

# THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER SELF-CARE

Information sheet produced for the Victorian Bushfire Support and Training for Affected Schools Project

May 2010

D1.2

This project was funded by the Australian Government.

## Looking after your own health

In all likelihood, teachers of children impacted by natural disasters such as the Victorian bushfires may also have been affected by the traumatic events, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, caring for others who have experienced the trauma may not only be a stressful experience, but may compound the teacher's own reactions.

The impact on the teacher or person caring for the young person can involve feeling physically and emotionally worn out, feeling overwhelmed by the young person's trauma and reactions and experiencing traumatic stress of their own. This is also often referred to as 'compassionate fatigue' or 'secondary traumatic stress'. Such reactions are not a sign of weakness. Rather, they are a cost of caring and helping others.

There is some overlap between the reactions demonstrated by young people following trauma and those of teachers experiencing 'secondary traumatic stress' or 'compassionate fatigue'.

Signs that may indicate teacher distress/secondary traumatic stress are:

- Decreased concentration and attention
- Increased irritability or agitation with students
- Problems planning classroom activities, lessons and maintaining routines
- Feeling numb or detached
- Intense feelings, intrusive thoughts or dreams about a student's trauma (that don't reduce over time)
- Symptoms that don't improve after a couple of weeks

Be on the lookout for any signs of teacher distress or compassion fatigue. The earlier you notice these, the earlier you can get help.

Teachers who look after themselves and manage their own stress levels are more equipped and able to manage student behaviours and difficulties. Try these tips for teacher self-care:

- Monitor your own reactions, emotions and needs.
- Seek out support for yourself. If your signs persist for longer than two to three weeks, it might be a good idea to seek further assessment or assistance from a health professional.
- Similar to the buddy system for young people, find your support system. Just like students, teachers need to protect themselves from becoming isolated.
- Seek help for your own trauma-related distress. Teachers who were also involved in the trauma or teachers who have other unresolved traumatic experiences are at greater risk of developing 'compassion fatigue'.
- Use positive coping strategies to manage emotions and distress
  - Try out calm breathing techniques, muscle relaxation, imagery (relaxation)
  - Challenge unhelpful thoughts that cause you distress.
  - Look for resources to help you feel more in control.

## AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

- Maintain a structured classroom environment. This is a good thing for both children and teachers.
- Plan ahead where possible, and have back-up strategies for difficult situations so you don't have to do it on your own.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle.
- Make time for yourself, family and friends.
- Spend time with students who have not experienced traumatic stress.