

Tool kit

Helping your children cope with the after effects of a natural disaster

How children react and how you can help

Lifeline's Helping your children cope with the after effects of a natural disaster tool kit will provide some practical information about:

What are some common responses?

What can I do to help?

When should I consider further help?

When disaster strikes everyone is affected. Knowing how to recognise trauma reactions in children and respond to these in a caring and supportive way can lessen the stress for all involved.

What are some common responses?

Trauma reactions to natural disasters such as bushfires, floods, storms or cyclones may appear immediately after the event or they may arise over the weeks following the event.

The loss of treasured possessions, pets, and sense of security can be felt very strongly. Reactions can vary greatly. The sorts of common reactions include: sleep disturbances, nightmares, fear of the dark, clinging to parents, loss or increase in appetite, aggressive behaviour, competition with siblings for parental attention, withdrawal, and/or loss of interest in regular activities.

There may be other reactions that your child could be experiencing. These reactions may vary according to a child's age. Importantly, most children will experience healing and recovery following painful experiences, as they rebuild their lives and develop new strengths. Your support can play a vital role in this process.

Children 5 years and under

Children 5 years and under have a tendency to be strongly affected by their parents' reactions. At this age children are unable to protect themselves, as a result, fear can arise, and your child may become anxious when separated from you.

Children 6–11 years

At this age children are able to understand loss and permanent change. Their anxiety can be high, this may be linked to the natural disaster experience or it may cross over into unrelated areas. Other reactions could be: regressive behaviour (e.g. thumb sucking), refusing to go to school, outbursts of anger, depression, feeling numb, physical complaints that have no medical basis, and concentration difficulties resulting in poor school work.

Children/adolescents 12–18 years

This age group may have reactions similar to those of adults. Reactions may be: flashbacks, avoiding anything that may remind them of the traumatic experience, anti-social behaviour, rebellion, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, agitation or decrease of energy, change in friends, substance abuse. A young person in this age group may also feel guilty for being unable to 'stop the fire', 'prevent the house flooding' or 'save the house'. Difficulty talking about thoughts and feelings is common.

What can I do to help?

There are things you can do to help your children recover from the trauma.

Let your children know about your own feelings through the traumatic event. If you were scared it is good to let them know this as it will allow them to feel OK about any fears that they have. Letting your child know that it is normal to feel upset after a terrible experience such as a fire, flood or storm is a good place to start. Encourage your children to express their feelings and listen to them without passing judgement. If your child is unable to discuss their feelings don't force them to, but let them know you are there to listen when they are ready. Patience and tolerance lets your child know what they are experiencing is normal. Reassure your child that you love them and that they are not responsible for what happened.

If your child is experiencing regressive behaviours do not criticise by saying "You're behaving like a baby" this will only discourage them from opening up.

Include your child in making plans for the future and cleaning up any destruction to your home.

Talk to your child's teacher so that you can work together in supporting your child through this terrible time.

Keep as much as possible to regular routines and activities. This provides the child with a sense that even when bad things happen, it is possible to rebuild and deal with painful changes in their lives, and that there can be security and support even in the midst of these changes.

Children, particularly those up to around 11 years, look to their parents for security. It is helpful to let them see that you are now in control of the situation; for example, by making plans for future safety.





Helping different age groups

Immediately following a traumatic event children often need extra attention and reassurance. Be sensitive to these needs and over time allow the level of attention to return to normal. The following tips provide a few guidelines:

5 years and under

- plenty of hugs and affection
- time together doing activities they enjoy
- spend extra time with them before they go to bed
- allow them to share a bedroom until they can return to their own without fear.

6–11 years old

- allow time to play with adults and friends
- encourage discussion of events with adults and friends
- temporarily relax your expectations of them
- include them in rehearsing plans for future disasters.

12–18 years old

- allow time for individual attention
- temporarily relax your expectations of them both at home and school
- encourage structured and non-stressful activities either alone or with friends
- allow them to talk about the natural disaster, but don't insist if they don't want to
- young people can gain a sense of control over the situation if they are able to contribute to some aspect of getting things back to normal.

When should I consider further help?

Most children will adapt and grow through traumatic experiences with caring and support from family, friends and teachers.

If you become aware of very severe reactions that are continuing for more than a few days or if less severe reactions have continued consistently for a period of more than 6 weeks you may need to consider seeking professional help.

Where do I go for further help?

- Contact your GP or the Child and Adolescent Health Service in your Area Health Service.
- If you would like further help finding an appropriate referral contact the Lifeline 24-hour telephone counselling service on 13 11 14.
- Children and young people can phone Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800 or access web & email counselling www.kidshelp.com.au
- Parents can phone the Parentline in their State for support, counselling and education
- Utilise online resources. Some good reference sites include:

**Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma,
Loss & Grief Network**
www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au

**Helping children cope with media coverage
of traumatic events**
www.ncac.gov.au/pcf/Helping_Chn_Cope_Media_Coverage_Mar07.pdf

Reach Out
au.reachout.com

Acknowledgements:



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