

Understanding natural disasters



Natural disasters like bushfires, floods, cyclones, and droughts can turn life upside down in an instant. They don't just affect the environment; they can also shake your sense of safety and leave you feeling overwhelmed or unsure of what's next.

Experiencing a natural disaster can bring up all kinds of emotions. You might feel grief for the people, pets, or places you've lost or anxiety about how to rebuild when everything feels uncertain. These feelings are really common. It's important to remember that you don't have to face them alone.

1 in 4 Australians say experiencing a natural disaster made existing mental health challenges worse.

Signs & effects

Natural disasters affect everyone in different ways. For some people, the impact is immediate. For others, it might take time to notice how they're feeling. Some common experiences include:



Feeling stuck

Struggling to make decisions or feeling overwhelmed by where to even begin.



Anxiety and fear

Worrying about what's next, the safety of loved ones, or the possibility of another disaster.



Physical symptoms

Trouble sleeping, feeling constantly tired, or noticing tension and restlessness in your body.



Emotional responses

Feeling sadness, anger, guilt, numbness, or even relief to have made it through.



Changes in behaviour

Withdrawing from others, avoiding reminders of what happened, or turning to substances to cope.



Grief and loss

Mourning the loss of loved ones, pets, homes, or belongings, and usual routines.

Mental preparedness tips

Make an emergency plan

Map out evacuation routes, list your emergency contacts, and chat through the plan with family, friends, or housemates so everyone knows what to do.

Create a preparedness kit

Pack essentials like food, water, medications, and comfort items. Little things like photos, books, or calming tools can help bring a sense of familiarity during stressful times.

Download helpful apps

Apps like Get Prepared offer step-by-step advice, safety alerts, and tools to help you stay informed and organised.

Practise everyday self-care

Getting enough sleep, food, and relaxation time can build resilience and make it easier to manage stress when things feel uncertain.

Check your paperwork

Make sure your insurance details are up to date and keep important documents (like ID, medical information, and contact lists) somewhere easy to grab if you need to leave quickly.

Use checklists to stay organised

Download or create checklists to keep track of tasks like packing your emergency kit, preparing your home, or checking on neighbours who may need extra support.

Recognising when and how disaster-related stress shows up

Having a plan like below can help you prepare for feelings you might experience before, during, and after a natural disaster. This can make it easier to spot what's happening and respond in ways that support your wellbeing.

Coping after a natural disaster

Anticipate **What situations or reminders bring up strong emotions?**
e.g., news coverage, certain smells or sounds, anniversaries of the event


Identify **How will I know it's affecting me?**
e.g., trouble sleeping, avoiding certain places, feeling anxious or on edge


Manage **What can help me cope?**
e.g., taking a break from the news, talking to a friend, doing a grounding exercise





Practical management strategies


 **Take a break from the news**
Mute alerts from news apps and social media to give yourself some space from distressing updates.

 **Name your feelings**
Grief, anger, sadness, or fear are all normal after what you've been through. Let yourself feel them without judgement.

 **Reach out for connection**
Talking with family, friends, or neighbours about your experiences can help ease feelings of isolation.

 **Take it one step at a time**
Focus on small, manageable tasks like tidying one area or organising important items.

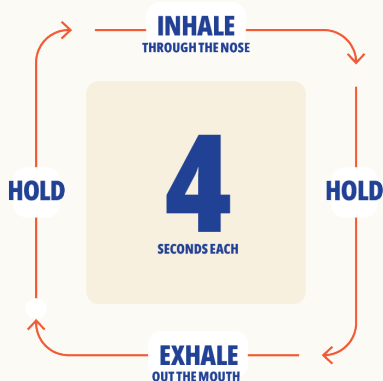
 **Create calm moments**
Use grounding techniques like deep breathing, stretching, or stepping outside for fresh air to help ease tension.

 **Write down what helps**
Keep a list of what brings you comfort or helps you feel safe. It can be a useful reminder on tough days.

Want to try something now?

If you're feeling distressed or unsure where to start, a grounding technique like **box breathing** or **using your five senses** can help ease physical sensations and take your focus off what's causing you to feel overwhelmed. You can also consider doing a **digital detox**.

BOX BREATHING



5 SENSES TECHNIQUE

Look for...

-  5 things you can **see**
-  4 things you can **feel**
-  3 things you can **hear**
-  2 things you can **smell**
-  1 things you can **taste**

DO A DIGITAL DETOX



Take a break from the news

Set limits on social media

Swap swiping for stepping outside



Everyone is different, so what works for someone else might not work for you, and that's okay.

The key is to keep experimenting until you find what helps you most.

When to seek help

You may want to speak to a health professional if:

- ✓ Feelings of grief, sadness, or anxiety feel overwhelming or aren't easing over time.
- ✓ Everyday tasks or relationships feel hard to manage because of how you're feeling.
- ✓ You're turning to alcohol, drugs, or gambling to cope.
- ✓ Memories of the disaster feel intrusive, or you're avoiding reminders at all costs.
- ✓ You're experiencing thoughts of self-harm or struggling with your mental health.
- ✓ You feel stuck, hopeless, or unsure how to move forward.

Reaching out can feel difficult, but it's a sign of strength.

Support is always available to help you feel more in control and hopeful for the future.

Support is available

Understanding and managing your wellbeing before, during, or after a natural disaster isn't something you have to do on your own.

Head to our **Support Toolkit** to find more practical strategies and discover national and local support services that can help.

The Support Toolkit also offers information on a wide range of mental health and wellbeing topics you can explore at your own pace, whenever you need.

Visit lifeline.org.au/natural-disasters/services or scan the QR code to get started.



If you're feeling overwhelmed right now, Lifeline is here to support you.

You can reach us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

☎ Call 13 11 14

✉ Text 0477 131 114

💬 Chat online at lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat

If your life is in danger, please call 000.

Wherever you are, help is at your fingertips with the **Support Toolkit**

➔ lifeline.org.au/toolkit