

Australian Institute for  
Disaster Resilience



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

Beyond Bushfires Recovery Matters webinar series

# Post-traumatic growth

Exploring the 10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report

📅 16 June, 2021

🕒 2pm AEST

📍 [aidr.org.au/events](https://aidr.org.au/events)

## SPEAKERS

Professor Lou Harms, University of Melbourne  
Rhonda Abotomey, Community member

## HOSTED BY

Amanda Leck, AIDR

Beyond Bushfires Recovery Matters webinar series

# Welcome

Amanda Leck

Executive Director, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience

## FUNDING PARTNERS



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Beyond Bushfires Recovery Matters webinar series

# Acknowledgement of Country

AIDR acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the various lands on which you all join us from today and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in this event.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters across Australia.

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# Housekeeping

- Today's event will be recorded and made available after the event.
- Please enter questions for our speakers in the Q&A function, not the chat box.
- Please use the chat box to share any thoughts or reflections during the presentation – remember to select 'all panellists and attendees' to ensure everyone can read your message.
- Please be respectful to each other when posting your comments or questions.

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## Beyond Bushfires Recovery Matters webinar series

The topic of today's webinar may be sensitive for some people. Some services to access support will be posted in the chat.

- Lifeline: <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>
- Beyond Blue: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

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## Beyond Bushfires Recovery Matters webinar series

# Professor Louise Harms

Lou is the Chair and Head of Social Work at The University of Melbourne. After a decade of working in social work practice in hospitals and educational contexts, in 2000 she moved into academia, taking her interests in trauma, resilience and recovery into her teaching and research activities.

She has been a Chief Investigator on the Beyond Bushfires longitudinal study of mental health and community resilience following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.

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# Ms Rhonda Abotomey

Rhonda is a posttraumatic growth advocate and presenter. She champions lived experience partnered with formal expertise to optimise ‘people oriented’ outcomes in trauma management. Rhonda's mission is expanding posttraumatic growth knowledge and resources to enhance trauma preparedness and recovery. Rhonda became a strong advocate around inclusion failures, and was driven to contribute to disaster policy improvements, after losing multiple family members to bushfire. She has been a Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Witness, a VBRRR Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group volunteer and worked in a University of Melbourne interdisciplinary research team who investigated Post-traumatic Growth after Black Saturday. Rhonda is a proud parent, author of Bushfire poetry and recovery initiatives, and novice artist. Traumatic events have unexpectedly added skills to Rhonda’s toolbox for navigating life.

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# Post-traumatic Growth (PTG)



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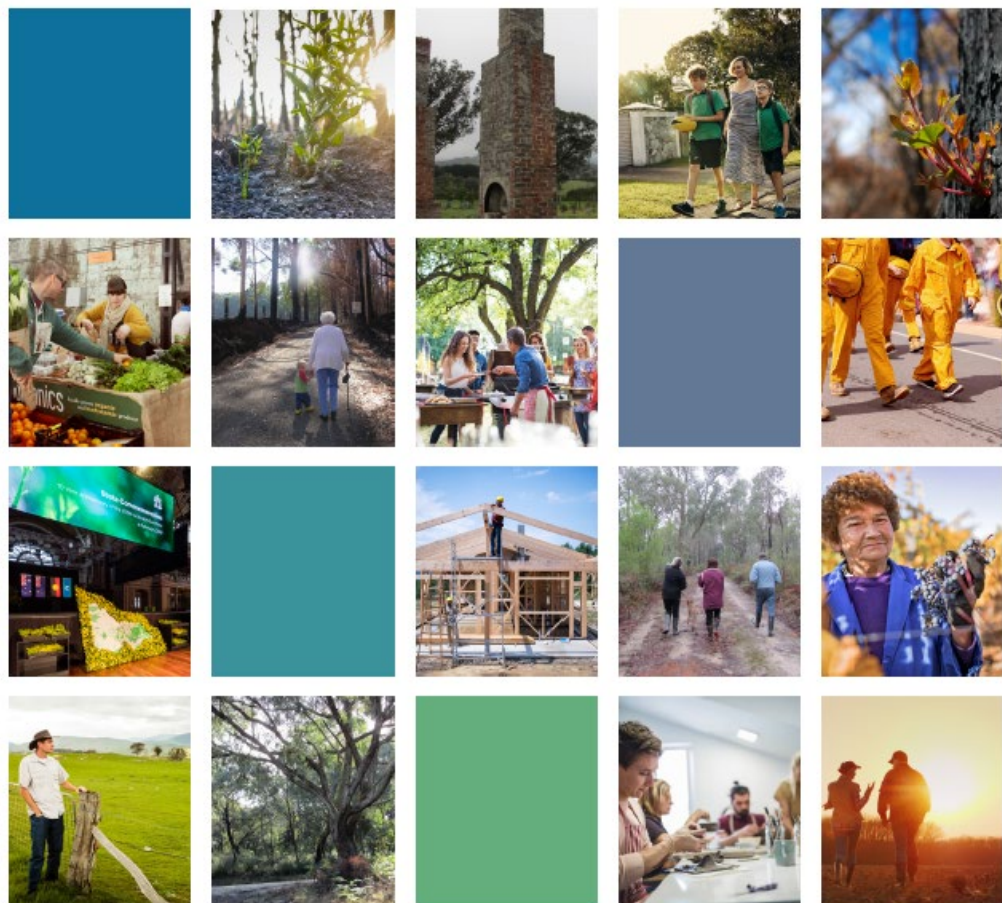
Professor Lou Harms &  
Ms Rhonda Abotomey

Department of Social Work  
The University of Melbourne

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# 10 YEARS BEYOND BUSHFIRES REPORT



## Contributors:

Lisa Gibbs, Robyn Molyneux, Louise Harms, H. Colin Gallagher, Karen Block, John Richardson, Vaughn Brandenburg, Meaghan O'Donnell, Connie Kellett, Phoebe Quinn, Lauren Kosta, Kate Brady, Greg Ireton, Colin MacDougall, Richard Bryant.

## Funding partners:



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MARCH 2021



# REAL EXPERIENCES OF POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

A TRAUMA RECOVERY RESOURCE

<https://posttraumagrowth.net>

HOME • ABOUT THIS SITE • WHAT IS PTG? • BLACK SATURDAY 10TH ANNIVERSARY • SNAPSHOTS OF PTG •

SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE • TIME • STORIES • THE RESEARCH PROJECT

SHOWCASING POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

~

**A TRAUMA RECOVERY RESOURCE**

**FOR**

**INDIVIDUALS, WORKERS,**

**VOLUNTEERS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

~

THIS SITE CONTAINS INFORMATION AND EXAMPLES OF






POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH







## Postdisaster Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Transformations Following the Black Saturday Bushfires

Louise Harms <sup>a</sup>, Rhonda Abotomey<sup>a</sup>, David Rose <sup>a</sup>, Robyn Woodward Kron <sup>b</sup>, Barbara Bolt <sup>c</sup>, Jenny Waycott <sup>d</sup>, and Melinda Alexander<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Department of Medical Education, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia; <sup>c</sup>Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia; <sup>d</sup>Department of Computing and Information Systems, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia

### ABSTRACT

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is emerging in the published literature as an important aspect of postdisaster recovery. Despite these research insights into the positive transformations that people experience, PTG has not been formally operationalised in postdisaster psychosocial recovery efforts. This paper presents findings from a mixed methods study of people affected by the 2009 Victorian “Black Saturday” bushfires. Data from in-depth interviews and the PTG Inventory-Short Form (PTGI-SF) with 20 participants gathered five years after the fires were used to gain new insights into perceptions of postdisaster growth. Higher levels of growth were reported by those who were personally involved. Thematic findings were consistent with most of the PTGI-SF factors. Additionally, growth through connections, the acquisition of new skills, and creative engagement were identified as core growth processes. These processes support conceptualising postdisaster PTG in broader relational terms, rather than more typically psychological ones, which may then inform effective interventions.

### IMPLICATIONS

- Many people report posttraumatic growth as part of their disaster recovery experiences. Growth experiences are diverse, and include the acquisition of new skills and connections as well as intrapsychic changes.
- Social workers can support growth by understanding the complex interaction with trauma experiences.
- Growth experiences may vary depending upon people’s personal and professional disaster involvements.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 February 2017  
Accepted 17 November 2017

### KEYWORDS

Posttraumatic Growth;  
Disaster; Recovery; Bushfire;  
Resilience



After disasters and major traumatic events, many people have reported positive changes in these areas:

1. Appreciation of life
2. New possibilities
3. Personal strength
4. Enhanced relationships
5. Spiritual growth

# Posttraumatic Growth

1. Appreciation of life
2. Personal strength
3. New possibilities
4. Relating to others
5. Spiritual growth



Growth through connection

(Re)Activation of skills

Creative engagement

# From five to ten years ...

- Average post-traumatic growth appeared to be stable over time
- PTG was associated with higher levels of posttraumatic stress
- But it was not associated with major depression, serious mental illness or resilience



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Strong attachment to the natural environment was associated with increased mental health, life satisfaction, resilience, community attachment & posttraumatic growth



# Community-level PTG at 10 years

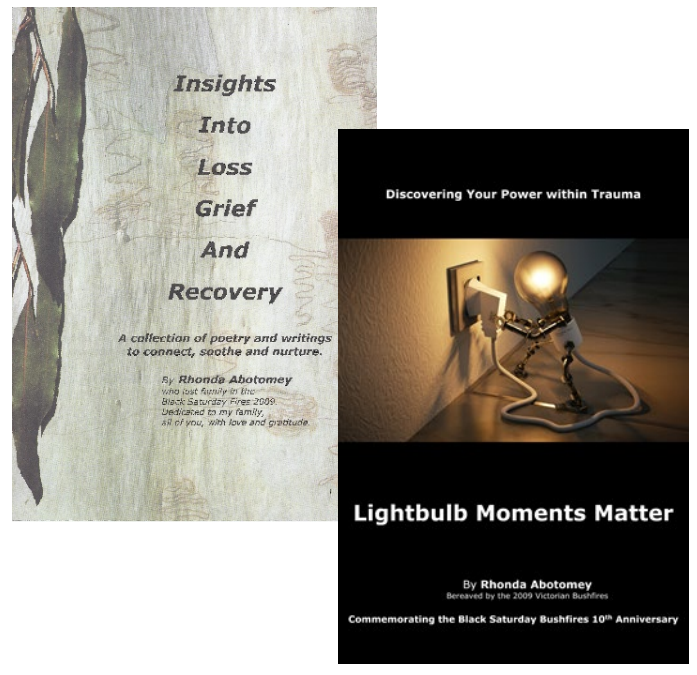
- PTG scores were found to be higher amongst high bushfire impacted communities compared to low impacted communities
- Levels of post-traumatic growth may vary between people *and* within communities.

# What might be going on?

- experiences of bushfire exposure?
- perceptions of community cohesion?
- to be investigated further ...







**Rhonda's PTG: - driven by trauma, exclusion, and making a positive difference.**

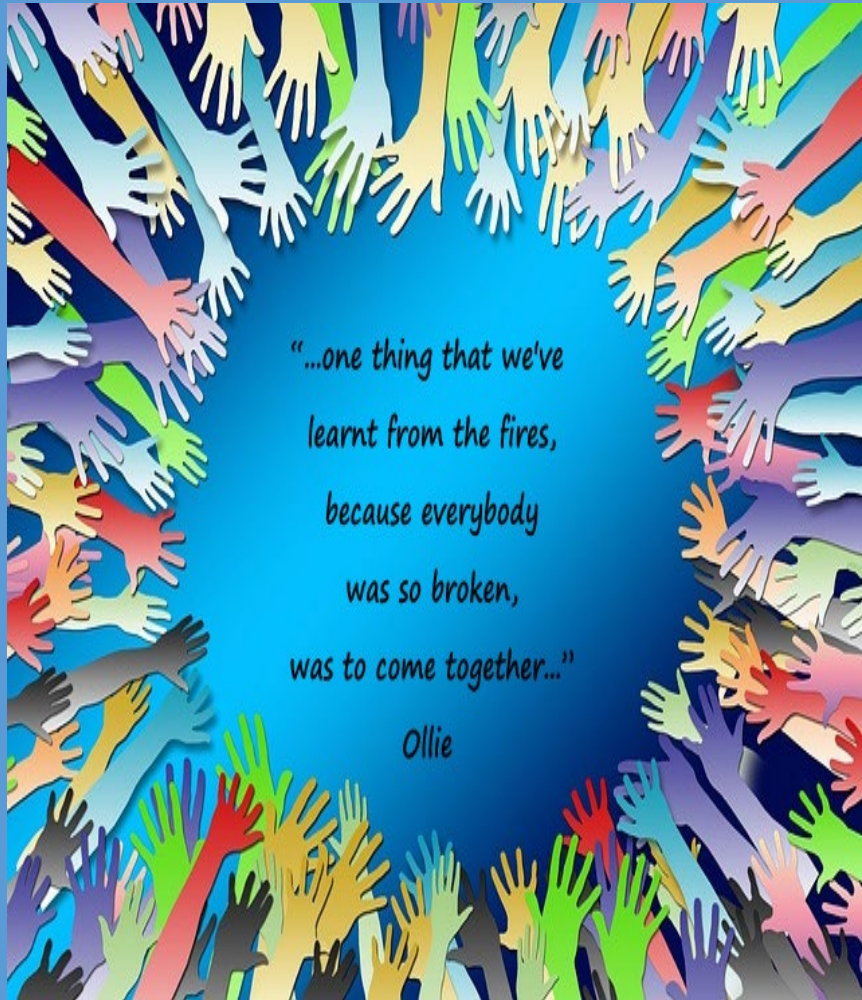
- 2009 Personal writing, VBBRA advocacy  
Vic. Bushfires Royal Commission Witness,  
Bushfire Recovery Initiative: SOC Day
- 2010 1st Anniversary Poetry Collection
- 2010 to 2014 VBBRA Bereaved Advisory Group
- 2011 Museum Victoria Bushfire Collection  
Contributor, *Surviving Traumatic Grief* Book  
Contributor
- 2012 **PTG Lightbulb Moment**
- 2013 -2017 Uni. Melb. PTG Research Project
- 2019 10th Anniversary 'Lightbulb Moments Matter'
- 2020 Bushfire Recovery Kits: "You Matter I Care"

- PEOPLE then PROPERTY and PLACE
- WHO IS BUSHFIRE AFFECTED?
  - Include: - Individuals, Workers, Volunteers
  - Direct and vicarious trauma
- WHERE ARE THEY?
- WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED & PROVIDED?





“ ...I’m not grateful for the fires. But I am grateful, not only for the opportunity to grow, but for the safe environment in which to do that ...”



*“... I'm not grateful for the fires, but I am grateful for not only the opportunity to grow, but for the safe environment in which to do that..”*

*Kate*

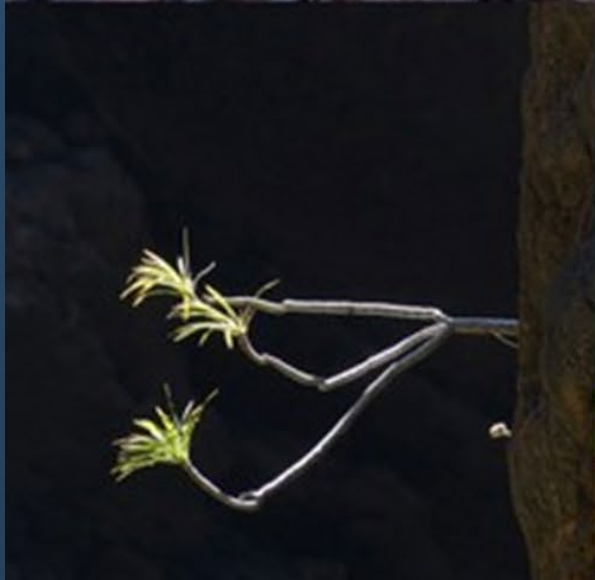
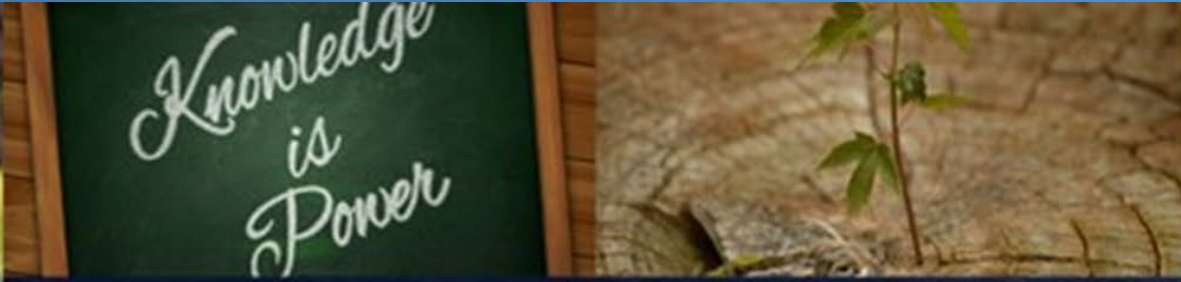
“...one thing that we’ve learnt from the fires, because everybody was so broken, was to come together” 20



*Knowledge  
is  
Power*

**POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH**

WHAT'S YOUR  
STORY





# Community projects and Creative expression

*“...this project saved my life...  
The reason I’m happy and healthy  
and able to talk to people today  
is because of this project and the  
growth it allowed me to find...”*

## THE TREE PROJECT

The Tree Project started one week after the Black Saturday fires as a call to blacksmiths around the world to forge stainless steel and copper gumleaves to send to Victoria. These leaves are being used by Australian blacksmiths to create a steel gumtree which will stand in the fire affected township of Strathewen. This tree will be a memorial to the people who lost their lives in the February 7 bushfires, to honour the tireless people who defended others and to stand as a symbol of regeneration for all fire affected communities.

Follow the creation of the tree on the Tree Project website: [www.treeprojectlabovic.org.au](http://www.treeprojectlabovic.org.au)

“...it's bought people out of their quiet hideaways and it's given them a new lease of life...”

## Welcome Men's Shed

“...we would never have a men's shed had it not been for the fires. So that's one good thing that's come out of a bad thing...” Danny

## Resource Book

### *Along the Road to Recovery – the Journey*

#### *The Communities' perspective*

“I felt that I had  
lost my identity  
and somehow  
embroidering  
my name  
made me feel  
I still existed”

Stitch 'n Chat Group



“I have more capacity now than I did before the fires

because I understand more about myself.

I feel better enabled through the skills that I have learnt

through that post traumatic growth.” Jesse

**LEARNING**

“...a whole range of new skills that I've learnt along the way, being involved in that [the Black Saturday bushfires] has just been remarkable...” Kate

## Skills and Knowledge

“...on a very deep level I feel I've got another wisdom...”

Rouve

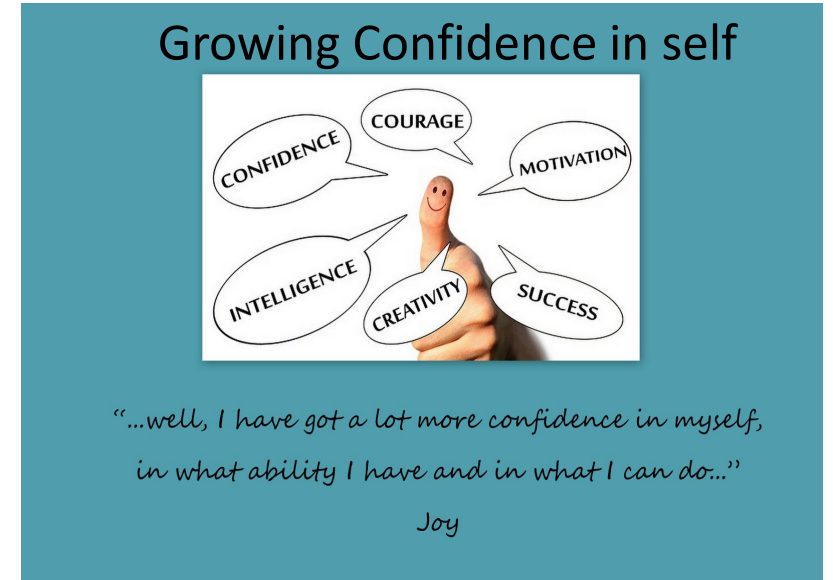


~~im~~ possible


“... I've done things that I didn't think were possible. what's important is different...”  
Anonymous: Social Worker / Counsellor



# Relationships

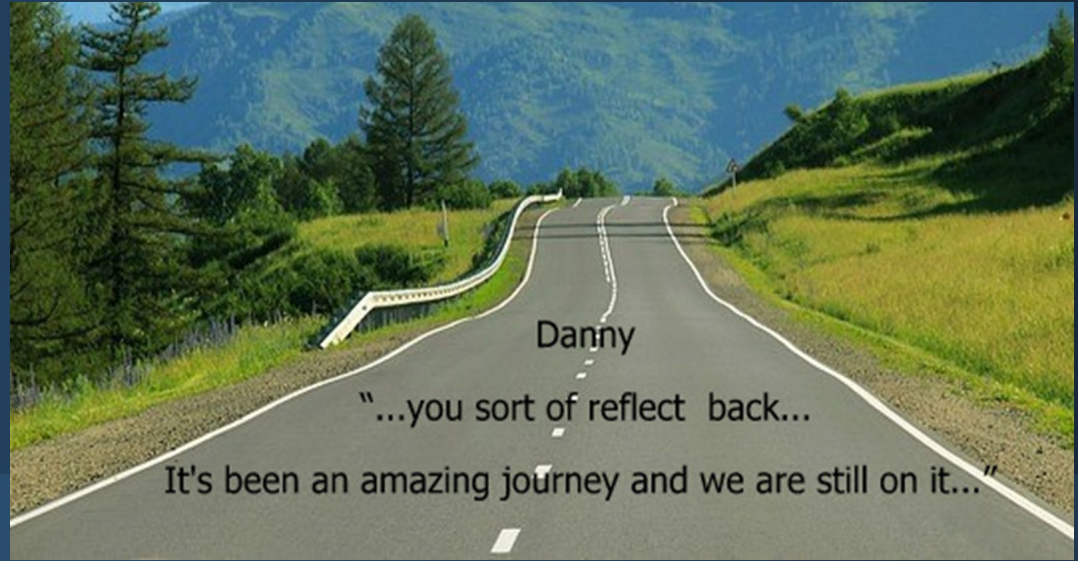


“...My mental health is in a far better place than it has been for nearly a decade..”  
Kate:  
personal reflection.



“...I would say the growth process is still very much ongoing..”  
Liza:  
Workers reflection.


“...I think the growth came, not in the first few years, but in the later part..”  
Anonymous Worker



Danny  
“...you sort of reflect back...  
It's been an amazing journey and we are still on it..”

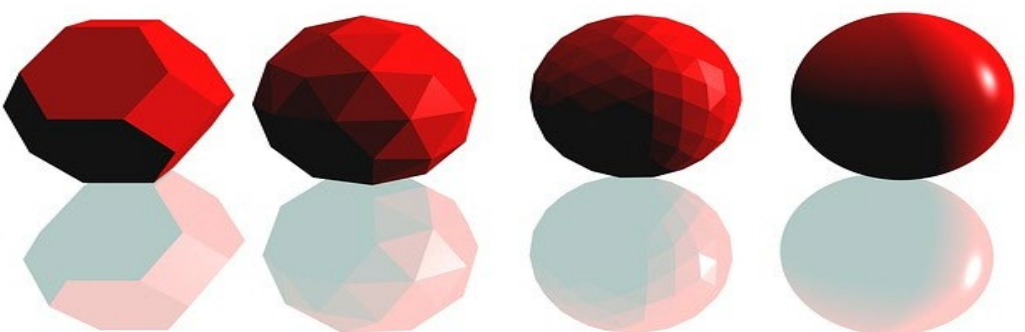
# Time

“...I reckon I spent two years feeling uncomfortable - but in a positive way...  
for me it was a real growth experience understanding my limits...”



I learnt a lot about myself...”  
John

“...I think evolve is actually quite a good word. It has been a process of evolution.”



[5 years on] - ...I think one of the big growth periods is yet to come...” Dale



# Strategies for supporting PTG

- Use a language of PTG both explicitly and implicitly in disaster preparedness and post-disaster communications
- Explore PTG conversations as an entry point for broader trauma conversations
- Be mindful of the sensitivities of timing, and the diversity of individual and community experiences
- Promote community connections
- Acknowledge PTG and create opportunities for ‘non-community’ aligned people
- Promote creative engagement opportunities
- Research PTG in other disaster contexts and research children’s PTG perspectives, needs and wants



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## Q & A session

Don't forget to enter your questions into the Q&A box.

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## Event concludes

View the 10 Years Beyond Bushfires report at  
[www.beyondbushfires.org.au](http://www.beyondbushfires.org.au)

### Mental health support

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Further resources:  
[knowledge.aidr.org.au/recovery](http://knowledge.aidr.org.au/recovery)

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