

KULNURA PUBLIC SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

13 December, 2019
Week 9 Term 4



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Dear Parents and Carers,

We welcome all families back from the turbulent bushfires in our community and hope that all families came through relatively unscathed. Whilst we may have no physical signs of the disaster on ourselves, there certainly is an impact on people's emotional wellbeing. Traumatic experiences such as being involved in a fire can be sudden and overwhelming. It is normal for people to feel unsettled and disrupted for a while. While there may be no signs of physical injury, there can be a serious emotional toll. Some symptoms can include depression, anxiety, sadness, anger, fatigue, nightmares and difficulty concentrating. If you find you do not return to your normal routine after a few weeks, it is important to seek help from a counsellor or your doctor.

Children can also suffer from stress following a fire. Understanding and recognising your child's responses to these events can assist you in providing support, and help them to cope effectively with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours they are experiencing.

We were visited today by our school counsellors from district office to support students who may need to talk to someone who is specialised in counselling. A general chat with the whole class and some students spoke with the counsellors individually. Mrs Woods has forwarded some fact files about recovery from a major event such as a bushfire. Please take time to peruse over the coming weeks as you recover with your family. Our school has booked school counsellors from district office to do some sessions with the kids as well as the Red Cross are doing the Pillowcase Program next Tuesday. We are doing our best to normalise school as much as possible over the next few days.

It is unfortunate that all events have been cancelled or postponed to a later date but we

have managed to come up with the following plan. Parents are encouraged to participate where they can in the activities being held over the final days of the 2019 school year.

Student progress reports for the second semester will be sent home next Monday, 16 December 2019

Pillowcase Program- Red Cross workshop around disaster preparation and recovery Tuesday 17 December 2019.

Presentation will be held Wednesday 18 December at 9.30am under the COLA

Pink Stumps Fundraiser will be held Wednesday 19 December 2019 at 11.00am.

Toowoona Bay- SLSC rewards day out has been postponed to Term 1 2020. Nicci from SLSC is going to give us another date next term and we can use that day for a family day out. It will be good for our community to have a fun family day out. All families are invited to participate.

First Day back for all Students K-6 in 2020 will be Wednesday 29 January 2020

We will be doing our best to keep children happy and feeling safe at school, in our homes and in our community. As a community we can overcome the setbacks that the fires have brought to all those who live at Kulnura and Mangrove Mountain.

I would like to take this opportunity to **thank our community for supporting Kulnura Public School** throughout 2019. I hope you all have a safe and happy Christmas / New Year and looking forward to a fantastic 2020.

Steve Collins
Principal



Promoting safety, comfort and help after the recent fires

The bushfires that have threatened some communities in recent weeks have been highly distressing for many people. But there is a lot that family, friends, volunteers and community members can do to help those affected.

What can I do?

Psychologists at the Australian Psychological Society provide some general advice to help people to look after themselves (and this can apply to carers as well as those directly affected by the disaster):

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and give yourself permission to experience some reaction to it. Don't be angry with yourself for being upset.
- Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.
- Remind yourself that you can and are coping.
- Spend time with people who are predictable, familiar and respectful.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened. Gradually confronting what has happened can assist in coming to terms with a traumatic experience.
- Don't 'bottle up' your feelings – share your experiences with people you trust when opportunities arise. But don't feel pressured if you don't want to talk now – this is also OK.
- Find other ways as well to express your feelings, e.g. through a diary or art work.
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Keep busy and structure your day.
- Allow yourself time to rest if you are feeling tired. Regular exercise is also important.
- Make time to practise relaxation. You can use a formal technique such as progressive muscle relaxation, or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music. This will help your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- Avoid making any major decisions or big life changes.
- Make sure you do not unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and whom you trust. Social support is enormously helpful in times of crisis.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs. Help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or want a chance to talk or just be with someone.
- If your recent experience stirs up other memories or feelings from a past unrelated stressful occurrence, or even childhood trauma, try not to let the memories all blur together. Keep the experiences separate and deal with them separately.
- Keep reminding yourself that things will get better, and you do have the ability to manage.
- Give yourself time to adjust. Resilience is the norm, but it can take a while to bounce back.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/

Useful skills for disaster recovery

Helpful thinking

Following the bushfires, many people's way of thinking about the world and themselves may have shifted to have a very negative focus. They might now see the world as dangerous and unpredictable, and be thinking things like, "Things will never be right again", or, "No-one can keep me safe".

These thoughts are very understandable given personal experience of the fires, but they can also cause additional intense sadness, fear or anger. Thoughts have a direct impact on how people feel, and when negative thoughts become habits of thought, they can increase distress and make it harder to deal with the situation. Then, they become unhelpful.

Tackling unhelpful thinking

A useful skill to learn is to notice if you are thinking in an unhelpful way, and try to find more helpful thoughts that make it easier to manage.

Catching yourself thinking unhelpful thoughts can be tricky. Often these thinking habits are automatic, and we don't notice what we're saying to ourselves, but just know we feel bad. Noticing that you are feeling worried might come first. Then, ask yourself what you might have been thinking. Perhaps it was something like, "This wind is like the winds during the fires and if we have more fires this year, I won't be able to cope", or, "Everything is ruined – I'll never get things sorted out".

The next step is to come up with an alternative, more helpful thought, which should give rise to more positive feelings like being in control and feeling more hopeful. Try, "I've coped with a lot already and discovered strengths I didn't realise I had", or, "This is hard work and will take a while, but I've started – just keep chipping away".

Of course, as with most things, you will get better at noticing unhelpful thoughts and focusing on helpful alternatives with practice. And the good thing about habits of thought? There are always plenty of opportunities to practice! If you're finding getting started difficult, it may be helpful to seek assistance from a health professional.

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Useful skills for disaster recovery

Managing emotional distress

Even after the danger of the bushfires has long passed, people can experience upsetting reactions, and these can go on for weeks, months or years. The distress can involve physical reactions, like a rapidly beating heart and sweating palms, and emotional reactions like feeling teary or anxious. These reactions often follow reminders of the bushfires, or come up in response to stresses in daily life. For some people, this emotional distress can lead to problems in relationships with family and friends which can affect mood, impact on health, and disrupt the ability to make decisions and get things done.

It is important to understand that distressing reactions are a normal part of recovery, and finding safe ways of expressing feelings is an important part of healing. Learning how to identify, understand, anticipate and manage these reactions so they don't feel so huge, uncontrollable and unpredictable is something everyone can do.

FOUR STEPS TO MANAGING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

1. Identify the distress in your body

It can be helpful to identify where in your body you feel things when you are distressed. Perhaps you clench your jaw or tense your shoulders when you're angry. Perhaps you blush, sweat or get butterflies in your stomach when you're anxious. Some people feel sick, or get headaches.

2. Name the type of distress

Once you are able to identify where distress is located in your body, it can be useful to name the type of distress this signals--e.g., 'I'm feeling anxious'.

3. Anticipate triggers for distress

You can also try to work out what sets off your distress. Some triggers might be particular reminders of the fires, like noises, places or people you see. Some things might seem to have nothing to do with the fires but they set you off anyway, like the car not starting, or children arguing. The better you get at working out what triggers your distress, the better placed you are to plan how to manage it.

4. Managing the distress

As you become more aware of the bodily signs of distress and the associated feelings, as well as the situations that trigger distress, you can start to practice skills to help manage the distress. These might include:

- Learning how to relax your body, especially the parts that tense up under stress
- Learning some breathing techniques to calm yourself down
- Using calming self talk (e.g., 'This might be tough but I will get through it')
- If possible, have a friend with you for support before, during and/or after the stressful situation

It takes practice to learn these skills, but every time you try them, you will get a bit better at calming yourself down. Importantly, you start to see that you have more control than perhaps you realised over your reactions to stress, so they don't need to have such a disruptive impact on your life.

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Useful skills for disaster recovery

Taking time for pleasurable activities

Now, a few months after the fires, many people are feeling tired and stressed, and they know that their daily struggle isn't going to be over any time soon. Disasters often disrupt routines or activities that have given people pleasure and a sense of control in the past, and people often don't make as much time as they used to for fun things. These recreational activities might have been sport, clubs or classes, walks or bike rides, visits to a favourite cafe, board games with the family, or regular get togethers with friends. Sometimes the disruption to recreation activities comes about because the places where they were held have been destroyed or damaged by the fires, or because club members have died or moved away. For some people, the grief and shock of the devastation of the fires, and the overwhelming task of recovery and rebuilding may have led them to withdraw from the activities or not make the time for the things they used to find pleasure in.

Doing things you enjoy is good for you

Doing activities that are enjoyable is very important as a way of gaining a sense of control and purpose in life, and for giving pleasure. Indeed, one of the most successful ways of improving people's mood, giving them a 'lift', and restoring a sense of control, is to increase their activity, create routines, and increase the number of positive events in their lives. When lives are unbalanced by a disaster, finding a new balance between work and pleasure gains importance. Pleasurable activities are important for our health, and for our connections with other people. It is important, too, that people have more positive experiences than negative experiences.

So, take some time out from the endless paperwork and the huge job that lies ahead, and give yourself permission to do some of the things you have enjoyed in the past – watching a DVD, having a day at the football, going out for a night with the girls (or boys), or just playing a game of scrabble. Try to plan ahead so that you've got things to look forward to. Try also to make sure that some of the pleasurable activities also involve enjoying your social connections with others. This is a great combination. Sometimes it can be easier to talk and share with people when you are busy doing something together.

You may find as you start picking up some of the activities you used to enjoy before the fires, that you're not enjoying them as much as you used to. This is very normal, and not a reason to give up. Sometimes after very traumatic experiences people's ability to enjoy themselves is diminished for the present. It can and will come back, and one important way in which you can help is by doing things that give you a break from the everyday stress of cleaning up, rebuilding and recovery, but which also help to rebuild some normal routines and a sense of wellbeing. And when you 'down tools' for a while and take time out for a bit of fun, you will probably pick up again when you're a little more rested, and you may even find that you make quicker progress with all of those jobs.

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[**psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/**](http://psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/)

Useful skills for disaster recovery

The importance of social connections

One of the best things we can do for ourselves following a traumatic experience is to spend time with people who care about us, and to feel the social support of friends, family and the community. It is not uncommon, though, for people's social support networks to be disrupted following a disaster like the bushfires. Friends may have died, or moved away. People may feel too busy sorting things out to spend time socialising, or the places they used to gather may have been destroyed, or group activities discontinued. Sometimes people avoid others because they don't want to be reminded about the fires, or worry about how someone else is going. And some people just feel too sad and dispirited to bother meeting or talking with others. It all just feels too hard.

Whatever the reasons for a decrease in social contact with others, we know very well that rebuilding social connections after a disaster is incredibly important. People need people. They help give us a sense of belonging, a feeling of being loved and cared for and that we're not alone, and reassurance that our reactions are normal. They can share burdens, provide practical support like helping replant gardens and caring for children. They can provide a sympathetic ear when we need to talk, or sensible advice when we're struggling with a problem. They can show us that we are important to them, too.

Rebuilding connections

Reconnecting can be hard, but worthwhile. Sometimes starting off with a small contact, like having a cup of tea together, is an easier way to begin. Remember to have patience with those with whom you are in contact as they may be as distracted as you. Maybe you need to make contact over the phone with friends who no longer live near. Maybe you could make a time to catch up with a friend who is a good listener. Maybe there's a friend you could organise to go on a bike ride with, or you could ask to help you fix your fence.

And don't forget that social support feels good to give as well – maybe there is a neighbor who needs your help. Other people complete us, and the benefits flow both ways.

You can also use existing community support groups to make social connections with others. Often, community recovery groups and activities are established after a disaster to help bring people together.

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disaster recovery resources please visit
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Useful skills for disaster recovery

Problem solving

Following disasters like the Adelaide Hills bushfires, people experience some common and often distressing reactions. These can include strong feelings of grief or anger, difficulty sleeping, or unhelpful behaviours like drinking more alcohol or arguing with people more than usual. But working on some basic coping skills can help a lot. For many survivors, these skills will be enough to enhance recovery and help tackle stressful issues. One very useful skills is problem solving.

Problem Solving

Following the bushfires, people are struggling with a variety of problems, from how to clean up their house block to worrying about arguments with their partner, or struggling to supervise children adequately in a new or altered environment.

FOUR STEPS TO PROBLEM SOLVING

1. Identify the problem

First, try to identify what the problem really is. Is this your problem, or does it belong with someone else? Is this a problem you can do something about? If not, put it aside and choose one that you can do something about. And if you're feeling overloaded with all sorts of not-finished tasks, give yourself permission to let some problems wait till later.

2. Assessing the problem

If the problem is big, break it into manageable parts. For example, if you're needing to clean up your block, perhaps you can break it down into house site, shedding, and the rest of your property. Then decide what you're aiming for, like 'We need the site to be safe', or 'What I can salvage?', or 'I want a break from this mess'.

3. Brainstorming solutions

Next, think up as many ways of achieving your goals as you can e.g., temporary fencing to keep children out of the rubble, organising a working bee, accessing a government-funded service, or going away for a short break. Try writing your ideas down, and come up with lots – a range of ideas can help at this stage!

4. Adopting a solution

The final step is to sort through the options together with those close to you, or perhaps with a case manager, and choose several that best meet your goals. Then think what you need to do to give them a go.

Good luck – and remember that help is available from counsellors and others at the recovery centres.



Psychological preparedness can save your life

When your home or community is threatened by a bushfire it can be terrifying. People who haven't experienced it before can underestimate how stressful it can be. Most people are not able to think as clearly as usual when they are under severe stress, and this can affect their decisions and reactions. You might already know that about yourself, and have noticed it in others.

Research shows that you are more likely to stick with a household plan if you have also prepared psychologically for a bushfire. Being able to manage your emotions in an emergency (that is, being psychologically prepared), can save your life and potentially the lives of others.

How to prepare psychologically: a 3 step process

Once the household emergency plan has been set and you've prepared emergency kits, planned your evacuation strategy, and practised your plan, it is then time to prepare psychologically.

1 **ANTICIPATE** that the situation will be stressful

How do you think you will react to the stress? How do you usually react to highly stressful situations? Although these reactions are very natural, they can get in the way of other necessary preparations.

If you understand your usual reactions you can learn ways to manage them better when they happen.

How you feel in highly stressful situations is strongly affected by the way you cope with the physical signs of anxiety and the thoughts running through your head. Our physical and emotional responses in dangerous situations are referred to as "fight or flight". That is, you either fight for your life, or run for your life.

2 **IDENTIFY** your typical physical and emotional responses, and any frightening thoughts that might be adding to your fear

In highly stressful situations, the body usually shows signs of anxiety, such as a racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness and sweating. Where do you expect you will notice it most when you are experiencing a serious threat?

What are some typical thoughts that you might be having that could be making things harder?

Typical thoughts and emotions might be:

- *I can't cope;*
- *I'm so scared;*
- *We're going to die;*
- *This is awful;*
- *I don't know what to do;*
- *We're going to lose everything;*
- *I can't bear it;*
- *I wish this wasn't happening;*
- *I can't deal with it.*

Remind yourself that strong bodily sensations and frightening thoughts are normal reactions to stress but they are not helping you to stay calm and clear-headed. Don't get too critical of yourself though!

3 **MANAGE** your feelings and thoughts with simple breathing and self-talk

We can find ways to MANAGE any changes to our body, mind and thoughts through some simple breathing and self-talk strategies. These strategies can help you to feeling more in control, and better able to make decisions about how to stay safe.

Slowing down your breathing can help calm down your body's fear response. Focus on your out breath and extend it for as long as is comfortable for you. It is best to breathe through your nose if you can. Then let the in breath come in of its own accord. It will happen! It happens all the time without us thinking about it.

Replace anxious thoughts and images with more helpful ones, those that will support you more at this time. While concentrating on breathing out slowly, say to yourself things like 'relax', or 'stay calm', or 'It's OK, I'm managing OK'. 'I can handle this', 'focus on what has to be done' or 'no need to panic'. Try not to dwell on the bad things that might happen, but instead tell yourself that the calmer you are, the better you'll be at managing exactly what needs to be done.

