



how to cope with the stress of natural disasters

This information is for young people affected by a natural disaster.

Have you been involved in a natural disaster?

It's common to need support after being in or witnessing an event that may be traumatic, such as bushfires, flooding, or drought. It's important to find the right level or type of support for you, as everyone will be affected differently.

There are specific things that are likely to be helpful in the days and weeks following a natural disaster. As time passes in the months after, the types of things that are likely to be helpful will be a bit different.

It can help to talk with a trusted adult about getting the right sort of help if it all feels a bit much.

Tips for the initial days and weeks after a natural disaster

In the days and weeks after a disaster, it is important to do things that make you feel physically and emotionally safe. It can help to:

- Find ways to connect with others, especially those who help you feel OK and support your wellbeing. This can include family and friends, in-person or online connections.
- Engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and feeling grounded (use of alcohol and other drugs can be counterproductive with this). Look for ways to include some routine and try to re-engage with things you enjoyed prior to the disaster as much as possible (e.g., playing games or sports, hobbies, etc.).
- Explore ways to get involved with repair and recovery of your community. This can help give you a sense of hope, which is important to recovery.
- Be mindful of exposure to traumatic information through stories, traditional and social media. It can be helpful to take regular breaks from the 24-hour news cycle.

1. (Hobfoll et al, 2007)



Tips for the shorter and longer term after a natural disaster

There are many different things that can be helpful in the weeks, months, and years after being impacted by a natural disaster.

- Acknowledge that it was a tough time. Having our safety threatened can be an incredibly confronting experience. You may have been impacted by the disaster in other ways (e.g., through media, or losing a loved one). It is OK to remind yourself that the events were out of your control.
- Be patient with yourself. You may be trying to make sense of what happened. This can take months or years. It is OK to need someone to remind you that you are safe.
- It's OK to start small. It is important to keep up any regular routines or activities. This could be daily activities, like attending school, TAFE or uni, a job, sports or catching up with friends. It could be something as simple as planning your day and trying to stick to that.
- Avoid getting into situations that are unsafe and avoid taking big risks.
- It's normal to feel like you want to get involved in the recovery process. You might like to look for ways you can contribute to your local community to help yourself and others to rebuild. It's also OK if this doesn't feel right just yet.
- Be aware of the triggers that remind you how you felt during or after the disaster. This could include particular sounds, smells, or images.
- Practice being calm. Breathing exercises are one way to help calm your mind. Find a quiet place, close your eyes and slow your breathing. Try to focus your attention on your breath. It can help to count your breaths as you go (e.g., "one" for every inhale and "two" for every exhale).
- Rest and comfort will also help you to feel calm. If you need to take time from school or work, make sure that someone knows that you are taking a planned break.
- Stay connected. Being with people who understand you and are calm can help you maintain calmness as well.
- Try to eat nutritious food. Eating well can help with your mood, sleep, physical health and wellbeing.

Common reactions to a natural disaster

Natural disasters can be hard to cope with. People can respond in very different ways, which can also change over time. Some people might feel OK immediately after the disaster but become overwhelmed when some time has passed.

Fear and anxiety

Following a natural disaster you might experience fear and anxiety. It's common to worry that the disaster, whether a flood, bushfire or cyclone, could happen again, or to find that you're not feeling safe.

Grief and loss

There is no 'right' way to grieve for loved ones who have died or other major losses. It's very personal, very individual, and it's very much OK to grieve.

Thoughts

It is common to go over memories of the disaster or to find it hard to forget memories that were frightening. You might find it difficult to concentrate, make decisions, remember things, or describe what happened.

Anger and confusion

It can be difficult to understand a natural disaster because the damage seems so unfair, and there's usually no one to blame. This can make you feel helpless, frustrated, angry and confused.

Sadness and emptiness

You might be sad about losing family members or friends, and perhaps your home and precious possessions. If you've been asked to stay away from your home, if your friends are still away, or if your neighbourhood is badly damaged, feelings of sadness can turn to feelings of emptiness.

Denial

When bad things have happened, some people might prefer not to think about them at all. This might be a help to start with, but our feelings can catch us by surprise later on. It's OK to distract yourself, but also find some time to think about what has happened and how you're going.

Guilt

You might feel guilty after a natural disaster. It might be about something that you did or didn't do at the time, or you might just feel bad about yourself. Sometimes you may feel guilty as people experienced loss or harm that you didn't.

Shock

Shock makes you slow down. It's a common way our bodies react to keep us safe in the first few days after a disaster and feelings of shock may come and go over a few weeks. You might feel numb or out of yourself.

Sleep

You might sleep a lot more or a lot less than before the disaster. You might find it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep.



Seeking support

People who experience traumatic events are often able to recover, and do not experience ongoing difficulties. Often people who are affected use their strengths and resources, as well as the informal supports of family, friends and the broader community to help recover.

Some people may need to access professional support to navigate ongoing challenges. It can be hard to know when it's time to seek professional support. Commonly, it's when someone has been experiencing difficulties for longer than a couple of months after an event, and is having an ongoing impact on the way they want to live their lives.

Other challenges

You may have faced multiple disasters in a short time. Recovering your wellbeing after one or several disaster can take time. You might find yourself struggling with other areas in your life while you recover.

Other areas of life that can be impacted include; relationships with others, worry about others, having to take care of siblings, wanting to be alone, sleep, appetite, and possibly [alcohol or other drug use](#).

These can be normal reactions and natural coping responses. However, they are associated with increased likelihood of experiencing ongoing difficulties. It is helpful to try to address these early, to prevent them from becoming ongoing issues. If they're starting to impact on your life, reach out to family and friends, or to [a headspace centre](#), for more support.

Ask our experts

How to look after yourself during a tough time?

Our headspace clinicians have plenty of experience helping young people deal with difficult emotions. No matter what's going on in your life, it's a good idea to look after your headspace. Our [healthy headspace tips](#) can support you to live your life in a positive and meaningful way and help you cope when times are tough.

After a traumatic event it's even more important than usual to make sure you focus on eating well, your sleep and staying active. Alongside this, it can help to:

- Have a routine. When everything feels 'a little out of control', a regular routine can help you manage things and make life seem more organised.
- Allow yourself some 'worry time'. If you're constantly worrying about or replaying the stressful event, then set aside some time to worry each day. At other times, remind yourself to leave these thoughts until later. An app like [WorryTime](#) can help you set aside worries until later.
- Set some realistic goals. You could break large goals down into small achievable steps. This will let you prove to yourself that you have the skills and strength to recover, and feel good about yourself.
- Reduce or cut out alcohol and other drug use. Alcohol and other drugs can mask your feelings, but sometimes make your feelings stronger so that you're less able to manage.
- Use your strengths and surround yourself with support. Everyone has strengths, and you can draw on yours. Surround yourself with people who are reassuring and comforting, and who allow you to be yourself.

When should I get help?

If you ever feel unable to cope because of overwhelming or intense emotions, or if you have any thoughts of harming yourself, then ask for help immediately.

Very strong emotions normally start to settle by about six weeks after the disaster. If you have trouble with your emotions or with your usual daily activities after this time, then think about getting some professional help.

National 24/7 crisis services

Lifeline: 13 43 57 (13 HELP) or [lifeline.org.au](#)

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467 or [suicidecallbackservice.org.au](#)

beyondblue: 1300 224 636 or [beyondblue.org.au](#)

Additional youth support services

headspace: visit [headspace.org.au](#) to find your nearest centre or call [ehespace](#) on 1800 650 890

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or [kidshelpline.com.au](#)

ReachOut: [reachout.com](#)

SANE Australia: 1800 187 263 or [sane.org](#)

Talk with a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, school counsellor or find out if there is a headspace centre near you.

Speak to your local doctor or [General Practitioner \(GP\)](#) and help make a plan for your recovery. Or you can search for a health service and GP on [healthdirect](#).

For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit [ehespace](#).

The headspace Clinical Reference Group oversee and approve clinical resources made available on this website.

Last reviewed 3rd September 2020

1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5668133_Five_Essential_Elements_of_Immediate_and_Mid-Term_Mass_Trauma_Intervention_Empirical_Evidence