



Help for you and your family after disasters

Most people experience acute stress during events of natural disaster or large scale acts of violence, and most manage with courage and strength. However, sometimes it is only later when the distressing images are recalled that some of the stressful effects start to show.

Distress is an understandable and normal response to natural disasters or large scale acts of violence. Common causes of distress may result from having being directly at risk, being concerned about family and friends, witnessing injuries and distress to others, or experiencing panic and confusion surrounding the event. In addition, feelings and memories associated with previous experiences of disasters or other grief and loss may also resurface.

Most people experience severe stress during events like bush fires, floods, civil unrest, bombings, cyclones, tsunamis and earthquakes. However, sometimes later when one recalls the distressing experiences, the personal impact may start to show. While most people manage with the support of family and friends, there are times when extra help and support may be needed.

Those who have lost loved ones, or have been seriously injured, may need special support and care.

It is important to recognise the following:

- normal reactions to this type of disaster;
- positive ways of coping; and
- when to get extra help

Normal reactions to a disaster include:

- shock and numb feeling, often fear at first
- horror and grief when one realises the extent of loss
- frustration, anger, feeling helpless and even sometimes feeling despair when it all seems *too overwhelming*

These feelings usually settle over the early weeks.

Many people may have previously experienced uncertain and troubled times and with the support of their community can learn from these experiences to help themselves recover from disasters.

Positive ways of coping may be:

- supporting one another especially in the family and in your community
- providing emotional support for each other
- carrying out practical tasks – tackling the jobs that need to be done *a bit at a time* and acknowledging successful completion of each task
- sharing your experience and feelings with others a bit at a time when it *is right for you*
- looking after your own and your family's general health – rest, exercise, food and socialising all help (being careful not to drink too much alcohol).

Children

Many adults are particularly concerned about the impact of disasters on children, including the impact of exposure of children to distressing images.

Over exposure to shocking media images may be distressing, particularly to younger children. Parents and carers can help by monitoring children's television viewing and prohibiting viewing of disaster scenes.

Parents and carers can help by answering children's questions honestly, acknowledging their concerns and fears and helping children understand how they are protected and safe.



Transcultural
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When to ask for extra help

Distress that results from experiencing disasters can be ongoing and affect your physical and mental health and wellbeing:

It is time to ask for help if:

- your sleep is badly affected
- you feel very distressed, irritable, restless or agitated much of the time
- you feel hopeless, despairing, miserable or that you *can't cope*
- you have trouble concentrating, are distracted and cannot do your usual tasks
- you feel your health is not so good
- you have new symptoms or your previous problems may seem to have returned, e.g., breathing, heart and stomach problems.

For children, they may isolate themselves from others, show aggressive behaviours, have difficulties at school, problems going to sleep or separating from their parents or siblings.

Seeking help

There are a number of ways of seeking help for distress related to the disaster.

- State Emergency Service - 132 500
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT): 24-hour consular emergency centre on 1300 555 135
- In addition, your GP can be contacted, as they often are in the best position to assist with ongoing concerns.

To talk to someone please contact:

Toll free: 1800 648 911

Phone: (02) 9912 3851