

Disaster relief

Teachers are in the front line of helping young people cope with traumatic disasters such as the recent bushfires. **Diny Slamet** reports.

Many teachers, children and teenagers lost homes, friends and family in Victoria's horrific bushfires in February. After a tragedy like this—and to a different degree, the almost concurrent floods in Queensland and New South Wales—primary and secondary teachers have an important role to play in helping traumatised students recover by providing psychological first aid.

Teachers all around Australia can learn valuable lessons from the educational response in the aftermath of these events.

Disaster-affected schools should resist the temptation to bring in teams of psychological counsellors, says Patrick McGorry, a professor of youth mental health at the University of Melbourne and clinical director of ORYGEN Youth Health, part of Victoria's public mental health system. What students need to be told initially is

that their feelings of shock, anger and grief are normal, and the problems they may experience later, such as difficulties in concentration, mood changes and sleep problems, are also normal.

“Young people need to be told what to expect and given comfort and support, which is not really a professional issue but a mental health first aid issue,” says McGorry, who worked with the Maldives government after the Asian tsunami. “That is best provided by people they know rather than strangers brought into a school. Teachers need to be reassuring and strong because the main thing after a disaster is to create a feeling of security and safety.”

International research has shown that professional intervention in the very early stages after a disaster is unnecessary at best and harmful at worst, he says. “The sort of psychological tourism that happened in the Balkans [school

Union support

Two AEU members died in the Black Saturday fires. Our deepest condolences go to the families and friends of Carol Holcombe, a teacher at Whittlesea Secondary College, and Barry Johnston, a retired teacher who was a member of the AEU's Trades Hall Council delegation.

The fires destroyed three schools, at Marysville, Strathewan and Middle Kinglake, and kindergartens at Marysville, Kinglake and Flowerdale.

The union is providing immediate financial and legal assistance to members affected by the bushfires. Go to www.aeuvic.asn.au and click on “AEU fire relief” for further information.

siege in Beslan], with teams of Dutch and Scandinavian psychologists coming in to debrief and counsel, actually did a lot of harm. It's intrusive and it pathologises what can be normal reactions. Survivors need support and comfort from people they trust and have formed relationships with. They don't need anything elaborate at that point."

Mental health professionals can play an important role several months later by helping people who are not making a natural recovery, he says. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress can emerge many months after a disaster and it is vital to pick up the problem to prevent more serious mental health issues developing. The risk is that when the professionals are needed, they may not be available.

Good listener

Teachers need to be mindful of not stepping over the line between being a good listener and being a de facto counsellor, says Dr Simon Crisp, a clinical psychologist and honorary lecturer in child and adolescent psychology at Monash University. "Simply listening is extremely valuable and one of the most important things you can do," he says. "As a teacher listening to a student in distress, you don't have to comment, judge, critique or say anything other than just listen. You can give them a sense of hope and reassure them that, as much as they are quite distressed at the moment, they have gone through something difficult and things will change with time."

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Signs of distress

Resuming a normal life as quickly as possible is an important step in healing trauma. Although returning to the routines of school is greatly reassuring for young people, there may be signs of distress. Teachers should look out for:

- Concentration difficulties
- Sleep problems
- Rapid mood changes
- Poor memory in recalling information or retaining new information
- Hypervigilance or hyperarousal
- Flashbacks and intrusive memories
- Lashing out, aggression, anger, non-compliance and running away
- Withdrawal or avoidance of things that may be associated with the trauma, including sounds, smells or weather conditions.

Resources

- **AEU Victorian branch for information about fire relief and teaching aides for discussing bushfires in class:**
www.aeuvic.asn.au
- **Australian Psychological Society tip sheets for individuals and professionals, and online directory of psychologists:**
www.psychology.org.au
- **National Youth Mental Health Foundation information on bushfire support:**
www.headspace.org.au
- **Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network:**
www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au

Teachers can play a pivotal role in the psychological first response, he says. "It's about looking for unusual signs or indicators that the student is in distress. But it's important that that role doesn't get confused with a therapeutic, clinical or diagnostic role. Teachers need to be teachers, not counsellors. It's potentially dangerous for anybody to practise outside their area of expertise."

Crisp notes that teenagers may balk at the thought of asking for help because of their desire for autonomy and independence from adults. Teachers can play a valuable role by encouraging students that seeking help when it is needed is a sign of wisdom and maturity. ●

Diny Slamet is a freelance writer.