



supporting a young person after a natural disaster

Everyone will experience or respond to a natural disaster differently.

The type of support young people need is different in the response phase (initial days to weeks following a natural disaster) to the recovery phase (the following months). Life changes for everyone during and after a natural disaster, even if we haven't been at the event.

Direct and indirect exposure

Direct exposure can be understood as the loss of possessions, the loss of safety or health, or the death of loved ones or animals.

Indirect exposure is commonly understood as exposure via third parties, whether through stories of family and friends affected, or by exposure to media (radio, television, newspapers and social media).

Both of these exposures can have an immediate and lasting impact on our mental health and wellbeing.

Young people are especially vulnerable to the indirect effects of natural disasters. This is due to these events sometimes being their first exposure, their developmental stage

and their increased chance of seeing lots of graphic content – especially on social media.

There is no right or wrong way to react to a traumatic event. Some people might experience sadness and seek connection to others while others might feel numb and become more disconnected. Following a natural disaster any reaction can be normal. You might notice changes to sleep, eating patterns, relationships or difficulty with routine activities like getting dressed or schooling.



These are normal reactions to not normal events.

Supporting young people during the initial response to a natural disaster

Encouraging a sense of hope is important in a young person's recovery



The following tips are helpful in the initial days and weeks following exposure to a natural disaster:

- Discuss the importance for young peoples' need to focus on physical and emotional safety, and be with those who are supportive of their wellbeing.
- Support young people to engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and feeling grounded (use of alcohol and other drugs can be unhelpful).
- Supporting young people to return to some routine and to get back to doing what they used to do as much as possible is helpful (e.g., playing games or sports, hobbies).
- Support connection with others, especially those that help young people feel OK.
- Include young people in the repair and recovery of their community and support them to identify ways that they can safely connect with themselves, peers, and families in ways that are meaningful and purposeful to them.
- Limit exposure to traumatic information through stories, and media (social and traditional). It can be helpful to take a break from the 24-hour news cycle.

(Hobfoll et al, 2007)¹



Supporting young people during the recovery phase following a natural disaster

Encourage your young person to engage in activities that promote a healthy headspace.

As much as possible, support young people to maintain regular routines and stay connected to regular activities such as sport, school, uni or TAFE, and spending time with friends.

People who experience traumatic events are often able to recover, and don't experience ongoing symptoms or difficulties, by using their own skills and the supports of family, friends and the broader community.

For some it's important to access professional support to help with these challenges.

Check out headspace's tips for a healthy headspace (headspace.org.au/tips) for more information.



Common reactions and behaviours you might notice:

- grief and loss
- difficulty concentrating or describing what happened
- anger and confusion
- sadness and emptiness
- guilt
- denial
- shock
- changes in appetite and sleep
- fear, anxiety and insecurity.

How to help your young person

- provide stability
- offer reassurance
- normalise, but don't minimise
- explain gently what happened
- use the young person's strengths and likes
- be available and encourage coping skills
- role model healthy coping skills.

For further tips go to headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/7-ways-to-support-a-healthy-headspace

Reaction of family and friends

Most people recover well from the emotional effects of natural disasters. Family and friends can have an important role in the healing process for young people. It's important to remember family and friends have their own challenges to cope with, and you may find yourself juggling your own reactions to the disaster with your responsibilities for the young person.

Reactions may include:

- guilt about not being able to shield your young person from the effects of the disaster
- fear and anxiety about the continuing safety of your young person
- negativity about the world in general, which you may not be able to conceal from your young person
- impatience and frustration about your young person making a slow recovery.

Look after yourself

Be kind to yourself and engage in self-care activities like sleeping well, connecting with others and staying active. These activities can be hard to do when facing stressful situations but try to do something small for yourself. It's also good for your young person to see these things modelled by others.



Getting support

It can be hard to know when it's time to seek professional support. Often, it's when someone experiences difficulties for longer than a couple of months after an event, and it's having an impact on the way they want to live their lives.

Seek immediate help if you think the young person is at risk, for example of self harm. Call your local hospital, emergency services (000), Lifeline (13 11 14) or Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800).

1. Hobfall et al. Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. 2007; 70(4):283-315 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5668133_Five_Essential_Elements_of_Immediate_and_Mid-Term_Mass_Trauma_Intervention_Empirical_Evidence)



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school, TAFE or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au

If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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