

Advice for principals and teachers 1: Look after yourself and each other

When schools reopen after a disaster, society takes for granted that principals and teachers will be there as usual but my work across five different countries and disasters as diverse as earthquakes, tsunami, floods, fires, terrorist attacks and cyclones has highlighted some common themes:

- You are not super-human. If you are living in the disaster zone yourself, you might have lost loved ones, homes, family livelihoods, whole communities, everything you own and some things that are irreplaceable. You are allowed to grieve.
- This has been a very hard time but eventually, sooner or later, you will need to stop and take stock of the emotional toll. Some of you will bury yourselves in your work; others will not be able to face going back to work. Everyone will have different strengths and limits and will need to work within their own coping strategies.
- Don't be hard on yourself or others. New trauma can bring up events or issues from the past that mean that some people are struggling in ways that you might not always know.
- There is no magic bullet and recovery is a long journey but here are things that other principals and teachers in post-disaster zones found helpful:
 - Visiting or checking on each other so that experiences could be shared and appropriate support and help could be organised.
 - Taking stock of the school's students and families so that teachers could have a sense of what had happened to individuals and their families when they first met again.
 - Having a planning day before school began so that everyone had an agreed way forward – the messages that they would be giving students and how to talk about the events.
 - Getting advice from trauma counsellors about how to look after themselves, each other and their students, families and the wider community.
 - Discussing how and when to accept support that is offered – counselling, financial support, resource materials, time off, relief teachers, official educational department support, parent help, NGOs, voluntary groups and the many offers that will come.
 - Building in times during the days, weeks, months *and* years ahead to keep checking in on each other, to debrief with like-minded people or form a support group. Principals, for example, who felt the strain of holding the school together, found it very helpful to share their experiences with other principals who had been through similar events.

This information is supplied by Professor Carol Mutch (from the University of Auckland), a researcher in disaster response and recovery from her own work and the research and advice of other experts in the field. It is designed to provide a general overview and might need adaptation for individual circumstances.