

FACILITATED CONVERSATION WITH DR ROB GORDON: SEVR

Notes from the **Trauma Recovery Team** facilitated conversation with Dr Rob Gordon.

IMPACTS OF THE COVID LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCE

Threat and arousal

- There is a continuum between fight and flight.
- Proper constructive motivation is on top of the curve - this is where we want students to be.
- Threat evokes arousal.
- As you come down the side of the graph, the arousal is too high to function properly - we see a pattern of constricted functioning.
- We have an enhanced capacity to focus on the threat - but at the expense of everything else in your life.
- This is what makes recovery difficult - we stay in an aroused state and don't return to other priorities (e.g. welfare, wellbeing).
- The arousal process is tuned to concrete thinking: here and now events - not complex systemic things like values and abstract ideas.

Threat #1: the illness

- Perceived as very dangerous; systems want to do something - we activate action.
- But we can't see the illness - for most people it's an idea.
- We have nothing to anchor our own experience of it.
- If we trust authorities then we will focus on what the authorities tell us.
- If we don't trust authorities (we don't believe them to be credible) - then we're going to diminish the threat.
- Anxiety is contagious.
- Is anxiety even more contagious than COVID?
- Everyone has to contain their anxiety - the psychological equivalent of putting on a mask and not letting your anxiety spray out onto others.
- People communicate anxiety in lots of different ways - it will come in waves from people in the community.
- The anxiety about the illness is an issue - informational trauma.
- Put a continuum between the trauma and the stress.
- A sensory trauma (e.g. bushfire) activates the instinctual brain and we go straight into action.
- When we don't have anything to look at to anchor our anxiety on, we start to imagine what the virus is going to do.
- We need to give information in concrete terms that people can visualise.
- Anxiety is an inherent part of information trauma - the anxiety sprays out like a virus.

Threat #2: isolation in relation to shut-down and loss of spontaneous communication

- Rob works with mental health organisations, who are often working with highly stressed clients.
- Rob has been able to watch what has happened to these organisations when they go into isolation.
- In meetings and other workplace and social scenarios you have an opportunity to interact before the official business event - we get lots of feedback about ourselves - and develop as a social organism.
- Fabric of spontaneous communication - unsolicited
- We get a constant stream of information about ourselves through spontaneous communication - this helps form our identity.
- Some people have a well-organised and well-constructed internalised sense of identity that is not reliant on external stimuli; most of us react to external factors.
- We are brought up in an environment that relies on a constant flow of feedback about ourselves to maintain a clear sense of who we are - but usually we don't have to think about this.
- We step out of the airlock into a vacuum (through isolation and shut-down) and the spontaneous communication is suddenly lost.
- There's a threat to identity - we get a series of side-effects from this that people don't understand - erosion of identity.
- People can go into a detached state.
- The extrovert is driven crazy by lockdown - they start sending annoying emails to all the introverts trying to get some interaction and feedback.
- Behaviours that try to serve the maintenance of identity can be problematic.
- Our social needs do not always match other people's social needs.
- Working from home and isolation is at the expense of the fabric of unsolicited communication.
- We need spontaneous interaction to help maintain our sense of identity.
- In response – as an organisation we can value unsolicited communication.
- Support is qualitative - not quantitative.
- Someone who taps us on the shoulder and asks whether you are okay can be really supportive - important to not be too intrusive.
- We need to show others (e.g. schools) that we 'get it'.
- People need to feel as though the person they are talking to can identify with their experience.
- The organisation has enormous capacity to empower and support and enhance people - but also to wound them.
- People need support from everyone in their environment.
- People need support from all the levels to which they are accountable.

- We need a stream of supportive communication that conveys a sense of 'I get what's going on for you' and 'We're in this together and we're trying to do this together'.
- There needs to be a request for qualitative information about 'what's going on for you?'
- This comes around the edge of the KPIs and feedback mechanisms - do anything you can to show that you get it.
- If you don't get it - ask them "Can you explain a bit more what that's like?"

Threat #3: disruption to roles

- We organise our world to be ordered.
- Social structures are implemented as roles (patterns of behaviour defined by the system that I am in).
- Role maintenance is very important - they protect us (like a space suit).
- Disruption erodes roles - they become unstable.
- One of the things we can focus on as a Department: is the role system still working?
- Is the role still working to support us?
- Chronic stress wears holes in the spacesuit and I move from professional self to personal self.
- Are people holding their role? Help them get back to their role.
- Flexibility is a resilience factor – improvisation is needed in these times.
- We go into rigid application of pre-set and pre-trained procedures.
- If you put a time constraint on people - they will fall back to familiar strategies as the situation gets more pressured and complex - in preference to innovating with new strategies.
- Engage in deliberate, reassuring information to explain why things are happening.
- Explain what's going to happen, limits.
- Hang onto the core values of education.
- If the students and parents all come out of this valuing education and being interested in learning - and still having a sense of a future that's available to them - they will pick up lost content quite quickly.

Q AND A WITH DR GORDON

How do we support school staff to 'stay in roles?'

Role confusion - I'm no longer quite sure what I should be doing.

- We need to go back to Principals "What am I here for?"
- Abstract ideas are hard during times of stress/arousal.
- We think best creatively with other minds - thinking together/collaboratively - talk together.
- We can talk at a peer level (somebody who 'gets it').
- Encourage peer exchange at all levels.
- We can see the creativity come to the fore.

- We don't want uncertainty about how we can improvise: Will I be supported by my organisation?
- We want broad messages - making sure the situation is understood.
- We need to remember that people will return to what they know and what is specific - people become inflexible.

Role conflict can also occur in a complex situation.

- Three roles that are in conflict - parent, work and teacher at home.
- Should I yell at my kids like a parent or do I become an inadequate worker and help them work out their educational issues?
- Anything we can do to recognise that role conflict is going to be inherent in situations that are no longer working to routine.
- Talk to people - make it explicit - about role confusion and conflict.

As an extrovert this situation has been challenging but I feel we can use this to provide creative situations. In Bayside Peninsula Area we created a virtual art competition.

- Art is spontaneous - you can create a representation of your experience.
- When I speak about an experience I separate myself from it to produce a narrative to describe my experience - then I can think about it.
- Making something explicit will enable us to think about something - we can do this once we have represented the experience somehow (music, sound, art, words).
- Talking about experiences is really important.
- People need to talk about how they are adapting (e.g. half an hour of talking about experiences, then natural transition into problems of the work).
- People have to represent their current situation before they can get on and do the work.

What is the role of communication during a crisis?

- 80% of normal communication is redundant.
- We can only process very familiar pieces of information that are well-nested in a secure situation.
- 20% is new information, 80% is everything else - culture, values, support, emotions.
- The emotional and the psychological exist together in an organic whole.
- Someone who repeats themselves a lot may have a great need to process things.
- Introverts vs extroverts process things differently.
- If someone is going around and around - are they incredibly anxious?
- Timelines become a pressure - can it be re-negotiated?
- We need to help people understand flexibility and timeframes.
- This communicates an environment that is friendly and supportive and helpful.
- When we're in a great hurry - we can speak slowly and calmly.
- When we communicate bluntly - we are communicating that we're not interested in the social relationship.

- Important to preserve good manners (these are one of the first things to go when we get stressed).
- Negative emotional tone impacts mental health.

How do we manage anxiety super-spreaders?

- We will find them everywhere: in schools, the Area/Region, parents, staff.
- We have to contain the anxiety - otherwise there will be no clear thinking.
- Anxiety masquerades as reality - the anxious person presents an incredibly important reality that must be dealt with.
- The anxiety is about 'what might happen'.
- Fear is the reaction to an immediate threat.
- Our instinctive natural selection helps us jump sideways at threats that remind us of other threats.
- Anxiety primes this.
- It is imaginary - looking at the future; e.g. seeing a snake then feeling fear about crooked black sticks.
- We can tackle this once we convert it into a clear-cut proposition that we can have something we can say about the issue.
- If you just deal with what the person is saying, the anxiety is not resolved - we can't take away the problem.
- Provide a privileged channel where the super-spreader can communicate their anxiety.
- E.g. bus accident scenario in emergency management:
 - Built in a highly anxious and vocal mother - making a lot of noise and insisted on talking to the Principal or Deputy Principal
 - Did they recognise an anxiety super-spreader?
 - What did they do about it...?
 - In the scenario, the character continued to create a problem for weeks afterwards; the key was to give her an audience and reassure her about what is happening.
- Containing super-spreaders is a cost-effective strategy; give them a sense that they have someone to whom they can talk.
- The higher we go in the hierarchy - the prestige can be helpful in counteracting people who are highly anxious.
- Do something symbolic – you don't have to solve the whole problem - taking it seriously and being responsive - leave a channel open.

How do we alleviate pressure that we have not been productive enough during this time?

- "How do we hold core values?" - what is education about?
- If we try to rigidly function as though nothing is different - this is going to transmit pressure to parents and students.
- How do we adjust productivity expectations?

- There are many things about working online that are fine - we can do good work; there are some things that are even easier! There are some things that don't work so well.
- What is working well? What isn't working well?
- Media message: There are likely to be significant issues with academic attainment.
- Students who are having problems - putting more pressure on them doesn't yield more learning.
- You need to work within their capacity.
- People get back to where they should be in a surprisingly short time (when problems subside).
- People who are living alone and are feeling lonely - what is the impact of this?
- People whose moods are low and struggling with lack of identity/spontaneous communication - there will be issues with prioritising and complex tasks - people will be better at doing simple tasks.
- Have a look at what's happening - productivity will go down because of stress factors.
- We have to help people work out what is most important to achieve.
- Routines help us; they enable us to conserve energy - even little problems require cognitive energy.
- Lots of trivial problem-solving uses lots of physical and mental energy.
- Mental problem-solving impacts physical strength/energy.
- Put a lot of energy into building routines - what is the most effective way of doing things?
- Design a new routine - then enact it – repeatedly.

What is the value of peer supervision?

- Supervision is the process that focuses people on their work - including their emotional reaction to work - to help them learn from an experienced colleague - to help them learn from and improve their skills and work.
- A more experienced person can be used - or also peer supervision.
- We all pull each other's creativity and thinking to collectively problem-solve.
- Reflective groups of peers: if people are working in an environment that is having a personal impact - this has a cost; the reflective session provides an opportunity to have a conversation about the work; there is usually no place for a conversation while doing the work.
- The reflective conversation is about the experience of the work.
- As an organisation, we may tend to lean on EAP instead of providing people with an opportunity to talk about the experience of the work.
- People will process information in this environment – we need to create an environment that sets the boundaries about the session (e.g. we're here to discuss the work) – and provide an opportunity to talk about role conflict or introverts/extroverts having different reactions.
- It can take people a while to know how to use such a space.
- It can help the group to develop this magic quality of support - they have a message of identification reflected back by others - "I'm not alone".

- This creates a collective sigh of relief.
- It could happen once per month or quarterly.
- You have to dedicate time (even when people are stressed).

Shifting the mindset from 'is the child ready to come/return to school' to 'is the school ready for the child to come/return' will assist the system/leaders being active instead of reactive.

- Most people will adjust to a period of stress - but with some cost.
- Adjustment puts us into stress - at the expense of other things.
- Our capacity to deal with the highest priority problem is strengthened - but we withdraw supports for other situations.
- We take all the resources that we normally use to monitor and take care of ourselves and put them into solving the external problem (e.g. we shut down fatigue receptors and pain receptors).
- We become completely focused on the problem we need to get solved.
- We disconnect really important physiological processes from self-maintenance.
- Analogy of deep-sea diver: we make adjustments to the pressure; but if we surface too quickly, we get the bends.
- If we surface too quickly from a dive, we get a 'decompression reaction' (e.g. like a deep-sea diver might get headaches) - this is the same with coming out of a period of high stress.
- We have all made adjustments and have had to keep adjusting and improvising under intense pressure.
- When people come out of it - they feel extreme exhaustion; we're drawing energy out of reserves and are not replenishing them.
- Is it physical exhaustion? Students would say probably not - but it might be an exhaustion for learning; novelty; emotional management - take the pulse - what has this period of stress done?
- What has it done for teachers? Doing lessons remotely - how differently demanding this is - pressure "are students working?"
- Teachers will have some sense of fatigue - is it professional, physical, emotional?
- We need to give people a chance to come out of the stress and recharge – to find satisfying, enjoyable work in a routine that helps us remember why we are in our professions - help us capture rewards.
- Is the school ready? If the school is in stress mode - it will be hard to 'get back to normal'.
- Are the teachers and other school staff poised ready to look at what's going on and what to do about it?
- People conserve and make resources available by regressing - this frees up energy to deal with the stress.
- Transition back might mean a bit of a looser program - a bit more time processing what it's been like - reconnection with friends.
- We can prepare the kids by giving them a clear message "We're going to spend some time talking about what it's been like".

- Help people ground themselves.
- Talk about what the experience has been like for different subjects - stop and have a conversation - processing the huge experience they've been through

For further information regarding trauma recovery supports available to school communities, please email trauma.recovery@education.vic.gov.au or contact Martina Holland via martina.holland@education.vic.gov.au or (03) 7022 1278.