

Supporting students through natural disasters

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Across the country, we are experiencing some of the most intense natural disasters in Australia's history.

From harsh droughts to devastating bushfires, there is no doubt it's a concerning time for all Australians.

However, with much of the focus on attending to the immediate threats and issues and simply making it through, day to day and week to week, it can be easy to overlook the impact heightened stress, heartache, worry and concern can have on our own mental health, and that of our family, friends and young people.

We know teachers are on the front line, dealing with not only their own concerns about what might be happening in their community but also having to support and remain aware of the impact on students.

Crucial to providing any kind of support to students is recognising and understanding how you are feeling and looking after your own mental health first, seeking professional support if needed. It's only when you have addressed your own mental health that you can respond to your students' needs in the most appropriate way.

Key national youth support services:

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800
www.kidshelpline.com.au

headspace: 1800 650 890
www.headspace.org.au

ReachOut.com:
www.au.reachout.com

In the days and weeks after an event like a bushfire, or during a period of drought, keep an eye on student behaviour as responses to trauma or distress can manifest in different ways; such as reactivation of previous problems, increased sensitivity to issues of justice and equity, behavioural changes like withdrawal or acting out and peer conflict.

Having open and honest conversations can be helpful for students: for some, this will mean speaking about what's happening but for others it might be drawing or writing down their feelings or experiences. It will be important to acknowledge these feelings and discuss issues in a way that considers student maturity.

At times like this, students

Key national 24/7 crisis support services:

Lifeline: 13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service:
1300 659 467
www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

might also look to teachers to explain what's happened and make sense of the world. We know it can be hard to provide responses that make sense and reassure students, but it is important to recognise and respond to students in distress. While honesty is necessary in discussions, stick to the facts and try to remove personal opinion. Although it's a difficult time, it's crucial to express hope and positivity for the future.

Remind students that after a traumatic event, or prolonged stress it's even more important they focus on mental health in dealing with difficult emotions. Empower them with the knowledge of how to spot signs their mental health might be impacted; this can also extend to friends and family. Find ways to remind students that nutrition, sleep and exercise are extremely important to get through tough times, and we know that these are often the first things to be forgotten.

Connection is also vital and a support system will help young people get through tough times; this might be talking with a family member, friend, teacher or school counselling staff member. Most importantly, let them know

that there is support available and where they can find it.

Students should know that although their environment may be stressful outside of school, school is a safe space for both students and teachers. For more resources on how teachers can best support students, explore the *Be You* fact sheets and *headspace* supporting students portal online. Here are some other resources that may assist school communities to support students responding to the immediate and longer-term needs following the impact of natural disasters.

- Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network produced a resource for teachers in response to the Victorian bushfires, which includes a range of excellent ideas for classrooms, called the *School Recovery Tool Kit*.
- The Australian Red Cross produced a resource for parents and caregivers that gives an excellent summary of stress and trauma as well as some excellent strategies and activities that may be helpful for both parents and teachers.

This can be found online and is called [Helping children and young people cope with crisis](#).

Additionally, check your State and Territory advice for responding to critical incidents or trauma reference documents.

If you or someone you know is struggling, visit headspace.org.au to find your nearest centre or call [headspace](tel:1800650890) on 1800 650 890.

