

DISASTER

# Teacher Tips



Phoenix  
AUSTRALIA

## Tips for assisting students following a disaster

Children and teenagers show a wide range of reactions to stress and trauma. A young person's reaction following a natural disaster such as a disaster will vary from person to person. It can be difficult for young people to express their feelings in the same way that adults do, and they may not show the same reactions as adults would. With time and the support of parents, family, friends and teachers, most children and young people will recover from the negative impacts of the disasters without professional help.

There are several things that teachers can do to help children and young people to cope after a natural disaster.

### What you can do to support your students

- **Maintain routines.** Maintain your students' and school's daily routines as much as possible. Getting back to the usual routine is not always easy, but stability can be reassuring for your students. Organise activities that are enjoyable, and that encourage peer engagement and a sense of control.
- **Help students connect with peers.** The support of friends is particularly important for recovery in the school setting, so encourage students to play, interact and talk with friends and those they trust. They may need some help to identify who these trusted people are. Remind students of the school's support services. Encourage family input into how best to support and ready their children for school.
- **Help students to feel safe.** Reassure students that they are safe and cared for, and that you are available to talk about the disaster if they want to. Limit exposure to television and other sources of information about the fires, and don't be afraid to tell a student if you don't know the answer to their question. Help correct any misunderstandings and rumours about the disaster and recovery efforts.
- **Be aware of potential triggers.** Students may react to reminders of the disaster, and these trauma triggers may be distressing to them. Triggers may include, for example, very hot and windy weather, bushfire alerts on TV or social media, or anniversary dates and corresponding media attention.
- **Help them manage distressing feelings.** Reassure them that many people experience strong and distressing emotions after a disaster, and that for most people the current level of distress will pass in time. Be patient and understanding regarding displays of moodiness and odd behaviour in your students; however, do not accept aggressive behaviour. Encourage and model healthy coping, including talking, physical activity and using relaxation strategies. You may wish to teach students some simple relaxation strategies such as controlled breathing.
- **Assist with concentration at school.** Those who have experienced a trauma often have difficulties with concentration, at least in the short term. Where possible, adapt the school schedule to help minimise the impact of these difficulties. For example, consider reducing the pace of the current workload, break down big tasks into smaller steps, ensure students take regular breaks within the classroom, and encourage them to take part in physical activity during official break times.



## Communication Tips

### Examples of helpful things to say when supporting your students:

- “The important thing to remember is that you’re safe now.”
- “Is there anything about the disaster that you’re especially worried about?”
- “Any time you feel scared or upset about what happened, I’m here to help/ listen.”
- “Sometimes things happen that are really scary, and it’s okay to feel afraid/upset.”

## Changes you may notice and when to seek help

### Changes you may notice

While children and young people are generally quite resilient, it is important to look out for any changes in their behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or distressed. For example:

- change in school performance (decline in academic performance or interactions in class discussions)
- problems paying attention, being easily distracted or showing signs of excessive sleepiness
- loss of interest in activities that the student has previously enjoyed
- reliving the traumatic experience through drawings or play
- seeming more irritable, worried, or sad
- attention-seeking or out of character challenging or ‘acting out’ behaviour
- seeming jumpy or on the lookout for danger
- weight loss or gain
- isolating themselves from friends in class or in the school yard. “Sometimes things happen that are really scary, and it’s okay to feel afraid/upset.”

### Noticing when further help may be needed

Many young people will experience some of the above reactions immediately after a disaster, and for most, these will reduce with time.

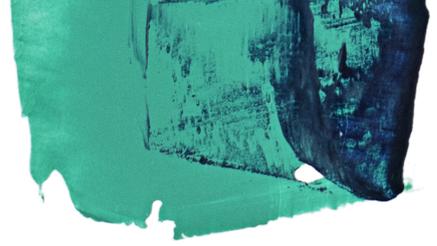
However, a small number of young people may go on to develop more persistent mental health problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and/or anxiety, and require additional support and treatment.

Teachers are in a good position to monitor early trauma reactions, provide support as suggested above, and seek professional advice as needed.

If you notice that a student continues to experience significant trauma or stress reactions for longer than two weeks, or the student is very distressed or unable to participate in usual activities, follow your school’s processes for approaching parents with these concerns and encourage them to see their GP. There are effective treatments for children and adolescents who experience difficulties after a traumatic event.

### Looking after yourself

Teachers are more easily able to help their students if they are taking good care of themselves. Therefore, it can be helpful to discuss your own reactions with another trusted adult and practice good self-care.



## Further Tips

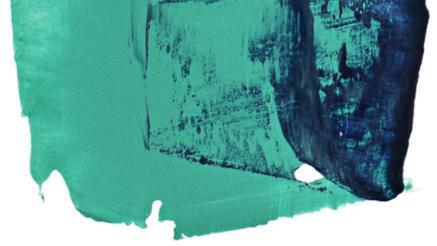
Below are some further tips for supporting your students, tailored to different age groups.

### For younger children

- Discuss the fires in an open and honest manner. Children might want to talk intermittently; younger kids might need concrete information to be repeated.
- Limit children's exposure to other sources of information about the fires and the victims
- Filter the information children receive by restricting or limiting their access to traditional and social media.
- Reassure younger children that they are safe and that their families and other adults will take care of them • Acknowledge questions about the death and the destruction
- Acknowledge your students' feelings: "You sound sad/ angry/worried..." "Are you sad/ angry/worried?" • Remind them that their feelings are okay
- Acknowledge that you too may feel sad, angry, or worried.

### For older children and adolescents:

- Listen to students' stories, allowing them to respond to their experiences in their own way • Remember the importance of providing emotional support by 'naming' the common reactions of sadness, numbness, anger, fear, and confusion
- Explain that seemingly inappropriate silliness, laughter, or callousness can be a strategy that people unconsciously use to avoid becoming overwhelmed
- Be alert to students expressing overwhelming feelings. Limit time spent talking about the fires to help students express only as much as they wish to share, and not more than they might wish they had.
- Be alert to changes in students' usual behaviour (e.g., drop in grades, loss of interest, not doing homework, increased sleepiness or distraction, isolating themselves, weight loss or gain)
- Some students may appear distracted or have trouble remembering things. These changes in behaviour should be tolerated and understood.
- Some children and adolescents may feel 'stirred up'. Set limits and help them to understand their behaviour in order to help them manage their emotions.
- Encourage good sleeping and eating habits
- Encourage students to be active participants in disaster and emergency planning
- Taking age-appropriate actions can be a powerful remedy for hopelessness. For example, doing volunteer work, or writing letters of sympathy to friends and family. Allow students to assist in the rebuilding and re-establishment of the school where appropriate, for example, in designing artworks or new spaces.
- Increase your students' sense of control and mastery wherever possible.



If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties or irritability persist for more than two weeks after your return home, you should talk to your GP. For immediate assistance and/or 24-hour counselling and referrals, see details on the right.

## Useful services and resources

**Lifeline - for immediate assistance**  
13 11 14

**Australian Psychological Society - find a psychologist**  
1800 333 497

**Beyond Blue**  
1300 224 636