

WHITE PAPER

What remains when all is lost?

The psychological effects of
fire on survivors.



Trauma derives from the Greek word *traumatikos*, meaning 'wound'. When we discuss trauma pertaining to humans, we are referring to a human wound - be it physical or emotional.

'Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like a car accident, injury, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.'

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGY ASSOCIATION

This definition, and trauma itself, does not just include people who have directly experienced such events, but also those who may have directly witnessed such an event. For instance, directly witnessing a horrific accident can meet the criteria for trauma, while indirect experiencing or witnessing, such as watching an accident on TV, does not, and is not, the same.

On 14 June 2017, a fire broke out in the 24-storey Grenfell Tower

block of residential flats in North Kensington, West London, UK. It caused 72 deaths, more than 70 were injured and 223 escaped.

Thousands of people may be suffering from psychological trauma as a result of the fire, and the impact will reverberate for many years, according to leading mental health practitioners working with survivors and residents.

David Bailey, the manager of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) in Kensington and Chelsea, said: "We are trying to do the very best we can in the light of an unprecedented event, the scale of which has been quite astounding.

But the Grenfell Tower fire hasn't just affected those in the tower and families of those residents. Bailey goes on to say:

"We're talking thousands in terms of children, and thousands in terms of adults. There are the families in the tower, families that lost people in the tower, families who witnessed what happened, there are people driving past on the Westway who see the tower and who might have to explain to their children why it looks the way it does, teachers who are working with children who are bereft and terrified, people who work in the area, people who haven't stopped [helping] since day one. It's thousands.

There's a ripple effect and I'm not envisaging this being over any time soon. It's a significant event that has significantly changed this community."

The subject of trauma predominantly and typically focuses on the physical: a vehicle accident, residential fires, accidental falls which create broken bones, etc.

What about those that are not involved in the incident and don't witness the act itself, yet suffer the consequences? Residential fires are frequent, and not all those who resided in the properties



that suffered a fire witnessed the trauma – yet lost all their possessions because of the fire, which is traumatic itself.

In 2009, the Black Saturday Bushfires raged across Humevale, Victoria, Australia. The fires killed 173 people and damaged or destroyed more than 2,100 homes.

A six-year study into the effects of the bushfires found that more than a quarter of those in high impact areas still suffered serious mental health issues, years after the deadly event.

The study's lead researcher, and director of the Jack Brockhoff Child Health and Wellbeing Program at the University of Melbourne, Associate Professor Lisa Gibbs, said it was important to take a long-term approach to disaster recovery.

'I think what we've done is perhaps underestimated the ongoing disruptions that occur after a disaster,' she told a breakfast news channel.

'You might cope with the original trauma event, but then there's a change of accommodation, impact on relationships, change of income, loss of possessions – and that starts to bring people down.'

Do we really think about those that have lost all their worldly possessions, and the effects of losing everything? Why do we hold our material possessions so close to our hearts?

Perhaps our possessions become extensions of ourselves. We use them to signal who we want to be and where we belong.

A car, a house, clothing, books and other mementos cement our sense of self and individuality. These 'things' are important, for we create our world and home with them.

To be attached to possessions can seem like a moral failing, yet having a love and connection to objects doesn't necessarily make someone greedy or materialistic.

According to Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University, there are two kinds of materialism:

'Terminal materialism is the kind typically derided as shallow and empty—wanting things for their own sake, or to impress others. What inspires someone to save something from a burning house is more likely instrumental materialism, when the object is simply a bridge to another person or to another feeling.'

Personal items and possessions that are destroyed in a residential fire can have a significant consequence on those that suffered the loss of their home, but what if those objects that are lost forever have an impact on a greater amount of people?

Brazil's oldest and most important historical and scientific museum has been consumed by fire, and much of its archive of 20 million items are believed to have been destroyed.

The fire at Rio de Janeiro's 200-year-old National Museum began after it closed to the public on Sunday and raged into the night. There were no reports of injuries, but the loss to Brazilian science, history and culture was incalculable.

Cristiana Serejo, one of the museum's vice-directors said:

'It was the biggest natural history museum in Latin America. We have invaluable collections. Collections that are over 100 years old.'



She went on to say:

'It is an unbearable catastrophe. It is 200 years of this country's heritage. It is 200 years of memory. It is 200 years of science. It is 200 years of culture, of education.'

Dr Maryam Afshar, who wrote her dissertation on object attachment at Washington State University, states:

'I think our attachment with objects is this kind of dance between how we view ourselves and the values that we have, and then what those objects represent to us.'

These weren't personal possessions, yet affected a major amount of people.

Psychological research has revealed that objects can have powerful effects on emotional wellbeing, acting as 'attachment figures' that provide a sense of comfort and security in the absence of loved ones and historical figures.

Historical artefacts may well affect an entire country, but what of those individuals who 'anchor' themselves with small and somewhat insignificant (to some) possessions?

'As our lives unfold, our things embody our sense of self-hood and identity still further, becoming external receptacles for our memories relationships and travels.'

Says Christian Jarrett, The Psychologist.

We mustn't dismiss the trauma of losing one's worldly possessions in a fire, whether or not we subjectively decide that the pieces are in fact not worth the anguish. Treasures to some may be valueless to others.

Foster Huntington asks in his book *The Burning House*, 'If your house was burning, what would you take with you?'

There are the practical picks—laptops, passports, and car keys—and the sentimental—photos, stuffed animals, and gifts from family.

But while things are, on the one hand, just things, they are also storage for the meaning people project on them. People build meaning around their possessions; a gift from someone's mother might represent their love for her; and souvenirs may be reminders of places close to their hearts and remind them of loved ones.

It's wise to remember that while objects are seen as inanimate, we must also see what is truly important to most as we all encounter more and more insecurity and loss in the modern world. We have to ask ourselves:

'If you lost it all, what would still remain of importance and value in your life?'

We shouldn't underestimate the psychological effects of fire survivors. Be it direct witnesses, indirect witnesses, those who fought the fire, those who lost all their possessions because of fire, and those whose memories – whatever the memories – all suffer in different ways and at several levels.

The UK-based Daily Telegraph reported that emergency service workers were also suffering post-traumatic stress following the Grenfell fire. It was stated that:

'Around 80 police officers and fire fighters are seeking help for post-traumatic stress every day and two have taken their own lives, as they struggle to cope with events such as the recent terror attacks and the Grenfell fire.'



Such is the issue of mental health within the UK that a charity was set up in 2016 to help emergency workers deal with psychological problems, and a spokesperson said its helpline had been inundated in the wake of Grenfell.

Nursing Standard, the weekly professional magazine, stated that:

'The shocking tower block fire in London may have long-term effects for those who were there. As nurses, fire fighters, police and residents struggle to come to terms with the events of that night, expert advice can help.'

But those who are the professionals tend to get forgotten. Those who have helped others to recover often need help to recover themselves.

Palliative care nurse Simone Williams was woken by sirens on the night of the fire at nearby Grenfell Tower and rushed out to see what was happening. She helped look after those who had escaped from the burning building and knocked on doors appealing for blankets for them.

The University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust nurse said, while this was traumatic, at that point she and others assumed the people still inside the tower block would get out.

Ms Williams had [at time of writing] been signed off work by her GP and referred to occupational health by her supportive employers as she tried to process the tragedy that happened on her doorstep.

"Someone said to me you should be used to this because you are a palliative care nurse, but with that there is a process and a journey."

"These people went to bed with the belief that they would wake in the morning, as everyone does. I went to work and I couldn't do it, I cannot face the patients."

Trauma from the fire manifests itself in many other guises, for many more.

Marcio Gomes, who fled from the 21st floor through the thick, poisonous fumes with his heavily pregnant wife Andreia and their daughters, spoke at the Grenfell inquiry about his son, who was stillborn in hospital just hours after the family's escape:

"I held my son in my arms, hoping it was all a bad dream. Wishing, praying for a miracle, that he would open his eyes, move, make a sound." Mr Gomes said, crying as he spoke, with his wife by his side.

Clinical psychologist Alasdair Bailey, whose surgery is within view of the tower, told officials that he was treating witnesses and people who lost loved ones as well as those who had fled the blaze.

Bailey said: "the sight of the burnt-out block in the area was a 'constant reminder' that has, and will, continue to trigger some mental health illnesses."

Medics fear the inquiry, which began a year after the fire, will also trigger mental illnesses as people re-live the trauma and face having hopes for answers dashed.

Dr Bailey, based at St Charles Hospital, said the figure of more than 200 adults diagnosed with PTSD does not include children or members of the emergency services.

He said: "We would expect the numbers with PTSD will continue to rise."

The Grenfell tragedy affected a huge number people; yet this was only one building in one area of the city of London. What devastation and trauma can we expect from an incident of a much greater scale?



In mid-July to August 2018, a series of large wildfires erupted across California, mostly in the northern part of the state. On August 4, 2018, a national disaster was declared in Northern California, due to the extensive wildfires burning there.

In November 2018, strong winds aggravated conditions in another round of large, destructive fires that occurred across the state. It destroyed more than 18,000 structures, including almost 12,000 residential homes. There were many injuries, including 79 fatalities. It became California's deadliest and most destructive wildfire on record.

The Sacramento Bee, Sacramento's daily newspaper, reported in December 2018 that:

'For the survivors, recovery means more than replacing physical items. Many face a long path toward peace of mind, and for some, overcoming mental trauma and illness that can take years to heal.'

Irva Hertz-Picciotto, director of environmental health sciences at the University of California studied the mental health effects of wildfires. She told the Sacramento Bee:

"Mental health symptoms were more prevalent in people who were evacuated and were more likely to be in a life-threatening situation."

She continues:

"That can have long term effects of post-traumatic stress symptoms."

"PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) can happen to those who experience an extreme amount of stress that overwhelms coping skills", says Caroline Giroux, a Sacramento-based psychiatrist who specialises in trauma. It can manifest itself in a variety of ways.

But how do you know when you are suffering from trauma-related PTSD?

Giroux says the first symptoms many people exhibit are shock and dissociation. Some may also experience irritability, depression or anxiety.

"Usually what scares people the most, what is the most traumatic, is what could have happened, but what didn't happen," said Giroux. "That is the scenario that will keep being replayed in their minds."

Regardt Ferreiri, professor at the Tulane School of Social Work in New Orleans, told the press that it could take six to twelve months for the Sacramento fire survivors to recover from even the initial symptoms of PTSD. However, Ferreiri said that the recovery process might be delayed if PTSD symptoms aren't immediately treated through therapy.

Ferreiri says:

"You might be on autopilot for months, or even years. Then, triggered by a smell or a sound, PTSD can kick in, bringing a flood of traumatic memories back."

WHAT REMAINS WHEN ALL IS LOST?
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF FIRE
ON SURVIVORS.



Mental health experts say that this year's natural disasters – including hurricanes and the Californian wildfires – will likely have both immediate and long-term psychological effects on survivors – but that doesn't mean that it will happen as soon as the ash clears.

1,893,913 acres were burned and 6,700 homes were destroyed by just one of the Californian fires. The estimated cost of these natural disasters is \$3.5 billion and continues to grow, as those who survived, suffered, witnessed and helped at the Californian wildfires develop mental health illnesses from this traumatic event.

Mental health issues can affect us all; and is still a taboo subject with many. We mustn't forget those who are affected by this type of disaster - whether natural or intentional – for years after the event.

Terry Penney, senior occupational health and safety and motivational safety speaker reassures those who have suffered a fire:

'It is common for people to experience several stages of adjustment including shock, anger, depression and hopelessness. Ultimately, however, people can reach a stage of acceptance and become able to move beyond disbelief, bitterness and sadness. Positive feelings can begin to re-emerge as the focus shifts towards the future. Safety, security and comfort are regained and life moves forward once again.'



Support

If you have been affected by trauma, there are organisations that are available to help.

Globally: The Red Cross offers help to survivors of disasters and anyone who is affected.

<https://www.redcross.org/>

Mind: The mental health charity is dedicated to making sure no one has to face a mental health problem alone in the UK. <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

The Grenfell Support Organisation is here to help anyone affected by the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

<https://grenfellsupport.org.uk/>

Canada <https://cmha.ca/>

USA <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>

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