

# After a natural disaster



Natural disasters such as a flood, bushfire, earthquake or cyclone are uncommon but when they do occur their impact can be devastating and widespread. Everyone needs support after being in or witnessing a natural disaster, but the type or level of support they need may vary or change over time. People usually recover well from the emotional effects of a natural disaster with the support of family and friends.

## Common reactions and behaviours

### Grief and loss

People who have survived a natural disaster often feel a sense of grief and loss. They may have lost family members, friends, neighbours, pets, their homes and cherished possessions.

Young people sometimes have trouble explaining their feelings and can find it difficult to talk about what they are thinking or feeling in the aftermath of a natural disaster. They may seem 'cut off'; unable to grieve openly, particularly if others seem to have experienced greater loss.

### Confusion and guilt

Trying to understand a natural disaster can be confusing, especially for children and young people. This can make them feel angry or more frightened as the days go by. Sometimes survivors of a disaster feel guilty that they

have survived while others have not, or feel guilty that they were unable to prevent or control the disaster. These feelings of confusion or guilt can be overwhelming or difficult to verbalise and may cause them to withdraw from other people or hide their feelings.

### Fear, anxiety and insecurity

Natural disasters often impact the entire community and this can affect a young person's sense of security and normality. Sometimes people continue to feel anxious, frightened and unsafe for weeks after the disaster, despite being physically safe. This is a normal reaction to a frightening event but it can add to a person's distress. Some young people may also start to feel insecure about the future.

### Reactions to trauma

Young people can 'act out' when they are grieving or

traumatised. They can become aggressive or irritable and start having problems at school. Alternatively, some young people might take a step back in their development and display regressive behaviour (e.g. thumb sucking) and become withdrawn and 'clingy'; finding it hard to separate themselves from family members. They might experience stomach aches and headaches in response to their distress.

Some young people may use drugs or alcohol to help them cope with their difficult emotions, and some might have thoughts of harming themselves. If a young person is reporting suicidal thoughts or plans to harm themselves, or you feel concerned for their safety, it's essential to seek professional help immediately.

## Reactions of family and friends

Parents and families have to manage their own reactions to the disaster while also caring for a young person. Some of these reactions may include:

- Guilt about not being able to shield the young person from the effects of the disaster
- Fear and anxiety about the continuing safety of the young person and your family
- Negativity about your future and the world in general, which you may find difficult to conceal from the young person
- Impatience and frustration about your young person making a slow recovery or with the behavioural and emotional changes you may notice in them.

## How to help your young person

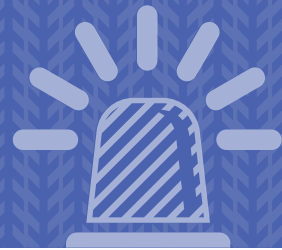
Families and friends, especially parents/carers, have an important role in the healing process of a young person.

### Provide stability and routine

Be available, give them time to talk and return to normal activities and previous routines where possible. Explain what will happen today and the next day as best you can. It might be helpful to write down a plan to remind them. Maintain some regular, non-stressful activities and encourage them to eat, rest and sleep well.



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## How to help your young person (continued)

### Offer reassurance

Acknowledge the losses from the natural disaster but reassure them by emphasising what is being done to help the whole community. When possible, reassure them that their friends and other family members are safe, and re-establish contact with their other support systems if you can.

### Normalise, but don't minimise

Provide them with a safe environment when they are prepared to talk and encourage and let them know that you are available to discuss what has happened and how they are feeling. However, don't insist if they don't feel ready to do so. Let them know there are other people they can talk to, it doesn't have to be you, but you are there for them.

It can be a relief for young people to know that their feelings are normal, but be careful not to dismiss or minimise the intensity and importance of their reactions.

### Explain gently, create a shared story

When they are calm and feeling safe, you can talk about how natural disasters can be random and unpredictable. It can be helpful to find out what their understanding of the event is and correct any

confused explanations of the disaster they may have.

Some young people might respond well to talking about their experiences verbally, while others might prefer expressing themselves through other mediums (e.g. through play, drawings, or stories). Acknowledge that what has happened is not 'fair'. If you have lost loved ones, tell them enough details so there are no 'secrets', without causing extra distress.

During discussions keep in mind what is appropriate for their age, emotional maturity, and level of understanding. Where appropriate, they might benefit from being allowed to participate or contribute to some aspect of getting things (in the family or the community) back to normal.

### Use your young person's strengths and encourage coping skills

Highlight their resiliency by reminding them about their strengths and discuss how they can use them in this situation. For example, talking through another difficult time they experienced in the past, what they did then to help them cope with it, and how they can use that skill or ability now. Encourage them to think of ways to reduce their distress, find ways to relax and help them work out ways to solve problems.

### Be available

Make time to be with them, to do normal things, and to have some quiet time with them. Try to be available emotionally, although this can sometimes be hard when you have a lot to cope with too. If you seem anxious, it can reinforce their view that the world is unsafe. At the same time, allow them some space and some time to themselves.

### Keep in contact with teachers and other carers

So that they get a consistent response from the other significant people in their life, ensure they understand how the young person is feeling. Talk to the young person about what information you can share and with who. Let them know that others can support them if they have some understanding of what has happened and how this has affected them.

### Be a role model

Look after yourself and be true to how you feel. Try to keep your life as structured as possible. If you can, put off big decisions until you feel more stable. Get enough rest and talk with friends, family and health professionals if you're feeling overwhelmed. Don't forget that caregivers need care too.



You should think about getting help if your young person is persistently distressed or continues to have difficulties a few weeks after the natural disaster or is not functioning well in their normal activities.

*If you have concerns about the safety of the young person or others, seek immediate help or contact 000.*

Supporting a young person to find a health professional such as a general practitioner (GP) or counsellor who they trust and feel comfortable with is important. You could also support them to contact your local community health centre or **headspace** centre.

Don't forget to look after your own needs too and reach out for extra support if you or other family members (e.g. the young person's siblings) need it.



**headspace**  
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)