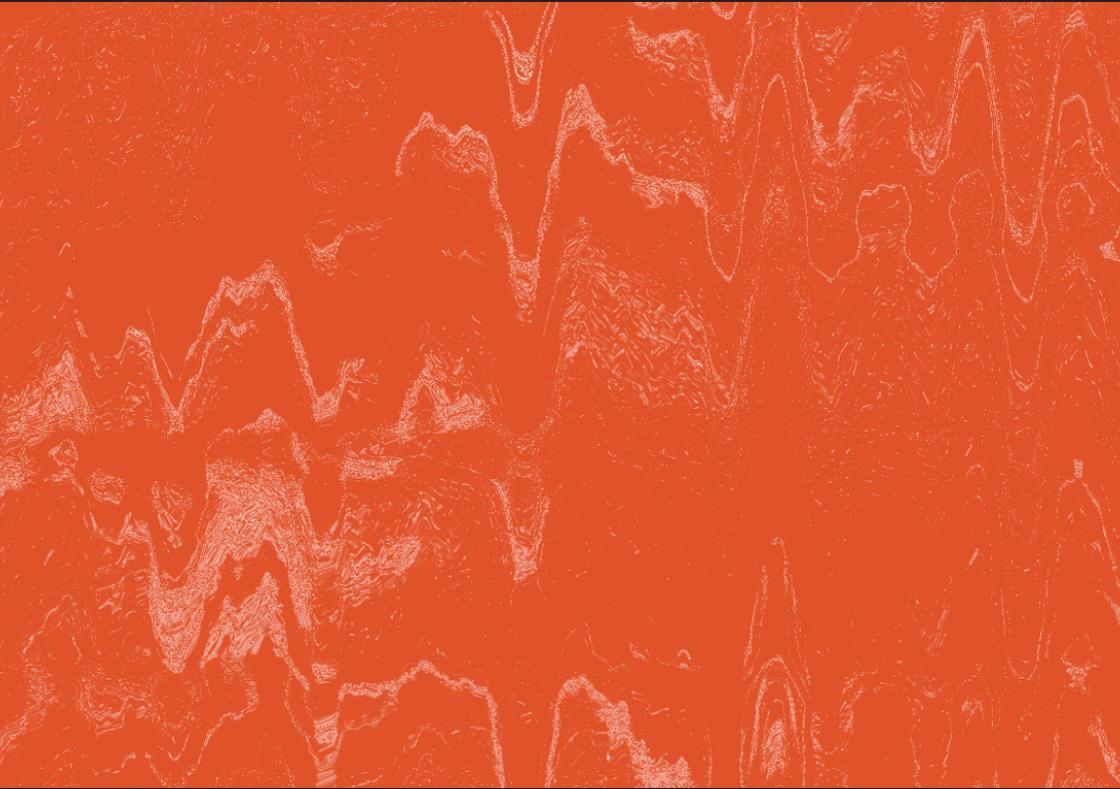


# after disaster

Responding to the Psychological Consequences of Disasters  
for Children and Young People



PETER STANLEY & SARAH WILLIAMS

Children and young people are the focus of this book. In many ways, their reactions to disaster may be similar to those of adults. However, the developmental and age-related needs of children and adolescents mean that the impact on them can be different.

After Disaster is intended as a psychological first aid guide. It provides critical understanding and information about children's reactions and how to respond to them with psychological knowledge beyond the obvious. These days we have wonderfully complex technical aids for medical emergencies. Sophisticated personal support and understanding are equally necessary for psychological adjustment.

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NZCER

# After Disaster

Responding to the Psychological  
Consequences of Disasters for Children  
and Young People

Peter Stanley   Sarah Williams



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
WELLINGTON, 2000

NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
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## Preface

If popular movies are anything to go by, natural disasters hold a special fascination. Perhaps it is the theme of ordinary people becoming heroes, or the inevitable way that a totally unpredictable crisis can unite strangers in mutual support. Such images, are, of course, drawn from real life. TV cameras bring us brief moments of happiness — applause as the highly trained canine nose helps drag an exhausted child from the rubble. But there is a reverse side to heroism and relief. Can we even begin to comprehend what is left for children and families when the media leaves the devastated villages, the flooded towns, or the burnt out homes? How do children and families cope, and what might we be able to offer if we were ever required to do so?

Psychologists have studied these situations in detail and we now know a great deal about how children respond to disasters, as well as to the more personal and intimate trauma of everyday accidents and misadventure. Peter Stanley and Sarah Williams have done a fine job of synthesising this research literature and presenting it in a highly usable and practical form for teachers and schools. For among the things we know is that the way in which trusted adults respond to young people exposed to disaster has a profound impact on the child's subsequent ability to cope.

There are few better contexts for this sensitivity to children's needs than the school. Family, whanau, and adult relatives may be so caught up in the catastrophe and its practicalities that children are sometimes relegated to lower priority—they're tough, they're too young to understand, they're physically safe and that's what matters. Sometimes these things are true, but often they are not. Informed teachers can play a vital role.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand we have much potential for major geological disaster, but in truth it is the commonplace event of fire, car crash, or

flooded home that can be equally devastating to emotional security. This book provides teachers with critical understanding and information regarding children's reactions and how to respond to them with psychological knowledge beyond the obvious. These days we have wonderfully complex technical aids for medical emergencies. Sophisticated personal support and understanding are equally necessary for psychological adjustment.

Ian M. Evans  
University of Waikato

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## Introduction

*Coping with disasters is probably the most daunting task with which members of the caring professions can be faced. We need to be prepared in advance and to have some cognitive models, and ways of approaching these situations, that reduce the awful feelings of helplessness that inevitably arise in both care-givers and the cared-for when faced with massive loss. (Parkes, 1997)*

**D**isasters have a profound effect on individuals, families and communities. They usually result in widespread property damage and financial loss. In the worst cases, they bring injury and death. Disasters also have other less immediate and obvious consequences: their negative effects on emotional wellbeing. These effects may last for months or even years.

Children and young people are the focus of this book. In many ways, their reactions to disaster may be similar to those of adults. However, the developmental and age-related needs of children and adolescents mean that the impact on them can be different.

Over the last ten years, a growing body of research has highlighted the adverse psychological effects of disasters on children and young people. However, these effects are still not always acknowledged. There seem to be a number of reasons for this. Children, like adults, can appear to be fine, and parents and teachers may not want to think of them as suffering. Adults can mistakenly believe that children are “too young” to be affected by a disaster, or that it is best dealt with by not talking about it.

These adult-centred views deny some developmental realities. Children are probably more vulnerable than adults to disaster trauma because they do not have the understanding, vocabulary and coping strategies

to deal with these events. They are in a dependent situation, and they have a relatively limited capacity to determine what happens to them.

This book is intended as a psychological “first aid” guide for teachers when students return to schools and early childhood centres after a disaster. It is based on a comprehensive review of the literature on the psychological effects of disasters on children and young people, undertaken by Specialist Education Services and funded by the Earthquake Commission. It aims to provide help with:

- responding to the needs of students within the school or centre after a major disaster
- identifying those students who are most at risk, and seeking help for them.

Disasters may be major emergencies, such as earthquakes, cyclones, volcanic activity, floods, tsunamis, landslips and electrical storms; or they may be local emergencies, such as fire or local flood, in some cases on the school premises only. Other disasters affecting the community, such as transport-related accidents, toxic spills, or deliberate acts of human violence (murder, vandalism) may have similar psychological consequences.

For children and young people who have experienced disaster, the early childhood centre or school is the most natural support system beyond the family. Schools and other education facilities are a major source of activity, guidance and structure for their students. They provide the best site for delivering helping services in the aftermath of a disaster.

Students spend as much time with their teachers and classmates as they do with their own families. An early therapeutic response by teachers can help them to recover. Teachers also have many opportunities to observe their students’ reactions to disaster, and can make referrals for more specialised assistance when this is required.

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**A.**  
How are students affected  
psychologically by disaster?

*...people operate on the basis of some unchallenged, unquestioned assumptions about themselves and the world. Trauma represents a major violation of these assumptions, threatening to completely undermine the bedrock on which people ground their existence. (Bower & Sivers, 1998)*



---

## **A.** How are students affected psychologically by disaster?

**D**isasters can affect how students think, feel and act. However, it is important to understand that students will respond to disaster in different ways and within different time periods. Teachers should not assume that particular responses will inevitably follow a disaster. Nor should they assume that all student distress after a disaster is automatically related to that event.

Nevertheless, teachers are likely to see some common behaviours and responses resulting from disaster or disaster-related disruptions in family life. Students may worry if they begin to experience some of these. They need to be reassured that what they are feeling is an understandable reaction to an abnormal situation.

Although few students will exhibit a large number of the symptoms discussed here, it is crucial to be able to identify, quickly and accurately, those students who have been significantly traumatised. Knowing each student's usual pattern of responding to stress, and being able to take their individual situation into account, are obviously helpful.

While symptoms displayed by young people may be a response to a disaster or disaster-related disruption, they may also reflect conditions that were present before the disaster. The stresses and strains caused by the disaster may reveal or worsen pre-existing difficulties.

*...providing the maximum degree of adaptive recovery and normalisation with a minimum of therapeutic intrusion and overload, while at the same time identifying those at-risk children and families at each stage who may require more intensive and extensive treatment and support. (Miller, 1999)*

*If a traumatic response does not have the chance to become entrenched, it will become only a small scar on a very large life. (L.C. Terr quoted by Brock, 1998)*

## Changes in thinking

Following disaster, there are some common ways in which students' thinking — their cognitive reactions — may change.

### Re-experiencing the disaster

Many students are troubled by repetitive and intrusive thoughts about the disaster. These thoughts often concern a specific vivid image or sound related to the disaster or its aftermath. These thoughts may occur at any time, but they are particularly likely to come up when the young person is quiet or trying to fall asleep. At other times the distressing thoughts may be triggered by something in the environment that reminds the student of the disaster.

### Memory disturbances

Disasters do not usually result in severe long-term memory loss for students. However, some students experience more general memory problems. For example, they may have difficulty memorising new material, or remembering old skills such as reading music. Not being able to memorise new material may affect their progress at school.

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Students may show several types of memory distortions related to the disaster itself. When they recall the events, they may play down the threat to their own lives. For instance, they may leave out moments of extreme danger, or not mention their own injuries.

Students may also become confused about the sequence of events. As well, they may start to feel that there were “omens” or premonitions of it, such as stepping in a bad luck square. One boy reported that ten days before an earthquake his uncle had said “we will all die together”.

### Decline in school performance

Students may show a decline in school performance after a disaster. Disruption and breaks in schooling may be significant contributors to this. Children may also have problems concentrating on schoolwork because of intrusive thoughts about the disaster, or lack of sleep.

### Sense of a foreshortened future

Students may express limited expectations about their future. This could include a belief that they will never marry, have children, have a successful career, or even live beyond a certain age.

*...people operate on the basis of some unchallenged, unquestioned assumptions about themselves and the world. Trauma represents a major violation of these assumptions, threatening to completely undermine the bedrock on which people ground their existence.*  
(Bower & Sivers, 1998)

## Changes in feelings

Students are also likely to have emotional reactions to disaster. Some of the common changes in feelings are listed here.

### Fears

Most survivors of disasters are likely to develop fears related to their experiences. Many students fear and believe that the disaster will occur again. Children, in particular, lack the perspective to appreciate that another disaster is very unlikely.

Some students become generally fearful. They suddenly become afraid of many aspects of their everyday experience. These children may appear to have had a personality change, so that they start to fear and avoid routine activities which they probably enjoyed in the past.

Other students develop specific and isolated fears of stimuli connected to the disaster. Some of these fears may seem unrelated in content or meaning to what occurred. Fears of the dark, going to sleep, being alone, monsters, spiders and the supernatural are typical.

### Isolation, anger and irritability

Young people can feel very isolated after a disaster. They may feel that others, including their parents, cannot fully understand or even recognise what they have gone through. These feelings may persist for many months.

Child survivors do need to talk about their experiences, but they can find it very difficult to do this with their parents and peers. Often they do not want to upset adults by expressing their feelings. This means that parents and teachers may not be fully aware of the extent of the child's suffering.

Students can also withdraw socially and appear to stop wanting to meet with their friends. Peers may hold back from asking the survivors what happened, in case they upset them further. Survivors often experience this as a rejection.

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Young people are likely to become more irritable and angry after a disaster. They may show reduced tolerance for the normal behaviours and demands of peers and family members.

### **Guilt and shame**

Some students may feel excessive guilt. This often results from the fact that they have survived a major disaster when others have not. The experience of guilt has also been reported for students who were unable to help a victim. For instance, they may have heard others pleading for help, but could not do anything to help them. Young people can also feel intensely guilty when they believe that something they did increased the danger or threat to others.

### **Depression**

Students involved in disasters may experience mood swings. If these mood swings are coupled with feelings of low self-worth, loss of appetite and disrupted sleep, they can amount to depression. It is important to identify the difference between fluctuating low mood (lasting three or four days) and persistent low mood (lasting for two or more weeks).

### **Anxiety and panic**

Some students can become very anxious after a disaster. Where possible, it is important to work out what factors in the immediate environment might be triggering off these more extreme forms of anxiety or panic attacks.

*In disasters it is the details that influence perceptions and reactions of people but which are not always appreciated by those looking back with hindsight, with full information and without the fear and tension of those present at the time. (Capewell, 1997)*

## Changes in behaviour

The way students behave — their behavioural reactions — may also change following disaster.

### Disruptive behaviour

Students may display a significant increase in the number and severity of problem behaviours. They may become much more dependent and demanding, and they may exhibit frustration, irritability and temper tantrums.

Aggressive behaviour, such as bullying and fighting, is also common. Over the longer term, some adolescents may become truants, substance abusers or juvenile offenders.

### Withdrawal and avoidance

Students may avoid activities, social situations, places and people that are reminders of the disaster. As well as being a response to depression, a reduced interest in the usual activities may indicate that a student is trying to avoid further trauma by reducing involvement with the external world. Younger children may become inhibited in their play and stop playing familiar games. School-age students can also discontinue enjoyable activities in order to avoid any chance of encountering another painful or frightening situation.

Avoidance behaviour can take the form of truancy from school. Truancy is especially likely if the incident occurred during school hours or is linked to the school (such as a school fire). Young people who stay at home following a disaster run the risk of delays in resuming their normal roles as students, as well as losing the benefits of social support from other students and adults outside the family.

---

### Setbacks in age-appropriate behaviour

Children who have experienced a disaster may regress to behaviour patterns associated with earlier developmental levels. In younger children the most common behaviours of this kind are bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, clinginess and dependence on parents.

Young children may also lose academic and language skills, or their language development may slow down. Older children and adolescents can demonstrate increased dependency on parents.

### Post-traumatic play

Post-traumatic play is the continual repetition of traumatic aspects of the disaster in play. Both pre-school and school-age children may do this. In ordinary circumstances, many children use play as a way to solve the problems and worries of everyday life. Conventional play is characterised by light, easy feelings and a sense of enjoyment. Post-traumatic play, by contrast, often has a seriousness and intensity that is not typical of ordinary play.

Post-traumatic play can provide relief for children, provided that they can improvise a satisfactory ending, such as the rescue of the school by emergency personnel. However, post-traumatic play can also create anxiety and be retraumatising. The most important factor is the degree to which the child can control the outcome of the play.

### Retelling

In another form of repetitive behaviour, students who have experienced a disaster often tell and retell stories associated with the event. The need to retell can appear insatiable, and the story may need numerous retellings for the child to experience some control over it.

Students who spend a huge amount of time discussing the details of the traumatic event may be temporarily protecting themselves from feelings of anxiety and grief. Often this can lead to unemotional and journalistic accounts of the event. These can be disturbing to the person who hears the stories.

### **Sleep disturbances**

Disruptions in sleep can be both immediate and long-term effects of experiencing a disaster. Sleep problems include reluctance to sleep alone, problems getting to sleep, superficial and fitful sleep, night terrors, nightmares, and repetitive dreams related to the disaster. Although nightmares can be fairly common in childhood, post-traumatic nightmares occur more frequently. They also include events that are specific to the trauma the child has experienced.

Sleep disturbances are a common traumatic response in young people after a major disaster. However, general sleep disturbances are frequent for pre-schoolers, and may not be specifically related to the disaster.

### **Physical ailments**

Students may report a variety of physical ailments such as headaches, stomach aches, muscle aches and pains, nausea, and stuttering. Young people may also experience physical sensations such as feeling shaky, light-headed, ill, nauseated, and having an increased heart rate in response to reminders or memories of the disaster.

### **Exaggerated startle response**

Students of all ages may exhibit a sudden involuntary shuddering or tensing of the body in response to loud noises.

---

## Hypervigilance

Every sound or sudden movement becomes meaningful for some students following a disaster. These young people react by staying “on alert”, ready to respond to any sign of threat. Students may display symptoms of hypervigilance when they are exposed to events that symbolise or resemble aspects of the disaster experienced. For instance, parents report that some youngsters who have been in car accidents mimic putting on the brakes in the back seat when the driver must stop suddenly.

*It may be difficult for those outside the situation to comprehend the full extent of the trauma and life disruption that ensues for an extended period of time following a major disaster.*  
(La Greca, Silverman, Vernberg & Prinstein, 1996)

## Age-related symptoms

Children of different ages may respond to a disaster in different ways. In this section you will find summaries of reactions common to early childhood, middle childhood, early adolescence, and adolescence.

## Disaster-related symptoms

### Early childhood

Children in this age group are particularly vulnerable to disruption of their environment and changes in their routines. They can also be particularly affected by the reactions of their parents and other family members.

- Resumption of bed-wetting
- Thumb-sucking
- Fear of the dark, monsters, strangers
- Clinging to parents
- Sleep disturbances
- Bowel or bladder problems
- Startle response to loud/unusual noises
- Nervousness
- Irritability
- Withdrawal
- Disobedience
- Hyperactivity
- Speech difficulties
- Separation fears:
  - not wanting to be away from parents
  - worrying about when parents are coming back
  - sleeping in parents' bed
- Aggressive behaviour
- Shorter attention span
- Talking repetitively about the disaster
- "Playing out" the disaster experience

### Middle childhood

A setback in age appropriate behaviours is particularly common in children of this age following a disaster. They can also be deeply affected by the loss of prized possessions or pets.

- Competing with younger siblings for parents' attention
- Clinging
- Crying
- Wanting to be fed and dressed
- Toileting accidents
- Headaches
- Complaining of visual or hearing problems
- Persistent itching and scratching
- Nausea
- Sleep disturbances
- Fear of future disasters
- Fear of objects, sounds, conditions associated with the disaster
- School avoidance
- Withdrawal from play group or friends
- Hyperactivity
- Irritability
- Disobedience
- Decreased concentration
- Drop in school achievement
- Aggressive behaviour
- Talking repetitively about the disaster
- "Playing out" the disaster experience

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## Early adolescence

Peer reactions are especially significant to students in this age group. They need to be reassured that their fears are both normal and shared by others.

- Competition with siblings for parents' attention
- Failure to carry out chores and normal responsibilities
- Headaches
- Complaints of vague aches and pains
- Appetite disturbances (overeating or loss of appetite)
- Bowel problems
- Skin disorders
- Sleep disturbance
- Loss of interest in peer activities
- Drop in level of school performance
- School avoidance
- Disruptive behaviour
- Loss of interest in hobbies and recreation
- Resistance to authority
- Difficulties relating to siblings/peers
- Sadness/depression
- Irresponsible or antisocial behaviour
- Limited expectations about the future — expecting never to marry or have children, or not to live beyond a certain age

## Adolescence

Most of the activities and interests of students in this age group are focussed on the peer group. Fear that feelings are unusual or unacceptable may push the adolescent toward withdrawal or depression.

- Resumption of earlier behaviours and attitudes
- Decline in previous responsible behaviour
- Bowel / bladder complaints
- Headaches
- Skin rash
- Vague physical complaints or exaggerated fear of physical problems
- Painful menstruation or ceasing to menstruate
- Sleep disturbance
- Marked increase or decrease in physical activity
- Expressing feelings of inadequacy and helplessness
- Irresponsible or delinquent behaviour
- School avoidance
- Decline in school performance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Depression
- Self-consciousness about fears
- Isolation and withdrawal from family or peers
- Limited expectation about the future — expecting never to marry or have children, or not to live beyond a certain age



---

**B.**  
What influences students'  
responses to disasters?

*In disasters it is the details that influence perceptions and reactions of people but which are not always appreciated by those looking back with hindsight, with full information and without the fear and tension of those present at the time. (Capewell, 1997)*



---

## B.

### What influences students' responses to disasters?

The psychological impact of disasters does seem to lessen over time, with minimal long-term effects for most students. However, some young people may experience significant long-term difficulties. This is particularly likely if they:

- directly experience the disaster or have major exposure to it — such as being injured themselves, having a family member die or be injured, feeling in physical danger, or witnessing a frightening event first-hand
- experience major disruption in their relationships — especially in family relationships.

All the young people involved in a disaster have experienced an extremely frightening event. However, their experiences differ. They may have homes, property, or personal possessions destroyed; they may have been personally injured, or faced extreme danger; they may have experienced others, including their loved ones, being injured, in pain, or dying.

The severity of a young person's reaction to a disaster seems to be influenced by three important factors:

- personal experience of the disaster
- personal characteristics
- family context.

## Personal experience of the disaster

### Threat to life and degree of exposure

The intensity of a student's exposure to the disaster and to scenes of destruction or death increase the degree of traumatisation. The factor underlying the relationship between exposure and traumatisation seems to be the degree to which the student feels that their own life is in danger.

### Bereavement

Students are more likely to show severe reactions when disasters result in the death or injury of a family member or friend. Young people suffering bereavement as a result of the disaster are sometimes denied the opportunity to grieve fully for their loss. The suddenness, shock, and trauma of disaster-related deaths, and the fact that they may have had little opportunity to see the body or participate in rituals of farewell, may add to the difficulty of understanding what has happened.

### Separation

Youngsters between the ages of six months and four years often show strong reactions when they are separated from parents. This separation anxiety is likely to be especially intense when the child is in an unfamiliar setting and is uncertain about where the parents are. Separation from families during disasters is likely to be particularly stressful for young children. However, disaster separation is stressful for older children as well. For example, after a devastating bushfire in Australia, many parents sent their children to relatives for several days while they coped with the damage. Twenty-six months later, children of all ages who had been separated from their parents showed more persisting disaster-related difficulties.

---

## Personal characteristics

### Age

Pre-schoolers and younger school-age children seem to be affected to a greater degree than older school-age children and adolescents. This finding is consistent with the view that younger students are more vulnerable to disruptions in family stability and routine.

### Gender

Some gender differences in students' responses to disaster have emerged in the research. In general, girls report higher levels of overall distress, anxiety, and depression. Boys seem more likely to exhibit acting-out behaviour, aggression, and attention difficulties.

## Family context

### Parental response

How much parents are affected by the disaster appears to influence how severely their children are affected. Parents who are having difficulty coping themselves seem to convey distress to their children. In addition, parents who are unable to cope effectively may be less available to support their children.

Young people tend to report higher levels of distress than their parents report for them. Parents do not seem to be fully aware of the extent to which their children are affected. Alternatively, young people may over-report their distress. Both these possibilities need to be considered in assessing the impact of a disaster on students.

### **Family atmosphere and levels of communication**

Some family atmospheres appear to be associated with trauma symptoms persisting in students. How consistent the reactions of the two parents are seems to be particularly important. Young people may feel less secure where parents have different reactions to the event. A family atmosphere marked by irritability and distress has also been associated with more persisting symptoms in young people.

Communication patterns within families after disasters may also be linked with students' reactions. Families who find it difficult to share their feelings will probably have more difficulty in coming to terms with the disaster. Supportive family communication can reduce long-term problems.

Disasters may have a significant impact on how well families function. Strains in family relationships can be shown in illness, increased alcohol and other drug use by family members, and increased conflict or violence.

### **Evacuation and relocation**

Homes have enormous practical importance and personal significance in the lives of families. Having to evacuate the family home or move because of a disaster can have a lasting impact on family members. Even temporary evacuation involves the loss of a home and personal possessions. It can also mean separation from the neighbourhood, school, and friends. If the move becomes long-term, the impact on students is likely to be substantial.

---

## A resilience perspective

*The resilient child "... works well, plays well, loves well, and expects well." (Garmezy cited by Howard, Dryden & Johnson, 1999)*

This book provides a detailed catalogue of the psychological consequences of disasters. As a balance, we should acknowledge, and celebrate, the personal robustness that children and young people can show in the face of adversity.

A resilience perspective can be helpful in this regard, and it can also greatly assist in the assessment of children's circumstance. Some fundamental ideas here are that children belong to many contexts (such as family, school, peer group, and recreational activities), and each of these is a potential source of risk and protective factors. What is important is the power and the interaction of the risk and protective processes. Rarely, if ever, is a child's situation without positive aspects.

Resilience is a developing area of study, but already it has provided us with some valuable insights. One of the most important of these is that resilient youngsters often have relationships with caring adults, who may be parents, teachers, or other people. The values associated with the resilience approach are really significant as well, as they purport to:

*... promote hope rather than despair, empowerment rather than alienation, survival rather than victimisation and pro-action rather than reaction. (Dryden, Johnson & Howard, 1998)*



---

## **C.** How can schools, early childhood centres and teachers help their students?

*...providing the maximum degree of adaptive recovery and normalisation with a minimum of therapeutic intrusion and overload, while at the same time identifying those at-risk children and families at each stage who may require more intensive and extensive treatment and support. (Miller, 1999)*



---

## C.

### How can schools, early childhood centres and teachers help their students?

Schools and early childhood centres are typically the second most important setting for children and young people after their homes. Following a disaster, they have the potential to provide help that will complement what is done in the best resourced families. For this potential and opportunity to be realised, schools and centres need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities that they can assume, in relation to the other services available within the community.

Of course, counselling and psychological services may not be available after a disaster. If they are, the demand for help could exceed what these services can provide. On the other hand, schools and early childhood centres may be inundated with offers of help. Whatever happens, principals and supervisors share with parents the responsibility for what happens to the young people in their care. The evidence suggests that the best course is local people providing local solutions, with the school or centre providing leadership for its community.

Many caregivers will take their cue from the centre or school, and all parents and children will fairly quickly sense a lack of control or direction. Some families will suffer more than others. Some parents will be simply unable to meet the emotional needs of their children. These families are in special need of help. The whole school or centre community will welcome the re-establishment of familiar routines and evidence of commitment to delimit the disaster.

### Forward planning

No-one can predict when a disaster will occur. However, forward planning and effective policy will help a school or early childhood centre to cope better after a disaster. They will very likely lessen the physical and emotional consequences for students and staff.

How would your school or early childhood centre respond to disaster? How can teachers prepare to deal with the aftermath of disaster once students have returned?

The focus of this book is on responding to the emotional and psychological consequences of disaster. Nonetheless, a chapter has been included on how to plan for an immediate and practical response to a major event.

Schools and early childhood centres are very busy places. Thinking about and planning for a situation that has yet to happen is unlikely to be an immediate priority.

However, it is important to devote a day to putting together a policy and training staff. All teachers should understand the policy and their designated roles, so that they can move into action and avoid unnecessary confusion and trauma if a disaster happens. The policy should encompass the psychological consequences, as well as the practical demands, of an event.

Note that schools and early childhood centres have statutory responsibilities to prepare for civil defence emergencies. These obligations are outlined in the chapter on planning for a disaster.

---

## Taking care of yourself

The need to cope with student reactions comes at a time when staff members are still dealing with their own reactions to the disaster. Teachers must care for themselves too.

It may be useful for staff to have regular supervision sessions with colleagues, in order to get support and discuss strategies to use in the classroom. Collegiality is very important at this time, and new links can be forged between schools. A report (Ruscoe, 1988) shows that after the Edgumbe earthquake, teachers of all levels of the school system met for the first time as an integrated profession.

## After students return

Staff have two primary responsibilities once students have returned to the school or early childhood centre following a disaster:

1. To decide how they are going to deal with the aftermath of the disaster in their own school or centre.
2. To understand and cope with student reactions in their own class or group.

These responsibilities need to be shared with colleagues, parents, and social service agencies. However, each individual teacher is ultimately responsible for responding to and dealing with the reactions of their students.

The trauma of the disaster and the changes and disruptions in day-to-day living caused by the disaster mean that:

- some students may not be ready to learn
- some symptoms may persist for a long time, especially if students are coping with long-term family disruptions or strains
- effects of longer-term disruptions may appear later

- classroom management may be more difficult and teachers may have to cope with children who are regressive, withdrawn or disruptive.

Overall, schools and centres should start operating as normally as possible, as soon as possible, after a disaster. This helps all students to re-establish normal patterns.

Teachers and guidance staff need to be aware of the range of symptoms that students may show after a disaster. As the summaries of symptoms in this book show, many of the distressing effects of trauma are subjective and internal. Observing that students are concentrating less well than usual, or that their work is deteriorating, or that they look tired or upset, requires sensitivity and awareness.

Two ways to monitor student well-being are:

- reminding class teachers and supervisors to be alert to the potential signs of distress
- talking with parents more regularly than usual.

Teachers can help individual students by:

- recognising signs of distress
- understanding what they have experienced
- helping them to come to terms with their experience
- knowing when to refer students for extra help.

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## Referring students to counselling and psychological services

As the summaries of symptoms show, there is a wide range of normal reactions following a disaster, and children of different ages can respond to stressful circumstances in different ways. The responses of many students can be considered normal reactions to a traumatic event. However, students should be referred to social service agencies if:

- symptoms signal a very unusual change in behaviour or appearance
- symptoms persist for two to four weeks following the return to the school or centre
- several different kinds of symptoms are seen (e.g., appears sad, complains of headaches and sleeps in class).
- symptoms are seen in different settings (in different classes, during different activities, outside of school, at home, with peers)
- the student reports being very upset during and after the disaster
- the student threatens or actually tries to harm himself or herself
- the student shows signs of abuse or neglect.

Referral may also be appropriate for children who:

- lost family members or friends in the disaster
- were physically injured
- felt that they were in life-threatening danger
- lost their belongings or house during the disaster
- had to relocate because of the disaster
- have been in previous disasters
- have a history of emotional difficulties
- have higher levels of post-disaster life changes (e.g. hospitalisation of a family member, parental separation).

Any concerns should be discussed with colleagues before implementing the referral procedure at your centre or school.

*Ask the children themselves to evaluate their functioning. It is very important to ask the children themselves how they are doing rather than relying on the reports of their parents or on their behaviour. Sometimes children do not express their difficulties in order to protect the adults around them. Children need the opportunity to discuss their feelings while believing that they will be accepted and supported during the process.*

*(La Greca, Vernberg, Silverman, Vogel & Prinstein, 1994)*

### Long-term responses

Teachers also need to prepare for long-term reactions. For some students, the distress may last for months or even years, and may have long-term effects on their education. The emotional effects of disaster on students may not always be immediately obvious to parents or teachers. Children may find it difficult to talk to adults about their distress. Other young people will have an ongoing need to discuss the disaster.

Students need to know that they can ask for help, and that there will continue to be people available who are willing to listen.

Ceremonies can help to achieve closure for some students. For instance, there could be a special remembrance ceremony held for the one-year anniversary of the disaster.

### Classroom and curriculum responses

For all students, teachers need to:

- provide classroom opportunities to discuss the disaster
- provide curriculum opportunities to consider the disaster.

However, teachers ought not to attempt any activity that they are not comfortable with. Equally, they should not force students to take part.

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## Opportunities to discuss the disaster

*Children who have experienced traumas need the opportunity to discuss what has happened. They need to make sense of the event and build up a picture of what occurred, what caused it, why they were involved, why they acted as they did, and why they were, or were not harmed. They need to understand that changes in their behaviour are expected and are normal reactions to an abnormal event. (Stallard & Law, 1994)*

Providing students with age-appropriate opportunities to share their experience of the disaster and express their fears and concerns can help the recovery process because:

- expressing fears or concerns often relieves tension or anxiety
- telling and retelling their story can help students create a sense of order and coherence, and control over events that seem confusing or overwhelming
- hearing other students' stories may help young people to appreciate that they are not alone in their fears or concerns.

When the students return to school, many opportunities for discussion will come up. These may be on an individual basis, with a small group, or with the whole class.

The immediate goals of discussion are to defuse emotion, and to provide a means of acknowledging feelings concerning the disaster. By facilitating discussion of the disaster, teachers can:

- give pupils accurate and up-to-date information
- acknowledge their distress by actively listening to personal accounts
- encourage students to label their feelings and recollections
- provide information on common physical and emotional reactions

- correct any misconceptions, especially about personal responsibility
- provide reassurance that responses are normal reactions to an abnormal event.

Discussion of the disaster in a safe and secure environment provides students with a way of making sense of the event. Students are able to move towards accepting what has occurred and regain feelings of coping and competence.

These questions could be a useful basis for discussion of the disaster experience:

- Where were you when it happened?
- What were you doing?
- Where were your friends?
- Where was your family?
- What was your first thought when it happened?
- What were you thinking during it?
- What did you see?
- What changed? (lifestyle/living conditions)
- What did you hear?
- What sound did it make?
- What did you smell?
- What did you do after it?
- What did you lose?
- How did you feel?
- What did other people around you do?
  - What happened to the animals around you?
  - What do you do differently since the disaster?
  - How do you feel now?
  - What makes you feel better?

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Teachers need to set ground rules for discussions. Students need to know that the purpose is to share the experience and help each other, and that it should be positive and useful for everybody. The most severely affected students will probably be seen individually.

Discussions may not be possible where there are divisions or a lack of cohesion in the class, for example in a secondary school group that has cliques. Therapeutic work would also be really difficult where there were classroom/centre behaviour management issues.

### **Adapting the curriculum**

The main focus of this booklet is significant natural disasters. However, teachers and supervisors may find some parts of this section relevant and useful for dealing with school-related events such as fires, vandalism or violence.

Activities or projects focussed on learning about disasters provide continuing opportunities to deal with the crisis. Investigating the causes and consequences of disasters may help students to understand what may be mysterious or confusing, and provide them with a sense of control.

For children in early childhood centres, the curriculum provides an open-ended framework for exploring the disaster experience. Activities involving play, stories, painting, drawing, music, movement, carpentry, clay, and water can all provide opportunities for younger children to regain confidence in their surroundings. Other kinds of curriculum activities and adaptations can help older students to process and come to terms with the disaster experience.

Below are some suggestions for projects and activities that teachers can build into their lesson plans.

### For younger students

- Provide continuing access to toys and materials to encourage play re-enactment of the disaster
- show and tell about the disaster
- viewing photographs of the disaster
- drawing pictures of the disaster experience
- group mural or collage on topics such as “what happened to our house” or “when the earthquake struck”
- role plays or puppet shows about what happened
- story writing
- daily journal writing
- poetry writing
- creating picture books for other students about the disaster
- information boards and scrapbooks on the disaster
- projects on the disaster
- research topics
- song writing
- video or school production
- class project to contribute to community disaster recovery effort
- students can draw or write about the thing they best remember, or respond to topics such as:
  - What happened when the disaster hit?
  - What helpful things could you do if you were in another disaster?
  - What did you learn from what happened to you?
- collections of student work could be published or performed for the class, school or community.

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## For older students

- write about their own experiences in the disaster
- videotape interviews with a variety of people about the disaster
- investigate issues portrayed in literature (disaster, grief, bereavement)
- investigate disasters portrayed in Maori myth and legend, and in the legends of other cultures
- develop role plays, skits, productions to portray some of the emotions that arise in response to disaster
- conduct a debate
- write essays/stories about different aspects of the disaster (e.g., community impact, geological impact, human interest stories, lawsuits that may result)
- investigate issues such as accurate reporting of catastrophic events and sensationalism
- portray disaster experience in various art media
- discuss emotional reactions to disaster, health and safety implications, and effects of stress on the body
- investigate scientific aspects of the disaster (climate conditions, geographical impact); short and long term impact of the disaster on the environment
- study governmental agencies responsible for aid, how they work, how effective they are, and the political implications within the community
- examine community systems and how the disaster has affected them
- prepare oral histories by interviewing people who may have experienced an earlier disaster
- evaluate emergency management procedures in the area.



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## **D.** Partnership with the community

*It may be difficult for those outside the situation to comprehend the full extent of the trauma and life disruption that ensues for an extended period of time following a major disaster.  
(La Greca, Silverman, Vernberg & Prinstein, 1996)*



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## D.

### Partnership with the community

Following some types of disaster, the school or early childhood centre is likely to become the focal point of the community. Responsibilities in the short to medium term will include providing accurate information and guidance for parents.

Forming a partnership between the school or centre and the community is crucial to the successful management of a disaster situation. Procedures for liaising with family/whanau, community groups, and social service agencies following disaster need to be developed as part of emergency planning.

#### Liaising with parents

The school or centre is likely to have a special leadership role within the community following a disaster. It is important to keep families informed about how the recovery process is being managed.

Once students have returned to the school or centre, staff should maintain close contact with parents and caregivers. They need to know what is being done for their children, and it is important to seek their co-operation and commitment, through:

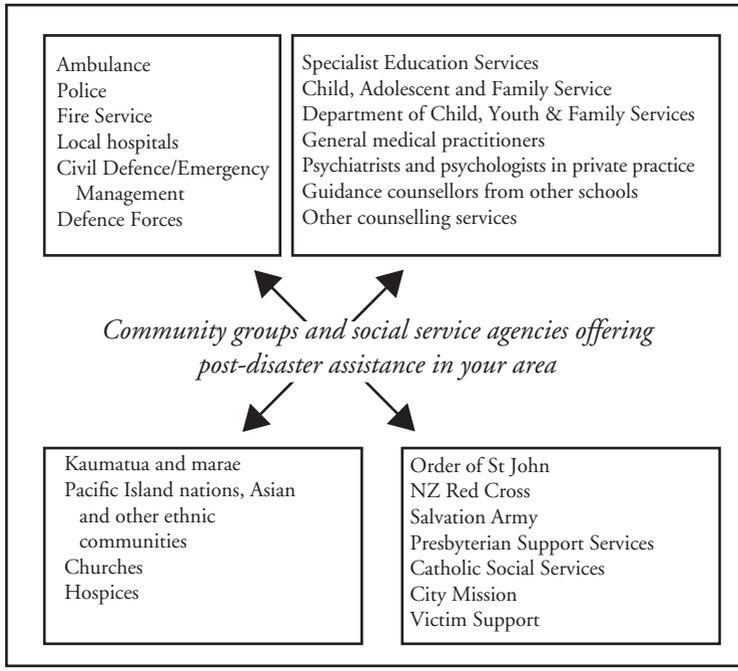
- Regular written or phone contacts
- Information sheets covering:
  - who has been called in to assist students
  - how parents can get help
  - who to contact if they are worried about their child
- Educational forums to provide:
  - information about reactions to expect in children
  - strategies for responding to these reactions.

### Liaising with community groups and social service agencies

The centre or school is best placed to oversee what is done to assist children and young people in the community. To do this well, however, it needs to plan how to use community resources, and network with these in advance.

The specific responsibilities of the school or centre will differ depending on the particular circumstances of the disaster situation. In the event of a large-scale disaster, such as a major earthquake, it may be difficult to know which groups to work with, and available resources may not be used to best effect.

Identifying and contacting suitable support agencies in advance does take time, but this will pay off if there is an emergency. Personal contact with specialist social service agencies means that in a crisis, working relationships will not have to start from scratch.



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## **E.** Planning to cope with disaster

*Experience around the world has shown that where people are aware of the potential for disaster and plan their response, then injuries, damage and subsequent trauma are significantly reduced.  
(Emergency Management 1995.)*



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## E. Planning to cope with disaster

**T**his booklet is mainly about responding to the psychological consequences of disasters. However, there is a larger message. To ensure the best outcome, we need to prepare for both the practical and the psychological effects of natural disasters and other traumatic incidents. This requires planning well in advance.

A first step is to set up a school-based working party. This group analyses needs and puts together action plans for a host of contingencies. These strategies are then communicated to everyone who will be affected by them, within and beyond the school. They need to be continually thought about, debated and updated.

The strategies should also be frequently practised, as realistically as possible. Disasters produce the unpredictable, but regular practice strengthens the mental and emotional capacity to deal with these events. It is extremely difficult to learn new tasks in the midst of a disaster.

Planning to respond to disaster involves four phases:

1. Mitigation – what can be done now to reduce the risk to life and property in the event of a disaster
2. Preparation – how to prepare now in order to respond effectively to the disaster situation
3. Response – what to do immediately after the disaster happens
4. Recovery – what to do to return life to normal as much as possible.

The Civil Defence uses “response” to refer to what is done immediately after a disaster. In the earlier sections of this booklet, “response” refers to what teachers and early childhood centre staff can do to help their students recover from the psychological consequences of disaster.

### School-wide management

Planning a school-wide response to the disaster involves a thorough investigation of the implications of each of the four phases. Not all of the issues mentioned here will come up in every type of disaster or be appropriate for every school or early childhood centre. But schools and centres can use these general guidelines to establish specific emergency procedures which are appropriate for individual needs and circumstances. Refer to the guidelines published by the Ministry of Civil Defence (1992, 1994) for further detail on the development of emergency procedures.

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## Phase 1: Mitigation

### Identifying hazards

What hazards could affect your school or centre? Geography plays a part — some schools and centres are more likely than others to experience cyclones, floods, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions.

### Maintaining safety installations

All safety installations need to be checked and maintained — alarm system, fire extinguishers and fire hose reels, smoke-stop doors, exit doors, exit signs, emergency lighting, telephones and smoke detectors.

### Taking hazard precautions

Staff need to be aware of potential hazards on the premises and take steps to deal with these. For instance, furniture and heavy equipment should be restrained or fixed to the walls. Raised edges can be attached to shelves and catches to cupboards. A floor plan can be used to show the location of potential hazards, utilities and emergency equipment.

### Complying with statutory responsibilities

Every school and centre needs to ensure that it complies with all statutory responsibilities under the various Acts.

#### Education Act 1989

Schools and early childhood centres are responsible for:

- safe storage of equipment and materials
- the prominent display of a plan for the evacuation and care of children in emergencies

- training all staff in fire and earthquake drills, and in other emergency procedures, and carrying out regular evacuation drills
- all hazards to the safety of children being corrected, repaired, removed or made inaccessible.

These regulations are audited by the Education Review Office.

#### Fire Service Act 1975

Under the Fire Safety and Evacuation of Buildings Regulations 1992, schools and centres are required to provide and display a fire evacuation scheme approved by the New Zealand Fire Service.

#### Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992

Schools and centres are responsible for:

- safety of employees
- identification and elimination or isolation of hazards and hazardous materials
- establishment of health and safety procedures.

#### Civil Defence Act 1983

Under the National Civil Defence Plan, individuals are expected to be responsible for the welfare of themselves, their families, and those in their care in the event of an emergency.

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## Phase 2: Preparation

In order to respond effectively to disaster, planning needs to:

### **Define positions of responsibility**

Identify these and make sure all staff are familiar with what is required. Be aware that it is the role that matters, as specific people could be absent or injured during the disaster. For instance, whoever assumes the role of the deputy principal or supervisor will know they are responsible for turning off the gas, or accounting for everyone who attends the school or centre. They will also know how to do this.

### **Identify and initiate contact with all necessary community support agencies**

Support agencies can include emergency services, specialist services for students identified as being particularly at risk, voluntary agencies, support people for different cultures, churches and religious groups, and other informal networks.

### **Make sure staff, students and parents are all familiar with the disaster plan**

Every staff member (including ancillary staff) needs to know the disaster plan. All students need to be familiar with safety and welfare procedures. Parents must be informed of emergency plans too.

### **Rehearse emergency management procedures**

Rehearsal is essential to test equipment, see if the disaster plan works, and find out how well everyone understands the emergency management procedures. Rehearsal should involve more than just evacuation drills; it should represent reality as closely as possible. But in any role

playing situation, students need to be carefully debriefed, because simulating disaster could be disturbing.

### Assemble emergency supplies

Resources to be used specifically for emergencies should be assembled and stored. Emergency supplies will probably include first aid equipment, food, water, rescue equipment, communication equipment, lighting, hygiene supplies and some way of getting warm. A camera and a log book are useful for recording events. Schools and centres should keep full records of what happens and what they do. A database of parents, their occupations and the resources they have (e.g. tractor, portable generator) is useful. This may prove invaluable later for noting where people are and recording details of victims and the bereaved. It is also helpful to know whether there are any elderly, disabled or sick people living nearby who would need assistance in a disaster.

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## Phase 3: Response

The Civil Defence uses “response” to refer to what is done immediately after a disaster. In the earlier sections of this booklet, “response” refers to what teachers and early childhood centre staff can do to help their students recover from the psychological consequences of disaster.

Following a disaster, schools and early childhood centres may have to be self-sustaining for several days or more. Utilities such as gas, water, electricity, communication and transport could be unavailable. Students and staff injured during the disaster may need to be looked after for several hours. The school or centre is likely to become the focal point for the community once parents and caregivers are able to reach the site. Staff will need to take a leadership role and remain in control of the response process.

During the immediate period after a major disaster, staff and students will have to handle many important tasks, such as:

- assess casualties and give first aid
- establish communication with emergency services
- rescue people
- put out fires
- assess safety of buildings
- account for all students
- locate missing students and staff
- keep records of students released to parent/caregiver/or other authorised person
- comfort and support people
- respond to concerned parents/caregivers
- consider temporary shelter requirements
- evacuate people.

## Phase 4: Recovery

Before students come back, staff need to have planned for:

- resuming the school or centre routine
- ongoing support for students and staff
- dealing with the media
- liaising with bereaved families
- identifying students at risk and having a plan in place to help them
- possible referral to specialist agencies
- responding to bereaved children
- counselling
- helping parents to help their children
- attending funerals and memorial services
- acknowledging gifts and support
- reviewing and revising emergency management procedures.

Communication is a central issue. Both during and after a disaster, public interest can create a media circus, with negative personal consequences. Accurate communications facilitate control, dispel rumour, provide certainty, and send messages to people about how they should behave and respond.

Communications include:

- ensuring information is accurate
- answering parents' enquiries
- appointing a media spokesperson
- ensuring confidentiality of student and staff information
- deciding on frequency and form of bulletins to the community.

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## In conclusion

*If a traumatic response does not have the chance to become entrenched, it will become only a small scar on a very large life.  
(L.C. Terr quoted by Brock, 1998)*



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## In conclusion

Thinking about disaster means thinking about the unthinkable. We often try to ward off disasters by not thinking about them at all. Few of us can fully imagine the capacity for destruction, disruption and suffering which even a minor disaster may have. A medium-sized natural disaster is likely to result in substantial property damage, physical injury and death. Large numbers of people will be disoriented and distressed.

A “quality” response to a disaster will encompass all its consequences. This requires a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, an enlightened approach to psychological aspects, and adequate disaster preparation.

Disaster distress is a normal response. It is important not to see resulting reactions and changes in thinking, feelings and behaviour as pathological or irreversible. Classroom teachers can do an enormous amount to help most children to make sense of a disaster and to lessen personal upset. With insight and ingenuity, teachers and centre staff can help young people to see the relationship between their thoughts and feelings and the disaster, and their anxiety can be lessened through sensitive presentations of material relating to the event.

However, these activities require staff to tread a careful path, neither making light of disaster reactions nor allowing them to be magnified. The ultimate aim is a return to normal. As much as anything, this is achieved through patience, acceptance, understanding and empathy in a classroom context that also emphasises predictability and security.

In addition, teachers need to be aware that disaster reactions come in phases, and that periodically there will be setbacks. Initially there is

likely to be panic and open distress to respond to, followed by disaster trauma, and then various reactions associated with the slow process of repair and rebuilding. Cultural and religious aspects need to be considered as well, particularly with regard to death and bereavement.

Both students and staff are likely to be profoundly affected by disaster. Responding to the psychological consequences of disasters makes tremendous demands on teachers and other staff. However, they are the best placed to facilitate and monitor student recovery. Nobody else has the ability to provide large numbers of group interventions that are developmentally appropriate, and that continue over time. Teachers and supervisors can also make good use of peer support and of structure and regularity.

Finally, early childhood centres and schools have an unparalleled capacity to promote optimism and hope, and to create a sense of movement and progress, translating victims into survivors.

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