

Dear Parents and Guardians

Series Synopsis:

EPISODE THREE: TUESDAY, 14 JUNE AT 8.30PM

Andrew Reeves left the corporate world to become a school counsellor. At Kambrya he faces the daily task of assisting students with emotional problems, many of them serious. Andrew is on the front line of a growing issue for schools and for the nation.

The awful fact is that mental illness and suicide are on the rise among young people in Australia. Suicide is now the number one cause of death in those aged under 24. Andrew Reeves is only too aware of this. The city of Casey, the outer-suburban municipality where Kambrya is situated, experienced the tragedy of a youth suicide cluster in 2012. Andrew is always on alert when a student is absent.

It's now known that up to 25% of the students in any class will be experiencing clinical symptoms of mental illness. And as Professor John Hattie says, just being a teenager and facing pressure to achieve and perform places burdens on our children and these can have a major impact on their learning.

Year 12 student Tausif is a great example. He's a bright kid who makes light of his studies with a devil-may-care attitude. Yet underneath he's sensitive and stressed, not dealing well with the need to perform in looming Year 12 exams. He wants to get into medicine at university but the closer the exams are, the more he procrastinates.

The issue is what can be done to help the emotional wellbeing of every student? If Kambrya can address wellbeing more effectively, it should mean students do better at school. Michael Muscat draws on the support of Melbourne University's Graduate School of Education. Professor Lea Waters has a special focus on wellbeing. She attempts to measure students' emotional wellbeing and to develop ways to improve it. The focus is on students' and teachers' character strengths rather than weaknesses, to create a sense of positivity.

The daily challenges continue. Assistant Principal Jo Wastle has Bailey in her office. He's a new arrival struggling to adjust to Kambrya. He left his mum's care and went to live with his dad, who he hadn't seen for five years. Bailey is a mature, charismatic student who uses his tough guy image as a shield. But Jo has no choice to suspend him after he snaps and punches Darrabi Boy Aden.

But the focus on wellbeing is having a positive impact for students and their families. Year 11 student Rachel and her mum Cassie have resolved their differences after the traumatic arguments they had in Term 2. Rachel explains she felt trapped by her parents' over-protective rules. But they have worked their way through the issues and are getting along much better. The main issue now for Rachel is focusing on study as the exams loom.

Key Dates

Monday 13th June
Queen's Birthday Public Holiday

Monday 20 - Friday 24 June
Year 10 Work Experience
Year 10 Central Australia Camp

Wednesday 22nd June
Student FREE day
Parent Teacher Conferences

Friday 24th June
Last Day of Term 2

Monday 11th July
First Day of Term 3

Friday 22nd - Saturday 23rd July
School Production

Monday 25th - Friday 29th July
Year 9 City Program
(Warin and Mirrim)

Tuesday 26th - Friday 29th July
Year 10 Course Direction Interviews
(classes run as normal)

Tuesday 19th July
Parent and Friends Group - AGM

Focusing on study is not something the 'Darrabi' Boys are practiced in - yet. This group of 18 teenagers struggle with discipline and low academic results. But, after much planning, they're ready to go on their bushwalk. Some of these boys have rarely left the suburb they live in and not walked further than a short stroll to their mate's houses.

They head to Wilsons Promontory and slowly the rigours of the gruelling walk bring out strength, determination and friendship bonds they didn't realise they had. It's an inspirational scene when they finish the trek and appreciate what they've achieved together.

As the term moves on, Andrew Reeves tries to talk to Bailey about his tough guy exterior. Mr Reeves gets Bailey to open up and reveal how he hides his feelings from others. He explains it's because he has struggled with suicidal thoughts and had to bear the pain of seeing two close friends take their own lives.

Following the highs and lows of their bush trek, the 'Darrabi' boys are back in school and their teacher Mr McDonald is testing their maths. Camping out in the bush and pushing themselves to new limits appear to have had a transformative effect on the boys' self-esteem and caused a shift in their learning. Earlier in the year, the boys' maths results hit rock bottom, lower than year 7 levels. Now they smash their maths test, with everyone passing.

Michael, 15, declares with pride that this is the first time in his school life that he's passed a test. The smiles on their faces are a gift to their dedicated teacher Mr McDonald.

Tausif has never had to struggle to understand maths. His problems are procrastination and distraction and now they come home to bite him as Sarah Hewat gives the year 12s their marks from their trial VCE exams. Tausif has not done well. He reacts angrily, knowing he has only four more weeks before his final VCE exams.

VCE exams are the peak academic tests for school students in Victoria and determine university entry. But, nationally, less than half of all students go to university. To meet the needs of students who don't intend to go to uni, Kambrya also runs a large vocational, work-oriented program for students such as Ben.

Ben is juggling the complexities of life for modern teens. Alongside course work deadlines for his school projects, he's juggling his job as a fitness instructor, his relationship with girlfriend and fellow Kambrya student Lauren, and dealing with the emotional burden of a sick grandmother at home.

Assistant principal Keith Perry has his eye on Ben. Frustrated when Ben prioritises his paid work above school work, Mr Perry is also a compassionate listener when Ben reveals the sadness at home. All schools deal with such realities on a day-to-day basis, which can make it harder to always stay focused on the job of raising students' education standards. Kambrya is making a concerted research-based effort to deal with wellbeing alongside academic pursuits.

In an effort to keep Bailey in line and avoid more damaging suspensions, Jo Wastle brings him into her office, along with Aden who he has been feuding with. It's a 'restorative session' and the two boys get a sense of how much they have hurt each other's feelings. They shake hands and agree their fighting is over.

The Darrabi boys, who have now spent nine months in the special program, are celebrating – they've finished and the school holds a valedictory night. With their proud parents and Mr McDonald looking on, it's heart-warming proof that Kambrya's extra effort has had a positive outcome for these students.

The boys have been on a massive journey. At the start of the year they were so disruptive they were in real danger of being excluded from school. Their maths tests showed they were only at primary school level. Now they're on track to return to mainstream school life in year 10. The acid test for the 'Darrabi' boys is how will they manage the transition?

As the end of the year approaches, it's exam time for everyone. Professor Lea Waters from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education has been monitoring the students' wellbeing. For both students and teachers, the focus on their feelings was initially hard to deal with. Professor Waters and teacher Sarah Hewat now turn their attention to exam nerves and use Ms Hewat's year 8 science class as guinea pigs. It seems to be working and students Tahlia and Tasia report on how they are more calm and confident going into their tests.

The same is true for Rachel, who does brilliantly in the year 11 maths test that earlier had her so worried. The wellbeing program at Kambrya is in its initial stages but early signs are that it is effective. It's a sign that the research being done at the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education on the connection between emotional wellbeing and effective learning can have a real impact in all our schools.

With exams done, it's time to kick back and enjoy the annual debutante ball where, in an emotional climax among the glitz and romance, Rachel hopes her mum will see her little girl in a new light ...

Kambrya has been on a relentless path to lift its academic standards. Now, it's nearly time for the results. The question is, have principal Michael Muscat's attempts to transform the school worked?

And what does the experience at Kambrya mean for every school in Australia?

Jo Wastle
Assistant Principal