

# RESILIENCE AND SELF CARE FOR PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

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# AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

## THE AUTHOR

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She is currently Professor of Psychological Medicine at the Australian National University and Professor of Population Mental Health & Disaster at the University of Western Sydney. She has chaired the National Prevention, Promotion and Early Intervention Working Party and has written numerous reports relevant to the prevention and management of trauma, loss and grief as they affect children, adolescents and families. In 1984, Professor Raphael was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her work in mental health and in 2008 the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrists awarded her the College Medal of Honour – its most prestigious award for distinguished and meritorious service.

ACATLGN is a national collaboration to provide expertise, evidence-based resources and linkages to support children and their families through the trauma and grief associated with natural disasters and other adversities. It offers key resources to help school communities, families and others involved in the care of children and adolescents.

This project was funded by the Australian Government.

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This document is for principals and teachers who have been or may be required to respond to disasters, mass emergencies or other critical incidents. It outlines strategies to promote resilience and self care for principals and teachers as they support themselves and their school communities in the time before, during and after these events. People involved in leadership roles through disasters and their aftermath face many challenges. Building resilience and promoting self-care are important ways to enhance your capacity to manage any such incidents. Ways to build resilience include establishing psychological and practical preparedness strategies before an emergency; sharing leadership tasks during an emergency; and taking steps toward returning to normal function following an emergency. Self care involves learning about your strengths and coping styles, how to manage stress and how to connect with others for mutual support. It also involves maintaining your physical wellbeing and knowing when to seek help. These strategies can help you fulfil your leadership role during a disaster experience and to look after your own needs and fulfil your personal and professional roles in the aftermath.

## Introduction

Principals and teachers have extensive responsibilities for children and adolescents, providing not only education, supportive environments and developmental opportunities, but also exercising a duty of care for their students during school hours, known as 'in loco parentis'. This places them in a unique position of providing care, support and safety in the event of a critical incident.

Principals and teachers already play significant roles in developing their school's crisis or disaster plan, and are well-equipped to deal with a range of emergencies, from smaller incidents affecting only a few students, through to major events. Nonetheless, only a few will have had direct experience of disasters or of the role they may play. They may face significant challenges in the period from disaster warning through to risk appraisal, emergency, response, aftermath, and recovery.

## How might a mass emergency or critical incident impact upon a school?

- It may occur during school hours, directly affecting teachers and students in school buildings and environments, alongside the broader community
- It may directly affect specific schools such as hostage taking, school-based violence, fire or other hazard
- It may occur when students and teachers are not at school, as with the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (February 2009), but where the school community is affected as part of the disaster impact.

## Resilience

Resilience refers to our ability to cope with and recover from adverse events in our lives.

Resilience refers to our ability to cope with and recover from adverse events in our lives. Resilience can be bolstered or strengthened. It can also be worn down by stress, fatigue and inadequate support. We enhance resilience by identifying those actions that strengthen our response to the disaster and which help us in the face of future threat.

Teachers and principals need to be mindful of their own resilience, to become aware when it is running low, and to learn ways to bolster or replenish it, before, during and after a disaster.

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When facing a disaster, challenges for principals and teachers include their own experience of the disaster and its acute effects and ongoing consequences for them, their families and communities. Principals and teachers also face the challenge of understanding and responding to the students in their care, whose lives and those of their families have been changed, challenged, disrupted and potentially transformed by the bushfires. Supporting and helping students experiencing these tragic and painful consequences requires courage, altruism, strength and resilience. Staff may find these internal resources running low, which can impact on their decision-making, physical or mental health or relationships. Teachers and principals need to be mindful of their own resilience, to become aware of when it is running low, and to learn ways to bolster or replenish it, before, during and after a disaster.

### Resilience before the emergency

**Practical and psychological preparedness strategies work best together to help you gain confidence that you can deal with a future threat.**

The key strategies to build resilience before an emergency relate to being prepared. Preparedness strategies can be practical or psychological. Practical and psychological preparedness strategies work best together to help you gain confidence that you can deal with a future threat. These strategies are dealt with in detail in 'Preparedness: Facing Future Disasters' by the same author but are summarised here.

#### *Practical preparedness*

There is national agreement on a Prepare, Act, Survive strategy as well as on a new system of emergency warnings. There is also commitment to providing new advice about extreme or catastrophic threats and the importance of strategies to leave early in such cases, where this is possible. Victorian Government strategies have also identified the potential need to close schools in extreme threat circumstances. These advice components are available from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/default.htm>.

Planning ahead is important in order to be ready for upcoming bushfire seasons and for other disasters, especially those where there is a higher risk with predicted weather patterns. Excellent guides to bushfire planning have been developed:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/emergency/default.htm>

<http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/residents/summer/firereadykit.htm>

[http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/file\\_system/attachments/Attachment\\_BushFireSurvivalPlan.pdf](http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/file_system/attachments/Attachment_BushFireSurvivalPlan.pdf)

Practical actions include drawing together resources – knowing how, when and where you might go, and having a contingency plan in place if this doesn't work or can't be done safely.

#### **Key elements for practical preparedness:**

- Prepare and know the plans of your family, school and community
- Practise your plan
- Have resources to hand – such as contact lists, torch, portable radio and batteries, protective clothes, mobile phone, water and food bars
- Plan for safety

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## *Psychological preparedness*

Preparing psychologically builds personal strengths to help you deal with future threats.

### Psychological preparedness strategies for teachers and principals

- Learn about risk for disaster or other threats; your local/state preparedness and warning strategies; what to do to protect yourself and your school; and how to access external assistance
- Know and practise strategies and skills for protecting students, staff and yourself
- Recognise and learn to manage your own reactions to life-threatening circumstances and your own arousal and fear, so as to be able to mobilise yours and your school's strengths
- Practise exercises and drills to promote confidence and competence for an emergency.

## Resilience during the emergency

During the emergency, principals and teachers display their experience and expertise with quiet courage and ability. Nevertheless they face considerable challenges.

### *Challenges faced by teachers and principals during the emergency*

- Dealing with the needs of their students and staff, to the best of their ability. If a disaster or other incident occurs during school hours, they may need to handle threats to life and provide strategies for safety and survival.
- Dealing with their personal experience of the disaster and the possible broader threat to their own families and community
- Managing and organising aspects of the response to the emergency in collaboration with emergency services
- 'Hyper-arousal' (hype). Heightened arousal is a common psychological reaction to an emergency, especially for those in a leadership or management role. It can help drive effective management and decision making, but sometimes can continue at very high levels, making it difficult for the leader to let go, or hand over to others. This has been called the 'counter-disaster syndrome' and may impact on decision-making and functioning. It can lead to exhaustion.

### *Strategies to build resilience during the emergency*

- Share decision-making: it is easy in an emergency or when under intense pressure to either over- or under-estimate risk or threat.
- Limit tours of duty and have a deputy, senior colleague or leader, or other person to hand over to in order to step down and return with strength, especially if the emergency period becomes extended.
- Monitor hours of work. Repeated 12-15 hour days are not conducive to good leadership and decision making.
- Be watchful for the responses and needs of yourself and others you are responsible for throughout the emergency.

## Resilience in the transition to the aftermath

The transition to the aftermath occurs when the threat to physical safety has been resolved. At this time, individuals often count the costs, recognise the losses and start to deal with what has happened. This includes deaths that have occurred; uncertainty about the whereabouts of loved ones; relief and sometimes guilt at survival; and concern, fear and distress over what happened in the emergency, whether at the school, with family, or elsewhere.

### *Challenges faced in the transition to the aftermath*

- Heightened arousal may continue through this transition, leaving leaders in an overactive state
- Individuals involved in the disaster may begin to review what happened, reflecting on their personal experiences and what they and others did. Leaders may blame themselves for what they could not or did not do, while failing to recognise their own courage and what they did achieve. This may lead to a preoccupation with guilt or with what happened.
- Leaders such as principals and teachers may have suffered a personal disaster experience and may still be experiencing ongoing impacts of the trauma, or profound grief, loss or dislocation. Leaders may be left with fearful feelings, a sense of having nearly died, some level of traumatic impact and reaction, depression, sleep or health problems. This usually settles in the first week or so but if it continues and disrupts the person's capacity to function or is overwhelming, it may indicate the need for assessment and care. If teachers have been affected in this way it may make it difficult for them to deal with the distress of their students in the times ahead.

### *Strategies to build resilience in the transition to the aftermath*

- Use step-down strategies to gradually reduce hyper-arousal
- Begin to return to 'usual' functioning. Continuity and routine is important for both students and teachers. These normalisations or continuities help the psychological and social processes of recovery.
- Develop compassion for yourself, in the same way as you would have compassion for others experiencing the emergency.
- Stay tuned to your own reaction and needs. Seek help if you are experiencing ongoing distress or difficulties.
- Recognise increased tension among staff in their relationships with each other and other members of the school community.
- Develop strategies to deal with any acute needs, behavioural and emotional problems that may be appearing in student reactions.

## Resilience in the aftermath and recovery journey

Disasters such as the Victorian bushfires are likely to have a long recovery period, particularly with ongoing disruptions such as temporary accommodation, family pressures, school transitions, dislocation from familiar settings and ways of life, and ongoing grief about the many painful losses. Challenges at this time include dealing with ongoing reminders of the disaster like blackened forests, the empty places where houses and other buildings used to be, memories returning unexpectedly, or re-experiencing some aspects of the disaster such as fear or helplessness. Anniversaries are powerful reminders, both of the disaster, but also of other significant events that were shared with someone who died at the time. New problems may arise post-

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disaster, requiring problem-solving at a time when teachers and principals may still be experiencing ongoing personal reactions to the disaster.

### Strategies to build resilience in the aftermath and recovery journey

Recognise when memories and reminders are likely to upset you or others. Try to hold onto calm or hopeful thoughts and positive memories or experiences to balance those that are more painful, recognising that both are natural parts of recovery. Sometimes you need to do this in a conscious way, to teach your brain a different way of thinking.

If you experience an upsetting memory, try slow breathing for five or more breaths, slowly in and out. Try taking time out and drawing comfort or support from others. Helping someone else can reinforce feelings of efficacy.

Plan ahead to prepare for anniversaries and deal with the emotional aspects bit by bit, to lessen the impact when the time comes. Plan to be with friends who are positive, hopeful people and who can also support your distress and grief and support you through such difficult times. Or plan to be alone if you feel this would be your better choice.

If you face new problems post-disaster, break these issues down to components that you can progressively manage, starting with those aspects that are easiest to address. This helps to prevent problem overload and reinforces strengths.

Keep a positive outlook. Post-disaster is a tough time for most people. While people generally get through this and are resilient, it is useful to remember ways to keep positive:

- Gather information to see what you can learn to help you during this stage.
- Remember your strengths: what you know about your emotions, coping and thinking strategies, how you manage fear and negative feelings. Reinforce the positive and count your achievements.
- Connect with others – this will help you, and them. Showing you care and sharing your concerns can help both others and yourself through difficult times.
- Make time for positive activities and time with loved ones
- Look after your life. Don't let the disaster and its aftermath take away your hopes and wishes for the future. Look after your family and personal relationships. You are all needy in such circumstances. Tackling problems together helps if done with the aim of shared outcomes.
- Look after the love and affection in your life. This is a two-way process and probably the most important thing to get you through tough times.

**Look after the love and affection in your life. This is probably the most important thing to get you through tough times.**

Strategies that work for you through this time can also be helpful for your family and your students. Strengths built through both your hard experiences and this disaster and its aftermath can help you in a range of future contexts. There is clear scientific evidence that once you start with positive thoughts and feelings, and start to act, it becomes easier to be hopeful, optimistic and emotionally resilient, helping you and those you are involved with through this and future tough times. Keeping notes of lessons learnt can contribute to a resource to help others in the future, and has been found to improve physical and psychological wellbeing.

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Stay tuned to your own reaction and needs. Seek help if you are experiencing ongoing distress or difficulties.

## Self care

Leaders such as principals and teachers need to develop self-care strategies. These are part of building your personal resilience to deal with everyday stressors and adversities, but can also help in dealing with the disaster after-effects and new or ongoing trauma. These can also contribute to the personal sense of efficacy and competence, and can give a greater sense of wellbeing. Self care strategies provide some ways for teachers and principals to look after their mental and physical health in the face of a disaster or critical incident.

## Learn about yourself

Ongoing learning about your work is an accepted and important part of most professions, in terms of both knowledge and skills. This is also true for learning about your own life skills. Learning about your own life skills can help to build strengths for the future. Try answering these questions: what has worked for me in terms of coping with problems; managing relationships; handling crises; thinking through challenges and making decisions? Make sure you recognise these strengths and coping strategies as well as ways of dealing with things you find difficult. It is also important to look for the challenge or positive aspect of a difficult situation, as well as the danger or risks.

## Manage your stress

Most people know when something is the last straw or too much for them. Try to recognise this before you get to your tipping point.

There are different ways you can try to manage your stress. It is worth trying different ways to find something that works for you.

### Ways you can manage stress

Recognise problems and break them down into manageable 'bits'.

Manage the number of stresses to which you are exposed. Most people know when something is the last straw or too much for them. Try to recognise this before you get to your tipping point. Use trusted colleagues to help monitor this.

Practise physical stress management techniques like taking slow, deep breaths; taking time away from the stressful situation; relaxing with music; thinking calming thoughts about peaceful, positive experiences; practising body relaxation or massage; and reducing alcohol and caffeine intake.

Try stress inoculation training. This involves thinking of stressful or threatening situations, anticipating them and dealing with them so that fear, distress or other reactions can be 'de-conditioned' to some degree. This technique can help you to use behavioural and emotional skills to lessen the impact of stress. Similarly, thinking through problems and possible solutions beforehand may also assist.



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Write down stressful experiences. This has been shown to be helpful in dealing with their effects and can lessen their impact on physical and mental health.

Share your concerns with someone with whom you have a supportive relationship.

### Link in to systems of support and connectedness

It is important for principals and teachers to link into systems of psychosocial and practical support or, if need be, establish these. Make sure you have a system of support, especially through difficult times, like the aftermath of the bushfires, and in coming seasons. Having a support group amongst teachers may allow staff to share difficulties, provide emotional support and assist with developing ways forward.

**Connect with others. This will help both you and them. Showing you care and sharing your concerns can help them and you through difficult times.**

#### *Sources of support*

- Family members are usually the first line in sharing distress: getting and giving support is likely to help both ways. Sustaining affection, care and positive two-way bonds in family life contributes in major ways to the wellbeing of all members. This involves engaging in rewarding activities together as well as mutual support and affection through tough times.
- Friends can provide support, especially those with whom you share open communication and trust and with whom you can share concerns.
- Work colleagues can provide connectedness, mutual concern, respect and support. This can help to strengthen personal resilience and that of the organisation.
- A peer group of teachers or principals is a very effective strategy for mutual support, building on the value of having been through the disaster together or sharing other common concerns and strengths. Such a group can be informal or phone-centred, but is usually better with some regular face-to-face discussions. It can also help to set up a structure of meeting times and shared responsibilities such as where you will meet. It can also help to have an outside advisor or mentor, perhaps one with mental health expertise. They can provide information; guidance about when, how or where to get help; and ideas and strategies to deal with students' needs, in class or elsewhere. This support model is useful for day-to-day management of the distress that students may present with, problems in relation to other emotions and behaviours, or mental health problems and their management and referral. It will also be very useful for the first and second years after the disaster, and possibly beyond.

### Maintain physical and mental wellbeing

Practical activities that are part of your everyday responsibilities in work or other settings, can, in themselves, give a sense of structure and value. If your roles and work have become a problem for you, this can affect your physical and mental wellbeing.

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Develop a personal action plan with a focus on your physical health including proper nutrition, regular sleep patterns, physical exercise, time for activities for yourself or with your family or others, and time for nurturing your relationships.

### Know when to seek help

It is important to seek professional help if you need it. Consult your GP, Mental Health Service or a professional such as a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist or other mental health professional with recognised skills and expertise relevant to disasters, for assessment and care.

People who seek help for disaster impacts usually find it valuable and often wish they had done it sooner.

### Signs that you may need professional help:

- difficulty sleeping
- problems concentrating
- increased alcohol use or taking other drugs (not medicinal)
- feeling on edge or fearful most of the time
- feeling despairing or hopeless or depressed much of the time
- feeling numb or disengaged
- feeling preoccupied with what happened
- relationship problems at home or work
- feeling so bad you feel you can't keep going
- feeling irritable, angry, or even out of control
- other unusual experiences, or changes in yourself, in your relationships with others or how you view the world.

Further information about self-care resources and access points:

The Australian Psychological Association: <http://www.psychology.org.au/bushfires/>

Department of Education and early Childhood Development, Victoria:  
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/support/parents.htm>

### Conclusion

Building resilience and promoting self-care are important ways to look after yourself and help you get through a disaster experience. These strategies can help fulfil leadership roles during a disaster experience and importantly, in the aftermath, they can also help you to look after your own needs and build your own future.