

ACTIVITY

25
MIN

Staff professional development exercise

When you're responsible for teaching hundreds of students, it can sometimes be tough to remember all their names, let alone their unique personal characteristics and family circumstances.

By continuing to develop your knowledge of your students' personality traits and unique contextual factors, you'll not only get to know them better, but will also build better relationships with them. This exercise can help you to develop the skills to do that.

Use this short exercise at your next school or faculty staff meeting. It's aligned to 'Standard 1: Know students and how they learn' of the [Australian Teacher Professional Standards for Teachers](#).

If you're not a leader in your school but are passionate about wellbeing and have seen the impact that the current drought is having, share the resource with your deputy or principal as something they might consider using with your colleagues.

RESOURCES NEEDED

- ▶ Facilitator notes
- ▶ Discussion personas: Hannah and Tom
- ▶ Discussion questions and suggested answers

FACILITATOR NOTES

1. Introduce the topic for today's staff meeting: *How the drought is affecting student wellbeing, signs to look for, and what we can do as a staff collective.*
2. Distribute the two hypothetical student personas and encourage staff members to spend some time reading through the personas in groups.
3. After a suitable amount of time, explore with staff the discussion questions at the end of the handouts. Also see the 'Discussion questions and suggested answers' section in case you need a hand in prompting conversation. Some other points to raise and discuss include:
 - a. Anxiety: Hannah and Tom are both experiencing worry and stress, which can lead to anxiety if it's not addressed in a timely manner. Find more info about anxiety among students: [ReachOut.click/DroughtAnxiety](#)
 - b. Wellbeing: Encourage your staff to explore some ReachOut Schools articles related to wellbeing: [ReachOut.click/TeacherWellbeing](#)
4. Call for, and have someone note down, practical actions your school may implement to support students struggling to cope with the wide-ranging impacts of the drought.

There are a range of signs that a young person might be experiencing high levels of stress.

They include:

- ▶ tiredness and lack of motivation
- ▶ irritability and anger that are uncharacteristic
- ▶ forgetfulness
- ▶ excessive worry and anxiety
- ▶ withdrawal from social circles and activities the young person usually enjoys.

Stress can show up differently for everyone, so if you notice a change in a student that's out of character, it might be good to check in with them.

For more information, see:

[ReachOut.click/StressOfDrought](#)

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Discussion personas

HANNAH

Age: 15

Location: Darling Downs, QLD

Education: Currently studying in Year 9

Work: Unemployed

Technology: iPhone X, Instagram, Snapchat, Spotify

Interests: Equestrian, online shopping

ABOUT HANNAH

Hannah lives with her mum, dad and younger brother on a property that's about a 30-minute drive north-west of Toowoomba. She's bright, bubbly and has lots of friends who she chats with most nights on Instagram.

Hannah is a member of the local equestrian club and has represented her school a number of times at state meets. This has meant her family has travelled quite a lot over the past few years. She does well at school and is regarded as a mature student by the teaching staff. Her English teacher says that Hannah is a pleasure to teach and has great interpersonal skills, which can sometimes mean she gets a little too chatty in class.

LATELY

The family's cattle farm has been hit hard by the drought. Hannah's father, a third-generation farmer, has had to buy in feed for some time now and is starting to truck in water at a cost of more than \$700 a load, as all the dams have dried up. With significantly lower livestock sales, there has been very little income for the family. Hannah is feeling increasingly stressed and is worried about her dad, as he hasn't been himself lately. She worries that her hobbies, and the fact that she goes to a private school in Toowoomba, are putting a financial strain on the family.

Hannah has stopped wanting to take part in local equestrian events and has told her parents that she's lost interest in the sport. She is noticeably quieter and isn't volunteering for activities like she used to do. She isn't the same chatty, sociable person in class that she was a couple of months ago.

After a number of teachers expressed concerns, Hannah told her year adviser one lunchtime that she's really worried about her dad. She doesn't know how to talk to him and feels kind of responsible.

CONSIDER AND DISCUSS IN GROUPS

1. What noticeable changes in Hannah's behaviour might be of concern?
2. What impacts might Hannah's feelings of responsibility have on her wellbeing and her relationships at school?
3. How can individual teachers, wellbeing staff and others at school support Hannah during this tough time?
4. How can teachers support Hannah and her family as they cope with the impacts of the drought?
5. How can the school engage the family and discuss Hannah's wellbeing, considering the family's current circumstances?



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Discussion personas

TOM

Age: 16

Location: Narrabri, NSW

Education: Currently studying in Year 10

Work: Casual at IGA

Technology: Samsung, Snapchat, YouTube, Soundcloud

Interests: Rugby league, hanging out with mates, PS4

ABOUT TOM

Tom lives at home with his mum in Narrabri. His older brother, James, recently moved out of home to go to uni in Newcastle. Tom has a couple of good mates that he likes hanging out and playing footy with, but he's missing having his brother around. Tom and James had a really good relationship. They used to chat all the time when they went fishing at their local spot.

Tom's parents separated a number of years ago. His dad now lives in Coonabarabran, which is only about an hour away. He visits Tom infrequently, though, as he travels a lot for his job and has a new partner. Tom is frustrated by his dad's absence and lack of communication, and gets angry when he thinks about him.

Tom likes living in Narrabri because it's close to his friends and he can walk to where he works. He thinks he will probably have to leave the town when he finishes school, though, to have a chance of getting a good job in the future. But he's worried about leaving his mum now that his brother's gone.

LATELY

Tom's mum has been really stressed at work because of all the redundancies and is worried that she might be next. Because everyone knows everyone in Narrabri, Tom feels like he can't talk to his friends about the situation at home. He doesn't want word getting out around town. He also feels like he needs to contribute more to help his mum pay the bills that never seem to end.

Because of feeling stressed out about all this, Tom has lost interest in school. He has been asking around about jobs, either local or out on one of the big farms further west. His teachers have phoned his mum because he hasn't been handing in assignments. This only adds to her worries. When she raised the issue with Tom, he got angry and said that school was pointless anyway.

CONSIDER AND DISCUSS IN GROUPS

1. What effect is the drought having on Tom and his mum?
2. How might increased stress and anxiety affect Tom's mental wellbeing?
3. How can individual teachers, wellbeing staff and others at school support Tom during this tough time?
4. Attempt to identify a number of students at your school who might be experiencing similar challenges. What can we do to assist them?



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Discussion questions and suggested answers

HANNAH

WHAT NOTICEABLE CHANGES IN HANNAH'S BEHAVIOUR MIGHT BE OF CONCERN?

Hannah is starting to become more withdrawn and isn't displaying her usual positive behaviours, such as being involved in activities that she usually enjoys. Her comment to her year adviser shows that she is starting to worry and stress about the situation she and her family now find themselves in.

WHAT IMPACTS MIGHT HANNAH'S FEELINGS OF RESPONSIBILITY HAVE ON HER WELLBEING AND HER RELATIONSHIPS AT SCHOOL?

Hannah may continue to withdraw from her social group, have issues with paying attention in class, and become increasingly anxious, agitated and frustrated with little challenges that she may encounter. She may be experiencing some of the challenges associated with anxiety and depression. Her friends may not understand why she's no longer interested in chatting each night or at lunch. Out of frustration, Hannah's long-term friends may decide to drop her from their social group. The resulting disconnection can further impact on Hannah.

HOW CAN INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS, WELLBEING STAFF AND OTHERS AT SCHOOL SUPPORT HANNAH DURING THIS TOUGH TIME?

It's always important to show students that they matter. This can be done formally, such as when Hannah's year adviser had a chat with her. Or, some simple words of encouragement or affirmation can be helpful, as can listening. Making time simply to listen to what Hannah has to say and to acknowledge her stress and worries will help her feel more supported.

HOW CAN TEACHERS SUPPORT HANNAH AND HER FAMILY AS THEY COPE WITH THE IMPACTS OF THE DROUGHT?

Communication is important. The year adviser or individual staff may want to call Hannah's parents at home to celebrate her small successes, such as her excellent teamwork or a great piece of submitted work. It's also important to share issues and concerns with parents. Just as it's important to listen to students, it can be really beneficial to listen to their parents and try to understand any concerns that they may have. By both listening and being available, we can show as a staff collective that we are supportive. It may also be helpful to refer Hannah's parents to ReachOut Parents for more info, links and other resources so they can be informed and equipped to take action at home.

HOW CAN THE SCHOOL ENGAGE THE FAMILY AND DISCUSS HANNAH'S WELLBEING, CONSIDERING THE FAMILY'S CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES?

It's important to acknowledge the challenges that Hannah's family must be currently facing. Remaining positive is also beneficial. By seeking to 'team up' to help Hannah on both the school and home fronts, you can develop a healthy working relationship that puts Hannah first. You could also talk with the school's business manager if financial stress is a concern, which it may likely be in this circumstance.

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TOM

WHAT EFFECT IS THE DROUGHT HAVING ON TOM AND HIS MUM?

Although they may not be directly impacted by the drought, Tom and his mum are feeling its secondary effects, such as the related economic downturn, which is decreasing employment opportunities or forcing more companies to lay people off in Tom's community.

HOW MIGHT INCREASED STRESS AND ANXIETY AFFECT TOM'S MENTAL WELLBEING?

Similar to Hannah, Tom is troubled by feelings of worry, stress and responsibility. Although healthy in small doses, these feelings – if left unchecked – can develop into anxiety, which can be debilitating for young people like Tom. Ruminating on past events and worrying about the future can be emotionally draining and decrease Tom's self-efficacy.

HOW CAN INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS, WELLBEING STAFF AND OTHERS AT SCHOOL SUPPORT TOM DURING THIS TOUGH TIME?

By establishing and supporting a positive teacher–student relationship, staff members can show Tom that they genuinely care about him and his wellbeing. A great way to approach this situation is to always be open to having a conversation without forcing it. Also effective are positive affirmations of Tom's successes, however small. If Tom seems to want to talk about bigger issues that staff don't feel able to address comfortably or confidently, it's wise to refer him to the school counsellor or to encourage him to see a doctor. It's important when making such a recommendation to highlight that there's no shame in talking to a professional about feelings, just like with any other health concern.

ATTEMPT TO IDENTIFY A NUMBER OF STUDENTS AT YOUR SCHOOL WHO MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING SIMILAR CHALLENGES. WHAT CAN WE DO TO ASSIST THEM?

Although every student's experience is unique, there are some issues that young people commonly face in relation to coping with the current drought, including stress, worry and anxiety about the future.

There are some excellent articles on [ReachOut Schools](#) about referral and support for young people struggling with a range of challenges: [ReachOut.click/ReferralAndSupport](#)

As a teacher, the best thing you can do is to show students that you care. Maintain open communication lines with parents. Spend a little time at the start or end of class getting to know each of your students better. Our fun, short and engaging [Wellbeing Fives](#) are a great way to do that: [ReachOut.click/WB5DR](#)