

Talking about disaster impacts and psychosocial wellbeing with communities

This document is an excerpt from the *Psychosocial Support in Emergencies: A humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy toolkit*. It includes key messages to help you talk with communities about the impacts of disasters on people and communities and how they can take steps to look after themselves, their loved ones and their communities.

Who to talk to about key these messages

- Individuals and community groups in disaster affected communities
- People working in, or with, individuals or communities affected by disasters
- Individuals and community groups considering their disaster risk and resilience.

When to use these key messages

This will depend on your role but you might use these messages to inform your advocacy:

- When working in communities affected by disasters
- With Community Recovery Committees or other local community representative groups
- When talking with the general public about the impacts of disasters.



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Key messages

Strong reactions and feelings are common, understandable reactions and we can overcome them

It is common to have strong feelings after a difficult event or period of time. Such reactions include loss of interest to daily life, feeling sad, irritable or confused, having difficulty to concentrate, physical reactions or vivid memories of the event. Recognise that this is a challenging time but one that you can work to manage. You have likely tackled hardships at other times in your life. With time and support we can overcome most or all of these difficulties¹.

Taking care of yourself will help you care for others. Don't be ashamed to ask for help

It is important that you take care of yourself, so you can help others. Focus on the things you did well and try to be patient with the changes in how you are feeling and reacting. Even during these difficult times, try to re-establish your daily routines such as sleeping and eating regularly and try to take time to do things that are satisfying. If you feel you can't cope or are not getting better, go to a health clinic².

By working together, we can cope better with this situation

Helping others and getting help from others is one of the best ways to cope with difficulties. Listen to others, provide them comfort, and participate in regular social activities. Don't hesitate to accept and ask for help from others. Talk with people with trust in the family and the community³.

We can rebuild our community together

Work with others to organise community and social activities such as religious ceremonies, community meetings, sports, arts, cleaning and helping others in the community⁴.

Pay particular attention and reach out to those who are most affected

We need to take particular care of and reach out to those that are the most affected or at the margins of our communities, including, injured people, elderly people, people with disabilities, widows and children that have lost their parents⁵.

1 UNICEF and Inter Agency Standing Committee, 2011, op. cit.

2 ibid

3 ibid

4 ibid

5 ibid

Adults and older people in the community play an important role in helping children to cope with situation

Children need extra attention and care after a difficult situation. You can help children by keeping them safe, listening to them, speaking kindly and reassuring them. Provide opportunities for children to share their concerns and hopes, play with their friends and to participate in daily life such as helping with family tasks⁶.

Protect your children even more than usual

Children need adults' love and attention during this difficult time, thus, watchfulness and comfort throughout the day is important in order to prevent further harm. Recommendations for parents to secure children include: keeping children close to their parents or a trusted caregiver (day and night) and ensuring that your family and children know their name, where they live and where they are at every moment during the day⁷.

Parenting can feel very different during or after a crisis

It is normal for parenting at this time to seem harder or even overwhelming. That may feel like a loss in itself. If you really enjoyed parenting before and felt on top of things, that may change. For a time, parenting might feel more deliberate, less intuitive. You might find parenting motivating, comforting or rewarding during or after a crisis. The experience will be different for everyone and it can also change over time⁸.

Try to face safe things that you continue to be unnecessarily scared of

Some people feel so severely upset about the emergency/disaster that they unnecessarily try to avoid places, people, conversations or activities that remind

them of the events. They continue to avoid even when it is no longer dangerous. This is understandable. Strangely, in order to feel better, it can be extremely helpful to visit places that you are avoiding, to talk to people that remind you of the events, and to continue to try to do the activities that you used to do. It can be difficult to stop avoiding, but try. Maybe you can ask a trusted family member or friend to help you and be with you when you approach things that you have been avoiding?⁹

Avoid taking alcohol or drugs to feel better

It is very common to want to take alcohol or drugs when you feel bad. However, when you drink or use drugs it takes longer to overcome the painful feelings and anxiety. Also, when you drink or use drugs it is difficult to protect and support your family and to help your community to overcome the difficulties. It will take longer to rebuild¹⁰.

Most people will probably feel better over the coming months

If your distress does not decrease or gets worse, then it is especially important to try to seek help from others who can support you. If possible, talk to a trusted family member, friend, or person in your community. If you are not feeling better overtime, seek help from a professional¹¹.

Consider wellbeing planning

When planning for emergencies, be mindful that your decision will impact on both your physical and mental health. Exposure to a bushfire for you and your family can increase risk of mental health problems.

Plan ahead for how to find each other

Separation from family members during a disaster is highly stressful. This stress can have a lasting impact, even when everything turns out (relatively) okay. Have a

6 ibid

7 ibid

8 Australian Red Cross, The University of Melbourne & Phoenix Australia, 2020, Parenting: Coping with crisis

9 ibid

10 ibid

11 ibid

plan about where or how you will reconnect, especially if communication and road systems are affected. The Australian Red Cross provides the Register Find Reunite service.

Be kind to yourself and others

It can take more than five years for some people to recover from a disaster experience and its aftermath, particularly in high impact communities.

Pleasure and leisure helps us manage stress

The days, weeks and months following an emergency can be a busy, chaotic and stressful time. Often, during stressful or hectic times, our social activities, and those things that we do for fun or leisure are the first things to be dropped because we feel like we don't have time or have other priorities. However, pleasure and leisure is exactly what we need during these overwhelming times to help us manage our stress, and make us more productive.

While it can seem like the hardest thing to do, taking time out to do something that you enjoy, spending time with friends and family, prioritising some personal time and taking care of yourself is vital in order to manage stress and stay healthy.

Be open to the possibility of positives

Positive outcomes can come from a disaster experience, even for those who have had the most severe losses. This is referred to as posttraumatic growth¹².

We are all different and we respond to disasters differently

People can respond differently to the same experience and have different recovery needs, including within families. Remember the children – Even very young

12 Harms, Abotomey, Rose, Woodward Kron, Bolt, Waycott & Alexander, 2018. Post-disaster Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Transformations Following the Black Saturday Bushfires, *Australian Social Work*, 71:4, 417-429.

children can be affected by the disaster and what is happening around them for years afterwards. Ensure children and young people of all ages feel safe and stable, and involve them in recovery decisions and activities in age appropriate ways.

You might need to adapt how you parent

You may find your parenting changes as you accommodate your own and your child's reactions to the disaster trauma and subsequent disruptions. Remember other parents have felt this way too, sometimes it's about doing the best you can in tough situations¹³.

Community groups can make a difference

Being involved in community groups leads to better mental health outcomes. However, share the load: Don't leave it to just a few people to make sure these local groups keep going. Local groups need leaders and members to survive, and those who do "too much" might become overburdened¹⁴.

Relocating can help for some

The decision to stay living in a disaster affected community or to move somewhere else is offset by two contrasting forces in peoples' lives: connection to the community, and post-disaster disruption. Those who decide to stay are likely to feel more connected to their community. For those who decide to move away from the disaster affected community, the impacts of post-disaster disruptions to income, accommodation and relationships are likely to be lessened¹⁵.

13 Australian Red Cross, The University of Melbourne & Phoenix Australia, 2020, op. cit.

14 Gallagher HC, Block K, Gibbs L, Forbes D, Lusher D, Molyneaux R, Richardson J, Pattison P, MacDougall C and Bryant RA. The effect of group involvement on post-disaster mental health: A longitudinal multilevel analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2019; 220:167-175

15 Gibbs L, Gallagher HC, Block K, Snowdon E, Bryant R, Harms L, Ireton G, Kellett C, Sinnott V, Richardson J, Lusher D, Forbes D, MacDougall C, Waters E. Post-bushfire relocation decision-making and personal wellbeing: A case study from Victoria, Australia. In Awotona, A. (Ed). *Planning for Community-based Disaster Resilience Worldwide: Learning from Case Studies in Six Continents*. Ashgate Publishing Limited. 2016.

Changes in the natural environment can influence recovery

Many people find watching the bush regrow and recover helpful for their own wellbeing¹⁶.

Go online

Many people find online connections a helpful way to gather information and share experiences¹⁷.

Be considerate of your media exposure

After a disaster, it's natural to want to access as much information as possible. However, it's a delicate balance to make sure you're getting the information that you need without over exposing yourself to harmful effects of repeatedly seeing or hearing stressful information about disasters. For many people, too much media exposure after a disaster can increase feelings of distress. Minimising exposure to stressful or traumatic images and sounds is particularly important to think about for children¹⁸.

Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint

It can be tempting to assume that as soon as material items are replaced and infrastructure is repaired that life will go back to normal. Experience and research tell us that the impacts of disasters go on for a long time. Disasters are more like marathons than sprints. You need to pace yourself.

It can be unhelpful to rush things, or to get frustrated with yourself or others if you feel like it's taking longer to recover than you first thought it would. Go slow and steady, and look after yourself and your relationships. It's normal for it to take a long time to recovery from disasters.

¹⁶ Block K, Molyneaux R, Gibbs L, Alkemade N, Baker E, MacDougall C, Ireton G, Forbes D. The role of the natural environment in disaster recovery: "We live here because we love the bush". *Health & Place*. 2019; 57:61-69.

¹⁷ Gibbs, L. op. cit.

¹⁸ March, E (2020) When too much news is bad news: is the way we consume news detrimental to our health? *The Conversation*


