

# Be You Virtual Conference Transcript

## Recognising, reflecting on and responding to grief and loss in a school community

**Presented by Nicola Palfrey and Sheralee Fordham**

### Nicola Palfrey

Hello, everybody, and welcome to this session of the Be You virtual conference. I'm Nicola Palfrey I'm the national clinical manager of Headspace Schools.

### Sheralee Fordham

I'm Sheralee Fordham, I'm a Be You consultant, and I specialise in education. Today we're looking at recognising, responding and reflecting on grief and loss in school communities.

### Nicola Palfrey

Yes, so, as Sheralee says, we're going to tick tack as we go along today, we're going to be presenting some information. We'll be inviting you to contribute as we go along in the chat, we have a couple of poll questions. We also have our lovely team members, Natasha, Georgina and Pim in the chat box to help moderate and answer some questions and resources as we go along. So, we invite you to contribute. It's much more interesting if we hear from you guys as we go along.

### Sheralee Fordham

First, we would like to acknowledge country. So, Yumalundi, which is hello in the language of the Ngunnawal people. Nicola and I are on Ngunnawal lands today. We would also like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work. And we value their identities, cultures, and continuing connection to land, water, kin and community. It is our privilege to be able to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, looking after the land we are on today. We would also like to extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future, and to any Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people who are here today. We encourage you to acknowledge the country that you are on in the chat, and if you've got your language, add that too.

### Nicola Palfrey

Thank you, Sheralee. As we start off our conversation today, as always, we just want to remind everybody of the supports that are available for yourselves. As we talk through a topic like grief and loss, we all come into today and this week, this year, with our own experiences of adversity. You can't get through life without adversity, it's what builds us up and makes us strong, but it also can undo us at times. So, I encourage you to check in with yourself. Obviously, all of these supports are available that we are very used to referring

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other people to, but we just wanted to draw our attention, your attention to them today as we go through today's chat.

Moving on from that, we also want to encourage you to participate, as I said, but I ask us all to be respectful of making this a safe and inclusive space. And what we mean by that is, in discussions about our own grief and loss, inevitably, our own experiences will come up, as I mentioned, and whilst that's really helpful for us, to take some time to reflect on ourselves, whether it be as an educator, as an adult in life, as a parent, as a child, as a friend, all of these things will come up, and we may want to explore that and discuss our own experiences. I'd ask you to be really mindful of the impact that may have on others joining us today.

Whilst we might feel comfortable sharing our own stories, we can never be certain how that might land on somebody else. So, we ask if you do share questions or experiences that you keep them general, so that everybody can participate and feel safe to do so. So, what are we going to cover today? We're going to look at grief and loss. We're going to pull the lens back a little bit and give you a definition of what we mean by grief and loss, because it's not just bereavement, or grief by death of a loved one. So, we want to talk about the context in the school setting, because we think there's a huge amount that educators in the setting experience, in the early childhood setting, in primary, in secondary, in tertiary settings all the time, and we know there's roadblocks. There's roadblocks from educators managing and acknowledging their own distress at times, and we'll unpack some of those, and look at ways to overcome them.

We'll also look at how we respond to grief and how planning in that can be really helpful. There's a mix of predictability and lack of predictability in how grief and loss impacts us. So, let's plan for what we can, and then learn to have some strategies to cope with what we can't always plan for. And then think about what we need. Going through the levels as an individual, as a community, with our peers, up and down, thinking about what we can get in place for each other, for ourselves. The theme of the conference is self care, as we know, but what that looks like. We're not gonna use that word as much, that can turn people off, but how can you look after yourselves and be the best you can be to keep doing what you want to do, which is be a great educator.

So, grief and loss in school communities. What do we mean by grief? When we talk about grief and loss, as I said, we're not just talking about grief by bereavement. Grief can be individual, it can be familial, it can be on a community level, and it can be on a global level, as we've all experienced over the last 12 to 18 months now. I would consider last year to be a year in which pretty much everyone in the world has experienced a sense of grief and loss, whether it's death of somebody they care about, whether it's a loss of freedom, whether it's a loss of plans, hope, all of those sorts of things. And that's what I want us to think about today as we're conceptualising how we manage grief, cope with grief and work with grief and look after ourselves, is that it comes in many, many forms.

## Sheralee Fordham

So, one of the things we wanted to explore today in our presentation, was the different types of grief and loss that we can experience in school communities. So, in our role as educators, we actually do quite a lot of things. We have many connections with people, many relationships. We talk to school leadership, to colleagues, to community, to families, and all of those places are places where we can intersect with grief and loss.

So, some of the things that we find in our everyday educator life, where we might have an experience of loss, would be farewelling a colleague, for example, if they're retiring or moving to a different school environment. Maybe they're being promoted, so they're no longer within your faculty group or within your team, or if they're transferring to another position or school. Farewelling students is a big one for educators as well, through that regular process of graduation. It might be through transition, from one part of the school to another, if you're in something like a central school, or even just through transience, where you have students moving to different school locations, or moving across states. All of those are aspects where, as educators, because we have a relationship with those young people, that's necessary for us to be great at our job, is also a place where we can then intersect with that sense of grief or loss.

There's also, for ourselves as educators, our ability to feel loss when we change a position or a role. As an educator myself, some of those experiences have been where I've moved from one, looking after student leaders, for example, into a year advisor role, but actually having to let go of that space first, before I could move into my next transition. So, those are places where you might find a sense of grief or loss. If you're in an acting position or if there's a leadership opportunity, moving away from something that's familiar, that you are confident in, into a new space, can also be a challenge. There's professional losses through things like redundancy or restructuring. That's happened quite a lot in education recently.

Or, also, changes to permanency and transfer. So, if you are moving from a temporary position into a permanent position, from a permanent position into a temporary position, to a period of leave or possibly even transfer to another school. In addition to that, because that's all part of our school community, we then have community grief and loss. So, there might be vandalism at your school or an accident or a natural disaster that has changed the way you feel about your school environment. So, that might be an external coming in or it might be internally. There might be an incident within your school that creates that sense of loss of safety or loss of confidence in your school community. And then, finally, the death of a colleague, a community member, or a student. Sadly, because we are so connected to one another, those things can impact us quite strongly and none of us are immune to those kinds of losses.

### Nicola Palfrey

I think one of the things, obviously people across Australia are dealing with community trauma events right now, this week, in New South Wales and Queensland where I think it's a very unfortunate but apt example, where schools become the centre of a community. A lot of us would have seen on the news the schools, the primary school kids, I think they were kindy kids, sleeping overnight because they couldn't get home safely in New South Wales. So, the school community is the hub of... Disaster recovery is often there and then the knock-ons of that. And the other thing to say about community trauma events is, as educators, we impact it personally as well. So, we have our professional hat and we have our personal hat.

So, we're coming in and trying to provide what we know is the best thing for kids after traumatic events or critical incidents around stability, relationship, back to normal, where our normal could have been turned completely upside down. We might have lost our own home, we might be really concerned about our parents in another state that we can't visit. So, we're always wanting to think about the parallel processes that you might use a lot and probably shouldn't. But how do we hold our own experiences as an individual, as a human, and how do we interact and do the best for our students and young people? We're really good at telling others to look after themselves and to consider those things, but there is a very strong culture in educators. I'm not an educator, but I come from a family of them and I'm surrounded by them, of stoicism. And that can be to our detriment at times.

### Sheralee Fordham

Yes, definitely. So, one of the things that I wanted to bring forth after thinking about those different spaces of grief and loss is this quote that I found from an educator on Twitter. So, this is Bianca Jimmy Hughes who's quite prevalent in the Twitter universe. And Bianca wrote this quote as part of a larger body of writing. The last observation I want to make about farewelling a beloved class is this. They are not your family. We must remember that we have friends and family outside of our teaching life. We must give more time to the non-teaching life. We must nurture those relationships so they flourish and carry us into the time when we are no longer teachers. The truth is, as wonderful as a teacher can be, and those relationships are very real, no denying it, it is temporary. You are not your job.

You are a human being with a life beyond teaching. Don't lose you to your job. You'll regret it. And I think this is actually indicative of something that, as teachers, we get very, very connected to our community and we fall into a trap sometimes of putting our school community and our students above other things in our lives, which then, when we leave teaching or when we leave a school community, can actually intensify that sense of loss and grief. So, I thought this was actually worth bringing forward because it is a way of increasing a protective factor for yourself as an educator, which is to make sure that you have a strong and vibrant life outside of school so that helps buffer the things that you face daily within the school community.

### Nicola Palfrey

Yeah, I think it's really... I'd be interested if people wanted to put in the chat their response to that. I think that will resonate with a lot of people, but also it can be hard to hear. I think, certainly, in our line of work when we're talking about looking after the mental health and wellbeing of young people, we bang on all the time about the importance of a relationship between students and their educators, and it is absolutely crucial. And I think what this highlights is a balance is important, but I also think what we want to foreground today is the pressure on educators. It can be damned if you do and damned if you don't in exactly the same way we do the parents, you know. If you stay at home too long, you're lazy. If you go to work too soon, you don't care about your kids. If you breastfeed for too long, it's creepy. If you don't breastfeed at all, you're a bad parent. All of these sorts of things, the same with educators.

If we don't engage enough with young people and we don't take the relationships to heart, then we're not doing a good enough job. But then there is a feeling that, perhaps, if you're too distressed about a school, a cohort moving on or so forth, that's a bit unusual and your professionalism is dropping. So, I think it's really important to also acknowledge that we're just humans and we're going to feel really connected to certain people that we engage with, the same we do with colleagues, the same we do with kids in the community that we meet with, that we might coach them in sport. And we really like some teams and we feel really connected to them and it feels sad when we move on.

### Sheralee Fordham

Yeah, there's definitely that sense of tension, I think. As a professional, in a classroom, you need the rapport to work well with young people and to get the best out of them, but then the tension between then also having to have that professional facade in that space, definitely is something that makes it difficult, particularly when you have these regular transitions like graduation where that's sort of an expected thing every single year and we don't actually necessarily think about the impact of that long term or process that regularly. So, I think that's important.

### Nicola Palfrey

I think the other thing I wanted to bring up is, before we get into the roadblocks, just stepping into that space again around what can impact an educator around grief and loss. And I was sharing with Sheralee, I asked my teenagers today, I've got a 13 and a 15-year-old, what might make educators sad or what might make them experience, you know, not feeling so great, grief and loss. And the first words out of my 13-year-old's mouth were bullying. And I asked her whether she meant amongst kids or teachers, and she said, well, both. But it was very interesting, my son, who wasn't quite listening, because he's 15... Yeah, I tuned him in again. He also said bullying. It was not the first but it was the second thing out of his mouth.

So, teachers experiencing bullying was something that kids thought they might experience. The other thing that my son said was not being listened to and not being respected in terms of what make them feel sad. And we had a conversation around efficacy, that sense of you feeling like you're doing a good job which is, I think, what he was talking to, or maybe I'm putting words in his mouth. But I think when we have a sense that we're not doing well, this is when it can snowball. So, if we're starting to feel a bit overwhelmed by grief and loss, by sadness, frustration, kind of just burnt out by the world a little bit, we get more rigid, kids pick up on it, they stop listening in class, they start trying to get you back on. Like, where are you? You're not the same you used to be. Then we get more stuck. And so, it escalates. So, I think it's all these cumulative factors, and I think you've been talking about that, Sheralee. It's not just one thing.

### Sheralee Fordham

Yeah, definitely. And I think, too, it's just the breadth of the experiences that you can have as an educator in terms of those griefs and losses. I think we sometimes, as educators, put a little a hat on that goes, "No, it's fine because that happens all the time." And so, we try to be very protective of ourselves in that respect, but don't acknowledge that we need to actually process that so that we can keep moving forward. And the fact, too, I think, that what we do as educators actually, then, our young people and children will reflect back to us. And I've seen that, you know, teacher walks in, coffee, chocolate, that's what we're surviving on during report time, and then we're surprised when our Year 12s come in and they're like surviving on coffee and chocolate to get through the HSC. So, I think sometimes, as educators, we forget that how we respond to something, how we process our grief and loss, that's what we're modelling for our young people and they will then think that that's appropriate.

### Nicola Palfrey

Yeah, exactly. So, we want to go into the roadblocks and barriers because there are many, and roadblocks and barriers in terms of getting support or perhaps acknowledging and getting what we would ask others to do. We are asking kids all the time to come forward and ask for extra help, whether it's in terms of getting their assignment done or their mental health and wellbeing, but we're not always great, as I said, of doing it ourselves. I think there's... well, there are a multitude and we're gonna ask you. We've got a poll coming up in a sec. Some of the things that are kind of present in our minds are, what will people think of me.

So, that kind of professionalism or lack thereof that we perceive that asking for help might evoke in others to be seen to be not coping, that's a double negative, is it, is not something we want to do. That sense of, I

should be able to manage this. So, this happens every year, or teachers are supposed to cope with that. That supposed to, should have, could have, would have, is not helpful, but it does get in the way, I think. And then really that notion of, it's not as bad as. Really common, really unhelpful. Particularly, we see it in community trauma all the time. I don't want to access those mental health supports because we're not as badly off as the people down the road. We only lost our fences, we didn't lose our house. So, all of that is a really common trait and it's rewarded as being, you know, considerate of others but it's also self-sacrificing and detrimental, if we do that as well. Worry. I'll be judged, lose my job, all of those sorts of things. So, we've got a whole list of things that we think, but we want to hear from you.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

So, let's open the poll.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

Yep. What gets in the way? So, this is about ourselves but also when we notice somebody else is grieving. And again, think of grieving as in wobbly, struggling, they might have had a loss, they might have lost a pet, they might have lost their home, they might have had a marriage breakup, they might have, you know, be really struggling with a change of leadership in the school setting, all of those sorts of things. What gets in the way? We're gonna ask you what gets in the way of you offering help, to start off with, and then, of course, we'll ask you to reflect on whether or not that ever applies in the alternate. So, you might be worrying about saying the wrong thing, being uncomfortable, feeling a need to fix it. Our own grief, you know, not wanting to go into a conversation if we're being uncertain about how we might respond or something else you can put in the chat. So, I'll give you another 30 seconds or so to add in that and then what we'll do is go through them.

One of the things that I think is really interesting is, and again, we were talking about this today, when we talk about how to support somebody through grief and loss, whether it's a child, a young person, an adult or a peer. We were talking about how we could write a fact sheet or an information sheet about difficult conversations, regardless of the content. It could be supporting them after grief, supporting them after separation, supporting them after adversity, supporting them through any other difficulty. The commonalities in terms of what people need are there, but people's comfort level, I think, with weighing into this ground makes it tricky.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

Definitely. And I think, as educators, because we're problem solvers, like, every teacher is a problem solver in the classroom. And so, I think, as educators, there is a bit of that cultural sense, Gosh, we have to fix it, we have to make it better." Like, it took me a little while, when I first started teaching, it took me a little while to get comfortable with those uncomfortable moments with young people when they burst into tears on you and you're, like, instantly you want to just make it better. But having to actually sit back and go, Actually, it's OK that you're crying. I used to say to my kids, sometimes, it's OK because you're waterproof. Because they get really upset. Oh, I'm crying. I've snotted everywhere. And you're like, "It's OK. It's actually OK to feel that and to have that moment. So, yeah, I think that need to fix or deflect is a big one.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

So, had enough time. Yep, let's go and let's see what gets in the way.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

So, it's looking to me that about 50% of our responses are saying, fear of saying the wrong thing.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

Yeah, saying the wrong thing. Yeah. So, I'm gonna knock them all on the head. That's my job here today, to get us to step into these conversations. And the response to fear of saying the wrong thing is, I'd ask you to reflect on a time when you were in pain and hurting and what it felt like when somebody came up and expressed empathy, care. Did you notice whether or not they mucked it up or did you notice when people avoided you? And it's one of the biggest things we see, particularly in grief and bereavement, is the hurt and distress of being avoided as if there's something wrong with you, particularly with big grief. We do fear

saying the wrong thing and we can say the wrong thing, and we'll talk about some of the things not to say. However, it is much better to say, and any of you who have seen the Brene Brown, the difference between sympathy and empathy. If you haven't seen that video, I encourage you to watch it. She says a couple of really useful things. One of which is, never did a compassionate sentence start with...

**Sheralee Fordham**

"At least." (LAUGHTER)

**Nicola Palfrey**

At least. At least, it's not as bad as this. At least you've still got one good kid." Or, "at least..." whatever. It's not helpful. The other thing is, you can't really go wrong if you say, I'm not really sure what to say, but I'm just really sad to hear what you've been through." Really simple, really straightforward. We don't have to fix it, right? What was C, how big was C in terms of fixing it?

**Sheralee Fordham**

Feeling a need to fix was 30% of people were saying that, yeah.

**Nicola Palfrey**

So, wrong thing and wanting to fix it. The power of listening and engaging with people is what we know helps, right? We know that on a visceral, personal level if we think about it. We also know what it feels like when someone tries to come and fix something that's not really fixable. It's irritating. Our partners do it all the time. (LAUGHTER) We often don't want people to fix it. You can't fix grief, but you can be with someone in it. I'm sad, can I take something of your load. Can I get you a cup of tea. Like I get it, I get that you might need some space. Please don't say, "I get it, I get exactly what you've been through." (LAUGHTER) I shouldn't have said that.

But the desire to make it right and the desire to have the perfect answer get in the way a lot. And so, I would encourage everybody to just think about... (BREATHES OUT) What might be nice, what might be kind. And it's surprising, all of us have been through, as I said, some kind of grief and loss. And we remember people that really surprise us, that step up. It might be that they just come up and put a bloody Tim Tam on my desk. And they walk away and they leave us be. But then we also notice the people that do a kind of really wide concentric circle around us, as if our grief is so unpleasant you can't be around it, and that's hurtful. So, I think going in with the willingness, and ask, it's like all this stuff when we're talking about tricky conversations. If we're not sure, ask. Is there anything I can do for you? Do you wanna be left alone, do you wanna chat?" Those sorts of questions, I think, are really helpful.

**Sheralee Fordham**

And sometimes it's just your presence in that space, in that moment. That can be very helpful and supportive too. I had a colleague a few years ago, where that was just the one thing she really needed, was just people to be there. Not say anything, not do anything, just be, and just allow it to be there and holding some space. Other responses in our poll were being unable to trust leaders in a school provide help in a sensitive, timely and appropriate way. Also, where we don't have close personal space with each person that we work with can sometimes be a barrier. The fear of what people might think of me and they're not wanting to look vulnerable in front of others.

**Nicola Palfrey**

Yeah, and we're gonna go through some of those, again. I think it's still amazing to me that we keep having these conversations, there's still such a persistent and pervasive notion that showing vulnerability is weakness. When time after time after time when we actually test people's views on it, the opposite is true. It reminds me of that show a few years ago, where this young guy talked to, I'm not gonna be very specific, talking to young blokes about their feelings and they step up to the line. Some of you remember this, you step up to the line if you cried in your life in the last six months, in the last week, in the last day, da-da-da. And Year 9 and 10 ten boys all did it, a couple of kids were in tears and it came out, what did you think of, you know, Stuart and James, that cried just then, do you think they're weak? No, they're super brave, I can't believe it, I have compassion, I have empathy, I didn't know they were going through that. When we actually

ask people what they think of somebody expressing vulnerability, is inevitably that they think it's strength and humanity or they saw a side of them that I didn't see before. It'd be very rare that somebody thinks it's real weakness. Or if they do, that's their own stuff. (LAUGHS)

I would encourage that. So, sometimes, you get a response, which is a bit like, for heaven's sake, that's unprofessional. For heaven's sake, they shouldn't be doing that. That's their inability to tolerate that distress. So, yeah, I think we should kind of lean into that because I think we're all human and we know that about each other, that we would offer the others the kindness. We need to offer it to ourselves as well.

**Sheralee Fordham**

Yeah, cool. So, how do we respond to a plan for grief? Nicola? This is often a curly question.

**Nicola Palfrey**

So, I think there is a couple of concepts when we talk about grief and loss across the age range. But for all of us, there's been a really unhelpful but really dominant narrative that there's five or six stages of grief, and we move through them in a linear fashion. So, the people that developed that model never said that. (LAUGHS) It's been taken out of context. Certainly, there are points in time we might feel some of those things, so, sadness or bargaining or acceptance, all of them. But the point is, we move in and out of grief. There is a predictability, to a certain extent, of a normal grief process. However, there's also prolonged grief, there is grief that doesn't kick in until a bit later. We're actually seeing quite a lot of that at the moment.

For a lot of educators, as we're coming to the end of term one, there's a sense. And certainly in the Be You community, I know a lot of consultants that are talking about, schools are finally... (BREATHES OUT) Maybe a few weeks ago, had a bit of breathing room to kind of engage in a way that they couldn't last year when they were just reeling off the back of disasters, then COVID and so forth. But also, then it feels like that it's been very quickly followed, as we see often, we see this in the disaster context, a drop of adrenaline and now everyone's exhausted. Who's getting sick, kids are getting sick. So, there is a timeliness that can follow a path.

But I suppose the notion is, as you said, we're gonna talk about what you can plan for but also judging or not judging yourself. I can remember after the death of someone very dear to me, the following year, it was the day before the anniversary and I was very upset. But I remember saying to people, it's really stupid 'cause it's not the anniversary today. And they were like, what! In my head, I was like, it's not today, it's tomorrow. So, I'm not allowed to be upset, it should be tomorrow. This is not rational, but it's this judgement on ourselves about how we should or shouldn't do things. So, we move in and out of it and kids particularly move in and out of it. And you will have seen that in your life. As educators, you will see it in the school setting. Kids particularly distressed by something that's going on and then they move on really quickly.

The reverse of that is something to be aware of as an adult because that can leave us quite undone. So, say if you had a loss in the community, let's say you had a death of a colleague, a staff member. So, you may be managing students' grief. And then they move on and you see them going to the playground and they are fine. They seem fine. And they may be fine in that moment but you're left completely depleted. And that can be really difficult to manage even though you kind of know cognitively that that's normal. Cause you might not, you know, we can't be experts in everything. So, kids moving out of grief into moment to moment doesn't mean they don't care. But it can feel like that, it can feel really hurtful.

**Sheralee Fordham**

And I think too, because educators are really good at putting other people first. Often educators will, in a critical incident, or where there's been, you know, a death in the school community, or even just loss generally, they'll put themselves behind a little barrier, sort out the kids, make sure everything else is going well in their classroom. And they kind of... It can be a delayed response. And I think sometimes that creeps up on us and we judge ourselves for that.

**Nicola Palfrey**

For sure. So, in terms of having a response to grief, all of this stuff is something where we put in a presentation around educators' support in grief in children. It is exactly the same for yourselves. So, if you're responding to loss, crying, some people are really good at it. Some people can bring it on, you know.

I've been known when I'm really worked up and I know I've been building up stress for a really long time that when I have time and space on a Friday night, say, I watch a movie that I know is going to make me cry because it just, I like, need an outlet...

Sheralee Fordham

That catharsis.

Nicola Palfrey

Catharsis, exactly. Creative expression, talking, as we said, I think coming back to that Twitter quote, it's a good point. It's like we have relationships in school and we draw on them really heavily and educators draw on each other. But also outside of it, rather than just say, oh, it was a busy week, you know, who can you share with who can you get extra support from? Exercises are boringly predictably helpful. It's really good for us and we know that once we've done it. And play, like, how do we have fun? How do we have capacity to kind of express ourselves, but also move through it? And the need to distract from feelings. I'm sure educators, like lots of other professions, dark humour is rife...

Sheralee Fordham

So prevalent, so prevalent.

Nicola Palfrey

And we need it, you know. I think one of the, when I was learning about some of the brain science and, you know, serotonin and cortisol and all those sorts of things, and I read somewhere that they were talking about the need... So, serotonin drains off cortisol, right? So what that means, it means when you laugh, you get less stressed and sometimes your brain will activate it. So, when you get the nervous giggles in a really tense situation, that's your brain trying to calm things down. So, when you burst out laughing at a dinner party or in a serious conference or something like that. So, that capacity, and I think in class, you know, that notion that, oh, this has been really heavy. It's been a really heavy term. It doesn't have to be disrespectful.

Sheralee Fordham

Yeah, absolutely.

Nicola Palfrey

Is a really important point, I think. So, all of those things, giving yourself permission as well. Sometimes we beat ourselves up for not... For showing feelings, and then we beat ourselves up other times for wanting to step away from them.

Sheralee Fordham

Yeah, 'cause it can be hard to sit in that space for a long period of time as well. And so, you do need that release. And I think too, as educators, recognising that young people, just because they're laughing at something in a really serious moment, doesn't necessarily mean they think it's funny. Sometimes I think we forget that. And to understand that it can be a physical release of tension, is really important.

Nicola Palfrey

And also I think, you know, we work with a lot of schools that are managing an enormous amount of stress and distress and grief and loss, particularly in the postvention space. So, there's this huge amount of responsibility that the school are holding around the wellbeing of their students and their student body and their families and their communities. They need some circuit breaker sometimes just... They're going to be back on that any minute now, don't worry about it. But that permission, I suppose, to have a bit of a space to have, you know, a silly meme set around or a cup of tea and a bit of, you know, a giggle debrief about it. Terrible TV show, something like that.



## Sheralee Fordham

So, some of the things that we can do then to help support ourselves and others when we're dealing with grief and loss, either ourselves personally, or if we're supporting someone who's experiencing grief and loss, is to embed our self-care. So, one of the things that I've been talking a lot about with educators lately is the importance of actually making self-care something that you have embedded in your daily practice. So, it's not just something that you come to... Gosh, I'm having a stressful day. I need some self-care, but it's actually something that you do all the time. And then increasing and sort of levelling that up when you have those moments that are particularly stressful, like a moment of grief or loss. So, improving sleep is something that we can all do to support ourselves for being the best self we can be when we get into a classroom or in everyday life. Minimising exposure to conflict or environmental stressors.

So, if you know that having a conversation with that particular person is going to stress you out, put it off for a little bit later, you don't have to necessarily do it straight away. Get back into nature. As someone who lives on a rural property, I love being out in nature, watching the birds, you know, watching the ducks on the dam. There's actually something really lovely about being in the natural space. Going to the beach is another one of my favourites. Giving yourself permission to take some consecutive days off. I think often as educators, we sit in a space where we are... You know, I'm not well, or I'm not coping, but I can only take a day, or I can only take a moment or half day. Giving yourself permission to take that extra time off so that you really can decompress, I think is really, really important. So many times, like, you take your day off, but you're still kind of holding everything. And I think that consecutive day is really important. The anchors in your life. They might be best friends, partners. Sometimes even children, sometimes in my world, just knowing that, I have a menagerie, knowing that my menagerie relies on me, can sometimes anchor me to the present and the moment.

## Nicola Palfrey

Is a menagerie what I think it is?

## Sheralee Fordham

Yeah, many, many animals. Many, many animals, a bit of a zoo. I have a bit of a zoo. Thinking about what you put in your mouth. You know, the banana... being able to say the banana not a muffin and a root beer. For me, it was the pink milk and the chocolate Freddo. Just being cognisant of that and knowing that, you know, have the apple instead. Switching off from emails and social media. I think that absent minded scroll can be a really big thing. But then sometimes you do just need a good binge-watch, I find, sad movie. And then start talking and recognising that vulnerability is a strength.

## Nicola Palfrey

I think it's all a balance, right? I think that switching off from emails is a really good one. I think there's... We've all probably played with this a bit over the last 10 years of being able to get emails at home, where we thought, oh, that's good, isn't it? I can knock off a few more. And then you're like, hold on. There is no border between my work day and my non-working hours. And certainly, with the working from home and mixing and matching. I think we'd all agree, when we put boundaries in, it's better. You know, there is, I think, a false efficiency sometimes, in being available all the time versus actually not having any off time and that not being restorative. The same around social media and binge watching. I think, you know, it is great to be able to switch us off, but going back to the first point when we're doing it til 12 or 1am in the morning, and then we're really impinging on our sleep. It's hard. It takes discipline. Cause it is designed by nature to keep us there.

## Sheralee Fordham

Sometimes it's that self-awareness too, when you sit there and you're like, oh gosh, I've been on this for... I've been watching that for like three hours.

## Nicola Palfrey

When it says, are you're still watching?

Sheralee Fordham

Yeah. Yeah.

Nicola Palfrey

That might be a cue.

Sheralee Fordham

To like, you know, move to a different room.

Nicola Palfrey

Yeah. Yeah.

Sheralee Fordham

So, planning for grief and loss. How do we plan to respond in terms of grief and loss in school communities? And so, one of the things that we wanted to present today was some practical strategies for yourself as an educator or for your school community to actually help you support people or yourselves in this situation. So, one of the things we can do, obviously, is to anticipate when we're going to have a difficult time. So, I had a friend who was a year adviser a little while ago, and I knew she was very, very connected to her year group. And so, one of the things we as a faculty do, we'll be like, graduation's coming, we need to put some things in place to make sure that we've got a bit of extra space and time for our colleague.

Just, you know, a nice card or an extra cup of tea or something like that, just to, because we knew that was coming, just to add that extra level of support in that season. Systemically, schools might do that around providing extra casual support, so that teachers don't have to be on the whole day. They might take a playground duty so that you've got that little bit of extra time. Or if, you know, like a colleague's, an anniversary of a colleague losing their partner is coming up, maybe you would then just provide that little bit of extra flexibility around that in case they need to take some time. Personally, I find that planning, if I know that there's going to be period, like I'm losing my year group or something like that, doing some meal planning, just doing some of that practical stuff so that I don't have to think about what I'm going to cook for dinner that night, I've got something ready to go. And that's also a really good one for that, think about what you put in your mouth as well, because you're not then just gravitating to the easy you've got something ready to go. I also embed a bit more intentional self-care.

So, making sure you've got that extra time to have coffee with a friend on the weekend or, you know, some time to sit and watch a movie and planning some of that additional self care, that more supportive stuff in and around those anniversary times. And then collegially putting some space in your day for you to support yourself or a colleague. So, making time to connect, planning for conversations. Making sure, for example, with my colleague who lost a partner, because I had planned a bit of time in my day, when she needed a class covered, I could take it for her. And I had other things already in place for my own planning that allowed me to have that time. I wasn't desperately looking for that time. So, I think sometimes just making sure that we've got a little bit of flexibility. I'd say probably flexibility is the big key thing. Yeah.

Nicola Palfrey

I think all of those things are really helpful and we need the reality check that, you know, wouldn't it be great if we said, get some casuals in, have some time off class, all of those sorts of things. And we know that that's impossible for most educators most of the time. I think the thing to remember as well is if you're feeling really wobbly and worn down, so are your students, probably.

Sheralee Fordham

Yeah.

## Nicola Palfrey

And I think there's been some really interesting conversations, some more helpful than others, about the impact of home-schooling and in and out of, well, not home-schooling, but schooling at home, has had, and the impact on kids' educational outcomes. All that kind of stuff. It's global. So, I think people just need to take a step back. If they have... If you're feeling overwhelmed in that, you can't really get through it, the curriculum, the class, the classroom, your students are probably similar and you'd be better stepping back, doing something fun, doing something connecting, doing something relational. They'll appreciate it. They'll enjoy it. And then you're probably going to be more productive next time. So, I think, thinking about it at those levels, and I know that sometimes that's hard to do because there's a lot of pressure, huge amount of pressure on curriculum and performance. Revert back to the science. You can't learn if you don't feel safe. If you're feeling really worn out and disconnected, the outcomes are not going to be achieved anyway. You're just going to have to cover it again. So, you're not actually saving any time.

## Sheralee Fordham

And you do actually make a bit more of an inroad when you do it. When you've taken time to connect your class together and then you take it later, you'd be amazed at actually how much you can actually get through at that point.

## Nicola Palfrey

Well, and it's what you're modelling, right? We say to kids all the time when they get super frustrated with an assessment piece or an assignment, like, step away from it, come back, what's your plan? What are you going to do? You know, have a break. All of these sorts of things we say all the time, it's modelling that as well. So, what do we need in terms of supporting each other with? Sheralee has gone through a lot of them already, but we want to be able to support each other, support ourselves, our peers and our community. So, we've got a couple of key concepts that we'll go through that a lot of you will be familiar with that have had anything to do with Be You, which is the notice, inquire and provide. So, a scaffolded conversation. So checking in, if I'm coming in, going for work a number of days, I'm not coming out, I'm not really chatting in the tea room, notice you've kept to yourself a bit lately. I'm wondering if you're travelling OK. Can I do anything for you? Do you need to chat?

## Sheralee Fordham

And, look, it can be as simple as taking somebody's photocopying and getting it done for them. Like, it can be that, honestly, if you're in the photocopy room anyway, sometimes, and even you don't necessarily even have to take it to them. You can just put it through and they can collect it in a moment. But sometimes it's just those real little things.

## Nicola Palfrey

And I think one of the things we can get caught up in, particularly if this is not in our nature and it feels very awkward and fumbly to do it, is that if we try it once and people don't automatically say, well, thank you for asking, yes, I'm really feeling wobbly and blah, blah, blah. It's not always going to happen, but people will remember that you asked. You know, we've had this conversation about, you know, young people and students and that they remember. They might not say to you in the moment, actually, I'm having a really rough week because mum and dad and I had a huge fight and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But they remember that you actually gave a hoot and actually asked how they were and your peers and colleagues will be the same.

So, what do we need most? Again, these are taken straight from presentations we give on what young people need when they're experiencing grief and loss, because we're all human and we need the same things. So, we need connection and belonging. We need to feel part of the communities that we're in, the school communities, our families, and that needs to be supported. So, we need to be welcomed in and we need a sense of, you're part of this, and we're in this together. Schools are really good at it, it's their bread and butter. It's what we do day in, day out, but just reiterating that, that you're part of this community, we know you've had a hard time and wrapping around each other. Conversation. It's not the same as therapy necessarily, we need opportunities to chat, and space, and who we can chat to around that.

Autonomy and choice as we see it. So, not, do you want have a chat now? Would you like to have a chat? Do you want me to leave you alone? Those sorts of things. Do you feel that... Is it helpful for you to be at work at the moment? Do you need to be offloaded duties, where we can, and again, recognising the difficulties that exist, where we can offer autonomy and choice is great. Agency and respect is critical for all of us that you have some say in what's going on. And that each person's ability, we don't shame people for over responding for under responding, for, they didn't even cry, or they cried. So, thinking about how they are. Protection and advocacy. So, step in when you need to, for your colleagues, and speak up for them and say, well, actually, they're not OK to be on class at the moment, I've spoken to them, they don't feel like they can talk.

So, I'm going to speak for them in these circumstances, with their permission. And as we've talked about, opportunities for joy. And that could be those circuit breakers, but also to talk about whatever the loss was. Their house, or their pet, or their partner, or the student, or whatever it might be that loss was. One of the most crippling things is when you feel you can't talk about it, because it's going to distress other people. Oh, don't bring that up. We do it to kids all the time. We don't want to bring it up in case it upsets them. They're already upset, let them talk about the good, the bad.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

But those moments for joy too, when you're reflecting on, you know, a great thing that you've had with that person or in that home, or they're actually really healing, I think, too. And when people get so worried that bringing it up is gonna create some kind of avalanche, I think that actually then robs the person who's grieving of that moment to...

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

100%.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

..move through.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

The context and centre of all therapy around healing from trauma is narrative. (LAUGHS)  
And people have been doing it for many thousands of years, telling stories to heal.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

So, we have another poll now. We're looking for you to tell us what practical strategies you can put in place to support yourself and those around you with grief.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

So, have a look at the poll, complete that. And also any other questions in the chat. So, we're gonna challenge you in the last couple of minutes to think about what you can do, what your next steps might be. And also open it up for questions, I think. We've only got a couple of minutes to go. So, we'll let that poll tick away. And we'll talk about it as we go through. But as we're finishing up, obviously, there's a whole load of resources that you can access in Be You that talk about well being, talk about grief and loss and so forth. So, we encourage you to have a look at them. But let's have a look, have we got any...? What are people thinking they might do?

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

We've got 39.4% are saying having a range of self-care strategies embedded. And being available for conversation and active listening.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

Yeah, great. So, just having a look in the comments, no questions, there was a comment. It's hard to switch off from emails at school, we get at least 100 a day, and if you miss something crucial, it's disaster. Emails get full and you can't respond to any new ones. So, the problem compounds. It's a really good point. I

mean, I think sequestering some time is really helpful to do that. But recognising, the old sort and delete is also another great strategy. But yeah, I recognise it is really difficult, and I think, in the systems we work in as well, it's really important that we try and work out ways to reduce that load. And also make sure that if it is critical, is email the best way to pass on that information, or is there other things to do.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

Yeah, one of my colleagues was a very big fan of the, write the reply and then delay the send. So, they'd actually done it, and it was all good, and they could take some time out, and then it would send when they'd come back to work. So, that's another strategy that might be useful.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

We've got other strategies suggested. Monitor personal physical and mental health and seek expert support in a timely way, in addition to family and friends, which is a really good point. So, if we need it, knowing, again, we do a lot of signposting and when we think we need the young person to see somebody else, get more expert advice, and we all need to do that as well. Your GP is a great place to start that. We got any other things to get through? Last few slides.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

Pretty sure...

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

So, yeah, encourage you to think about that.

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

Question and answer? We've pretty much dealt with most of those things.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

I think so, they've come through. So, yeah, think about what your next steps will be. There's another suggestion. Going out all together for a debrief off site. Yeah, it's a great idea. And those things are really important, those connection and so forth. And it's hard to do, we were talking about this, you can't just go and get a coffee like you might do in another workplace, off site very easily. But suggestions for even just going outside or taking...

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

Taking a walk around the oval. And one of the things that I think might be useful as a next step is, I used to write my wellbeing strategies in my diary every day. So, today, I'm gonna have a chat to this person or tomorrow I'm gonna go for a walk or, just as a little reminder.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

You're really organised. (LAUGHTER)

[Sheralee Fordham](#)

You can get a well being teacher diary that actually does it for you.

[Nicola Palfrey](#)

I think it's helpful to think about... I mean, we've had this conversation a lot over the last year. And I think it's also noticing the things that help and then not necessarily kind of saying, oh, they're my well being strategies, but just then prioritising them. So, what my one of mine was the driving home, past my favourite trees, cause in the seasons in Canberra, they are like the different stages, but it's that just little moments in time...

## Sheralee Fordham

I like the moment watching the new lambs and calves, cause I live rurally. As you drive out to work in the morning, you can see the little lambs gambling around. It's very lovely. Alright, so we've talked about learning more about Be You, [beyou.edu.au](http://beyou.edu.au) is our website. And you can find a whole range of resources there to support yourself in well being and your own professional development around mental health and well being. And we've got our Twitter handles, Facebook handles, YouTube, LinkedIn, you'll find us on all the social media platforms. And that's pretty much us for today.

## Nicola Palfrey

I think we, yeah, we encourage you to check out the other sessions and yeah, be in touch if you need more information or advice. Otherwise, go well, look after yourselves. Thank you.

## Sheralee Fordham

Thank you.