



NATURAL MIND SET

Associate Professor Janet Schloss

Qualifications:
PhD from School of Medicine,
University of Queensland

Institution:
Southern Cross University,
National Centre for
Naturopathic Medicine

Research Field:
Helping to improve recovery
from disaster-related trauma
by developing a world-first
approach to PTSD, combining
community-based supports
with clinically supervised
therapies to ensure people
receive the right level of
treatment at the right time
following disasters



IN THEIR WORDS

My motivation as a researcher, nutritionist and naturopath working in oncology is rooted in a deep commitment to supporting people at one of the most vulnerable times in their lives.

Cancer does not only affect the body but it affects identities, families, hopes and daily functioning. Being able to sit with patients, listen to their concerns, and offer evidence – informed, compassionate guidance – is what drives my work every day. Helping people feel empowered, understood and supported is not just a component of my role; it is the core of it.

My research builds on this commitment. In addition to my research with oncology patients, I am leading a much-needed trial addressing climate-related PTSD through compassion-based therapy incorporating arts and nature.

In oncology, I am driven by the belief that complementary medicine, when grounded in rigorous evidence, can offer meaningful improvements in quality of life, possible extension of life and symptom management for people with cancer. This is particularly important in brain cancer, where conventional treatments often carry significant side effects and treatment options can be limited.

My work aims to explore nutritional strategies, natural compounds, and integrative care approaches that may reduce treatment burden, support cognitive and functional outcomes, and ultimately give patients more agency in their care.

What motivates me most is seeing how research can translate into real-world benefits which can give patients safer options, improving treatment experiences, and offering families hope.

Knowing my work can help improve their experience, even in small ways, is what sustains my passion, purpose and dedication in this field.

When catastrophic floods devastated Australia's NSW Northern Rivers region in 2022, followed by landslides, the physical damage was undeniable.

What wasn't immediately visible was the psychological toll on survivors – many of whom are still grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder years later, some still without permanent homes.

Now Associate Professor Janet Schloss, from Southern Cross University's Centre for Naturopathic Medicine, is leading the world's first clinical trial combining nature-based and arts-based interventions with MDMA-assisted therapy to treat climate-related PTSD.

The globally-admired Aussie credo of "she'll be right" often masks survivors' struggles and can stop people from even starting to look for support.

"They don't tell people a lot, because I'm resilient, I can do this," Associate Professor Schloss said.

"Our culture basically encourages people to not talk about the trauma

they have experienced, so they suppress it and don't tell people that they are triggered by rain or other climate related events.

"I know that there's debate in regards to climate change ... but what we do know is that there has been numerous climate-related disasters and repeated as well in the same areas, so that it's not only just one exposure, there can be numerous exposures in the same areas, and these people do have PTSD. So yes, climate-related PTSD has definitely been recognised."

The Southern Cross University research team and their multidisciplinary team secured \$3.8 million from the National Health and Medical Research Council, one of Australia's most competitive grant programs, alongside a Peregrine grant for nature-based components.

The study uses a stepped-care model where participants are randomised to participate in both nature-based or arts-based five-week programs.

Those with residual PTSD after the initial intervention can be put forward for step two: MDMA-assisted compassion therapy.

With 360 participants targeted and 60 to 80 expected to progress to the MDMA phase, the research team aims to complete both trial phases by late 2027. But what sets this research apart is its deliberate focus on global impact.

"The whole idea is to be able to show that this stepped-care process, this program, can actually be taken anywhere that has climate-related PTSD anywhere within the world," Associate Professor Schloss said.

"So like the bushfires down in Melbourne – this (program) could be taken and replicated down there with the people who've got PTSD because of the bushfires. We've actually had really positive feedback, and they felt a lot better participating in these particular interventions."

Associate Professor Schloss, whose background spans naturopathic medicine and oncology research, worked with Professor James Bennett-Levy, a psychologist specialising in psychedelics and low-intervention PTSD therapies, for the research.

Together with indigenous community leaders experienced in arts-based healing work around Lismore, the team built on existing

evidence while breaking new ground. This collaboration extends beyond disciplines to embrace diverse healing modalities – from evidence-based psychedelic therapy to traditional arts practices and nature reconnection – all grounded in rigorous clinical trial methodology.

This groundbreaking PTSD research sits within a larger portfolio of high-impact clinical trials.

Associate Professor Schloss is simultaneously leading the "Breaking Barriers" trial, testing sea cucumber compounds to support the treatment of glioblastoma, the most aggressive brain cancer. One is in conjunction with the oral chemotherapy given to patients to try and increase the effectiveness of that particular drug.

"The treatment itself (for glioblastoma) hasn't changed within three decades ... so any assistance that we can actually give this community matters deeply," she said.

"I watched my auntie go through hell (from bowel cancer) and end up passing away. We need to have concrete evidence of what works and doesn't work in the oncology space to actually help patients."