

# Community-based Disaster Mental Health Intervention for Bushfire-affected Rural Australia

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## Black Summer in Australia 2019/2020

Following three years of intense drought in eastern Australia, the catastrophic “Black Summer” bushfires of 2019/2020:

- Lasted nearly 12 months in various parts of the country, although mainly in the east,
- Burned an estimated 60 million acres (1,2),
- Destroyed over 6000 buildings (primarily homes) (3),
- Resulted in the death of 463 people - 34 directly fire related (3), 429 from smoke inhalation (4),
- Contributed to the deaths of an estimated 3 billion animals (5),
- Resulted in psychological distress, especially for those with direct exposure, including high rates of depression, anxiety and PTSD (6,7).

Climate change is increasing the intensity and frequency of natural hazards, including fires. It is crucial that communities are prepared for future fires. Preparedness includes material, psychological, and social components. A Community-based Disaster Mental Health (CBDMH) intervention used successfully with earthquake and flood affected communities is being adapted for the bushfire context (8-12).



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## Community-based Disaster Mental Health Intervention

In communities experiencing natural hazards related disasters the CBDMH intervention aims to –

- increase disaster preparedness,
- Increase social cohesion, and social support (disaster-related help-seeking and help-giving),
- decrease mental health symptoms - such as depression, anxiety and PTSD.

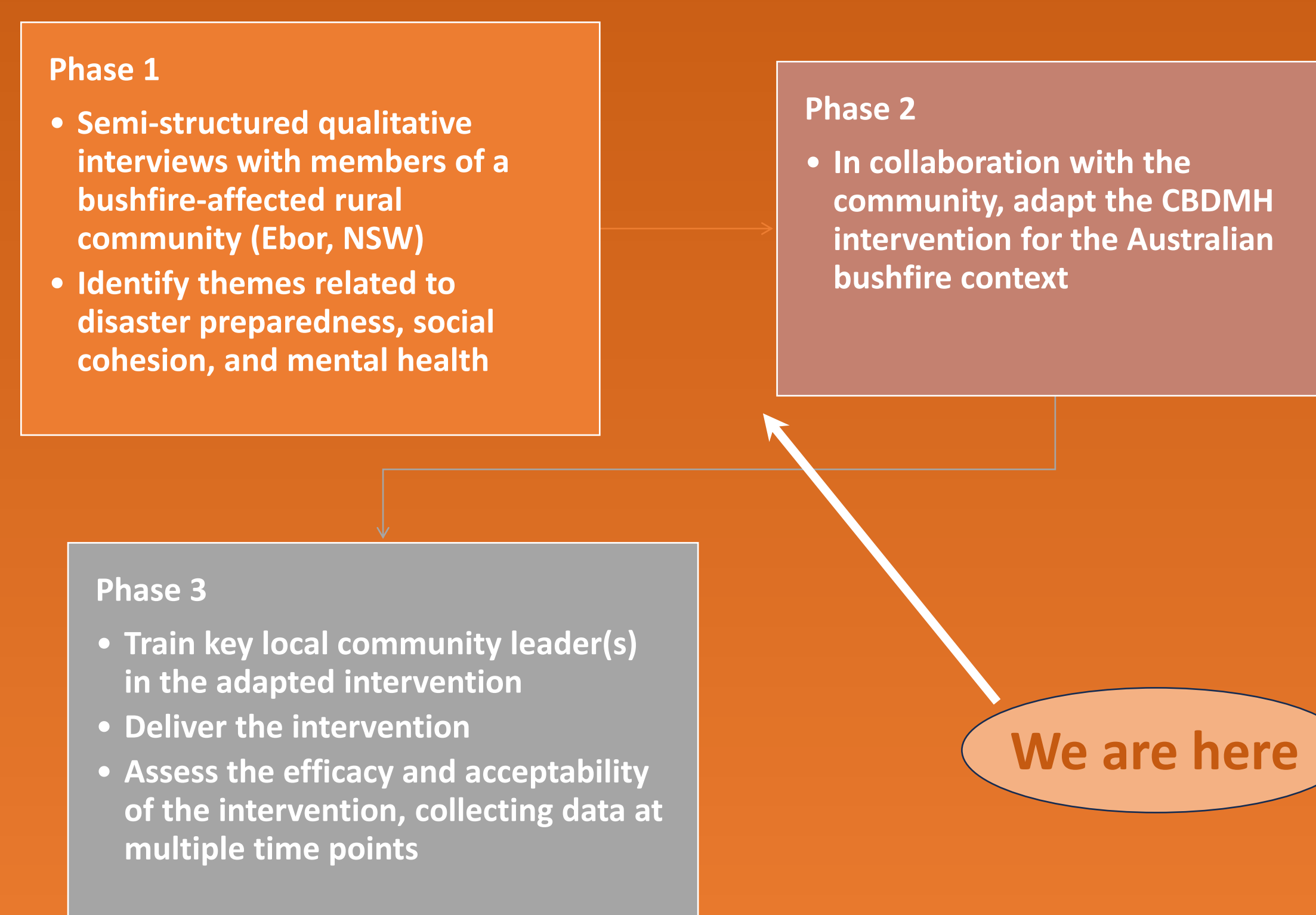
The 3-day manualized CBDMH intervention is an evidence-based approach to building community resilience for those at risk from natural hazards.

It is designed to be adaptable across contexts, cultures, and specific disaster events.

Community members are part of this adaptation process and are trained to facilitate and evaluate the intervention. An initial consultation phase is part of this adaptation.

## Current Project

**Aim: Adapt and assess the efficacy of the CBDMH intervention in the rural Australian bushfire context. Enhance community resilience in advance of future fires.**



## Community Characteristics

The research team is working with the local Rural Fire Service (Armidale LGA, NSW). The primary community supported through this project is the village of Ebor in rural New South Wales. Ebor has a population of only 149 residents, most of whom are Euro-Australian farmers or pensioners. Ebor experienced two major fires during Black Summer that threatened the village. Although no houses were lost, livestock died (primarily cattle), and there was significant damage to fencing infrastructure and local national parks. The village is at continued risk.

## Phase I: Community Interviews (N = 12)

Theme	Representative Quotes
Bushfire preparedness (lack of)	“...it was horrendous to [ ] watch four or five thousand acres just burn out in two hours... it’s not something ever seen before” (male, 69) “...when the evacuation order came, people didn’t know what to do, (a) they didn’t know where to go, and (b) they were still confused about how great the danger was...” (male, 67)
Social cohesion, help-giving/ seeking	“...when there’s an emergency, people do rally... but as far as contributing, there’s not a lot of social interaction round the village ...people just float along and do their own thing...” (male, 67)
Mental health/ psychological distress	(impact of reminders) “...for the first twelve months, if you saw a column of smoke somewhere or smelt some bush, ‘oh, there’s a fire over there,’ you’d kinda be a bit jumpy about it...” (female, 55) “...you know, it’s all stressful, but it’s hard, yeah bring(ing) back and talk(ing) about it gets a bit tough at times...” (male, 63, tearing up)

## Acknowledgements

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*Note: for REFERENCE LIST see Handout.*