember well how grateful I was when we received toys, colouring-in books, pencils and textas, craft items, DVDs, books to read and pushbikes.

Friends and acquaintances.

If you know personally know someone who was affected, every little gesture of help and support helps. Bake some biscuits or a meal and drop it around to them, offer to put their washing on the line, offer to do their supermarket shopping, offer to mind their kids. I remember feeling so overwhelmed and so busy answering phone calls and organising basic survival that I simply didn't have time or energy to cook meals, wash, clean and do all the other things that keep a family going -- this went on for months. This help will be invaluable in coming weeks and months.

Notes to Victorian Disaster Relief Organisers:

Counselling.

Don't sit the counsellors in a room at the recovery centres where people have to go to them. These victims are in shock and running on adrenalin. The women will usually talk about it, the men won't. Men seldom seek out emotional assistance or counselling. Often the men will hold it all inside and release it in anger or violence a few days, weeks, months or years down the track. Years on from the fires, women were saying that their husbands "didn't talk about it" and were withdrawn or showing signs of depression.

Put the counsellors and social workers in the field. Get them to go and help the men sort through the burnt out remainders of their homes. Get them to go to the pubs and clubs where the men are congregating. Get them to be there when the bulldozers move in to flatten what little remains of people's homes. Often people just want someone to listen and to tell them that what they are experiencing is 'normal' under the circumstances.

Get the social workers to be there to act as advocates when victims have to deal with public servants, banks, and government officials in the next few weeks. Some of the victims will have literally lost their identities -- they will have no wallet, no identification, and no bank details. They will have to deal with insurance companies and government agencies. People working in these institutions don't have training as social workers, and often are under increased stress themselves. I can't tell you the number of victims who were coping pretty well up until they had to deal with a bank or other institution who were either obstructive or unable to assist because "our computer system won't let me".

Buddy system.

Our children's school (Orana School for Rudolf Steiner Education) instituted a 'buddy system' for the families from school that lost their homes. This was a fantastic system that could be adapted for use in any disaster situation. Hundreds of people were phoning, dropping into our temporary accommodation and offering help, but it was so overwhelming. People kept asking "What do you need?" and it was very hard to say "Everything". Our buddy removed this stress so that when people asked "what do you need?" or "What can I do?", we referred them to our buddy. She had a huge list and would determine if we needed towels, cutlery, an ironing board, a fridge -- and let people choose what they wanted to donate or buy. My husband rented an empty house and then went up to Sydney to collect me and the three children. When we returned to Canberra four days later, we returned to a fully set-up house complete with beds, lounges, toys for the kids, bed linen, towels -- to the level of detail of waste paper baskets, scissors in the drawers and pot plants. I find it hard to express our deep gratitude for this amazing coordination of assistance.

Women's networks.

As well as dealing with trauma, pain and grief, women have to look after the needs of their family. This can mean they put their own needs last.

My greatest sources of support and friendship were a small group of women bound by the fact that our children all attended the same school and we all lost our homes. We started meeting for coffee a few weeks after the fires and, six years on, we still meet regularly for lunch. We call ourselves The Singed (as in "slightly burnt") Sisterhood. I don't know how I would have got through the last six years without these wonderful women who have now become close friends.

Getting women together in an informal way allows them to support each other and share their stories. In the months to come, as the victims are spread across the State, they will need avenues in which to come together and discuss what they, and their families, are going through. There is enormous comfort in knowing you are not alone.

Communication.

The victims of the fires will be spreading across the State, and in some cases interstate, to stay with relatives and friends. It is vital that all victims stay connected to the network of aid that will be coming their way in the following weeks, months and years.

While I know a database of victims is currently being compiled, it is imperative that this database is updated as victims move from temporary accommodation into rental accommodation and then decide to rebuild, buy or rent indefinitely. Wonderful companies will donate goods and services, or offer wholesale or discounted goods. In the next 12 months to two years, as victims decide to rebuild, buy another home or rent, they will need to access these.

People who move interstate will not have access to the assistance and counselling on offer -- they need to be tracked and supported. A friend of mine really struggled as she moved to Sydney and did not have anyone to talk with who had gone through the experience, she also missed out on most of the donations, assistance and counselling available in the period after the fires.

Often, those that had immediate help, staying in fully-furnished homes, or with friends or family for extended periods, miss out on some assistance in the immediate phase because they don't need it, however this puts them at a disadvantage further down the track in a few months time, when this accommodation ceases and they then have to begin again with nothing. The aid will need to be ongoing.

Not everyone will have access to a computer, certainly not in the first few weeks, or even months. Post information to people -- mail can be forwarded or passed on.

Shopping centres.

Everyone needs to shop -- particularly if you've lost everything. Distribute newsletters updating victims and survivors on what is happening and what help they can access via shopping centres around the State. Libraries, government offices, community centres, cultural and religious centres can also distribute the newsletters.

These newsletters can also inform members of the public how they can help.

Mobile phone bills.

Most of us faced enormous mobile phone bills after the fires. In the weeks and months after the fires, our mobiles were our lifeline -- to friends, family, work, the insurance company, to everything. In the weeks after the fires, I used my mobile more than I ever have in my life. In the months after the fires, when we were already under huge stress, we had to pay huge mobile phone bills.

At the time of the Canberra fires, I was not aware of any mobile phone providers who took this into consideration by negating or reducing mobile phone bills for victims (I would love to be proved wrong on this).

Survivors.

Consider the survivors who did not lose their homes so have to return to a devastated community. Please don't keep saying to them "Well, at least you didn't lose your house". They are going through such mixed emotions after losing friends and neighbours that they may have mixed emotions about being 'spared'.

They have to return to the devastated landscape and try and rebuild their lives. Their children will play in ash and dirt, the amount of dust and debris flying through the air is unbelievable. They will spend the next year or so cleaning constantly and yet everything will still remain covered in a layer of fine ash and dust. They won't be able to hang clothes on the line because they come in dirtier than when they went out. These seem like insignificant things, but when these things happen after a tragedy such as this, when you've lost friends and neighbours, and your support networks have gone, they make a very traumatic situation even more stressful. In the weeks to come, donations of play equipment, sandpits, soil, plants and trees will be much needed and appreciated.

Asbestos.

Some of the homes burnt may contain asbestos. Asbestos fibres explode under intense heat. If the home was built before 1984 it is likely some asbestos would be in the wet areas (bathrooms and laundries and some kitchens) and the eaves. If these sheets have been broken up, small amounts of asbestos fibre would have been released. While some asbestos is present in some of the dust and ash from destroyed homes, the levels are not high and the large size of the asbestos fibres released from asbestos sheets means there is only a very low risk of it causing disease. (refer to www.health.act.gov.au and put in 'asbestos' under search)

So, the risk IS low, but there is still some risk. So reduce this risk, and the risk of dust inhalation, by providing dust masks with filters and sturdy gloves to those who want to sort through the burnt remains of their homes and belongings.

Note to the Victims:

Learn to receive. Most of us are great at giving help, but many people find it difficult to accept help. Take the help when it is offered and don't be afraid to ask for what you need. For many people it can be incredibly hard to do this. While at the moment you have no choice but to accept help, it may be hard to keep accepting help months and years down the track. But you need to allow family, friends, and the wider community to give. It will make you stronger and, years from now, will be an incredible insight into what others need in times of trauma -- because you've been there and you understand. The only way you can truly learn to help others is by accepting help yourself when you need it.

Community.

When a disaster strikes, we are reminded of the amazing generosity, kindness and compassion of others. Humans have an incredible capacity to help others in times of need. I am forever grateful to the friends, relatives, work colleagues, acquaintances and strangers who did what they could to help us in the weeks, months and years after the fires.

No matter how small the gesture, it was appreciated. One friend gave me her copy of a cookbook she knew I used all the time and I bless her every time I open that book to thumb its familiar pages. A woman who worked with my husband knew that he had bought me some pearl earrings as a present before the fires, so she gave me her favourite pearl earrings as a gift, and I bless her every time I wear them. Another friend's son gave my son his cricket bat and ball, and I bless him every time I see the boys playing outside. A friend and former work colleague of my husband's donated furniture, a TV and cooking utensils, and I bless her every day.

At times, despite everything, I felt buoyed by the support of all these people, by knowing they cared. And now, six years on, I still feel an enormous faith in the human spirit, our ability to survive, and the compassion and generosity we can offer each other.

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/news/local/news/general/canberra-bushfire-victims-tips-for-a-great-relief/1431161.aspx> (published Canberra Time Wednesday, 11 February 2009 and sourced 12 February 2009)