Responding to students affected by natural disasters

Brought to you by the Counselling Service

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An overview

Today we will discuss:

- The types of responses that you may witness from students impacted by natural disasters
- How to recognise signs of distress.
- The best ways to help students who have been affected utilising your own resources, skills and abilities.
- How to refer students to more specialised care if needed.
- How you can look after yourself.
- Provide an opportunity for you to discuss any concerns or thoughts.
The Range of Responses to expect from students

• Students who have been affected by the natural disasters will have a variety of responses depending on the level of impact of the trauma for them personally and their own resilience and coping strategies.

• Responses will include physical responses, cognitive responses, emotional responses and behavioural responses.

• There is therefore not one predictable type of response that you will witness, so the best indicator of impact is likely to be a noticed **change** in the student.
Examples of Stress Responses

Physical
- Difficulty sleeping
- Lethargy
- Feeling sick or somatic symptoms (colds/flu's, upset stomach, body pains)

Cognitive
- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Attention problems
- Problem solving difficulties

Emotional
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Intense anger
- Incongruent emotions (a strong emotional reaction to a minor issue)
- Irritability

Behavioural
- Withdrawal/isolation from others
- Unable to maintain normal responsibilities
- Difficulty communicating with others
Grief and Loss

• Grief is a personal experience that we each experience differently.
• “Stages” of grieving may not be sequential and the time to grieve cannot be predicted.
• Grief responses can include denial, anger, depression, anxiety, guilt, loss of pleasure in living, and hopelessness.
• These responses may be expressed overtly (e.g. tearfulness) or more subtly (e.g. withdrawal, numbness).
Signs you might notice that might indicate someone is having difficulty coping

- Student is missing classes when they previously used to attend regularly
- Student seems inattentive or listless in class
- Student asks for an extension because they are unable to complete their work
- Student has a dramatic weight loss in a short space of time
- Student is regularly physically unwell
- Student does not communicate as well as they used to.
- Student seems more withdrawn and is less social with other students.
Other important issues to be aware of

It is important to:

• Be sensitive to topics in class that might stimulate memories for students affected by natural disasters. Be on the lookout for a distressed response if you are discussing topics that may be related to natural disasters.

• Openly acknowledge that students may be affected by natural disasters and let them know that it is okay to talk about it.

• Be aware that the media attention on natural disasters might also trigger past memories of negative experiences that seem unrelated. This can heighten a student's response to the trauma of a natural disaster.
What helps in recovery from trauma

- Practical support to deal with everyday issues and new issues arising
- Having a social link and engaging in activities that are pleasurable
- Being understood by others – having the suffering acknowledged helps the traumatised person feel cared for.
- Being able to talk about the experience with a trusted other or others
- Reducing other life pressures and having time out when needed
- Self care and stress management practices (e.g. a nutritious diet, getting enough rest and sleep, and exercise).
What DOESN’T help in recovery from a trauma

• Social isolation
• Withdrawing from others and dropping out of pleasurable or recreational activities.
• Avoiding situations and places that recall the trauma
• Using alcohol or drugs as ways to reduce the distress
• Not being able to talk about the experience, for example, when others refuse to listen or try to understand**

**This factor alone can be the most damaging in terms of recovery as it increases isolation and repression of the feelings that need to be expressed.
How you can help

• First and foremost – provide practical support. Be prepared to assist affected students more actively than you might in other circumstances (e.g. making phone calls, facilitating a referral by walking them to the point of service and introducing them to the service provider)

• Think of some small things that you could do for someone who is traumatised to help reduce the burdens of everyday living. Think creatively about some “small acts of kindness” that you could engage in.

• Help to provide the structure and routine of ordinary activities (this can be very reassuring to people). Don’t leave affected students out of the everyday activities that their classmates will engage in.
How you can help cont…

• Be prepared to listen when a student talks to you. You don’t need to counsel them but if you are their first contact, establishing trust and letting them know that it is okay to talk about their experience is vital. This trust will help you to refer them to a professional counsellor.

• Stay conscious of the fact that recovery is a long and often slow process. Long after the event has faded from the news headlines, those traumatised by natural disasters will still be experiencing the effects – time does not “cure” and healing takes time. It is important not to push the issue underground or imply someone should be “over it” if they tell you that they are still traumatised months or even years later.
When to make a referral to a service

• If a student tells you that they cannot pay their fees
• If a student talks to you about withdrawing from their course and requires a refund of course fees.
• If a student is experiencing visa issues as a result of impact of a natural disaster
• If you are worried about a student because they are displaying signs of distress, either overt or subtle
• If you feel out of your depth in being able to assist them.
Facilitating the referral process

You can assist in the referral process by:

- Informing the student of services available and encouraging them to attend.
- Being willing to accompany them to the service provider or making the first phone call if they are nervous about attending but have a trusting relationship with you.
- Accepting that the student may not wish to make use of a service. The student may not feel ready or may feel uncomfortable about using a service and it is important to let them know that they have the right to decide this for themselves.
What if a student does not wish to take up a suggested referral?

• Although it might make you feel nervous if a student decides not to take up a suggested referral, remember that just raising their awareness of services available may result in them utilising a service at a later time when they do feel ready.

• It is okay to gently remind them about services available at a later time if it seems that they have still not sought help.

• You can also always speak with a counsellor about your concerns by contacting the Counselling Service on 9925 4365.
What about the impact on you as a staff member or fellow student?

- It is important to acknowledge that hearing such heavy material is difficult and you may need support and debriefing from your friends or colleagues.
- It is possible that you will experience some stress symptoms yourself if you are engaged in supporting a traumatised student.
- You may also have been personally affected by the natural disaster yourself and may be in need of counselling support.

- Staff members can access support through the RMIT EAP program: http://www.au.ppcworldwide.com/

- RMIT Students can access support via the RMIT Counselling Service: http://www.rmit.edu.au/counselling