

Quick Start Guide

Feelings Are Okay: a debrief tool to help children after the 2019/2020 bush fires.

The complete manual for this resource is available via our website: Kidsreach.org.au. You will also be able to access a generic version for use in any disaster or traumatic event.

Feelings Are Okay (FRO) available in printed and downloadable format. The printed copy is available so long as stocks last. Both versions are provided for you free by Kidsreach. Donations towards the cost are welcome. Postage to be paid by recipient. Order from kidsreach@gmail.com or go to www.Kidsreach.org.au

FRO is a ten-step exercise designed to help children start to process what has happened. It is a way of debriefing for child victims directly impacted by the event or others who are affected through what is happening in their community or via the media. The intention is that if children process traumatic events healthily and openly, they may be spared long-term effects of anxiety or other disorders.

FRO is not just a reading book or exercise for the children to do on their own. It is designed to be done with a listening adult who will pay attention to what is said and done. Although counsellors may use it, it is not on its own a counselling exercise. If issues do arise that indicate counselling is needed, then the child should be referred to a professional. If you do not have a counsellor you can go to, then start with your GP.

There are no right or wrong answers. The key is a caring and listening adult who will help the child talk about what has happened and how they feel.

As you 'listen' and 'observe', you may also pick up signs that extra help may be needed.

FRO is not designed to be done during a crisis or even immediately afterwards when victims feel overwhelmed and simply need comfort, assurance and practical help. FRO is intended to be done in the weeks that follow when the child is ready to process the crisis events and their reactions to them.

It is not unusual in situations like a national disaster, for children to show signs of anxiety months or even years after the event. The best way to get help for the child is to refer to a professional immediately.

This 'Quick Start' guide gives only the basic ideas and suggestions for each of the ten steps. For a more detailed text, please order the manual from Kidsreach.org.au. There is a small cost (\$30) and can be obtained as a soft copy.

Quick Start

There are ten steps to the FRO. They can be done in one session but also can be covered in several sessions. There is a logical sequence to the order they are in the book but it is not necessary to do all, or keep to any particular order.

Step 1 Feelings are Okay (Cover) – *introduce the idea that everyone has feelings, and it is okay to talk about them – even the difficult ones.*

We all need to be able to talk about how we feel about what is going on for us, whether it is good or bad.

- It is okay to have uncomfortable feelings.
- It is okay to talk about bad/uncomfortable feelings.
- Feelings that are not talked about will likely cause problems in the short and long term.
- Having bad feelings does not make a person wrong or bad.

Give permission to talk – let them know it is okay to talk about how they feel and that they will be understood. Statements that can be used include:

- It is okay to be angry.
- It is okay to be sad.
- It is okay to be afraid.
- It is okay to talk about these things.
- I am here to listen to you.
- It is good and healthy to talk about how we feel when bad things happen to us.

Step 2 Education and REASSURANCE: Understanding the event and assurance of safety

We cannot assure children that an event will not happen to them again. There is a lot of uncertainty in life. But children can be reassured that they are going to be looked after. Children also need to know what happened. Telling them in a clear but appropriate way what has happened, can relieve them from on-going fear and confusion.

- Tell the WHOLE STORY of what happened in a way they understand and in a way in which they can feel as safe as possible.
- Answer their questions about what happened and why.
- To help them make sense of what is happening or has happened.
- Address their fears.
- Reassure their SAFETY.
- Offer HOPE for their present situation.

Step 3 Who is the Real You? Bring children back to thinking about who they are as a person and to remove self-blame.

There are a series of questions for the child to answer about themselves. What is their favourite colour? Their favourite television program? Who are their family members? etc. Help them fill in the pages with their answers.

Build rapport by affirming their answers with genuine statements like:

- Gosh, that is my favourite colour too!
- I like that too.
- Isn't that program just the best!

The genuine interest you show in them and in what interests them could help them start to look at their lives positively.

The last question will be more difficult for them. : "How has the affected me?" This question is designed to help them start or continue, the talking process. Some will find this hard even to start, and they may have answers like: "I don't know."

Try to allow them to talk about how they are affected personally. E.g., loss of friends, home, fear of fires, fear of floods, fear of buildings, fear for the future.

This is your chance to see how ready they are to talk about how they feel. The final statements you make should be to say:

There are many reasons why things like this happen. But the most important thing for you to remember is that none of this is your fault.

Yes, bad things have happened, but it is still okay to enjoy things and to look forward to what is ahead.

Hesitancy to talk about themselves, may (if it is out of character) be an indication the child is angry or in experiencing self-blame and needs more (professional) help. Recommend a visit to their GP as a first step.

Step 4: Identifying Feelings: *Help children express how they feel and to give them strategies to handle those feelings.*

Be open to listening to how children feel. They may be angry, frightened or worried. Everybody is entitled to their feelings; that goes for children as well, though it may hurt adults to hear.

Show the four feelings expressions and ask questions to help them talk about how they feel about what happened and how they think about their future. Point to each of the four phrases and ask: "Is this a mad, sad, glad or troubled feeling?"

Ask specifically about each question:

- "Which one is how you felt before the bush-fries?"
- "What did you feel about your life then?"
- "What has your life been like since?"
- "How do you feel about your life now?"

Look for safe ways to deal with their feelings. Explain the danger of bottling up hurts. It is like a pot of water heating up on the stove but no way for the steam to be released. What are the safe and appropriate methods for this child to release their feelings?

It can hurt to talk about painful feelings. But when we lock in our emotions, they will hurt us more. Talking about how we feel will help.

Step 4 Continued: This is My Life

Ask them to draw something about their life in the three boxes.

- Before the event.
- During the event.
- After the event (now or in the future).

The three pictures (before, during and after) are designed to help you as the helper see how they perceive their life to be. Some may be so overwhelmed by their grief; they will only be able to see their loss and not move on.

Gently talk about their pictures. Do not brush aside how they feel, even if it makes you feel uncomfortable. When feelings come up, it is a positive sign that the child is starting to deal with their loss.

Listen for expressions of personal feelings. Thank them for telling you and if necessary, explore it further.

A real picture of the event will indicate a positive dealing of their loss and then a positive view of their future.

If they only draw the event, or the results of it, (sometimes children draw the same thing in all three boxes), then it may be an indication that they are still holding on to intense feelings of shock, anger or grief. This may be 'normal' if it is only a short time since the event but maybe a concern if several weeks or more have passed.

Affirm their loss and how they feel about it. You might say something like: "It is okay to feel angry about what happened. I feel angry too when I think about all those people that lost their homes and the people who were hurt or died".

Note: If the three pictures show the bushfire, it could be that they are emotionally stuck in the event and do not see any future beyond. It may be an indication that they need professional help.

Step 5: Have a Plan and The Anger Rules

To give strategies for the children to use when they feel extreme anger and grief.

Tell the children that everyone has feelings of grief, anger, hurt and shame at some time in their life.

Feelings are not wrong, but we need to learn healthy ways to handle painful feelings. Physical activity is often an excellent way to work off these feelings. Deep breathing can relieve stress. Other ideas are listed in the book.

Go through the options and let them tick the ones that they feel they could do when they are angry. Talk about which ones are best for them. Explore them in details. For example, if talking to an adult is an option they choose, then ask, "Who is the adult you would talk to?"

It is most important they look for their ideas they can add to the list. Their suggestions will likely be the best for them.

Each child must have at least 3 or 4 options that will include at least one of their own.

Going hand in hand with this is the next page: The Anger Rules, which is self-explanatory.

Step 6: Where Does it Hurt

There are instances where children feel real pain in their arms, legs, stomach or head. Others may have difficulty breathing, suffering similar symptoms to that of an asthma attack. All these symptoms can be a result of emotional pain, stress, depression, or anxiety. In some cases, emotional pain can heighten symptoms that already exist, such as asthma.

Put the picture in front of them and ask if they are ready to talk more about how they feel. If the answer is in the affirmative, ask them to point (or make a mark) where they feel hurt. Most are likely to point to their head or stomach. A few may point elsewhere.

Ask them to tell you about what they feel (for example, in the head they may feel dizzy, a headache or trouble breathing).

If you feel concerned, organise them to see a doctor. However, if it is psychosomatic, then the only way to deal with the pain is to deal with the emotions.

Encourage them to keep talking just as they are talking to you now.

Go back over the strategies they used to deal with anger and see what they can do to deal with stress and anxiety.

Breathing deeply, doing an activity they enjoy such as listening to music, journaling or drawing and any physical exercise.

Step 7: Dealing with Loss and Saying Goodbye

To help children express how they feel and to give them strategies to handle those feelings.

Children write the names of the people they know were affected or died and then write an attribute next to their name. For example:

- David – a good friend.
- The family I saw on TV whose house got burned.
- The fireman who died.
- The animals who died.

If they do not know anyone personally who died, the grief may still be as real. They may be thinking about the numbers of people who died or someone they saw on television. They could write a message of sympathy or compassion to them as a group. It could be in the form of a picture, poem, rap or letter.

You may include a time of quiet reflection or, if appropriate, a prayer for the ones who have been lost.

In the second part, the children can write a letter to someone they lost, or a note of thanks to those who helped, or sympathy to the family who lost a loved one.

Step 8: Dealing with Loss and Saying Goodbye

Sometimes after a disaster, people do not feel that they should enjoy themselves or even look after themselves. There are also many hidden dangers children can face from small things like cuts when living in unhygienic situations or from predators that come disguised as aid workers. Parents who are caught up in their grief may not care properly for their children. This is especially important if children are living in emergency accommodation.

Read through the list and emphasise what is most appropriate.

Step 9: Learning from the Butterfly – hope for the future

People who suffer loss may not feel good about themselves. They may feel guilty that it was not them who died and neglect themselves as a kind of self-punishment. They may feel guilty about enjoying themselves. The biggest problem likely to engulf children after a significant event is despair.

Use the analogy of the caterpillar who becomes a butterfly to build hope for the future.

There was once a caterpillar. He did not feel very important, and he often got hurt because no one saw him. Those who did see him said that he was not very nice to look at.

One day after a particularly bad day, the caterpillar felt like he would give up and die because there was no future for him.

But one day after that, the caterpillar felt so very tired, and he had a long, long sleep. The caterpillar woke up and discovered a miracle. He had changed into a beautiful butterfly.

He stretched his new wings for the first time and before long, he was flying high.

People looked at him and marvelled. They said he was such a beautiful butterfly.

We learn from the caterpillar that even when things are the very worst they could be, never give up hope for what the future has for you.

Step 10: Build Resilience by Helping Others.

By giving children situations or projects where they outreach to others, they start to see themselves as having the resources to cope with their difficulties.

Feelings Are Okay - Trauma Prevention for Children 2020 Version

Assisting children to debrief after a major calamity.

USB Resource from Kidsreach - for teachers, kids pastors, counsellors, chaplains, parents and children's workers.

USB Contains:

- Children's interactive books – debrief exercises including a generic version
- Quick Start Guide
- Textbooks on Trauma Prevention
- **Two hours of training on video**
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- PowerPoints
- Extra material for the current bush fire crisis in Australia
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Quick Start Guide: Feelings Are Okay (FRO): Helping children think about the 2019/2020 bush fires in Australia are written to give instructions for the children's book of the same name.

For more detailed instructions, please obtain a copy of the full text:

Feelings Are Okay: Trauma Intervention Training Manual by David Goodwin. Available from Kidsreach.org.au See above

Feelings Are Okay: Helping children think about the 2019/2020 bush fires in Australia.

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