

COVID 19: Where to next?

There is no doubt that the experience of COVID-19 has been disruptive, even though in Australia we have avoided the most severe restrictions and large loss of life that has been (and continues to be) the case in other parts of the world. While restrictions are now being lifted, the impact is still being felt. News events including 'spikes' and 'second waves' continue to have the potential to 'trigger' a fear response. While schools are back to full operation, some processes remain changed as a reminder of what might have been (or may still be the possibility). Across wider society generally, restrictions are starting to be lifted. So how do we move from a crisis response to a more sustainable long-term approach?

While we may not think of the COVID-19 response as a critical incident or trauma event, the literature around responding to trauma is informative in thinking about how we manage our wellbeing in light of COVID-19. In this short article, some comments are made drawn from the research literature about how to manage and respond to a crisis, and the literature around trauma, illness and management.

First of all, research is clear that the vast majority of people who are exposed to a difficult situation or potentially traumatic event cope well despite it being challenging at the time. It is clear that trauma disorders occur only in the minority of cases following such critical events. Indeed, the research suggests that there are three different possible responses: While a small percentage of people do develop a trauma disorder and need some support to return to a level of effective functioning, the majority will return to functioning the way and as well as they were before the challenge, and some will actually return to a higher level of functioning. This last category is known as post-traumatic growth and can occur when people don't go back to 'normal' but incorporate what they have learned about their capacity to cope, and their new coping skills, to experience an improved way of operating.

In trauma exposure, a return to effective levels of functioning will depend on a range of things including previous exposure to trauma, personality and personal history, how resilient they were prior to exposure, other factors and pressures, and, their attitude prior (including how optimistic they were). While the recent COVID disruption may not (at least in WA) have been as pervasive and shocking as a trauma event, the framework for understanding trauma may offer a useful model to consider both staff and student wellbeing following the coronavirus isolation.

For schools (both students, staff and the wider school community) now is the time to consider how to effectively shift from what was a short-term 'emergency' response to a longer-term and more sustainable model that encourages effective incorporation of new ideas, models and ways of working as well as building (or if necessary re-building) wellbeing.

The first thing to consider is that people's response will be varied. At a recent webinar, participants were asked to rate how they were coping following COVID on a scale of 1 (badly) to 5 (very well). Over a third rated themselves at 4 or 5, and the majority rated themselves 3 or more. Only a small minority indicated they were at 1. The expectation should be that some people will really struggle, some people won't struggle at all, and many will cope well enough (and well eventually) seems to be the case. In considering how to move towards re-building wellbeing, we need to accept that some people may need support, but many will not.

Different people will respond in different ways and will have differing needs at different times.

Secondly, the frontline 'treatment' following trauma is practical support and psychoeducation. Most people have the inner resources to cope well, often with just a small amount of support. And some people cope really well without any support at all. In this post-shutdown world, the reality will likely be that some people coped very well and may have even thrived through the shutdown. These people were energised by the challenge, were excited by the chance to embrace new ways and IT, and flourished through and coming out of the COVID-shutdown. Others may have found it a challenge but, possibly with a bit of practical support, coped and are continuing to cope well. And of course, there are those who have and who continue to struggle. The most effective first-response is practical support if and as it is needed, for those who need it.

Assuming that everyone will need help potentially pathologises normal responses, devalues and diminishes the experience of those who coped well and potentially derails their ability to grow towards post-trauma growth, and, has the capacity to stall the recovery and return to wellbeing of the majority by communicating that they can't cope without help.

Finally, the response and movement to wellbeing or growth is less about the event itself than it is about the person-centred factors. Because of this, some people will operate at '100%' from day 1, others will take different amounts of time to get back to capacity, and others will need different things to help them get back on track – remembering that just because the COVID-shutdown may have been a challenge, does not mean that people will be broken nor that they will need support.

So given this, how can we support this movement from a 'crisis' response model to a wellbeing growth model? Wellbeing is not a single thing – it is an amalgam, made up of both different factors, components, influences and attributes as well as being Gestalt-like bigger than the mere sums of its parts. There are different models of wellbeing – some quite different, others very similar. But there is certainly no 'wrong time' to consider how we might give some attention to wellbeing either personally or for the staff (and students) generally. Once we accept that we can move away from a reactive to a planned and sustained model, we can move towards wellbeing.

One of the most well-known models of wellbeing is Seligman's PERMA model, which identifies the five domains of wellbeing as the experience of positive emotions, engagement, effective relationships, a sense of having meaning and purpose in life, and, areas of personal achievement.

This PERMA model has been widely adopted across schools. With physical health, the PERMA model is the foundation for SAHMRI's (South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute) Wellbeing and Resilience Centre population model and the UK Government's mental health at work plan. Most importantly, PERMA (and positive psychology more generally) is not a fad, but a widely researched and supported model that underpins wellbeing.

The PERMA model is well-referenced, and there are many resources easily available for anyone wishing to develop an understanding of the model.

Moving towards wellbeing means an intentional shift towards building (or re-building) the elements of wellbeing. Once we have managed the practical needs, it's important to look at wellbeing needs. What are the areas of strength we are currently experiencing? What are the PERMA wellbeing areas that have been neglected that I might now start to prioritise?

For those who need some specific support, obviously this should be provided. For everyone, time and intention should be directed to making this clear movement away from thinking reactively to planning and building into wellbeing generally.

Recovery Pathway

CRISIS RESPONSE

Focus on immediate needs. Aims to meet survival needs (safety, health, protection). Short-term response.



RE-BUILD

Shifts from safety needs alone, to include wellbeing needs. Is more long-term. Draws on our strengths, success, and, newly developed skills.



THRIVING

Normal functioning levels. Incorporates skills and mastery from both crisis and rebuild period for more effective functioning.



What are our strengths and successes?

What have we done well? What is working? Even if I found some things hard, acknowledge and recognise that simply coming out relatively unscathed is a sign of strength. Take a moment to list what went well in order to be ready to use those skills, strengths and strategies in the future.



P

Positive emotion: Not just 'happy', we experience (and notice) *positive* emotions including amusement, hope, interest, compassion, gratitude, and optimism (the belief that we can generally experience good outcomes in life).

Ask yourself – What am I grateful for (in your life, at work)? What can I notice are my strengths and successes? Am I spending time with people that I care about, re-starting (or finding new) activities that I enjoy, playing enough, exercising? When was the last time I listened to music (and sang out loud)?

E

Engagement: We are using our signature strengths, experiencing and engagement with what we love to do.

Ask yourself – Do I need to re-start my mindfulness, meditation, journaling or prayer activities. Have I been 'too busy' to stop and notice, pause, reflect, appreciate and observe? How can I stop and just be?

R

Relationships: We are inherently social creatures and positive relationships have a significant impact on our wellbeing.

Ask yourself – do I need to re-engage the better relationships? Get back in touch with people, and spend some time re-connected. How can I make sure I make the shift from transactional to more relational interactions at work? When did I MAKE time to have coffee time with someone? How can I share success and good news with people: telling my stories & rejoicing in theirs?

M

Meaning: To have a sense of meaning, we need to feel that what we do is valuable and worthwhile. This involves belonging to and/or serving something that we believe is greater than ourselves.

Ask yourself – Have I neglected being involved in things that matter, and can I recapture this? When was the last time I stopped to remember that what I am doing could be changing the world.

A

Accomplishment: We have worked towards and reached our goals, achieved mastery over an endeavour, and had the self-motivation to complete what we set out to do. A sense of achievement: 'I did it, and I did it well'. A sense of 'perseverance and passion for long-term goals'

Ask yourself – how can I look for, find, recognise and celebrate my achievements - with myself as well as with others? What strengths have I used to succeed? What can I continue to use?