

# TOOLKIT Getting through natural disasters

A self help resource to help people cope with natural disasters such as bushfires, flooding and extreme climate events

## How do natural disasters impact communities?

Some of the ways natural disasters can affect communities are:

- Loss of homes or damage to property
- Financial hardship
- Family and relationship problems (e.g. arguing, disagreements, lack of communication, physical conflict, relationship breakdown)
- Job pressure, overworking or loss of regular employment
- People leaving the community due to a lack of opportunities or income (particularly young people)
- Environmental problems, such as loss of vegetation and animals, drying or overflowing of rivers and soil erosion.
- Lack of community services, including health care, education, housing and employment organisations
- Higher incidence of physical and mental health problems amongst community members, as well as an increased risk of suicide
- Loss of social networks and a breakdown in community spirit

## How do natural disasters affect individual wellbeing?

The experience of natural disasters can affect our wellbeing in several ways.



Some common reactions may include but are not limited to:

- Physical: fatigue, changes in appetite or sleeping patterns, easily startled by noises, muscle tension, restlessness, irritability, upset stomach
- Behavioural: increased use of alcohol or other drugs, withdrawal from others, loss of interest in normal activities, low motivation
- Psychological: poor concentration and memory, confusion, indecision, flashbacks or feelings of 'reliving' the event, frequent thoughts or images of the incident, dreams or nightmares about what happened
- Emotional: shock anger, fear, sadness, guilt, denial, helplessness, worry, grief.

Most people will experience some of these reactions at some point in their lives. However, if you are experiencing several at the same time or if they interfere with your ability to carry out daily activities, you may want to talk to someone you trust (e.g. partner, friend, relative), or seek help from your GP or another health professional.

13 11 14

 Lifeline

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

## Practical strategies to help you manage your reaction to natural disasters:

### 1 Recognise when it's getting too much

Listening to your body and recognising your signs of stress is the first step in understanding how to take care of yourself. Take notice of any changes in your physical health, your behaviours or your emotions that might indicate that things are getting too much for you. Sometimes it is hard to see changes in yourself, so it can be helpful to listen to concerns from loved ones about your wellbeing or behaviour.

### 2 Talk about it

Talking openly to someone you trust about how you're feeling can help you make sense of your emotions and will often make you feel less alone. If you don't feel comfortable talking to someone you know, Lifeline is available for confidential support and advice.

Remember, during natural disasters, most people in the community are likely to be experiencing overwhelming emotions, so talking to family members, friends and neighbours can help everyone to support each other.

### 3 Visit your GP or health professional

If you notice changes in how you feel, it can be helpful to talk to your GP or another health professional. Let them know what you have experienced, how you are feeling and any changes you have noticed in yourself. Try and be as open and honest as possible, so they can help you to the best of their ability. Your GP can provide you with advice and give you referrals to other services that might be able to offer you support..

### 4 Helping children and adolescents

Sometimes we don't discuss stressful situations with children and adolescents because we don't want to worry them. However, they usually pick up on when you are stressed and know when things aren't right, particularly if they witness adults upset or arguing. Not knowing what's going on can make them worry and they may blame themselves for what's happening.

It's important to include children and adolescents in discussions about the situation and involve them in decision-making as much as possible. Help them to understand their responsibilities (e.g. concentrating at school, doing homework, helping at home) and reassure them that, although things are tough, you will get through it together. Talk to them about their feelings and be aware of any changes in their behaviour or mood that may indicate that they are feeling overwhelmed.

## 5 Take care of yourself

Do your best to eat healthy food, get around eight hours of sleep each night and exercise regularly.

Try and limit intake of alcohol and other drugs, as these can leave you feeling worse - agitated and anxious, flat or unmotivated.

Remember to take time out to relax – read a book, listen to music, watch a movie or try something new, like yoga or meditation. It's also important to do fun activities that you enjoy, both on your own and with family and friends. Spending time with those important to you helps to prevent isolation and loneliness.

## 6 Seek and accept help from others

Research shows that people with strong connections with family, friends and their community cope best in times of crisis. A strong support network reduces your sense of isolation and gives you people to talk to when things get rough.

It takes strength and courage to ask for and receive help from others, but people are usually more than happy to help! Make a list of where to go for different types of help and advice and keep it in a handy place.



## 7 Routine

Maintaining a regular routine can be really helpful in times of stress and uncertainty

Sticking to a routine can:

- Help give you a sense of control
- Combat or prevent burnout
- Lower stress levels
- Boost motivation levels
- Help you feel a sense of accomplishment.

You may want to consider establishing regular times for sleep, meals, physical activity, socialising and self care.

## 8 Seek Support

Experiencing a natural disaster can cause feelings of overwhelm and distress. If you or someone you know needs support or is experiencing thoughts of suicide, help is available.

You can seek immediate support by talking to someone you trust, contacting Lifeline (phone: 13 11 14 or text: 0477 13 11 14) or other support services. If life is in immediate danger, call triple zero (000).

## Places to go to for help now:

- Disaster Assist: <https://www.disasterassist.gov.au/>
- National Emergency and Management Agency: <https://nema.gov.au/#/map>
- Salvation Army: <https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/need-help/disasters-and-emergencies/>
- Farmer Assistance Hotline - 132 316
- Rural Aid Australia - 1300 327 624
- Griefline - 1300 845 745
- Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800
- Lifeline 13 11 14 (24hrs), 13 43 57 (for bushfire recovery) or [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- State Emergency Service for NSW, QLD, ACT, TAS, WA, SA - 132 500
- State Emergency Service for VIC - (03) 9256 9000
- Government Assistance: <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/active-natural-disaster-events>
- Rural Financial Counselling Service: 1800 686 175
- The Red Cross: <https://www.redcross.org.au/emergencies/>
- St Vincent De Paul: [https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find\\_Help/National/](https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find_Help/National/)

If your family is finding it difficult to pay for basic items such as food and petrol, you may be eligible for short term emergency relief assistance (e.g. food or petrol vouchers). To access this kind of help, talk to your local Salvation Army, St Vincent De Paul or Material Aid/ Emergency Response Agency.

For 24-hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14 or text 0477 13 11 14 for more information visit [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

This Toolkit has been produced by the Lifeline Information Service as a public service. You are welcome to reproduce it without alteration and with acknowledgment of Lifeline.  
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## Utilise online resources:

- Lifeline - [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- Griefline - <https://griefline.org.au/resources/natural-disasters/>
- Headspace - <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/natural-disasters/>
- Red Cross: Looking after yourself and your family after a disaster: <https://www.redcross.org.au/emergencies/looking-after-yourself/english/>

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