

Disasters and their impacts

Disasters can be natural, caused by people, or a combination of both. They can affect individuals and can leave communities struggling to cope.

People who survive disasters often experience extreme stress. Disasters can affect us in many different ways, including:

- threats to safety
- loss of loved ones, animals, and community members
- disruption to social connections and community functioning
- loss of home, possessions and built environments
- disruption to cultural or spiritual practices
- destruction of the natural environment
- loss of livelihood and financial security

Disasters can involve two stages: the disaster event itself, and the rebuilding or recovery stage. Both have their own challenges, and it is important to understand the how they can affect mental health.

Common reactions

Many people respond to disaster by using existing coping resources and drawing on the support of family, friends and other connections. However, the effect of disaster may be more significant for some people, and may lead to mental health issues. Where this happens, the following reactions are common:

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| Emotional | shock, irritability, anger, grief, sadness, fear, anxiety, guilt and shame. |
| Mental / intellectual | confusion, disorientation, difficulty concentrating or solving problems, repetitive images of the disaster. |
| Behavioural | withdrawal, avoidance of disaster reminders, getting into arguments, taking risks, overuse of alcohol or other substances. |
| Physiological | feeling tense, wound up or jumpy, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, aches, pains and headaches. |

A disaster is an occurrence disrupting the normal conditions of existence and causing a level of suffering that exceeds the capacity of adjustment of the affected community.

World Health Organisation

Helping yourself after a disaster

Recovering after a disaster doesn't mean that you forget about it. Recovery means becoming less upset when you remember the event, and having more confidence in your ability to cope as time goes on.

The following strategies may help you recover:

1. Acknowledge your experience

- a. You have been through a hard time. Many people will have an emotional reaction. Give yourself permission to feel the way you do.
- b. Give yourself time to re-think. A traumatic event can affect the way you see the world, your life, your goals, and your relationships.

2. Take care of yourself

- a. Rest and relax. You need time to replenish.
- b. Get regular exercise and eat regular, well-balanced meals. Good physical health supports good mental health.
- c. Cut back on tea, coffee, chocolate, soft drink, and cigarettes. If your body is tense, stimulants will add to this feeling.
- d. Try to avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope as these can lead to more problems.
- e. Self-soothe through the senses: pleasant sounds, sights, smells, tastes and sensations to help you wind down, relax and feel settled.

3. Have a routine where possible

- a. Structure your days and try to schedule at least one enjoyable activity each day.
- b. Make a timetable for each day, including exercise, work and relaxation.
- c. Get back into your normal routine as soon as possible but take it easy, do it bit by bit.

4. Ask for help and stay connected

- a. Spend time with people you care about, even if you don't want to talk about what happened.
- b. Sometimes you will want to be alone, and that's OK, but don't become too isolated.
- c. Try not to bottle up your feelings or block

them out. Talk about your feelings to other people who will understand, if and when you feel able to do so.

- d. Write about your feelings if you feel that you can't talk to others about them.

5. Don't over do it

- a. Tackle the things that need to be done a bit at a time, and count each success.
- b. Don't do activities or work to avoid thinking about or remembering what happened.
- c. Stay informed by watching the news or reading the newspaper, but limit exposure to what you really need.
- d. Make as many small daily decisions as possible - such as what you will eat or what you will do to relax - as this can help you to feel more in control of your life.
- e. Avoid making important life decisions such as moving house or changing jobs.

If you've tried these strategies and things still aren't getting better after three or four weeks, or if you are having trouble coping, talk to your doctor or mental health professional about getting some professional support to help you feel better.

Further information

- Download a copy of **Recovery after trauma – A guide for people with posttraumatic stress disorder** from phoenixaustralia.org.
- Talk to your doctor about your concerns and ask about a Medicare Mental Health Plan if you feel you could benefit from some professional support.
- If you are in immediate distress, and cannot see your doctor right away, call Lifeline on 13 11 14
- If you or someone you know is at immediate risk, call 000.