



CatholicCare
CANBERRA & GOULBURN

There for any human

Stress Management Package

MR FLUFFY GROUP

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Background Information

CatholicCare Canberra & Goulburn (CCG) is working together with The Asbestos Response Taskforce (Taskforce) to provide ongoing psychological and therapeutic support for homeowners or tenants who resided in an affected residential loose fill asbestos insulation (Mr Fluffy) property.

The CCG will be facilitating a 2-hour therapeutic group once every two months equating to six sessions annually. The group will be facilitated at Tenison Woods House at O'Connor, and it will be open to homeowners of Mr Fluffy properties. Attendance is voluntary and individuals can choose when and how they would like to engage with the program. The therapeutic support group will be facilitated by clinicians from a team consisting of psychologists and mental health accredited social workers. The group framework will be embedded in strengths-based recovery and utilise Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) principles (including mindfulness-based interventions) to bring about a sense of hope and recovery.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, CCG have temporarily suspended face-to-face group activities. Instead, we have created a short webinar to share with you the tips and techniques to manage the stress that you may be experiencing. In addition, we have created a package for you, including a step by step guide of the strategies that have been discussed in the webinar.

If you are also interested to know more about the ongoing support available through this time of transition and recovery, you can check our website at www.catholiccare.org.au, call us on (02) 6163 7600 or contact the Asbestos Response Taskforce.

About this package

The unfortunate truth is that stress is inevitable. We all experience it on a day-to-day basis. Even though we can't avoid stress, we can develop better ways to manage it. The way we think about stress and how we act in response can make a huge difference to our wellbeing. This package is aimed at providing you with the tools and strategies that you could implement in your day-to-day life to make it a little bit easier to cope with the stressors.

Stressors

Homeowners of Mr Fluffy affected properties may experience a significant amount of stress, normally, associated with major life changes, including loss of a dwelling and the loss of the symbolic meaning of having a home. In addition, there is the stress of having to find another place to live and having to build another home. Contributing to this stress is a loss of autonomy, whereby you may feel like everything is beyond your control and feel as though you have no say over many aspects of the situation. There may also be financial strain and life plan disruptions, such as having to put your retirement plans on hold. Additionally, there is the stress and hassle of having to deal with different agencies, continually having to fill out paperwork and having to cope with uncertainty such as feeling like you're not getting a definitive answer. Finally, there may be stress associated with ongoing health risks.

All the stressors mentioned above can deplete your coping resources, causing a significant strain on your health and psychological wellbeing.

What is stress?

Stress can be understood when the demands of life significantly outweigh our coping resources and ability to manage the situation. When this happens, we can start to experience symptoms of stress which can impact our personal functioning and quality of life.

The impact of stress on our personal functioning

First, stress can impact our ability to think clearly and make decisions. When we're under a great amount of stress, our body and brain are designed to go into survival mode, otherwise known as 'fight or flight mode'. When this happens, it takes energy away from our brain, as it prepares the body to take action. This could then impact our ability to remember things, concentrate and engage in higher-order thinking skills such as forward-planning.

Second, stress is often experienced in our body. The mind and body connection is not to be underestimated. Stress uses up a lot of energy, and when stressed we can feel a nagging sense of fatigue and lethargy. In fact, stress has been known to cause inflammation in the body, which could give rise to various health problems.

Third, stress can give rise to the experience of emotional turmoil - anger, frustration, grief and sadness. For many, anxiety goes hand-in-hand with loss and uncertainty of what the future may hold.

Fourth, because your coping resources are stretched thin, it is normal that we want to avoid dealing with the stress. This avoidance, although helpful in the short-term, can be unhelpful for your recovery.

Recognising your stress signals

Sometimes, people experiencing stress do not notice they are stressed. It is important to develop skills to check in with yourself and recognise stress signals. This allows you to engage in self-care and expand your coping resources to withstand the demands of stress. In addition to those mentioned above, below are some more stress signals that people may experience under intense pressure:

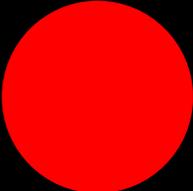
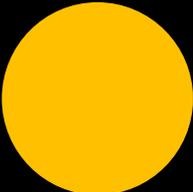
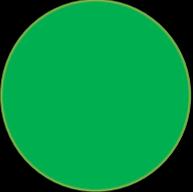
- Chest pains
- Rashes or skin breakouts
- Changes in appetited (Overeating or Restrictive Diet)
- Increase in blood pressure
- Upset stomach
- Inflammation
- More susceptible to cold/flu and slower recovery
- Frequent headaches or migraines
- Tension in your body leading to various muscle pain
- Exacerbating physical problems
- Disturbed sleep
- Difficulty stopping worrying
- Irritability and moodiness
- Often feeling fatigued

Take a moment to check in with yourself and how you are feeling. Otherwise, think back on a time when you were under intense pressure. What do you remember about how you were feeling? Write down in the space below any personally relevant stress signals (big or small) that you could identify. Use the space below to categorise your stress signals from when you are at the peak of stress (Red Zone), the build-up phase (Yellow Zone) and finally

the early warning signs (Green Zone). Understanding your stress response in this manner can help you better understand the progression of stress and inform you when to take early measures before your stress response gets to its peak.

[Please consult your GP if these symptoms persist]

Activity: Understanding My Stress Signals

| | My Stress Signals | Frequency (How many days of the week do you experience these symptoms) | Intensity (How intensely do you experience these symptoms on a scale of 0 to a 100, 100 being very intense) |
|---|--|--|---|
|  | [e.g., panic attacks, low mood, harsh and negative self-talk, feeling helpless and trapped, significant inflammation causing health complications; falling sick and slow recovery] | | |
|  | [e.g., feeling tired; increased irritability; excessive worrying; difficulty relaxing; feeling restless; body aches; poor diet; forgetting things] | | |
|  | [e.g., forgetting to have regular meals; skipping routines; juggling multiple things in mind; missing social activities; sleeping late] | | |

Why is it so hard to cope with stress effectively?!

Different people perceive and experience stress differently. More importantly, we also have different beliefs and attitudes towards stress, which can influence how responsive we are to our personal experience of stressors. These beliefs and attitudes are learned, and they could come from the family we grew up in or socialised by the broader culture we live in.

For example, we may live in a culture that values productivity and silent stoicism. We may internalise these cultural messages, which are then shaped into beliefs and expectations that we hold ourselves accountable to. We may start telling ourselves that we need to appear capable and resilient in the face of adversity—even if it means ignoring the bodily and psychological signals of stress. Some of these beliefs can be so ingrained that it skews our perception of stress. In this example we may see the stress response as a signal to work harder, to be better and to be tougher.

Unfortunately, these beliefs and the things we tell ourselves can be unkind and can give rise to secondary emotions that are complicated. Here are some examples of secondary emotions that we may unintentionally pair with stress:

- Feeling ashamed for feeling stressed
- Feeling angry with yourself for feeling stressed
- Feeling anxious about feeling stressed

These secondary emotions can get in the way of us responding adaptively to stress. People often deal with these secondary emotions through unhelpful behaviours in an attempt to soothe the discomfort such as avoiding the stressors, procrastinating, overusing alcohol, self-medicating and overeating. These behaviours can be successful in momentarily reducing the intensity of the emotions but can become problematic in the long-term.

The biggest issue with these secondary emotions and unhelpful behaviours is that they do not help you adapt to your circumstances. Very often, secondary emotions invite harsher and more critical self-judgements that invalidate your needs and undermines your ability to cope with the stressors. Some people might get caught in a cycle of negative self-talk, specifically around how you *should* be feeling about the situation as opposed to how you are *actually* feeling. What this does is exacerbate the stress, creating a sense of helplessness.

To break the cycle of unhelpful beliefs, the first step is to become aware of your automatic interpretation of stress. In the following activity, we ask you to identify the judgements you make about yourself when you're feeling stressed. Below is a list of beliefs that people might have about themselves surrounding stress. In the blank space provided, reflect on where these beliefs came from. In thinking about the source of your beliefs, it might be helpful to reflect on the environment and culture you grew up in and that you currently live in. Here are some questions that could help you reflect on the development of your beliefs about stress:

- Growing up, how did your parents deal with stressful and significant events (e.g., daily hassles, moving house, financial stress, traumatic events, etc.)?
- How do people in your life talk about their experience of stress?
- How did people in your life respond when you shared your experience of stress?

Activity: Awareness of Automatic Thoughts

"I should be able to handle this on my own"

Rate the strength of this belief:

Not true at all Very True
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Where did this belief come from? How did you learn this belief?

"I just need to suck it up and push on"

Rate the strength of this belief:

Not true at all Very True
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Where did this belief come from? How did you learn this belief?

“I don’t want people to think I can’t cope with the stress”

Rate the strength of this belief:

Not true at all Very True
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Where did this belief come from? How did you learn this belief?

“Being stressed is a sign that I’m weak”

Rate the strength of this belief:

Not true at all Very True
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Where did this belief come from? How did you learn this belief?

“The stress keeps me motivated”

Rate the strength of this belief:

Not true at all Very True
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Where did this belief come from? How did you learn this belief?

“I ought to have done better”

Rate the strength of this belief:

Not true at all Very True
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Where did this belief come from? How did you learn this belief?

Use the space below to write down any other things you tell yourself when stressed. Make sure to include the rating and the source of those beliefs/thoughts.

- “ _____ ”
- “ _____ ”
- “ _____ ”
- “ _____ ”
- “ _____ ”

Exploring the impact of these beliefs

At one stage, having these beliefs has kept us afloat in times of great stress. However, overtime we’ve come to generalise and grow overly reliant on using the same beliefs across different stressful situations to motivate ourselves to keep going. While these beliefs can be helpful, especially for temporary stressors (e.g., completing a project), they can be unhelpful

when it comes to ongoing life stressors (e.g., work or relational stress) – these beliefs can get in the way of us being curious and the rigidity of these beliefs can stop us from being creative in our approach to managing stress.

It is worth exploring the pros and cons of the beliefs you hold most strongly. Based on the previous activity, identify three (or more) beliefs that you hold close or those that come naturally for you in times of stress. Take a moment to reflect on those beliefs and explore the pros and cons of those beliefs. In thinking about the pros and cons of your beliefs around stress, some questions you could ask yourself are:

- What are the intended benefits of your beliefs about stress?
- Did the actual outcome of your beliefs satisfy the expectation you had in mind?
- Were there other costs involved in holding on to the belief?
- Does holding on to the belief reduce your stress about the situation?
- How do you think your belief affects how you deal with stress today?

Here is an example:

“I need the stress to help me get stuff done”

Advantages and disadvantages of holding to this belief:

Advantages: it prevents be from getting lazy; it keeps me going; it helps me get things done

Disadvantages: I feel tired from the stress; it takes me longer to get things done; I feel like I am always talking to my friends about how stressed I am; I get overwhelmed by the stress

Activity: advantages and disadvantages of the beliefs

“ _____ ”

Advantages and disadvantages of holding to this belief:

Advantages: _____

Disadvantages: _____

“ _____ ”

Advantages and disadvantages of holding to this belief:

Advantages: _____

Disadvantages: _____

“ _____ ”

Advantages and disadvantages of holding to this belief:

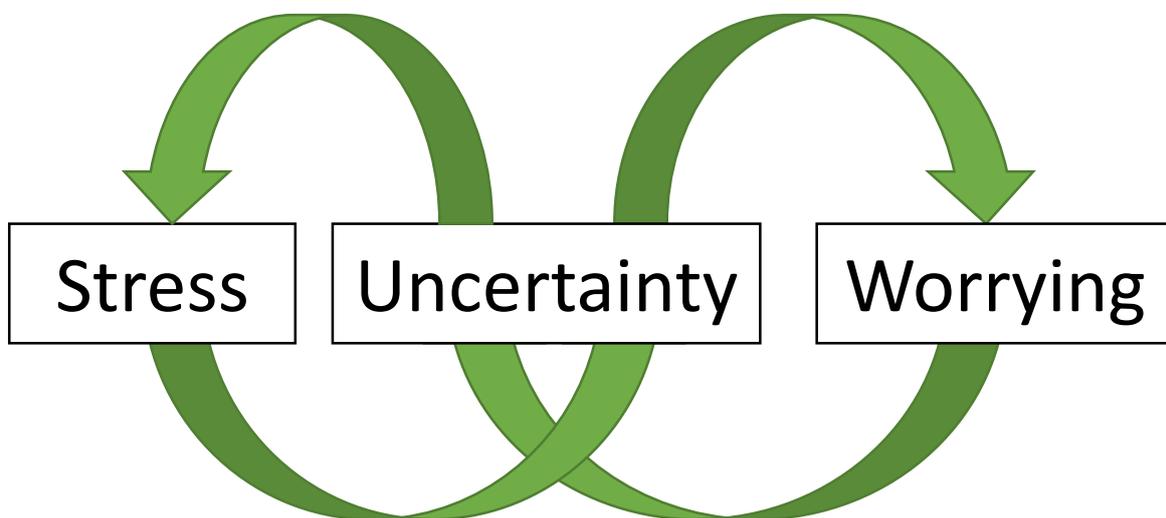
Advantages: _____

Disadvantages: _____

Taking effective action to manage the stress

Upon developing a much kinder and adaptive view of stress, we can start implementing actions to effectively respond to our stress.

When we stress, it is hard not to fixate on the cause. Our brain is wired to problem-solve and it deliberately scans for issues in our life. While this can be helpful, especially in ensuring our safety and survival, it can work against us, particularly when there is a high level of uncertainty. Our brain identifies any uncertainty as a problem and tries to solve it by making things certain. The brain does this by feeding us with thoughts of the worst-case scenario. Unfortunately, picturing the worst in our minds can make the situation even more overwhelming, and it can be paralysing. As you can see in the figure below, people may end up stuck in an infinity loop (or the pretzel loop) of stress, uncertainty and excessive worrying.



We need to learn the skills to capitalise on the brain's strength of problem-solving, without getting carried away with hypothetical worries. To break the loop, we need to determine what is within our control and outside our control. Below is an example.

| When things are within our control: | When things are outside our control |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happening in the here and now • Based on real-problems not far in the future • Something you can solve by taking actions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The problems and issues lie in the far, far, far, future • Because it is future-oriented, there will be high level of uncertainty • They make you worry excessively – such as thinking about the worst case scenarios. • They create hypothetical thoughts, very often thoughts starting with “What if...” • This worrying can be hard to “switch off” |
| Examples: | Examples: |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our sleep patterns • Keeping close connection with loved ones • Taking care of our health • Engaging with our hobbies • Where we can focus our energy • Your values and philosophy in life • Most importantly, our perspective on things | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Fluffy • Insurance and Government approval • The flow of funding • The pace in which things are being processed • The outcome of a situation • Other people’s perspective |

In this next activity, take the time to reflect and expand the list of things that are within and outside your control. Be gentle and kind with yourself. Some people may struggle with having to put things in the category of being outside of our control. Admitting that some things are beyond our control can be the hardest process to undertake. We like to have agency over a situation and we fight for the outcome we desire. Therefore, admitting that some things are beyond our control can feel like we’re taking a backseat or a passive role. However, the most active thing you could do is accepting the situation for what it truly is, which is probably the most pragmatic solution. Acceptance can give you a renewed understanding of where to go from here – specifically in how to work best with stress.

| Things that are within our control: | Thing that are outside our control: |
|--|--|
| | |

Starting small to make a big change

It's the little things that we do for ourselves and the situation that create the momentum of change. Having been through a significant life event, expecting more from yourself can exacerbate the stress response. At times, thinking about the multiple things you need to do can bring about feelings of defeat, and this makes it harder to get motivated again. People may experience difficulty starting a task or delaying making decisions about the situation. What we could do is position ourselves to feel effective again to develop a renewed sense of self-efficacy.

Our actions are what create motivation, not the other way round. We feel a sense of accomplishment when we get stuff done, and this can be highly rewarding, as well as motivating. However, we often set tasks so big that getting started becomes daunting! Consequently, we minimise the opportunities in which we get those rewards. What you could do is manage your expectations of the task, or break it down into smaller tasks. Additionally, for each small task you completed, make sure to reward yourself and celebrate.

An alternative strategy is to use the problem-solving method. When we are overwhelmed by stress, our mind can get scrambled, and it becomes harder to complete tasks. In fact, some of us can get so worried about finding the best way to do a task, that we think ourselves to a standstill. The problem-solving worksheet (below) is a step-by-step guide aimed to provide you with a framework to structure your thinking and simplify the process of tackling an issue.

Step 1: Defining/Identifying the Problem

What is the current situation, what would you like it to be, and what is the obstacle that is keeping you from achieving your ideal situation?

Step 2: Brainstorm the Solutions

Keep in mind to

- Defer judgement ("Crazy" or "Silly" solutions are okay!)
- Come up with at least 5 solutions, or even 10!
- Generate varied solutions (get creative!)

Step 3: Bring the solutions together and evaluate them together

- Rate the solutions based on merit (i.e., Pros and Cons)
- Solution does not have to be perfect!
- Will this meet your needs?
- How much time and effort is involved in this solution?
- How would you feel if you used this solution?
- What are the consequences of this solution for yourself and others in both the short and long term?

Step 4: Implement the solution

What steps do you need to take to actually start implementing this solution? Break it down into smaller and simpler steps. Have you agreed on a start date/time?

Step 5: How will you know if this solution is working?

- After the implementation, check the result
- What checks or markers will you use that tell you whether the solution is going as planned?
- Take a moment and reflect:
What has changed? What do you observe, or what do others observed? What worked and what didn't? What could you do for next time?

Problem Solving Record Sheet

| What is the problem? / What goal would you like to achieve? | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| What are all the possible solutions to this problem? | | |
| Solutions | Pros | Cons |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| Implement the Solution | | |
| Action Steps | | When |
| | | |
| | | |
| Evaluate and Reflect | | |

Recharge and Revitalised

Establishing a new home and life is something to do at your own pace. Try not to rush or force it. Some people experience a sense of urgency to replace what's lost. When we are in that state, remember to return and take care of the first *home* that was given to us from birth – our body. We can do this by participating in activities that can help recharge our energy. Under stress, our body and health often fall off our priority list. There is a biological aspect of stress, so factors such as rest, hydration, and nutrition can have a significant impact on our resilience to stress. So, it is essential to pay attention to your health by participating in activities that can help recharge us. When we are energised, we are in a better space to process the situation and make considered decisions about the future.

There are four main areas in which you could start taking active steps to recharge and revitalise your body:

Rest and Sleep

Ensure that you maintain good sleep habits. Some of the critical habits that research has shown to be effective in helping a good night sleep are:

- a. *Teaching and conditioning your body to go to bed and get up at more or less the same time every day (even on weekends and days off!).* This will create some regularities and rhythm in our day, which means our body does not have to work extra hard continuously adjusting to changes in your sleeping pattern.
- b. *Minimise stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine and alcohol four to six hours before going to bed.* These stimulants can interfere with your ability to sleep, as well as the quality of sleep.
- c. *Keep your bed for sleeping!*

Try not to use your bed for anything else other than sleeping and sex. We humans can learn by unconsciously making associations – so if we use our bed for other activities such as watching TV, scrolling through our phone, reading, working on our laptop and completing life administrations (e.g., paying bills, scheduling, etc.) your body can become conditioned and start to making unhelpful connections. For example, Bed becomes associated with Work.

d. *Avoid taking naps during the day.* This is to ensure that you are tired by bedtime.

However, if you are highly active person and you feel that you can't get through the day without a nap, make sure that it is less than an hour and before 03:00 PM.

e. *Taking warm showers/bath an hour or two before bedtime*

During a warm shower, your body temperature will naturally increase. As your body temperature gradually decreases afterwards, it can induce a feeling of relaxation and sleepiness, which can be conducive for a good night sleep.

f. *Noticing when worrying thoughts come to mind*

Sometimes when stressed, we can start to ruminate about the past or worry about the future. These thoughts can make us feel low and anxious. If you happen to be worrying about things that you need to do, you can write it down in your diary and re-visit them again tomorrow to problem-solve.

Physical Exercises

Physical exercises and activities can help to regulate your mood and recharge your body.

There is a large body of evidence showing how exercise can improve physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. However, this does not mean exercising for hours and hours – start slow and just enough for you to feel revitalised. There are various forms of physical activities that you could do, including strength, endurance and flexibility. Here are some guidelines around how to incorporate into your life:

- a. First, it is important to get a physical examination from your GP and be aware of any health/physical problems that can be exacerbated by exercise or a particular type of exercise.
- b. Create small, achievable goals for exercise. Exercising does not mean that you have to be at the gym, running and lifting weights. Broaden your definition of exercising to include more day-to-day activities, such as going for a walk, stretching or doing yoga in your living room. Even participating in house chores or gardening are physical activities.
- c. Choose an exercise that you can do that makes your body feel great. Avoid overdoing your exercise.
- d. Choose an exercise that you enjoy – to make it more rewarding you can engage in recreational sports activities with other people (e.g., a walking group).
- e. Make sure to give yourself a present and reward yourself for committing.

Diet

Having a healthy and balanced meal is another way to nourish your body and build your resilience to stress. Conversely, unhealthy eating patterns can often lead to increases in the level of stress, followed by further health issues that may then add on as another source of stress. Very often, when we are enduring pressurising situations, we might not have time to cook and fit in balanced nutrition. Sometimes, you might end up skipping or forgetting to eat your meals. You might also crave food that is high in fat and sugar. So it is important to re-establish regular eating, as it helps keep your blood sugar steady and minimises tiredness, irritability and poor concentration.

Ideally, we function best when we eat 3 meals and 2 snacks in between. The quantity varies depending on how many activities you do during the day. Please consult your GP or dietician to get an individualised diet plan if required. Also, make sure to drink enough water (1.5 to 2 litres a day) as your body needs the fluid to absorb the nutrients from food and transport them throughout your body. Please see Nutrition Australia for more information (<https://nutritionaustralia.org/fact-sheets/australian-dietary-guidelines-recommended-daily-intakes/>)

Social Connection

According to health psychologist Kelly McGonihall, stress makes you want to be more social. In conjunction with stress, our body naturally produces a neuro-hormone called Oxytocin, otherwise known as the “cuddle” hormones. Oxytocin helps to fine-tune your brain’s social instincts; it drives and strengthens social connections. Further, Oxytocin is also a natural anti-inflammatory to help regulate the impact of high levels of stress. In other words, as you get stressed, your body naturally motivates you to seek social contact and support. The effect and release of Oxytocin is further enhanced by you reaching out, connecting and caring with others. Our body already has a built-in mechanism to cope with stress, and all we need to do is respond accordingly. So make sure to take the time and engage in activities that create opportunities for social connection – this can be a small gesture of talking to someone about the weather or saying hello to your neighbour. Alternatively, you could begin to share some of the challenges you are experiencing with trusted loved ones or developing a shared understanding with others who have been through the same adversity.

(For more information visit the TED Talk

video: https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend/next?language=en#t-754114)

| <u>Activity: Small Action Plan</u> | |
|--|-----------------|
| Start thinking of small steps (the smaller the better) that could gradually help you develop a plan in the four key areas to help develop your resilience. | |
| <u>Sleep and Rest</u> | <u>Exercise</u> |
| | |
| <u>Social Connection</u> | <u>Diet</u> |
| | |

Now that you've got a list of activities for each of the four areas, we can start putting them into practice. You could begin by scheduling some of these activities in your week to help buffer you against stress. If you know that you are going through a stressful week, do these activities with the intention of self-care. You can even set up these activities as part of

your Behavioural Experiment – and reflect on how you are feeling with these activities in place throughout the week.

Additionally, you can have these activities as part of your weekly routine. Breaking your week up with some self-care activities can give some structure to chaos. There is nothing more soothing for the mind and body than having something to look forward to in the week and feel that anticipation. Ensure to schedule hobbies and activities that you used to enjoy or that are important to you.

Conclusion

In this package, I spoke about the various strategies and techniques that you could implement to help you deal with stress. I hope this provided you with the opportunity to learn more about yourself and your relationship with stress. More importantly, I hope you could feel empowered and a sense of agency over how you manage stress.

If you are interested in ongoing support throughout this time of transition and recovery, CatholicCare will be facilitating a series of therapeutic groups for Mr Fluffy Homeowners. More information about these groups will be available on our website and can also be made available by contacting the asbestos response taskforce.