

HELPING ADOLESCENTS AFTER A BUSHFIRE



This has been designed for Teachers and Parents highlighting possible reactions and offering suggestions for helping adolescents work through issues relating to Bushfires.

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic events such as Bushfires will impact more on some students than others. Students will have individual responses to the event and will be affected in different ways.

What Can A Teacher Do?



- Firstly, ensure your own needs are being met. You may need support / assistance in dealing with your own thoughts, feelings and emotions.

You will be unable to assist / support students until you have worked through your own issues.

- Put the event in context – provide a perspective.
- Begin the healing process.
- Identify those students who may require support from mental health professionals.

NATURAL DISASTERS AND THEIR EFFECTS

What is a natural disaster?

A natural disaster is a devastating, catastrophic event that may be life threatening, injury producing and thus may create the following distressing experiences



- Sense of fear
- Disruption to home and school routine
- Feeling that one's life was threatened
- Witness to injury, death, pain
- Feeling isolated
- Feeling that life is out of control
- Threatening basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, comfort

Please Note:

Some students have been involved as part of a Response Team around the Bushfires. Some students have been assisting with fire fighting, Red Cross and other community requests for assistance.

POSSIBLE REACTIONS ADOLESCENTS MAY EXHIBIT AND WAYS YOU CAN ASSIST

❖ Fears and / or anxiety about safety of self and others

Talk to students about safety- feeling safe and being safe; allow time for students to discuss their concerns. You can validate their concerns by listening to them and acknowledging their fears and anxieties.

After discussion it may be helpful to do a relaxation activity – Ask students to close their eyes and visualise going to a safe place, ask them to think about what they can see, hear, smell and feel. Ask them to stay with that image for a few moments and then ask them to open their eyes.

These fears usually diminish in a few weeks.

❖ Increased sensitivity to noise/smells relating to bushfires – such as fire, smoke, sirens and loud noises.

It may be helpful to allow students to discuss the necessity of sirens – they can make a list. Smells relating to fire has both pleasant and unpleasant aspects – ask students to come up with lists for both.

❖ **Changes in behaviour:**

- **Decreased concentration**
- **Angry outbursts**
- **Absenteeism**
- **Altered academic performance**
- **Increase in negativity**
- **Withdrawal**

Students need as much normality as is possible. Timetables and Rules need to be reinforced.

Help students to develop a realistic view of the event.

Allow students to express anger appropriately, try to respond calmly and assist them to return to the task at hand.

Keep close contact with parents to ensure you are aware of any difficulties students are experiencing.

Do not be alarmed by a temporary lack of concentration – do allow individual students time to discuss any issues and offer suggestions of how you can work together to alleviate pressure.

Sometimes students need to be by themselves in order to make sense of what has happened and gain acceptance of the event.

❖ Lack of interest in usual activities

Try creative class activities that promote student confidence

Organise a fun activity- such as a cricket match against another class.

Ask students to organise a fund- raising activity.

❖ Inappropriate behaviour

Students may show signs of distress by displaying aggressive behaviour towards both teachers and peers.

Students respond to praise, make every effort not to focus on the inappropriate behaviour.

These reactions usually last for a short time.

POSSIBLE REACTIONS PARENTS MAY SEE AND WAYS YOU CAN HELP ADOLESCENTS

❖ Altered sleep patterns

Some adolescents may experience difficulty going to sleep and/or nightmares.

It may be useful to use bedtime as a time your young adult can spend talking to you – if you listen carefully to what they say and validate their feelings they know you care.

Some may want a hug.

❖ Changes in appetite – Some adolescents may be less interested in food.

Appetite changes usually disappear within a few weeks.

Engage your young adult in assisting with decisions about what the family might like and ask them to assist with preparation.

❖ Withdrawal – Some adolescents may be disinterested in spending time with friends and family, or competing in regular sporting activities.

Sometimes people need ‘time out’ in order to process what has happened, make some sense of it and finally acceptance of their experience.

It is helpful if the family can continue doing enjoyable things together – this also assists with accepting the experience and moving on.

STUDENT DIFFICULTIES WITH CONCENTRATION

Some students may find it difficult to concentrate and therefore could benefit from suggestions on how to manage their schoolwork commitments.

❖ **Time Management Skills**

❖ **Study Skills**

❖ **Relaxation Techniques**

Following pages give some suggestions for students relating to the abovementioned topics.



TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Time Management means managing yourself. It will assist you to be happier and more successful.

Why Time Management is Important

It allows you

- To succeed
- To achieve
- To meet deadlines
- To socialise
- To lead a balanced life



You will need to:

- Make up a Daily List of Things To Do
- List Goals and Set Priorities (make up a sheet and put it in a prominent place)
- Make yourself up a Personal Evaluation to see if you are completing set goals and priorities.
 - Look at things like – Self Motivation, Relationships and Self Confidence. If there are areas you need support/assistance to work through ask teachers/parents/friends to help.
- Work out what your Daily Time Commitment needs to be and include this when putting together your Study Timetable

STUDY SKILLS

FOR LEARNING - WE NEED TO HAVE A PLAN

Study Preparation

Firstly, list what you would like to achieve. Make sure there are no distractions- use an alarm clock to assist you with breaks –such as - work for one hour, break for ten minutes, resume work for one hour.

Make up a checklist for ensuring your study sessions go smoothly –

An example of a Checklist

- Trouble getting started
- Setting unrealistic goals
- Interruptions
- Not understanding the subject requirements
- Worried about something

If any of these are causing a problem talk to a Teacher/Parent

To achieve your goal of a successful Study Session you will need to:

- Fill out your study timetable and stick to the tasks you have identified as priorities to complete
- Make sure your study environment is free from distractions – let Parents, family members and friends know when you are unavailable
- Keep your study area tidy – this will generate efficiency

EFFECTIVE STUDYING

A positive attitude is very important because you are in charge of your Study Program.

Listed below are some suggestions for effective study.

- **You need to make sure your study becomes part of your daily routine – it then becomes a habit**
- **Concentrate on the task you have identified as a priority**
- **Make your own study place an environment where you have all the necessary materials to complete the task at hand- Organisation is a necessary step to successful study**
- **Start immediately at the time you have nominated to commence study**
- **Keep a Timetable of your study times and what you have completed – you will begin to see the goals/ priorities are achievable**
- **Make sure you have a diary and write in it daily all the things you need to remember – refer to this prior to your study session**
- **Ask teachers for Helpful Hints on**
 - **Research Skills**
 - **Essay Writing Skills**

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Quick Relaxation Techniques

- Quick all over tense, release then stretch like a cat and concentrate on your breathing – breathe in 1 2 3 4, breathe out 1 2 3 4.
- Think of your favourite place
- Sigh out tension – Aahh
- Play relaxing music
- Use a Relaxation oil in your oil burner, such as Lavender, Orange, Rose and Ylang Ylang

Suggestions for Dealing with Anxiety

- ❖ Go over the events of the day – write down those that produced anxiety, then list ways you might address these
- ❖ Close your eyes and visualise yourself dealing effectively with something that gives you anxiety – think about how you feel – think about what you will do/say
- ❖ Use ‘thought stopping’ to break the cycle of worrying thoughts – you will need to consciously think about something else that is pleasant.
- ❖ Before responding to a discussion/action causing you anxiety – Breathe deeply and sigh out the tension

WHEN TO REFER AN ADOLESCENT TO A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL.

If after approximately a month you notice a number of the following behaviours are continuing to manifest, mental health professionals are specially trained to assist.

They can help parents understand the unusual reactions of their adolescent. A good starting point for a Teacher would be making contact with parents and then with Guidance Officer/Social Worker, Department of Education and Training in your area. Parents can make contact with the School and ask for assistance with a referral to a mental health professional.

POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS

- ❖ Unwelcome memories
- ❖ Talkative about the event
- ❖ Bad dreams
- ❖ Reminders are distressing
- ❖ Fears about fires
- ❖ Somatic complaints – headaches, stomach aches.
- ❖ Numbness
- ❖ Withdrawn
- ❖ Sleep difficulties
- ❖ Irritable
- ❖ Difficulty concentrating
- ❖ Hypervigilance
- ❖ Separation problems
- ❖ Anxiety
- ❖ Aggressive or antisocial behaviour
- ❖ Eating Problems

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(Acknowledgement that some of the materials have been adapted from 'Recovering from Loss' – Health Department, Victoria, 1985.)

