Australian Government

TOGETHER AGAINST BULLYING

# Supporting your wellbeing following incidents of bullying and other harmful behaviours

## Who is this resource for?

All school staff, particularly those who respond to or support students affected by bullying and other harmful behaviours.

## Resource purpose

This resource supports staff to manage the emotional impacts of responding to bullying behaviours, including harmful antecedent behaviours (referred to throughout this resource as bullying and other harmful behaviours). Antecedent harmful behaviours are behaviours that cause harm and, if left unaddressed, may continue or escalate over time.

Supporting students affected by bullying and other harmful behaviours can contribute to emotional load, vicarious trauma and burnout. Supporting staff wellbeing is an essential part of maintaining a safe and supportive school environment.

This resource provides practical strategies for reflection, regulation, debriefing and recovery, as well as pathways to further support. It also includes guidance for school leaders on supporting staff wellbeing after challenging or distressing incidents. The resource should be read in the context of relevant school and school system policies, procedures and frameworks.

## Key practice question

What am I noticing, what do I need right now, and who can I reach out to for support?

## Quick reference guide

1. **Notice the signs early.**
   Emotional load can build over time. Pay attention to difficulty switching off, emotional exhaustion, irritability, withdrawal, reduced motivation or ongoing fatigue.
2. **Pause and regulate.**
   Use a strategy that helps settle your stress response, such as slow breathing, grounding, movement or time in a quiet space.
3. **Reflect on what you are carrying.**
   Consider what is within your control, what can wait and whether the incident has affected you personally.
4. **Debrief and seek support.**
   Talk with a trusted colleague, supervisor or school leader. Seek professional support when needed.
5. **Maintain healthy boundaries and share responsibility.**
   Record follow-up actions, share or escalate concerns through school processes, and use a routine that helps you transition from school to home.

# Understanding the impact on staff wellbeing

Responding to bullying and other harmful behaviours can have significant impacts on staff wellbeing. These impacts can build over time, take different forms and vary from person to person.

Recognising these signs early and taking steps to support your wellbeing can help prevent stress from escalating and reduce the risk of longer-term impacts.

The table below explains emotional load, vicarious trauma and burnout, including how they can develop and some common signs to look out for.



## Emotional load

The emotional energy needed to support students, families and colleagues through challenging situations.

**Signs can include:**

- feeling emotionally drained
- continuing to think about an incident after action has been taken
- difficulty switching off.



## Vicarious trauma

Can develop when staff are repeatedly exposed to students' distress, trauma or experiences of harm.

**Signs can include:**

- feeling overwhelmed
- worrying more than usual
- feeling on edge
- difficulty concentrating
- withdrawing from emotionally demanding situations
- having strong reactions to particular incidents.



## Burnout

Can develop when emotional demands continue without enough support and recovery.

**Signs can include:**

- ongoing fatigue
- irritability
- reduced motivation
- feeling detached from work
- loss of enthusiasm
- a reduced sense of accomplishment.

# Practical tools to support your wellbeing

## Your wellbeing matters

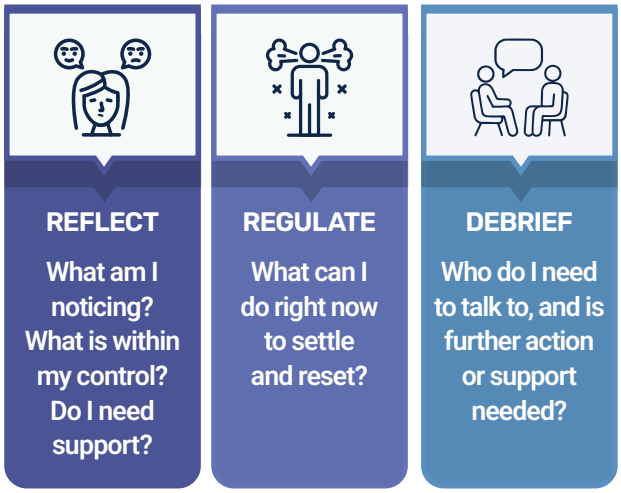
Looking after your wellbeing means:

- ✔ noticing when an experience has affected you
- ✔ taking time to reset
- ✔ connecting with support
- ✔ allowing time to recover.

## Reflect, Regulate, Debrief

Use the "Reflect, Regulate, Debrief" guide below to:

- ✔ Check in with yourself, Reflect
- ✔ Manage stress, Regulate
- ✔ Access support, Debrief




## Create a school-to-home transition

A short school-to-home transition routine can help create a boundary between work and home to help you to switch focus and support your wellbeing. Choose and regularly practise the strategies that work best for you.

**Before leaving school**

- ✔ separate what needs immediate action from what can wait
- ✔ write down any follow-up actions for the next school day so you don't need to keep holding them in your mind
- ✔ reflect on one positive action you took today
- ✔ even when situations remain unresolved, recognise one way you contributed to a student's safety or wellbeing.

**During your commute**

- ✔ use a regular activity to mark the transition from work to home, for example listening to the same music, podcast or audiobook.

**When you arrive home**

- ✔ create a physical transition at home. For example, changing your clothes, taking a short walk, stretching, or spending five minutes outdoors before moving on to home responsibilities.

While individual wellbeing strategies are important, leadership practices also play a critical role in supporting staff wellbeing following challenging incidents.

## When work and community overlap

In small, remote or close-knit communities, it may be particularly challenging to fully "leave work at work". These strategies can help protect wellbeing:




### Set boundaries

Set clear boundaries about when and where school matters can be discussed.



### Seek guidance

Seek supervision or debriefing when incidents involve family, community or cultural obligations.



### Identify conflicts

Identify potential conflicts of interest early and follow school escalation pathways.



### Respond to breaches

Seek support from school leadership when a student, parent, carer or other member of the school community breaches professional or personal boundaries.



### Share responsibility

Share responsibility with leaders or colleagues rather than managing complex situations alone.



### Look beyond the school

Access support outside the immediate school community when specific expertise or greater confidentiality or objectivity is needed.

# How school leaders can support staff wellbeing

## Leaders can support staff wellbeing by embedding the following practices across the school:

- ✔ create and maintain a safe, supportive and positive school culture
- ✔ develop clear processes for check-ins, debriefing, reflective practice and supervision
- ✔ ensure staff know how to access support including Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) where available, and other professional support
- ✔ include staff wellbeing, reflective practice and available support pathways in induction and onboarding processes
- ✔ clarify roles and responsibilities for responding to bullying and other harmful behaviours – including what should be shared or escalated to the wider school team
- ✔ encourage collaboration and shared responsibility with the school community and, where appropriate, external services.

### Supporting staff following challenging or distressing incidents

#### *Check in*

- ✔ check in with staff after challenging or distressing incidents and ask whether they need additional support
- ✔ be alert to changes that may indicate emotional load, vicarious trauma or burnout, such as:
  - › irritability
  - › withdrawal
  - › reduced motivation
  - › difficulty concentrating
  - › fatigue
  - › changes in usual work patterns.

#### *Provide practical support*

- ✔ provide practical support, such as:
  - › debriefing or supervision
  - › release time for follow-up or documentation
  - › access to a quiet space to regulate and recover
- ✔ consider whether responsibilities can be shared or adjusted to support staff following particularly challenging incidents, including those involving racism and discrimination.

#### *Connect staff with appropriate support*

- ✔ enable culturally safe supports, such as:
  - › access to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or culturally safe practitioner, supervisor or peer support
  - › culturally appropriate debriefing
- ✔ encourage staff to seek professional support from a General Practitioner (GP) or mental health professional if they are experiencing ongoing distress or finding it difficult to cope.

Recognise that staff wellbeing is a shared responsibility. Leaders and staff who support colleagues may also need guidance, supervision or support for their own responses.

### Supporting leaders' own wellbeing

Leaders may carry additional emotional demands when managing complex incidents and supporting students, families and staff. They may also be managing complaints, documentation, difficult decisions and external communication.

Leaders need support too. A shared responsibility approach can help distribute responsibility for complex cases, support collaborative decision-making and create opportunities to debrief on challenging situations. Use the same wellbeing practices you encourage in staff: seek supervision or peer support, share responsibility where appropriate, maintain realistic boundaries, make time and seek support to recover after particularly challenging incidents.

Remember that supporting staff wellbeing begins with supporting your own wellbeing. Looking after your own wellbeing supports sound decision-making, consistent support for others and sustainable leadership practice.

# Looking after myself when responding to bullying and other harmful behaviours

Use Reflect and Regulate in the table below when you notice stress building. After a challenging incident, use Regulate and Debrief to help you reset and decide whether you need further support.

## REFLECT

**Reflection can help you notice how a situation has affected you and whether further action or support may be needed.**

**Which of the following have I noticed?**

- ☐ Thinking about the situation after work
- ☐ Feeling responsible for the outcome
- ☐ Replaying conversations in my mind
- ☐ Finding it difficult to switch off
- ☐ Worrying about a student
- ☐ Feeling irritable or frustrated
- ☐ Feeling emotionally drained
- ☐ Feeling helpless, overwhelmed or distressed
- ☐ Other changes, such as difficulty sleeping

**Ask yourself:**

- › *Do I recognise any personal experiences, values or triggers that may be influencing how I am experiencing or responding to this situation? If so, consider supervision, debriefing or additional support.*
- › *What impacts am I feeling the most?*
- › *What's within my control? What's outside my control?*
- › *Do I need to reach out for further support or supervision?*

**Self-Compassion reflection. This situation has been difficult because...**

- › *What would I say to a colleague in the same situation?*
- › *What do I need right now?*

## REGULATE

**Regulation strategies can help calm the body's stress response and reduce emotional impact.**

**What strategies help you recharge?**

- ☐ Listening to music
- ☐ A school-to-home transition ritual
- ☐ Checking in briefly with a trusted colleague
- ☐ Mindfulness or relaxation
- ☐ Time with family or friends
- ☐ Taking a walk
- ☐ Creative activities
- ☐ Spending time outdoors
- ☐ Reading a book
- ☐ Physical activity
- ☐ Spiritual or cultural practices
- ☐ Other

**Which of these do I need more of this week?**

Try a simple breathing strategy, such as ***4–4–6 breathing: breathe in for 4, hold for 4, breathe out for 6.*** Repeat three times to calm your body and support clearer thinking.

Use the ***5–4–3–2–1*** grounding technique to re-connect with the present: name five things you can see, four you can feel, three you can hear, two you can smell, and one you can taste.

**STOP Strategy after a difficult incident or when stress is building:**

**S** – Stop: What do I need to pause?

**T** – Take a step back: What helps me slow down?

**O** – Observe: What's happening right now? What am I noticing in my body, thoughts and emotions?

**P** – Proceed: What would help this situation?

## DEBRIEF

**After an incident of bullying or other harmful behaviour, use these questions on your own or discuss them with a trusted colleague or school leader.**

- › *Is this incident still on my mind? What am I still carrying?*
- › *Do I need further support?*
- › *What have I learned from this situation that will help me next time?*
- › *Would support from a GP or mental health professional help?*

### Remember

Responding to bullying and other harmful behaviours can affect even the most experienced school staff. Seek collegial support, supervision or professional support from a GP or mental health professional when needed.

## Where to get more help

**Beyond Blue:** 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au. Mental health support for stress, anxiety and overwhelm.

**Lifeline:** 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au. Crisis support and counselling if things feel overwhelming.

**13YARN:** 13 92 76. Culturally safe support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**1800RESPECT:** 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Free support for people impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence.

**eSafety Commissioner:** eSafety.gov.au. Report cyberbullying, get advice, and request content removal support.

**Australian Human Rights Commission:** humanrights.gov.au. Support for cases involving discriminatory harm. Reports can be made via the website or by emailing infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

**Medicare Mental Health:** Visit medicarementalhealth.gov.au or call 1800 595 212 to find free mental health services and Medicare Mental Health Centres.

**QLife:** 1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Peer support and referral for LGBTQIA+ people.

**Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au. Free counselling and support for children and young people aged 5–25 years.