

Supporting Students in the Wake of the Beirut Explosion

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The horrific explosion that ripped through Beirut, Lebanon on 4 August came on the back of a crippling economic crisis which has decimated people's life savings, rising COVID-19 infections, food insecurity, power cuts lasting most of the day, widespread fury at the government and a long history of collective and personal traumas for the Lebanese people. In NSW many school students with ties to Lebanon are likely experiencing acute anguish, grief and shock as they come to terms with this disaster. *STARTTS in Schools* is available for consultation and support, including counselling for affected students and staff, for all NSW school communities impacted by this unfolding tragedy.

Which students are likely to be affected?

Students with Lebanese heritage - Australia has a long history of Lebanese immigration, meaning that many students with Lebanese heritage that are at school today, are second or third generation Lebanese. These students may have spent their whole lives in Australia and may or may not speak Arabic. Regardless of their perceived ties to Lebanon, these students likely have relatives in Lebanon who they are worried about, they may be witnessing the grief, worry and anger of their parents and family in Australia, and indeed, be personally struggling with sadness, hopelessness, horror and grief for a country and a people they feel an inextricable bond with.

Students with an Iraqi, Syrian or Palestinian background who have lived in Lebanon - Many students of Iraqi, Syrian or Palestinian heritage have strong ties to Lebanon due to having lived there prior to their migration to Australia or because they have relatives and friends seeking refuge in Lebanon. Many students who have lived in Lebanon as refugees for several years before being granted protection in Australia, still have strong ties to the friends they made there and often still have relatives in Lebanon.

How can I support my students?

- Ensure that at least one staff member with whom the student has rapport, has taken the student aside to **ask how they and their loved ones are coping** in the wake of the explosion. Acknowledgement and validation of their emotional reaction to the disaster helps students feel understood, while seeing that trusted adults are empathising with what the Lebanese people are going through, can help address some of the loneliness and pain that comes with grieving in a place that feels a world away from Lebanon.
- Offer the student **options for calming and comfort** if they become overwhelmed during the school day or need to take a break. It can be helpful to offer some suggestions, such as a walk around the playground with a support staff member, getting a drink of water or being allowed a break from the lesson to draw or doodle. Request the student's permission to share this plan with their other teachers so that all are aware of how they can best support the student. Also, work with the student to **identify at least two staff members** at the school whom the student can approach throughout the school day if they are struggling.
- In partnership with the student, **identify a way that they can discretely signal to their teacher that they are in need of a break**. For instance, the student can be given a small card (for placement on their desk) or silicone bangle that has a different colour on each side. The student can then flip the card or bangle over to signal to the teacher that they need a break.
- **Remove as many additional stressors from the students' life as possible**. For instance, consider offering an alternative time to sit tests and exams, an extension on assignment due dates and flexibility around homework completion. Not only may students be struggling to concentrate and

focus on these tasks at this very difficult time, but it is important that students can focus on spending time being comforted by friends and family and talking to loved ones as they try to process what has happened and brace for the tumultuous situation that is unfolding.

- Consider the topics that the student is currently studying in their subjects. Some topics in history and geography that reference war, violence, explosions and poverty can be particularly triggering. **Students won't be able to learn if they are being emotionally overwhelmed** by their personal associations with such themes. Such topics are often unhelpful to a student who is presently trying to redefine their worldview after such a traumatic event. Students can be given the option for alternative work to complete during class time and be offered earphones and a playlist of music that assists with regulation (e.g. tracks with 60 bpm).

What are the signs that a student may be struggling?

Students who are feeling overwhelmed by their reaction to the blast (and the broader situation in Lebanon) may show signs of their distress in one or more of the following ways:

- Having trouble concentrating. This may present as students asking for teacher instructions to be repeated, non-completion of work, appearing 'glazed over', looking out of the window or 'into space'
- Being more quiet or more talkative than usual
- Sadness and tearfulness
- Outbursts of anger and/or aggression
- Hypervigilance. Not wanting to sit near windows
- Reduced or increased appetite
- Lethargy or hyperactivity
- Stomach aches, headaches and/or a feeling of heaviness in their limbs
- Expressions of feelings of guilt at being in Australia, while loved ones are suffering overseas
- Expressions of feeling helpless and/or hopeless
- Spending a lot of time on their phone. Students may be feeling a very strong need to stay in constant contact with loved ones both here and overseas. Students may be anxious to receive updates about loved ones that were injured or went missing during the blast.

Addressing feelings of helplessness and hopelessness amongst your students

Many in Australia have experienced firsthand the healing power of offering our help in the wake or midst of a disaster, whether it be running errands for friends in COVID-19 isolation, donating supplies to the Rural Fire Service and survivors of the Black Summer bushfires, joining the 'Mud Army' of thousands of volunteers that helped clean up after the 2011 Brisbane floods or making a monetary donation to an effective charity.

Many students, especially those with links to Lebanon, will be feeling a strong urge play a role in helping Beirut recover from this disaster. Not being able to sweep up the glass, repair the broken doors, donate blood or open their doors to strangers and loved ones who have lost their homes is a very frustrating experience for affected students. Acknowledging and validating this frustration can help students make sense of the disquiet they are feeling. This can lead into a discussion of all the Lebanese non-government organisations that are tirelessly supporting people during this time, the foreign governments that sent medical supplies and rescue teams and the incredibly resilient Lebanese civilians who are walking the streets of Beirut offering their time to help affected residents in any way they can. These conversations help students preference a world view where help is at hand when people are at their most vulnerable.

Going further, teachers can involve the class in brain-storming about how they might fundraise for their chosen Lebanese non-government organisation. For instance, through a mufti-day or a gold-coin trail competition (with certificates for both the longest trail and the highest value trail). It can be very

comforting to affected students to see their class come together in support of a country they are grieving for. SBS has compiled a list of disaster relief campaigns that are currently assisting those affected by the Beirut explosion: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/how-you-can-help-those-affected-by-the-deadly-beirut-explosion-right-now>

Supporting Parents and Carers

Many family members of students will be deeply affected by the disaster. In addition, parents and grandparents of students may have been previously traumatised (either directly or vicariously) by the long history of war, occupations and assassinations in Lebanon. The Beirut explosion, together with Lebanon's dire political and economic situation, can lead to a recurrence of post-traumatic stress symptoms. Many families will appreciate a phone call from the school (for instance, from a teacher or Community Liaison Officer), checking in with their welfare at this difficult time. Schools can provide families with STARTTS' contact details (9646 6800) or offer to support them to make a referral for counselling at STARTTS (Telehealth via videoconferencing or phone is available) now, or at a future time that suits them. The staff member could ask the parent/carer if they are happy to receive a follow-up phone call in a month's time to see how they are coping.

Self-Care

As educators and counsellors, we are not immune to the impacts of trauma. You may find that the disaster has affected you personally, perhaps through personal links to Lebanon, triggering of previous traumas or through empathising with affected students, colleagues and community members. Some symptoms you may recognise in yourself include a change in appetite, sleep and/or mood, nightmares, intrusive imagery, trouble concentrating, memory problems, social withdrawal, increased sensitivity to violence and/or feelings of despair and hopelessness. There are several avenues through which you can seek support.

- Through your workplace, by seeking out professional supervision and/or through your Employee Assistance Program.
- Private psychological services. You can talk to your GP about a mental health care plan.
- Lifeline Australia (Call: 13 11 14) provides free confidential one-to-one support and is available 24/7
- [STARTTS counselling services](#) are available to anyone in NSW who has survived trauma (including inter-generational trauma) and has had a refugee, asylum seeker or refugee-like experience.
- STARTTS in Schools has produced a series of professional learning videos on Vicarious Trauma, Resilience and Self Care.
 - [Vicarious Trauma and Resilience Part 1: Introduction](#)
 - [Vicarious Trauma and Resilience Part 2: Consequences of Trauma](#)
 - [Vicarious Trauma and Resilience Part 3: Impacts on the Practitioner](#)
 - [Vicarious Trauma and Resilience Part 4: Boundaries](#)
 - [Vicarious Trauma and Resilience Part 5: Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth](#)
 - [Vicarious Trauma and Resilience Part 6: Self Care and Seeking Support](#)

STARTTS School Liaison Program

For more information or to request specialist consultation, professional learning or support for you school community, please visit our [website](#) or contact [Shaun Nemorin](#), School Liaison Team Leader.