

Counselors have noticed that, on such smoky days, students are particularly attached to their phones—their lifeline, Lester said.

When Lester sees students who are in crisis, he helps them soothe and manage the distressing emotional response they are experiencing through co-regulation: doing seemingly simple things like speaking in a calm manner, pouring them tea and joining them in breathing exercises. This helps ground students and bring them back into the present and out of a crisis state.

When students are not in crisis but need support, Lester works with them on resiliency practices: going through exercises that help them recognize and internalize positive traits about themselves. For example, in one exercise, he'll ask the student to think of somebody who respects and admires them, then relay what they think that person would say about them.

"For these students in particular, it's hard for them to see what's bright about themselves," Lester explained. These exercises help provide students with the tools to combat negative thoughts and judgment or damaging labels they may have internalized.

In addition to his counseling, every Friday before classes begin, Lester goes into Ridgeview's central dining area and

addresses the campus' small group of students. As with other ridge schools, attendance numbers dramatically decreased following the disaster. Ridgeview has about 60 students now, down from about 100 before the fire.

Lester's talks, which began this school year, cover a range of health and wellness topics to educate students and help them learn how to take better care of themselves. (This also helps vary morning announcements for groggy-eyed high schoolers.)

On a recent afternoon in Lester's office with Schroyer, both recalled a moment during a recent group talk where Schroyer spoke up and shared something hopeful about her life. What she said stuck with Lester.

"You said, 'I believe in what I'm building,'" he said to Schroyer.

She smiled and added that she's been forming more friendships lately and focusing on self-care. As for her career goals, she can see herself as a chef, a criminologist, an animator or a motivational speaker.

Regardless of where she ends up after high school, her core desire is to comfort others and change the world for the better, she said.

"I've lost a lot of things, but even before the fire I'd lost a lot of things, too," Schroyer continued. "I'm just trying to find ways to cope, feel better and find hope in myself to keep living. ... I've accepted [that] a lot of good things go away, but there's a lot of good [left], too." □

Robert Lester, an in-school mental health counselor for students at Ridgeview High School and Paradise Ridge Elementary School, says positions like his created post-Camp Fire have helped eliminate transportation and cost as barriers to accessing care.



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