

Bushfire Response Program

*Understanding
trauma responses
following a bushfire*



With delivery partners



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Be You Bushfire Response Program webinar handout

Included below are reflective questions referred to during the webinar along with links to additional information, resources and references.

Links to resources

Please find below a selection of resources either shared during the webinar or used in preparation for the webinar.

Be You resources

- Be You Wellbeing Tools for You (educators):
<https://beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-you>
- Be You Wellbeing fact sheet:
<https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/wellbeing>
- Be You Events:
<https://beyou.edu.au/resources/events>
- Be You Bushfire Response Program:
<https://beyou.edu.au/bushfire-response-program>
- Be You Bushfire Response Resource Pack:
<https://beyou.edu.au/bushfire-response-program>

Emerging Minds resources

- 2009 Victorian Bushfires: Supporting recovery (podcast featuring April Harrison):
<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/>
- Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit:
<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/>

Other resources

- Youth Views: a resource to booklet to help you get back on your feet (co-authored by April Harrison):
<https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/centres-institutes/centre-for-health-equity/research-group/beyond-bushfires/research/related-projects/children-and-disasters/youth-views>

Attendee question and answer responses

Q. How does Jess model and scaffold self-care for his staff?

Self-care for educators is incredibly important for all at any time not just when responding to a natural disaster. We have processes in place throughout the year for monitoring well-being and ensuring staff are engaging in self-care. We see wellbeing as a work health safety topic and have it as a standing item at staff meetings. We have regular discussion about identifying self-care strategies and keeping ourselves accountable for keeping to them. An example of this is that during the beginning weeks of term all staff set self-care goals and those who are comfortable share these with each other do so, to keep ourselves accountable. They are goals which are not work related and are something we just want to do for ourselves. Mine was to ensure I run at least three times per week and my staff touch base to see how I am going with this. Other staff include going to the gym regularly, recommence cooking classes, use their art studio at least twice per week or including more 'meat-free' meals into their weekly diet. It has been a proactive way to ensure we are doing something just for ourselves and so we don't stop doing things just for ourselves when life gets busy. In addition to this we have engaged with the Be You Contact Liaison Officer and used the resources to identify self-care strategies. They are available on the website and are a great way to consider self-care. Throughout the year I regularly look at ways to boost staff morale and take as many opportunities as I can to show appreciation for the work they do. It can be as simple as heading out and releasing staff from yard duties when I am available, purchasing hot drinks from a local café or taking a class to give staff a little extra time to complete work related tasks. We identify this as strategies which then allow an educator to find time for self-care.

-- Jess Moroney, Principal, Lenswood Primary School

Q. A lot of the communities that experienced the bushfires have pre-existing and longstanding experiences of trauma, both as individuals and as communities. What is the impact of this cumulative trauma on the recovery efforts?

The effect of pre-existing trauma is to reduce resilience and increase the impact of the subsequent event. It may mean that there is a response that seems out of proportion with the degree of impact. It also affects the ability to use recovery resources. It may mean the earlier trauma which has been put aside is the one to be worked with rather than the more recent fire, in which case the fire has had the effect of undoing the adjustment to the earlier event. As with all trauma we should have no preconceptions as to what is needed and follow the issues raised by the client or community and work with them in the order they are presented.

-- Rob Gordon, PhD., Clinical Psychologist

Q. What's some good sentence starters for children that have shut down?

The below questions are non-specific and may allow children to open up about what they are going through and how they are feeling without pressuring them to do so.

"Tell me about your home and who lives there, is there anything you are thinking about that you would like to talk about?"

"Do you have any questions for me?"

"What is a thing/activity that makes you happy?"

"If you could do anything in the world what would it be?"

-- April Harrison, personal experience of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires

"How have you been going?"

"Do you think about it much? Is it on your mind?"

"Are you finding it hard to concentrate?"

"Do you feel uneasy or frustrated?"

In general, I would just follow up the needs the child presents whatever they are, especially if they contain no reference to the fire (which is most likely). They will substitute other issues for the fire and they are the ones that need to be responded to first, then perhaps the fire will come up when they feel safe.

-- Rob Gordon, PhD., Clinical Psychologist

Q. The disruption to education due to COVID-19 has put teachers (particularly in Victoria) under increasing pressure to achieve academic results. Any comments on supporting teachers to provide flexibility and support to children following a bushfire?

COVID has certainly thrown a spanner in the works with how the education system works. In some ways there have been many positives and some aspects of remote learning which should be held onto. The pandemic has made it quite challenging regarding achievement targets and goals. In some ways it is out of our hands and all we can do is support our educators to do their best teaching and support children to do their best learning whether that be face to face, remote or a mixture of both. We did find that throughout the pandemic and bushfire, education was the consistent which really supported educators and children to have a common focus. We aimed to ensure we didn't drop the ball on our priorities and it was a great distraction from the global chaos that was unfolding. In saying that we also named it and acknowledged that in some cases achievement targets might look differently than they had previously. We aim for a minimum of twelve months growth for every child in every classroom, but also acknowledge that twelve months growth looks different for each child.

For some children impacted by bushfire or pandemic twelve months growth in 2020 might be a slightly different trajectory to what it had been previously, as they may have required a modified program to support with their response to trauma. The most important part for us was to be really transparent when talking with students, families and educators regarding academic achievement. For many children accommodations were not necessary, hence academic results and 12 months growth wasn't impacted, but for those who required accommodations then we were not afraid to acknowledge this and own it. When supporting educators to provide the flexibility, time to talk with children and their families was one of the best levers for providing support. Unpacking how families were actually going and then planning together strategies which worked for individual students was critical. There was no 'one size fits all' approach, but by talking with children and their families we were able to identify what worked for each child and then move on from there. It was about not dropping the ball with education, but providing accommodations and flexibility for children, families and educators when necessary.

-- Jess Moroney, Principal, Lenswood Primary School

Make sure school leaders make clear (backed up by regional and head office leaders) that what is important here is the children's recovery. It is quality of engagement and sensitivity to the situation of the child, if they cannot work like they did last year there must be a reason – they have things on their mind and sharing those is the priority and getting them to have some areas of achievement in whatever way they can, this is more likely to motivate them to start working. Teachers can substitute easier work or work in areas the child enjoys or can do easily just to give them some breathing space or leeway to work through their emotions while still allowing them to feel they are performing and achieving. Emphasising that the best preparation for a successful year 12 (if that is the concern) is a successful recovery in the current and following years, rather than pressuring them to perform when they cannot. That is more likely to put them on track for dropping out in later secondary school or getting through year 12 and dropping out of tertiary. If they were coping with their work before the fire, that should come back when they have worked the fire through so that is the priority during recovery.

-- Rob Gordon, PhD., Clinical Psychologist