



NALAG
National Association for
Loss and Grief (NSW) Inc

Welcome to this Courageous Conversation, part of the 'Let's Talk About Grief' awareness campaign. In this conversation, we delve into a critical discussion on supporting children and young people as they navigate change, loss, and grief in communities affected by natural disasters.

Joining us are Godelieve Hofman-Verkuyl, MacKillop Seasons' Natural Disaster Response Lead, and Dr. Meaghan Vosz, a Research Fellow at Southern Cross University's Centre for Children and Young People. Together, they share invaluable insights and learnings, shedding light on the challenges these young individuals face and the essential support they need to heal and grow.

Meaghan

Okay, well, here we are in a critical conversation. About supporting children and young people to navigate the change loss, and grief that when they experience disasters, natural disasters in their communities so welcome, and thank you for being here, Godelieve. I would like to start by acknowledging country. So I'm here in the beautiful country of the Widjabul Wia-bal people of the Bundjalung nation, some people will know it as Lismore. And I'd like to pay respect to the elders here, and respect to elders and country where you all are as well and just to acknowledge that this country was never ceded.

So today, thank you for being here. What we would like to do in this critical conversation is to explore change loss, and grief that children experience, but also young people and families and whole communities experience when they're affected by natural disasters and explore a little bit about what we learned, particularly what Godelieve and her team learned about how to build

capacity of regional and rural communities to support children and young people's disaster, recovery and preparedness.

So, I'm Megan Vosz. I'm a research fellow at Southern Cross Uni in the Centre for Children and Young People. I probably should have said that at the beginning, anyway.

Godelieve, thank you so much for joining me in this conversation. So just to kick it off from all of the experience you've had from years of working with communities around disaster.

How do natural disasters affect children and young people.

Godelieve

Thanks, Megan, and I just quickly like to acknowledge the Darkinjung people the traditional owners of the land from which I am meeting with you here today and paying my respect to elders, past, present, and emerging children and young people are, of course, impacted just as any adult in communities.

And I guess what we realized when we started working in this space with a team of people in disaster, impacted areas is that a lot of people don't give the children and young people that much attention. And there's still that assumption that they will be all right, that children bounce back.

So for us, the main focus of our work has actually been to show adults in communities, parents, carers, professionals, any adult in communities that children are impacted, and to bring that to the agenda, and to allow children and young people to have a voice in that space.

Meaghan

That's fantastic, absolutely. And you know,

I think to AI, I know that you've worked here in the in the northern rivers and and in many communities across New South Wales, and rural and regional Victoria as well.

I'm just thinking back to the times after the floods here, and children and young people here, you know, like people, don't necessarily think about the loss of things, the loss of pets, the loss of home, the loss of a sense of safety sometimes, and not knowing what's going on for lots of young people here. Loss of home temporarily, or in in the longer term loss of school.

I know we still have schools. Who have now come to permanently live on campus here at Southern Cross. Uni. So just a lot of change. You know that you.

When you're just trying to cope with the clean up or the rebuild, or the, you know, finding family friends, that kind of stuff. You don't necessarily think about the stuff that I guess children go through and experience.

So you worked. You have still are still working with community resilience offices. Across. You know, lots of those communities in New South Wales and Victoria that have been affected by multiple and ongoing disasters. And I know from our work that's been fires and floods and droughts and mass plagues, and Covid in the middle of all that kind of stuff.

Can you tell me about the community resilience offices, and what kind of role they played in these communities.

Godelieve

Yes, of course. So their roles must really focus that helping the community members and both focusing at children and young people as well as the adults in their life. Because children and young people are part of that ecosystem are part of that whole community they grow up in.

And we, we really were focusing it. Assisting them in developing the knowledge, the skills, and the tools to deal with the change, loss, and grief following those disasters.

But before we actually could do that, and our programs are psycho-educational programs, we had to understand what the particular needs and the situation was in those different communities.

And what we learned very early on is that each community has their own unique needs.

Often, there is a lot of stuff going on prior to any disaster. So some communities are very strongly connected and are really great in that immediate recovery phase. Other communities are actually very broken as a following those kind of events.

So for us it was mostly to 1st of all, connect these community members and mostly the leaders in communities, because you often see that the 1st responders that the school principals they because of the roles they are in.

They're often well respected in communities, and they take took on a real leadership role in terms of getting people together getting support in place.

So our community resilience offices started to connect with those key people in communities and getting an understanding of what had happened and exploring what would be helpful for that particular community.

And what we saw early on is that these leaders they needed support as well. They needed a place to actually talk because they were holding space for so many community members, adults and children and their own needs were actually not met.

So our often our 1st step was to offer a session to these community leaders, these key people in communities to create a safe space where they could talk about the impact of the event. What had changed since then?

And tell their story, and acknowledge and validating the feelings and emotions associated to that event was really our 1st step, so that they felt heard. And we identified also some immediate strategies they could apply to look after their own social and emotional well-being.

And that's been a key sort of lead way into our projects that then we started to connect with those key people, and we started to support them.

The next step would be that they could identify how valuable our sessions were to allow people to have a safe space to talk about the event and explore ways, to move forward in whatever phase of recovery they would have been and then a natural question from their side was like, Okay, who else can have access to these kind of sessions?

So that's sort of how we connected within communities and subsequent. Subsequently we offered professional learning sessions for all those professionals in community organizations and schools who work with children and young people all the time be offered parent and carer sessions, so that really we started to highlight the importance of listening to children's feelings and emotions and experiences as well, and to not assume that they would be similar in their responses as the adults would have been or that they would have a similar experience in that whole event.

And so from those sessions on, then we also reach the children and young people and trained professionals to build that local capacity because we never have presented ourselves as the experts. We always work within community.

We identified the needs and made a plan how we could support that community. But we would train local people in our children and young people programs so that they could deliver those programs ongoing.

But for those professionals to do so they needed to feel in a good space themselves. And that's why that support for these adults in communities was so essential.

Meaghan

I really love the way that you explain this, because, you know, often when we're thinking about working with children and young people or supporting

their participation, their recovery, their resilience, we think, going directly to the children, and what I've loved about watching your work has been, how you kind of gently and respectfully entered into communities and found ways to support the people who are around children and young people. And then, you know, once that kind of foundation has been bolstered up and strengthened a bit. Then, where there's a need going to children.

I would like to ask you a question. I think that some people might not know about. That's really kind of critical to the work that you do. Can you tell me about why the seasons or the stormbird might be a useful metaphor in thinking about how children and young people navigate loss and change and grief related to disaster.

Godelieve

Yes. So the seasons are used as a metaphor for change. And so the 1st main message any participant in our program receives is that they're invited to look at the seasons in their, in, their, in the environment where they live and explore that aspect in nature which shows us that change is all around us all the time.

And also the ability of nature to adapt to changes.

So, we go through the main seasons around winter. We started our programs. It's autumn where you really obviously identify in nature that things are changing. Then we move into winter, followed by spring and summer, and we adapt those seasons according to the aboriginal seasons in those areas as well.

But the main message of the seasons is that change is the only constant in life. And that is, for a lot of people, huge relief to experience, and then we can also help them to see that often they have been going through a lot of changes already in their lives and that gives especially children and young people.

The confidence that they can adapt to changes. So if you talk about the changes of just growing up where children at 1 point they start preschool, and then they move into school, and then they move into high school. And then they reflect back on those changes. They realize that they have adapted many times in their lives already, and where starting primary school may have been a really big and scary step, they have actually settled into that space, and they've done it again when they moved into high school. That's just one example.

Meaghan

And look, I really, I really appreciate that, because it gives us a sense that even though there may be such grief and sadness around what we've lost.

The capacity to keep going, and the knowledge that things will settle again, you know, will come to a place where there is a bit more certainty again, at some point, you know, like there will come a strengthening again, and there will come challenges again, and that kind of stuff. I really love it as a way, especially for young people got so much energy. But you know, for them to see those changes is something they can surf, you know.

All right, it's very, I think, a very empowering kind of message can I ask you about? There's something we talked about throughout this project over the last few years that has, I think, people have started to really get hold of. And that's the idea of ecological grief. And I'm wondering how you kind of connected with that concept and with children and young people around that.

Godelieve

I guess, with the with the natural disasters, especially with the fires, the natural environment changed so dramatically where you know from a full bush environment where I, for example, live. We had just black sticks everywhere,

and no grass. Everything was brown and gray, and no sounds. no sounds of any bird or any animal.

I think that was very obvious. And for people who live more in nature, and that's often the communities which are more impacted by fires. If you look on the south coast in East Gippsland, in Lismore, with the floods, those beautiful natural environments.

The impact is very obvious and I think there is an understanding more and more that we, as humans, are part of nature. And so any change in nature affects us on a very deeply human level as well.

So in our conversations with young people we really start to identify and acknowledge that despair they felt and very little hope for the future, considering the impacts of climate change. decisions which have been made even before they were born, and this real sort of doom and gloom. Feeling with regards to their future they really felt that this was something we needed to acknowledge and validate and help them to name as well.

And often, when we talk about ecological grief, people actually don't really immediately understand what that means. But when you explain the feelings associated with the changes in our environment and our future perspective. We feel then people say, like, Oh, yes, yeah, that is actually exactly what I feel. And that's why I feel so low, or, you know, down or disillusioned.

So from that understanding and the relevance of again creating a space where young people could come together and discuss this.

This threat they were feeling. We developed an ecological grief workshop. And then we also brought a beautiful little sort of a research paper. We have developed a professional learning session around it. So that really came from what we saw, what was happening on the ground, and what we then felt was another need we could actually support.

Meaghan

Thank you so much. I know I threw that question at you with no preparation whatsoever. So I really appreciate your wisdom.

There's something I'd like to explore a little bit in terms of children and young people and their experiences of loss and change and grief around disasters. And it's connected to schools.

So we know from research that children's participation in schools has a huge amount to do with their wellbeing, their sense of being heard, their having a voice being supported to speak that kind of stuff. So I'm interested in it from that perspective. But schools are also, for many people a hub of community as an asset, you know. The physical asset, the network of the school, and its connectedness to community. So what I'm wanting to ask you hopefully. I haven't put words in your mouth. Is what's how important are schools when it comes? Or is they a school when it comes to the community's recovery from disaster, and particularly for children and young people.

Godelieve

Schools are incredibly important because they are part of our community, the fabric of the community. And what we saw following the disaster, and especially in the Lismore region the lack of continuity in terms of their school communities that had a huge impact on their sense of belonging their sense of safety, their sense of routines, and those are all really important aspects in a child's life, you know, a sense of belonging is essential to our wellbeing.

Routines keep us safe and keep us focused so that all disappeared.

And I think that has, especially in the northern rivers region, a long, lasting impact.

Schools disappeared, schools were merged, and then they were not merged. You probably know all the ins and outs in the region.

And at the same time, there's also schools who kept going. There's also amazing schools who, even in their demountable places where principals and teachers pick children up from the street, who were just walking around, following the disasters where parents were busy getting their lives back on track and brought them back into their demountable buildings to create a sense of safety.

So schools are incredibly important. And I think, there has been a lot of change happening. People left the area. So children lost friendships, or they had to move elsewhere themselves.

Huge impact on relationships. So a lot of parents there they separated this subsequent consequences. So there we talk about the secondary losses following a big event.

Often they can have more impact on a child's life than the disaster itself. But all those secondary losses, this change of family constellation change of school routines loss of friendships, those changes they can cause most grief for a child and that's what we did in our workshops, highlighting that it's not only the impact of that flood or that fire which may have had that grief response for your child, but it can also follow all those other losses which have happened.

Meaghan

Thank you so much It helps doing this kind of work that you do like for, especially for the community resilience officers, but also for you supporting, training them, walking alongside them. What helps to do this work? Of, you know recovery and resilience building and supporting people to care for and support children and young people's recovery. What helps that work to happen.

Godielieve

Well, 1st of all, funding without any funding, we can't do this work. And so an understanding of the importance the impact on social, emotional level of a disaster that needs to be really highlighted and

And then we need space and time and time is a crucial factor, and what you see often is that following a disaster, a lot of funding is ready available to support communities which is great.

But that is good for the 1st needs to be met. That's really important that people get housing in order, and which is often a very long term issue. Anyway.

Following a disaster. I think there is a a long term need of funding and support needed in those regions.

What we have experienced is that, and in some of our regions we had Covid interfering with in the whole mix of things as well.

But 1st people have to look at their 1st needs to be met, which is shelter and food and those basic needs and work.

Then people start to really be able to delve into the emotional side of the impact.

Is often a few years further down the track.

But for children that may be different, and that's the tricky thing. That's where ideally we want to be.

Engage with communities on a more ongoing basis so that we can sort of, you know, fine tune, the focus of our support where it's mostly needed.

But the black Saturday fires and the the most recent research which is coming out highlights that it can take up to 10 years following a major event for a community to recover and most of our funding for the projects I have led so far are finished. And there is uncertainty around continuation of this funding, however, only the last 6 months of our projects.

We were really getting a real good level of engagement is in all communities.

So people and schools and services are now in this space to talk about the change, loss, and grief following that disaster community services and schools are able to take in the learning. To then roll out the programs is to children themselves. So there is that that's really that timing which is

It's much longer term than we initially probably ever expected it to be.

Meaghan

You know, when you and I 1st started working together, I remember you saying something like, you know, to run a a program or to train people to run a program to support children and young people's grief and loss and stuff around natural disasters. It's really better to kind of come in, you know, at that people are ready about that 2 year, Mark and I was because we just had the floods here. I was like, what are you talking about? People have needs now and all so, and we're both right in some senses. And the work.

Godelieve

Yeah.

Meaghan

That your teams did here was very much working with some quite distressed adults, as you say at first, st you know, and supporting them to I get ha! Have the skills and knowledge to get what's going on, and to work with it themselves, and then to support other people and children. But it's interesting, you know, talking with the community resilience officer down in East Gippsland.

and I remember her explaining to me that so she had experience of of disaster, but very extreme fires as well. From 10 or 15 years before, and was working with this community, you know, in the East Gippsland that had just

about hit the kind of 5 year mark you know of, of, since those really extreme events that went on all summer.

And I remember her saying, you know, it's amazing, because, even though our communities are so different, our experiences are so different, you do have a sense. There's a resonance between you. You know about these things over time, and I've got to say so many people here in Lismore talking about. I feel like I've just come out of from behind a cloud. You know from that I've been in for 2 years of struggling and struggling and being angry, and you know all those kinds of things. And it's really interesting. We're all having such different experiences. I was very well looked after and cared for other people, not so much.

But a common sense of coming out from behind something after a couple of years. It's really.

Godelieve

Yeah.

Meaghan

Extraordinary. And I really noticed that thing that you said about time, because it's not just about having enough time to do the work and staying long enough for those relationships to be able to be.

You know, then turned into something really useful for children and young people, but also organizations that have been there. You know there's something about after a disaster. There's a you can. We can be a bit untrusting, you know, because all these organizations are here.

And then, you know, over a few years they they do kind of disappear a bit or go back to their kind of business as usual. So it's there's something important about, I think, about your community resilience officers and the organization they work for being known over time to be.

Godelieve

Absolutely.

Meaghan

Work, you know.

Godelieve

And I think this is so so important, because what we, what we developed was 2 approaches. 1st of all, we were just holding space for those adults in communities.

And that is a really important part of the work we do.

But it is not measured in, you know, project outcomes or deliverables, but it is an essential part of developing those trusting relationships, and that was the other narrative we kept on following. We work at the pace of trust.

So it was really gentle and very considerate to engage with adults in the community, and offering just a listening ear and and a cup of tea.

And through those relationships we could actually start, you know, doing more work in the communities, and only at the end of the projects. People were coming out of their yeah, the the space of pure survival.

And felt that they could engage with learning. And so we did train a lot of professionals in all these regions who are now able to run our small groups programs, whether that be with adults, with parents or with children and young people.

But they are so connected to the community resilience offices in those regions that ideally we continue to be able to support these program facilitators because running those groups is a beautiful thing to do. But again,

we need to support the supporters. They will hear stories in their groups, and we'll have a need to debrief with somebody.

And ideally, that is that same person who has been there all along.

So I really see that there is a long term need for people to be able to support the supporters in these communities for the years to come.

Absolutely. And you know, I cause I'm a researcher. So I get to read the feedback that the children write when they do your programs and what the adults say and stuff like that. And it's it really stays with me how important those people who facilitate those programs and support processes with children. How important they are because the children heal through their conversations with the other kids in the room, and with that person as a safe, trusted kind of person. And so your work to support those people. To be that person in those children's lives is really important. And I what I love about it, too, is it's you're not trying to stand in place and and be a new person to those kids, and, you know, introduce a whole, you're really just supporting the foundations, if you like, around them that the network of support around them. It's a beautiful work that you do.

How could we improve?

The way that we support children and young people after disaster?

Godelieve

I think, by really providing children with opportunities to talk and to really being listened to.

And not just a checking in like, are you okay, but actually sitting and and creating that safe space, and and where they they can talk about the impact of the event.

What we hear a lot is that in the northern rivers region there is huge triggering when heavy rain starts to fall again.

And but we also try to help parents and carers and teachers to show that they built. They are triggered themselves as well. That's what we hear all the time, and to really trying to manage their own feelings and emotions without translating that towards the children they may work with, or who they have in their care.

So it's also understanding that we all have probably a lot of similar triggers, but we will respond to those triggers differently, and we cannot assume that everyone else is triggered in the same way.

So there was one teacher I spoke with, and she's also a parent last week in the northern rivers, and she said, when it starts to rain heavily. I get so triggered, and I actually have to take myself out of the classroom or out of my family environment to manage those big feelings myself before I actually go back and check in with my children.

And it can be the other way around that you, as an adult, are actually have managed that. But your children may not so. It is understanding the triggers. The long term impact of these events and offering opportunities to talk about these things.

Meaghan

Yeah.

Godelieve

And to talk about the feelings and emotions and acknowledging that any feeling is valid, whether that be anxiety, whether that be anger, whether that be frustration. It's what we do. How we act out those feelings is where we may set boundaries.

Godelieve

But for a child to understand that it is normal to feel that way and that it's okay. There's a reason why our bodies and our minds respond in a certain way.

So that that real helping them to develop that emotional intelligence.

Meaghan

I think that the other thing I really love about the way that you work is giving them opportunities to connect with each other and talk to it, because there's something about.

You know, like for you and I as peers is something I always learn throughout our dialogue, you know, and I think there's something there for young people and children as well in the right space with it, with the right support to learn from each other. You know and I don't know that they would always think that that's a great thing, but we see it, you know, when we evaluate the work that you do, that that kind of connection, that.

Godelieve

Oh, but we hear it from the children and young people as well, that the most common feedback on participation in our programs is like I learned that I'm not the only one.

Meaghan

Yeah, right.

Godelieve

And it is amazing what happens in these small groups, because there are 4 to 7 children in a group.

And they go for 8 weeks. The Seasons for Growth program goes for 8 weeks. So that is like an 8 week period where this group comes together and through activities and conversations, they explore change, loss and grief, and to learn

that they are not the only one having lost or having a grief experience, and having those big feelings or big questions is one of the most helpful and healing ways for us as human beings. and the same for adults.

Meaghan

Hmm.

Meaghan

Yeah. I was just thinking that while you were saying that how much you know Godelieve working with you doing this work over the last few years has really supported me individually as well as your work in this community. So I want to thank you and your team for the work that you've done here and so many other communities, because it makes a huge difference.

Meaghan

And I'll probably suggest that we bring it to a close about there.

Godelieve

Good.

Meaghan

Thank you so much.