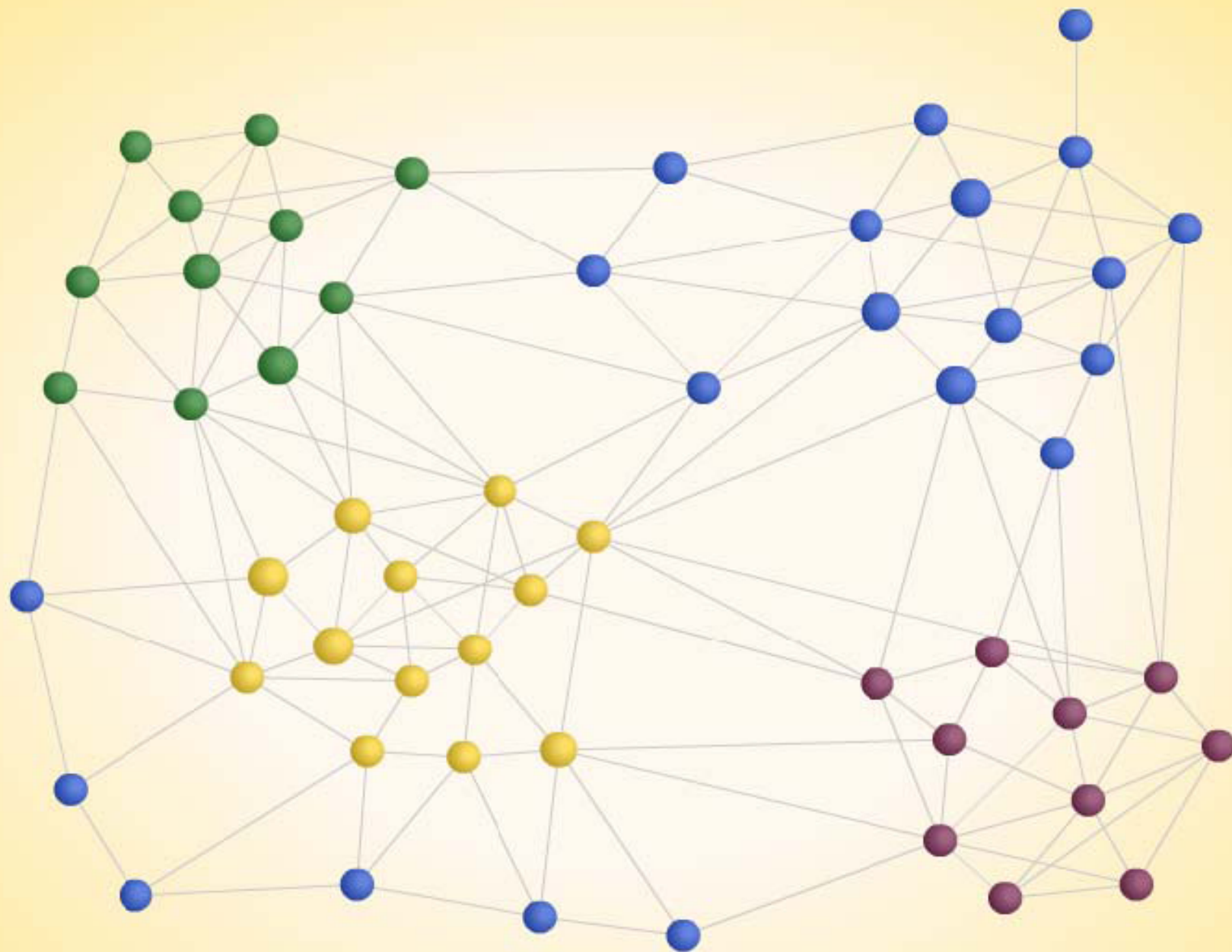


# Community and Personal Stress of Disaster Impact & Recovery

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Farmers for Climate Action,  
May 2020

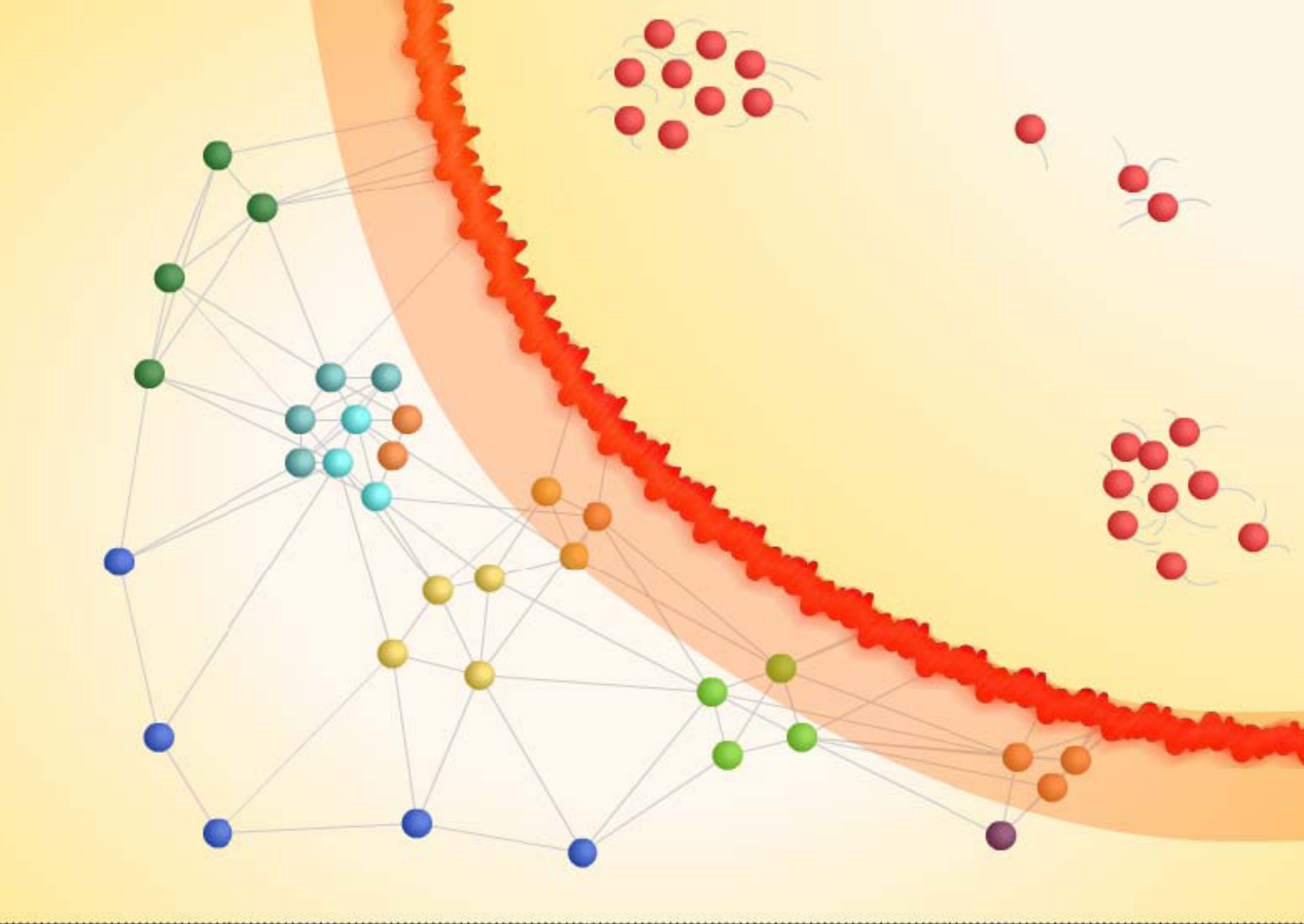
Rob Gordon PhD  
Consultant Psychologist  
[rob@robgordon.com.au](mailto:rob@robgordon.com.au)



Pre-Disaster Community Structure

# Definition Of Disaster

- Threat to life & property
- Community impact
- Survival brought into question
- Event disrupts community functions - communication
- Normal bonds not adapted to survival questions

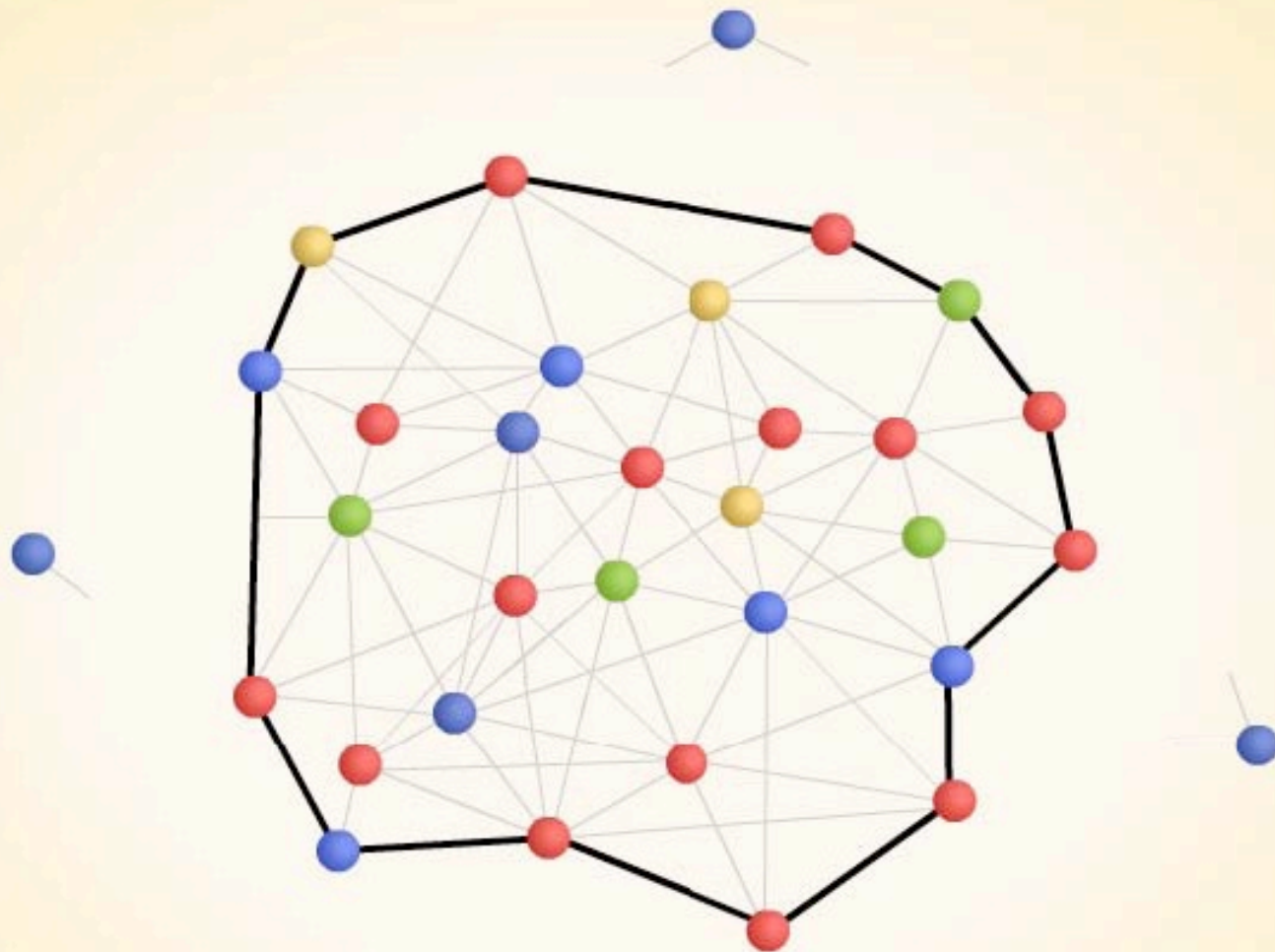


Debonding on Impact



# Social Debonding

- Disrupts physical, emotional and social continuity;
- Unfamiliar - not recognised nor understood;
- Affects what is constant, taken for granted, not consciously experienced;
- Self-focus excludes awareness of what is lost.
- Reversal not automatic, immediate or complete.



Post-Impact Fusion & Boundary Formation

# Recovery Requires Social Differentiation

- Transition from Fusion to a new sustainable community structure
- Integration of new and old structures
- Serve Recovery needs
- New future

*but ...*

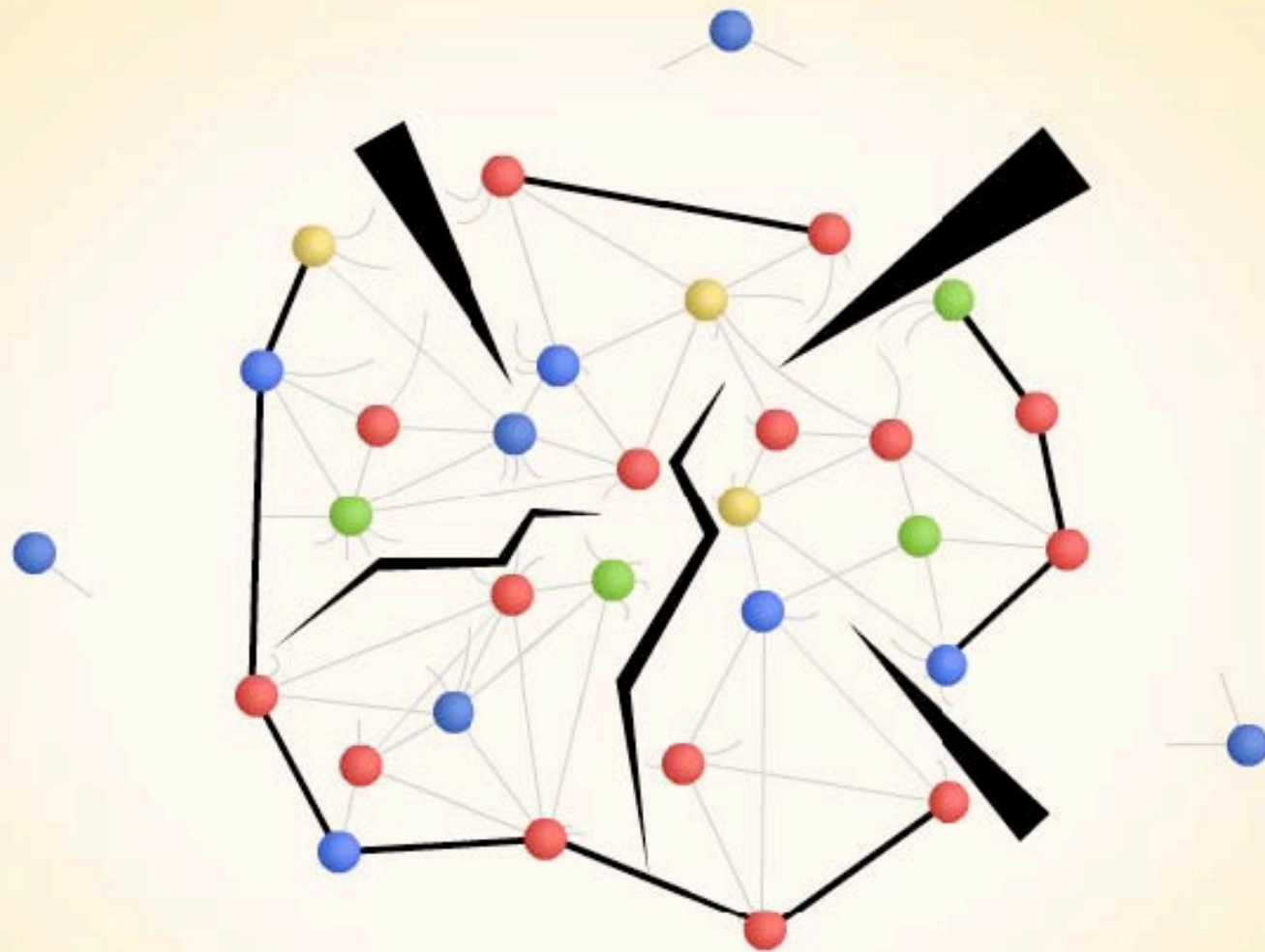
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when psycho-social differentiation  
is not consciously managed,

it occurs by ...

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hostility, antagonism,  
competition, anger and negative  
emotion.



Destructive Differentiation via Cleavage Planes

# Cleavage Planes...

- Serve to differentiate community sub-groups
- But do so along perceived differences
- Cut across pre-existing structures
- Alienate sub-groups
- Fracture support systems
- Impede planning and decision making
- Politicise the psycho-social process

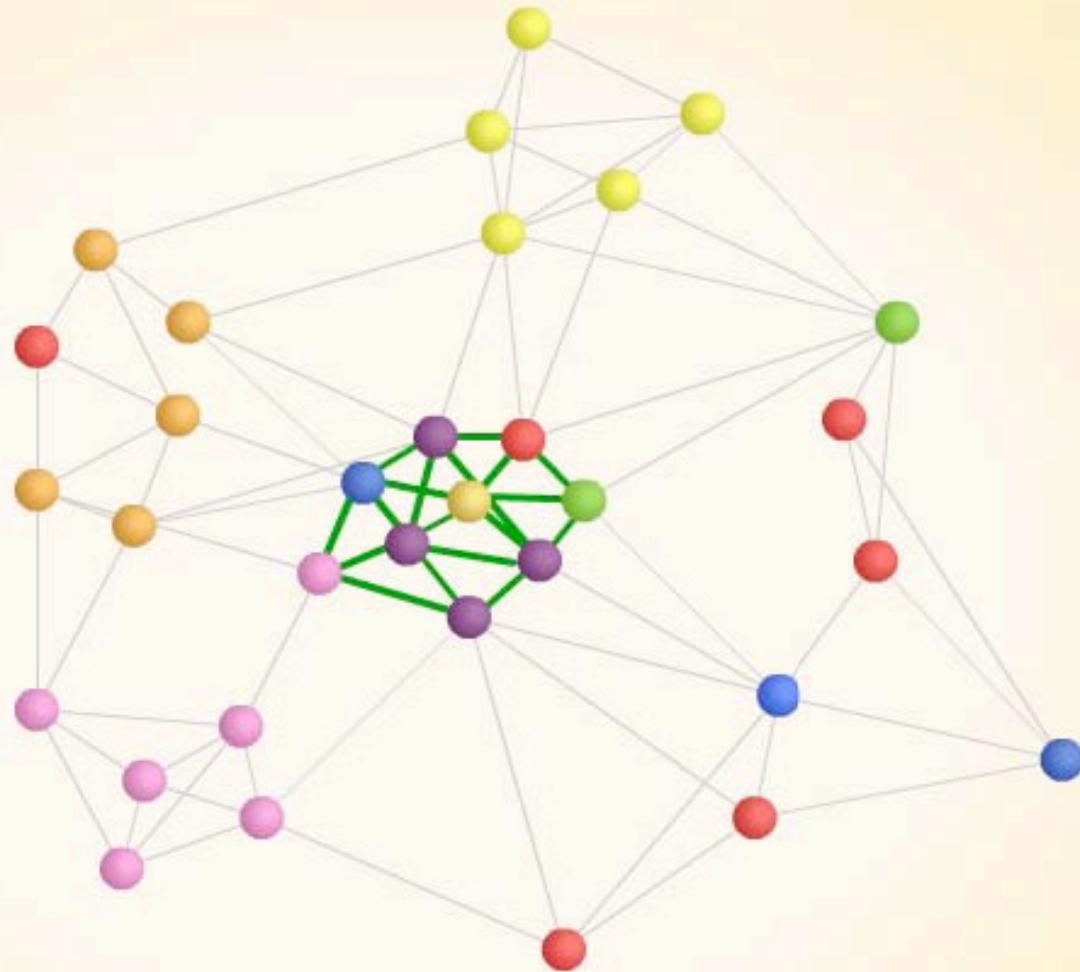
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*if...*

psycho-social differentiation  
is managed through shared  
communication  
and changed structures,

cleavage planes lose their  
communal function



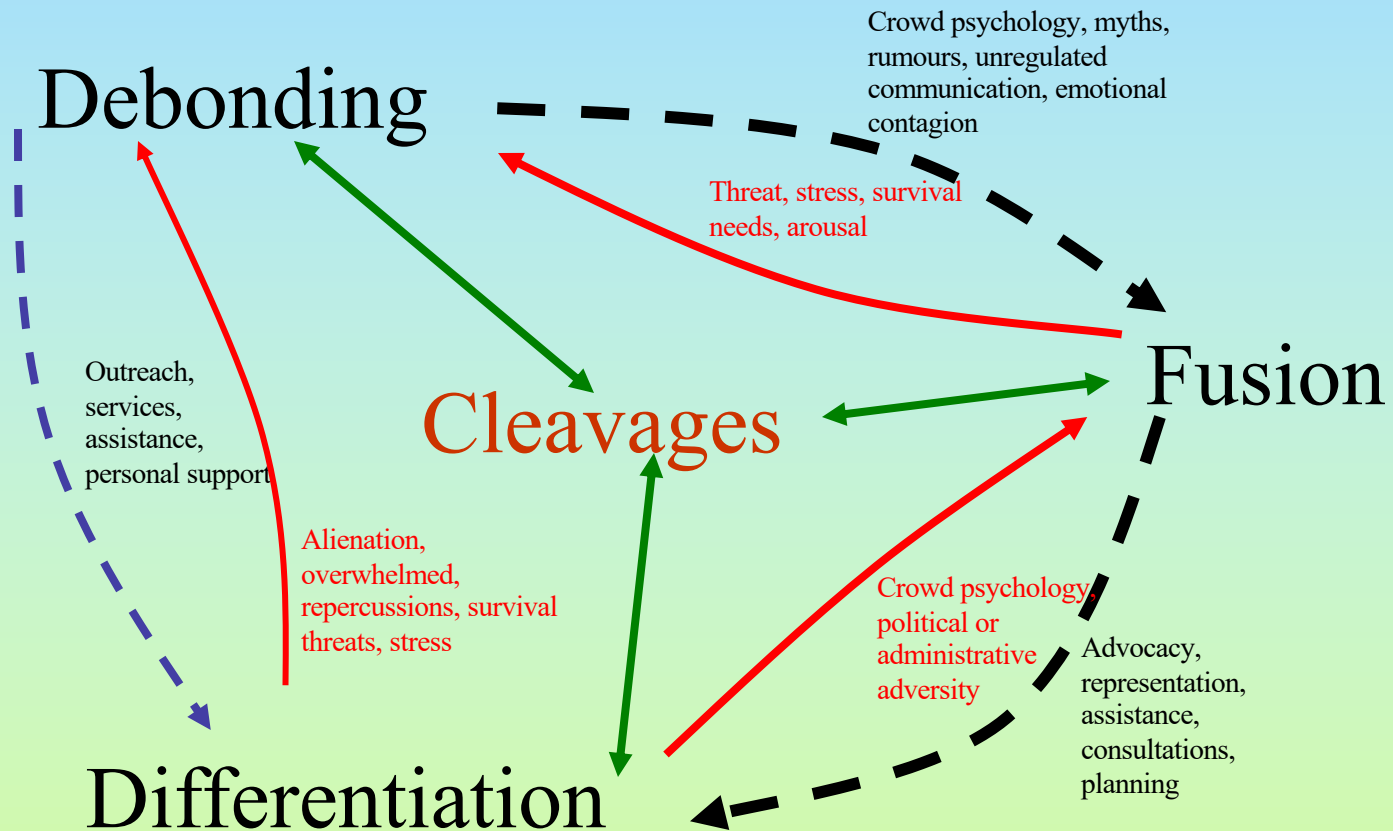


Constructive Differentiation via Emergent Groups

# Constructive Differentiation is supported by ...

- community participation
- validating emergent groups
- new communication structures for recovery needs
- a common fund of information relevant to potential cleavages
- active management of social tensions and inequalities
- consistency in relief and assistance

# Community Recovery Dynamics



# Some Principles:

1. Preparation and planning reduces debonding.
2. Degree of debonding determines degree of fusion.
3. Fusion is a major cause of post disaster disruption.
4. Cleavage planes based on *perceived* collective differences.
5. Information about commonalities “sutures” cleavages.
6. Circulation of information promotes communication.
7. Communication facilitates bonds.
8. Common action creates constructive differentiation.
9. Group formation promotes communication.

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# Strategy 1: PREVENT or TERMINATE DEBONDING

- Planning and Preparation;
- Roles and tasks;
- Preservation of pre-disaster organisation;
- Curtail the *Event Horizon*
- Preserve continuity, community norms and people who care;
- Provide relevant information;
- Preserve or re-establish communication links;

## Strategy 2: **MINIMISE FUSION**

- **Preserve pre-disaster roles and structures**
- **Integrate new tasks and roles in existing structures**
- **Provide information to avoid naïve ideas, myths and emotional contagion**
- **Provide structured communication to activate community processes**
- **Promote emergent groups, formal/informal networks, community advocacy, self efficacy**
- **Define interest groups memberships, work with inclusive identities**

## Strategy 3: **INTERCEPT CLEAVAGE PLANES**

- **Constitute a community “sense organ” to identify cleavages - outreach, community observers, representation;**
- **View all tensions as intergroup events;**
- **Map pre-disaster cleavages and disaster differentials**
- **Identify information lacks and inequalities;**
- **Take the initiative with community consultation**



## Strategy 4: “SUTURE”

# CLEAVAGE PLANES

- Give facts to manage rumour and myths
- Repeat crucial information
- Give overview information about events/actions
- Intergroup communication and exchange - all media
- Symbols and Rituals of community identity
- Contrast backward and forward looking issues
- Promote a new future
- Meet practical needs, provide care

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Strategy 5: **PROMOTE CONSTRUCTIVE  
DIFFERENTIATION**

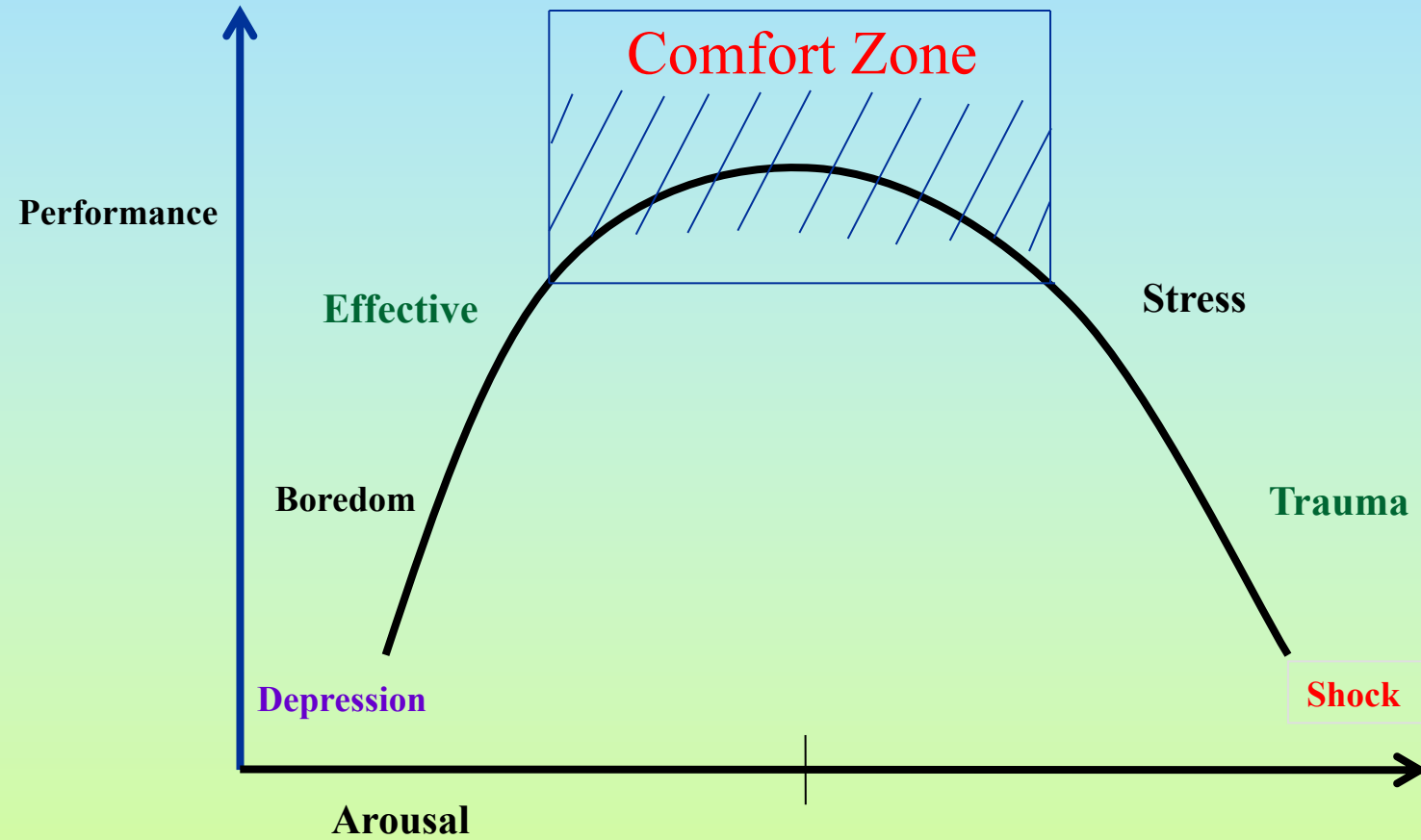
- **Promote new self determined community structures**
- **Work through community structures**
- **Self management with resource support**
- **Assist with communication**
- **Disaster specific media**
- **Integrate around tasks**

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# **The Role of Arousal & Stress Responses in Recovery**

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# Bell Curve of Arousal & Performance



As arousal increases, it improves performance - then as it gets too high, performance is reduced & deteriorates to breakdown and failure of adaptation.

# First State – Emergency Mode - Adrenalin

- Threat pushes outside comfort zone.
- Adrenalin stress – liberates unknown reserves
- Reorganised to focus on immediate problem, act now
- Think in images and actions - “flashbulb memories”
- Pre-programmed Emotions anger, fear, shock, grief
- Shut down feedback from self
- Adrenalin specializes for survival at expense of normality
- **Disaster** is the whole world



Calcutta

Fire

Rescue



# Second State – Endurance Mode - Cortisol

- Endure adversity, keep going as long as required
- Reorganise unimportant functions for necessary issues,
- Narrow problem-solving thinking, reduced memory
- Emotional numbness interrupted by instinctive emotions  
anger, fear, shock, grief
- Reduced feedback maintains endurance
- Social interactions reduced to minimum – but involved in  
community recovery - Fusion





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## Chronic and Cumulative Stress: Endurance Mode-

Maintenance of elevated arousal, disconnection of self/body feedback, shutting down of unessential functions and narrowed attention and modified functioning.

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# General Effects of Stress on Thinking

- Poorer problem-solving
  - Less verbal, more visual
  - Reduced flexibility and lateral thinking
  - Simplified emotional associations, rather than logical
  - Judgemental, jumping to conclusions
  - Good for emergency survival
  - Not good for planning and long-term sustainability
-

# General Effects of Stress on Emotions

- Instinctive emotions increased (fear, anger, distress, horror, disgust, shame, pain)
- Socially meaningful emotions reduced (regret, disappointment, sadness, compassion, resignation)
- Reactive, unstable, fluctuate, keep stress high,
- Shut down and numbed if physically active, can't feel what it all means
- Unjustified emotions stimulated by false judgements

# Communicating with Stressed People

1. Bring down arousal before tackling problems.
2. Listening brings arousal down.
3. Help them clarify what they want to say/ask.
4. Be slow, methodical and explain reasons
5. Don't use jargon, big words, complex ideas
6. Use the words you would use for a 9 year-old (**but** don't talk down to them).
7. Explain, do not assume things

# The Essence of Resilience

- Re-sile (Latin) “to spring back” from “*sale*” means Reeds, flex and deform to allow the threat to pass then reactivate essential features.

What is essential

1. Quality of life
2. Meaning and Value
3. Relationships – family and community
4. Those features of life that cannot be replaced



# Contributors to Resilience

- Moral compass – knowing what is important
- Flexible adaptation – adaptive behaviour in the face of stress
- Positive emotions and optimism
- Manage negative emotions,
- Self enhancers – valuing friendships, social contacts
- Use support
- Favourable world views – stress and trauma are part of life
- Maintain identity after the disruption
- Fewer regrets – not focussing on past, what is learned

# Resilience

vs

# “Desilience”

- Intellectual ability
- Social support
- Flexible personality
- Stable personal life, rewarding experiences
- Pragmatic coping – accept what happens
- Put out of mind – health problems

- Lack of perspective
- Isolation
- Inflexible personality
- Life stresses, losses, illness, accidents,
- Want things to be different – can’t accept
- Passive rumination – psych problems