

THE VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES – SOME THOUGHTS WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES OUR WORLD

All of us might want our own lives and the lives of others to be relatively settled. However, there are times when unexpected tragedies or crises occur in the lives of our family, friends or others in our wider community. We may not be directly involved in the event, yet we can be affected too. When this happens people can react in many different ways:

Thoughts: People sometimes struggle to make sense of an event that disrupts life's expected pattern. Such an event can make existence seem tenuous, and everyday things seem meaningless, shallow, or trivial. It's also common to think about wanting to help others who have been affected by this tragedy.

Feelings: It's natural to experience a range of emotional responses such as shock, disbelief, sadness, anger, worry, irritability, fear, or sometimes a sense of guilt about not having been directly affected by the event itself.

Imagination: Sometimes people imagine themselves in the other person's place. "What if that happened to me? What would I do in that situation?" and this can be highly distressing.

Memory: This event can trigger the memory of some tragic or upsetting experience in one's own life, reviving feelings and thoughts.

Ways to help others affected by the event:

Listen carefully, then listen some more – people may feel the need to go over the event repeatedly and this can be an important way of coming to terms with it.

Acknowledge people's reactions and avoid judging them as "good" or "bad". Don't make light of the situation or other people's reactions – it takes time to come to terms with tragedy or crisis. Don't take any strong reactions personally.

Stay with people if they are distressed or upset, but try not to crowd them. Listen as long as people want to talk – often "just listening" is all you need to do or being a silent companion can provide a sense of connection.

Help people with simple practical tasks that might be difficult for them to focus on in the short term. Be prepared to step back as soon as they begin to feel they can be in control – offer assistance but don't take over.

Our community is a great source of healing for many people. Utilise friends and family wherever possible. Some people may also want to talk with professionals to compliment the support they are receiving from their community.

At ANU we have the Counselling Centre for students (6125 2442) who may be concerned, involved or just worried about the bushfires in Victoria. For staff, we have the Adviser to Staff, Gail Frank (6125 3616) as well as the Employee Assistance Program (1300 360 364). These services are free to students and staff.

The ANU Counselling Team