

In Focus webinar
handout:
Building capacity
in learning
communities to
promote recovery



With delivery partners



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Key messages and reflective questions

The key messages from the webinar are summarised below. Each key message includes reflective questions to discuss in your Action Team, or other staff, meetings. These are designed to support your school in building capacity around recovery. We encourage you to discuss steps you can implement in your learning community with your [Be You Consultant](#).

1) Being prepared for critical incidents is key to minimising their impact on your school community. A well-thought-out plan with specific roles and pre-prepared templates can help to minimise disruptions to learning, promote help-seeking and enhance recovery.

- Does your school have a critical incident plan? How often is this updated?
- Does your school have an up-to-date emergency contact list?
- Are key personnel familiar with the plan and the steps they would need to take?

2) Plan how your school will plan for, and respond to, activating events. Activating events cause emotional distress by reminding people of the original critical incident.

- How does your school communicate about the possibility of an activating event?
- How does your school ensure staff and students who are impacted in an ongoing way have access to mental health support that's appropriate to their needs?
- What resources can you develop to support recovery after a critical incident?

3) Self-awareness is crucial for managing stress and avoiding burnout. Recognise early warning signs and set up support systems before stress reaches a tipping point.

- Do you have a wellbeing plan? How will you stay accountable for the actions in it?
- What internal and external supports can you lean on if you need support?
- What strategies can you draw on to support one another during a challenging period? Eg, establishing a peer support system, bringing in relief teachers.

4) Critical incidents have a significant psychosocial impact on principals and leaders.

Consider how you can create a supportive environment for leaders across schools.

- Could you establish regular drop-in sessions?
- What external supports or people can advise and support you during recovery?
- Could you engage with a leadership support network (eg, the principals association network in your state or territory)?

5) Extend support to neighbouring schools that have been impacted by a critical incident.

It is often easier to provide support when you have an existing well-established relationship.

- What steps can you take to establish relationships with neighbouring schools?
- How could your school provide a collective and coordinated response?
- How can you ensure you communicate about a critical incident in a way that's respectful and reflective of the school's circumstances and context?

Links to resources

The following resources can support you in building capacity in learning communities to promote recovery. These have been grouped according to commonly requested resources asked by webinar attendees.

Preparing for, and responding to, a critical incident

[Be You's Suicide Postvention Toolkit](#) can help your school to create a plan that covers how your learning community will respond if a young person dies by suicide.

[The Be You Suicide Response Plan template](#) can help your learning community outline the essential roles and responsibilities of your Emergency Response Team when responding to a suicide. The template should always be used in conjunction with the toolkit.

For templates on preparing for, and responding to, other critical incidents, most sectors have a specific critical incident management plan. We recommend speaking to the Department of Education in your state or territory, or your relevant sector body, to obtain a critical incident management plan for your area and sector.

Be You's Professional Learning includes [Responding Together](#) as a core domain. The professional learning modules within this domain aim to help you recognise the possible impacts of a critical incident on young people and encourage timely and appropriate interventions. There are specific modules on the recovery process following a natural disaster or other community trauma.

There are also a range of fact sheets on grief, trauma and critical incidents, including on [disaster preparedness, the role of schools in supporting students after a traumatic event](#) and [supporting children and young people affected by grief](#).

Educator wellbeing

Be You has a number of resources to support [educator wellbeing](#), including the Educator Wellbeing Plan and the Beyond Self-Care: An Educator Wellbeing Guide.

Longitudinal data from the [Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey](#), conducted by the Australian Catholic University and Deakin University, highlights the significant psychosocial impact of being in a school leadership role.

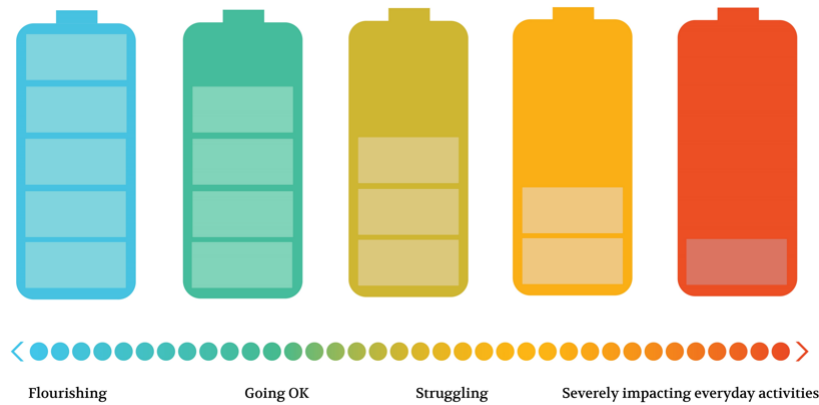
Some papers that explore the impact of dealing with critical incidents on leadership include [Emotion in leadership: Secondary school administrators' perceptions of critical incidents](#), which explores how secondary school leaders derive meaning from critical incidents retrospectively, and [Critical Incidents in the Development of Supportive Principals: Facilitating School Counselor-Principal Relationships](#), which highlights the importance of principals being able to access professional supervision in a similar way to psychologists/social workers.

Providing support to young people

The Notice Inquire Provide modules within the [Early Support domain](#) provide guidance on how to recognise behaviors that might indicate early signs of a mental health issue, how to talk to children

and young people and colleagues about these issues, and how to provide appropriate and timely support.

The Be You [Be You Mental Health Continuum](#) covers universal approaches (tier 1), intensive supports (tier 2) and individualised approaches (tier 1) that you can implement in your learning community. It's designed to increase your understanding of mental health, assist in determining your level of concern and inform your actions.



Family support

Be You Professional Learning covers [family partnerships](#) as a key domain. You can complete the modules (Partner and Assist) online to learn how to effectively, sensitively and confidentially work with families to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

The [recommending additional support](#) fact sheet can help you plan ahead for conversations with a young person's family.

Emerging Minds' [Community Trauma Toolkit](#) is designed to help educators, families and young people prepare practically and psychologically for a critical incident.

Panellists' responses to audience questions

Thank you to attendees who submitted questions before and during the webinar. Our panellists, Caroline Thain, Greg Cameron and Mat Grining, have addressed some of the key questions that weren't answered during the webinar below.

If you are looking for resources, templates or other materials, please refer to the '[Links to resources](#)' section of this handout on pages 3 and 4.

Response and recovery for the whole school community

1. What is the role of Psychological First Aid in responding to a critical incident?

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is widely endorsed as the best-practice approach to providing support during, and in the immediate aftermath of, a critical incident. Although PFA can be used anytime, it is mostly applied in the first hours, days and weeks following a critical incident. There are five principles that underpin PFA:

- **Ensure safety:** Remove any threats and protect the young person from any surrounding danger. Help them seek medical help if needed.
- **Keep calm:** Speak in a low, calm voice. Reassure the young person that you are there to support them and they are safe.
- **Connect with others:** Reunite the young person with their parent/carer and try to keep families together where possible.
- **Encourage self-efficacy:** Helping young people to meet their own needs, where possible, can be empowering. It can also help them to identify their own strengths and resilience.
- **Provide hope:** Validate their feelings in response to the critical incident, while conveying the expectation that people will recover.

Sources: [Psychological First Aid tip card](#), [Psychological First Aid - Be You](#)

2. How should schools respond after a critical onsite incident at the school?

The occurrence of a critical onsite incident can be very distressing for those involved, so it is essential to have a pre-prepared and coordinated whole-school approach for how you would handle an onsite incident.

Although a response to an onsite critical incident has unique considerations that may not apply to one that occurs offsite, we recommend looking at your existing critical incident plan and identifying any gaps. Consider what steps are missing from your critical incident plan that the school would need to take if the incident were to be onsite. Review the plan as a leadership team and consider points such as contacting emergency services and steps to reduce exposure to the threat such as following evacuation or lockdown procedures. Connect with your Be You Consultant to support with reviewing your critical incident plan.

Review and apply the principles of PFA covered in question 1 to provide immediate support to members of your learning community.

3. How do we help those who are recovered in a material sense but not emotionally?

Applying a trauma-informed approach can help young people feel safe and supported, particularly when they may be feeling more vulnerable after a critical incident.

Three trauma-informed principles that we encourage schools to focus on in the classroom and across their school community are regulation, routine and relationships:

- **Relationships:** One of the most influential protective factors in a child's life is having a safe, caring and supportive relationship with someone they trust (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). Nurture your relationships with young people by listening to their concerns, validating their experiences and greeting them warmly when they arrive at school. Prioritise your relationships with colleagues by checking in with them and finding out what they need.
- **Regulation:** Support young people to process their emotional responses to a critical incident. This might look like talking through difficult emotions such as anger, fear or sadness, and helping them to develop healthy coping strategies. Young people will also be naturally attuned to your response as an educator, so be mindful to practice self-care, model healthy coping behaviours and try to be a soothing presence where possible.
- **Routine:** After the upheaval caused by a critical incident, the return to normal routine can be very comforting and provide a feeling of safety. Try to establish routines, set clear expectations at the start of lessons and, where possible, provide notice if you anticipate a change in routine.

We also recommend using the NIP (Notice Inquire Provide) model to help you observe any early signs of mental health issues, learn strategies for speaking with young people and your colleagues, and provide support. Explore [Early Support - Be You](#).

For ways to support educators who may be impacted by a critical incident, please see responses to question 11.

Sources: [The role of schools in supporting students after a traumatic event - Be You, The-Science-of-Resilience.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](#).

4. How important is it to connect, communicate and coordinate with external services when responding as a school to a critical incident?

The way in which your school connects, communicates and coordinates with external services will be determined by the impact of a critical incident and the level of exposure – for example, did the event have a far-reaching impact on a wide range of people, potentially from different communities? When a broader community response is required, schools need to coordinate with external services to understand what support is made available and to whom. The school can then refer young people and educators to appropriate external support as needed.

For critical incidents that have a lower level of exposure, it can still be helpful for schools to understand the community agencies and supports that they can refer to for risk escalation and service support.

Familiarise yourself with mental health support services available in your area, including those that are specific to diverse members of your community who may be experiencing additional challenges such as LGBTQIA+ students, First Nations young people or students from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

It may also be appropriate to reach out to an external stakeholder with local insight, such as an Aboriginal Elder, to find out what culturally specific supports are available in their communities and how the school can respond in a culturally sensitive way to young peoples' needs.

5. How do we help students who (seem to) not want help from us?

Convey that you are there to support students, even if they do not take you up on your offer straight away. It can take time for someone to accept that they may need additional help, so be patient with the young person.

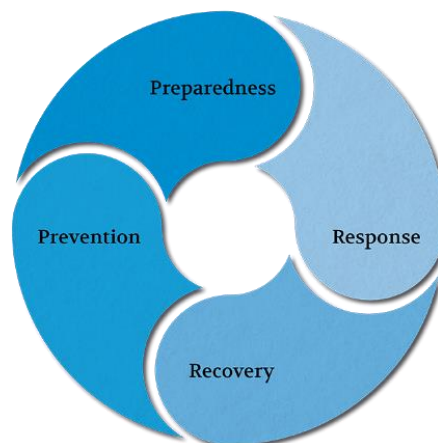
Try to understand what may be holding them back from seeking out or accepting help. For example, have they had a negative experience with a help-seeking service previously? Having insight into the factors that are contributing to their reluctance can give you a deeper understanding of the young person and come up with ways to support them and address their specific concerns.

If you are worried about a student, share your concerns with their parent/carer so that you can work together with the family to get the young person the support they need.

It is also important that you follow your school's escalation procedures by alerting the wellbeing team, principal or other relevant leadership staff as required, if you have reason to be particularly concerned about a student.

6. What steps can we take to be culturally inclusive?

Ensuring all members of your learning community feel included, empowered and supported should be a primary focus throughout all stages of the Be You recovery model (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery).



Know the demographic make-up of your school community and which diverse communities are represented in your student and staff body, so that you can ensure the right and appropriate support is available to them.

Some culturally inclusive steps to take include:

- Be guided by those impacted – ask what their needs are rather than assuming.
- Practice cultural sensitivity and respect – remember there are cultural variations in how people grieve and different understandings of mental health.
- When formulating your critical incident plan, consider if you need to include any faith or community-based leaders in your emergency contact list.
- Provide varied opportunities for a young person to express their emotional response to a critical incident – for example, through speaking, art, music or dance.
- Form a connection with a cultural liaison officer or other stakeholders in your region who can provide local knowledge and insight about their community's needs and experiences.

- Support access to culturally appropriate mental health services.
- Engage a translator for a young person and/or their family if English is not their first language and they may therefore benefit from having a translator present for discussions.

For further ideas on how to engage First Nations communities, please refer to the Be You resource: [Reflect, Respect, Respond: Protocols for culturally respectful engagement with First Nations communities.](#)

Honouring the life of a deceased community member

7. How long after a critical incident should a school community celebrate the life of a deceased community member?

Honouring the deceased community member's life will be the decision and responsibility of the family. There is no defined timeframe for how long a community will continue to celebrate the life of a deceased person. The timeframe, as well as whether the school takes any steps to honour the young person beyond the family-led celebration of life service, will be dependent on the context, needs and expectations of your community. The person's family should always be engaged in any decisions and actions the school is thinking of taking.

There are some processes that you can go through to seek advice and permission on how to respond, starting with advice from your Department or Directorate, school board, staff, and most importantly, the family.

8. What should we keep in mind when organising a memorial for a young person who has died by suicide?

Speak with the family to understand their wishes and level of comfort with the school hosting a memorial after their loved one's passing. Respecting the family's wishes and/or request for privacy needs to be considered utmost. If you are creating a memorial, engage the person's family and friends in the process. Be mindful of cultural or religious considerations – for example, in First Nations communities, it is commonplace to refrain from using photos and other images of the deceased person for a period as there is a belief that photos or other images of the deceased could disturb their spirit.

The family's wishes need to be balanced with the safety of the community. The guiding question to determine your approach should be how has the school responded to other deaths in the past? Or how would the school respond to a death that wasn't a suicide? Doing more than the school would do in other circumstances could inadvertently risk glamourising suicide. However, doing less could suggest there is a stigma related to mental health and suicide, which could lead members of your community to hold back from expressing vulnerability and seeking help.

It's a natural and compassionate response to want to honour the wishes of the person's family and friends, however it's also reasonable and important to set some boundaries. For example, if students create a spontaneous memorial at the young person's locker or desk, communicate the expectation that any tributes placed there will be collected and given to the young person's family after X date. It is also important to allocate a staff member(s) to monitor any tributes placed on the memorial to ensure these aren't in any way glamourising, minimising or sensationalising the suicide and creating risk for the community.

9. How do you support the community following a natural disaster when, years after a critical incident, the community is still struggling with housing, for example. Without a stable safe environment, learning is impeded, relationships are stretched and hope is lost.

Housing challenges are very difficult and unfortunately, they are common after a critical incident such as a natural disaster. Recovery is a long journey in these circumstances, but there are ways that you can support young people, families and staff in your learning community who continue to be impacted.

Focus on what's within the scope of your school, which is offering opportunities for connection and hope. Prioritise your relationships with colleagues through informal opportunities such as coffee catch-ups and check-ins, and more structured approaches such as peer groups. Nurture your connections with young people and their families by hosting school events. Organising a fundraiser can be a great way to help your community, while bringing people together for a shared purpose.

10. We are recovering from the disastrous flood. Do you have templates about how to address the reactivity of staff and students?

Unfortunately, we don't have templates for this, but there are some steps that can be put in place to support young people and staff as they recover from an extreme weather event. These include:

- Have a proactive duty statement to monitor any forecasted rain events through the Bureau of Meteorology or other reliable sources.
- Keep an up-to-date contact list of emergency services so information can be obtained and shared if there is a forecast of rain.
- Establish a clear communication strategy in terms of how you will inform staff and students if there is a forecast of rain, and how often you will keep them informed.
- Identify students who were most impacted by the initial flood and offer support and help-seeking pathways for them and/or their families to help them manage anxiety around wet weather events.

You may also find it helpful to read through some headspace resources on [supporting young people after a flood event](#).

Educator wellbeing

11. Could you share strategies that we can draw on to support our own mental health, as well as the wellbeing of other staff?

Supporting your learning community after a critical incident can be very overwhelming. Some strategies to look after yourself and your colleagues include:

- Create opportunities for connection to foster a sense of belonging.
- Be aware of how you, and others, are feeling by monitoring your own responses and those of other staff members.
- Ensure help-seeking pathways are known and accessible. Consider if your EAP can be made available on site for a period.
- Take up, and offer, flexible or reduced hours.
- Provide additional relief staff.
- Check in with colleagues.

If you are concerned about a colleague, let them know your concerns. If you are still worried, raise this with your principal.

12. How can we approach admin to make changes when dealing with staff who are recovering from a critical incident?

A whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing includes all staff within the learning community. Sometimes schools will focus on supporting leaders' and classroom educators' wellbeing and improving their knowledge and skills in mental health, however, it's critical to think about who else in your school community needs training or support. This includes admin staff, canteen staff and sports coaches, among others.

Emphasise to admin the important role they play in fostering a supportive and welcoming environment, particularly in the wake of a critical incident when members of the community may be feeling more vulnerable.

As part of a whole-school approach, it would be advisable for the admin team to receive training in mental health support, including in how to respond safely to staff and the broader community who may have been impacted by a critical incident.

When developing a communication plan in relation to a critical incident, consider what information needs to be shared with admin – for example, are there educators who will be working flexible hours? Is there an increase in the number of relief teachers coming to the school for a period? Does the emergency contact list need to be shared with admin? This will support admin in making the necessary changes in their work and processes to support staff who are recovering from a critical incident.

13. How can wellbeing staff reach out to colleagues whom they don't know well?

It's really important to establish a strong sense of psychological safety in the preparation phase – ie, before a critical incident occurs. If you build rapport and connect with staff during 'normal' parts of the year, it will enable you to more easily communicate after an event occurs.

Some other approaches you could draw on include:

- Run voluntary wellbeing and mental health workshops or drop-in sessions for educators. This is an opportunity to provide a space for educators to talk about their experiences, raise concerns or ask questions. It also means the wellbeing team becomes a more familiar presence before they then check in on any individual staff members.
- Find out if there is another wellbeing staff member or leader in your learning community who has a closer relationship with the staff member. It may be more suitable and appropriate for another staff member to reach out and offer support.
- When reaching out, say that you are touching base with all staff who were impacted by the critical incident to check how they are travelling and see if there is anything they need.
- Leverage the pre-existing staff network by setting up a peer support system.
- Create feedback channels such as through a dedicated email address, anonymous suggestion box or an online form.
- Conduct regular surveys to gauge staff wellbeing and identify any emerging concerns.
- Actively promote self-care practices and model these behaviours for staff. By demonstrating and encouraging healthy work-life balance and self-care, wellbeing staff can help to normalise and reinforce these important practices for the whole school community.
- Distribute wellbeing resources such as newsletters, self-care tips and mental health guides.
- Provide professional development opportunities that address staff wellbeing.

14. Does Be You offer wellbeing 'at a school' staff sessions?

Yes! We can discuss the possibility of facilitating a staff wellbeing session in-person at your school or online. Please reach out to your Be You Consultant or submit a request at beyou.edu.au/contact to discuss.

15. We are having more and more students displaying aggressive behaviours. How can we manage this ongoing fatigue?

This can be very challenging to manage and can significantly impact educators' wellbeing. Responding to behaviour of this nature requires a collaborative approach that includes wellbeing and leadership teams, and it shouldn't all rest on your shoulders.

When educators are feeling depleted, they may be more likely to respond in ways that are punitive rather than taking a holistic approach that empowers the young person to change their behaviour.

Develop a wellbeing plan that includes how you will seek support, as well as self-care practices you will engage in, before stress and fatigue set in. Reach out for support from a peer or mentor and take time out to look after yourself.

16. Am I able to access a recording of the session if I can't attend on the day? What other Be You sessions can I attend?

Yes, the session is being recorded and will be made available on the Be You website a few weeks after the webinar date. Please head to [Sessions and Events - Be You](#) to access the recording. Scroll down to 'Previous In Focus webinar recordings' where you will find the recording for this webinar listed, as well as previous In Focus recordings.

To register for our upcoming Be You sessions (which aren't recorded), please see the links below:
[Be You Conversations for schools - Be You](#)
[Be You Spotlight for schools - Be You](#)


17. How do we contact our Be You Consultant?

If you are a **participating Be You school or service** and would like to get in contact with your Be You Consultant, please visit beyou.edu.au. Log in to your account, click on 'My Learning Community' and then click on 'Supports'. You will then find your Be You Consultant listed there if you are an Action Team Leader.



If you are **not a participating school**, please complete this [web form](#) and we will be in touch. Select 'Find out more about Be You Schools' as the subject line.


External help-seeing supports

Mental Health Services and Support

Beyond Blue 24/7 mental health support service 1300 22 4636 beyondblue.org.au	headspace Online support and counselling to young people aged 12 to 25 1800 650 890 (9am to 1am daily) For wechat, visit: headspace.org.au/ehespace	Kids Helpline 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services for children and young people aged 5 to 25 1800 55 1800 kidshelpline.com.au	1800 RESPECT 24/7 support for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic violence and abuse 1800 737 732 1800respect.org.au	QLife LGBTI peer support and referral 1800 184 527 (3pm to midnight daily) qlife.org.au (online chat 3pm to midnight local time, including over holidays.)
Lifeline 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services 13 11 14 lifeline.org.au	Suicide Call Back 24/7 crisis support and counselling service for people affected by suicide 1300 659 467 suicidecallbackservice.org.au	Mensline 24/7 counselling service for men 1300 78 99 78 mensline.org.au	13YARN 24/7 crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 13 92 76 13yarn.org.au	

If you are concerned about someone at risk of immediate harm, call 000 or go to your nearest hospital emergency department.

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