

TOOL KIT Getting through natural disasters

A self-help resource to help people cope with the aftermath of natural disasters

How do natural disasters affect individual wellbeing?

The stress caused by natural disasters can affect your wellbeing in several ways.

Some common signs of stress may include but are not limited to:

- Physical symptoms: tiredness, headaches, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite
- Behavioural: increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs to cope or escape the situation
- Psychological: poor concentration, poor memory, indecision, confusion
- Social: withdrawal, less contact with family and friends
- Emotional: feelings of anger, fear, sadness, irritability, helplessness, worry.

Most people experience these emotions 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 should talk to someone you trust (e.g. partner, friend, relative) or seek help from your GP or another health professional.



Common reactions following a natural disaster

Reactions to a natural disaster are often more intense in the first weeks following the event. Usually these reactions ease over time, although you may experience some feelings for a longer period. It is important to allow yourself time to process the event and regain a sense of normality in your everyday life following a traumatic event such as a natural disaster. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to feel and everyone will experience the situation differently.

13 11 14

 Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

Strategies to help you manage the stress of natural disasters

Here are some practical tips for managing the stress of natural disasters:

1 Recognise when it's getting too much

Learning to listen to your body and recognising the 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. Listen to concerns from loved ones about your wellbeing or behaviour.

Seek help immediately if you have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself.

2 Talk about it

Talking calmly and openly to someone you trust about how you're feeling allows you to release negative emotions and helps to relieve tension. If you don't feel comfortable talking to someone you know, telephone helplines like Lifeline and online options (e.g. email, online chat, forums) are also available for confidential support and advice.

3 Visit your GP or health professional

Talk to your GP about your situation and let them know if you've experienced any negative changes in how you feel. Your doctor can provide useful advice on how to manage stress 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 our children and adolescents because we don't want to worry them. However, children and adolescents usually pick up on when you are stressed and know when things aren't right, particularly if they witness their parents 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 notice any changes in their behaviour or mood that may indicate that they are feeling stressed.

5 Take care of yourself

Eat healthy food, get at least eight hours of sleep each night and exercise regularly.

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 friends and family helps to prevent isolation and loneliness.

Alcohol and drugs weaken your ability to make decisions, often making your problems worse. They can also lead to mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, so it's a good idea to limit your intake.

6 Manage your exposure to media

Media coverage or alerts about the event (or similar events) can trigger a heightened sense of fear and anxiety. Ensure you are accessing reliable and accurate information and limit media intake where possible.



7 Routine

Try to keep the rest of your life as normal as possible during the period of stress; establish a daily routine with regular times for sleep, meals, being sociable and physical activity.

8 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.

9 Act immediately if you have thoughts of harming yourself or suicide

Ongoing stress due to natural disasters can cause you to feel hopeless and may lead to thoughts of suicide or self-harm. All thoughts or talk of suicide should be taken very seriously. If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, seek immediate help by talking to someone you trust, calling a helpline (e.g. Lifeline 13 11 14) or visiting your GP. In an emergency, call 000.

Places to go to for help now:

- Talk to a trusted family member or friend, or a health professional such as your GP or Psychologist/Counsellor
- Connect with a helpline. Call Lifeline's 24-hour telephone counselling service on 13 11 14 or reach out online via our Crisis Support Text (0477 13 11 14) or Chat (available here: <https://www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat>)
- Blue Knot Foundation: 1300 657 380 or <https://www.blueknot.org.au/>
- Young people can ring Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 or web and email counselling: <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

Utilise online resources:

- Lifeline - 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/globalassets/cms-migration/documents/emergency-services/lookingafteryourself_1.pdf

For 24-hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14 For more information visit www.lifeline.org.au

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