



the facts:  
navigating life



headspace  
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

# how to cope with the stress of natural disasters

**It's common to need support after being in or witnessing an event that may be traumatic, such as bushfires, flooding, cyclones or drought.**

It's important to find the right type of support for you, as everyone will be affected differently.

There are specific things that are likely to be helpful in the days and weeks following a natural disaster. As time passes in the months after, the types of things that are likely to be helpful will be a bit different.

It can help to talk with a trusted adult about getting the right sort of help if it all feels a bit much.

## Tips for the initial days and weeks after a natural disaster

**In the days and weeks after a disaster, it is important to do things that make you feel physically and emotionally safe.**

**It can help to:**

- Find ways to connect with others, especially those who help you feel OK and support your wellbeing.
- Do things that make you feel calm and grounded. Try doing things you enjoy and include these in your routine.
- Explore ways to get involved with repair and recovery of your community. This can help give you a sense of hope and connect you with others which is important to recovery.
- Be mindful of exposure to traumatic information through stories and traditional and social media. It can be helpful to take regular breaks from the 24-hour news cycle.

(Hobfoll et al, 2007)<sup>1</sup>



**Try to avoid or limit alcohol and other drugs.**

## Tips for the shorter and longer term after a natural disaster

- Acknowledge that it was a tough time. You may have been impacted by the disaster in other ways (e.g., through media, or losing a loved one). It's OK to remind yourself that the events were out of your control.
- Be patient with yourself. It can take time to make sense of what happened. It's OK to need someone to remind you that you're safe.
- It's OK to start small. It's important to keep up any regular routines or activities. This could be daily activities, like attending school, work, sports or catching up with friends. It could be planning your day and trying to stick to that.
- It's normal to feel like you want to help the recovery process. You might like to look for ways you can contribute to help yourself and others to rebuild. It's also OK if this doesn't feel right just yet.
- Be aware of the triggers that remind you how you felt during or after the disaster. This could include particular sounds, smells, or images.
- Practise being calm. You might try deep breathing or relaxation exercises. Rest and comfort will also help you to feel calm.
- Connect with others. Being with people who understand you and are calm can help you maintain calmness as well.
- Avoid getting into situations that are unsafe and avoid taking big risks.
- Try to eat nutritious food. Eating well can help with your mood, sleep, physical health and wellbeing.



**In the weeks, months, and years after being impacted by a natural disaster there are things you can do that can help.**



## Common reactions to a natural disaster

Natural disasters can be hard to cope with. People can respond in very different ways, which can also change over time. Some people might feel OK immediately after the disaster but become overwhelmed later.

### After a natural disaster people can experience:

- fear and anxiety
- grief and loss
- difficulty concentrating, remembering things, or describing what happened
- anger and confusion
- sadness and emptiness
- denial
- guilt
- shock.

## Other challenges

Following a natural disaster, other areas of life can be impacted, these may include; **relationships with others, worrying about others, having to take care of siblings, wanting to be alone, sleep, appetite, and possibly alcohol or other drug use.**

These can be normal reactions and natural coping responses. It's helpful to try to address these early, to prevent them from becoming ongoing issues. If they're starting to impact on your life, reach out for support.



## How to look after yourself during a tough time?

After a traumatic event it's even more important than usual to focus on eating and sleeping well and staying active.

### It can help to:

- have a routine
- allow yourself some 'worry time'
- set some realistic goals
- limit alcohol and other drug use
- use your strengths and connect with others.

## People do recover from the impacts of natural disasters

Most people who experience traumatic events are able to recover. Some people may need to access professional support to navigate ongoing challenges.



## Getting support

**Very strong emotions normally start to settle by about six weeks after the disaster. If you have trouble with your emotions or with your usual daily activities after this time, then think about getting some professional help.**

If you ever feel unable to cope because of overwhelming emotions, or if you have any thoughts of harming yourself, then ask for help immediately.

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](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](https://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.**

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation is funded by the Australian Government.

 **headspace**  
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

The headspace Clinical Reference Group have approved this clinical resource. Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, headspace makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information. 03 October 2022