headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

information for young people

affected by a natural disaster

Have you been involved in a natural disaster?

It is common to need support after being in or witnessing an event that may be traumatic, as everyone will be affected differently. It's important to find the right level or type of support for you. The type of support you may need can change as time passes.

The following covers information about what might be helpful during the days and weeks following a natural disaster; what's known as the ***response phase***. It then covers what might be helpful during the months and maybe even years following a natural disaster; what's known as the ***recovery phase***.

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

(Hobfoll et al, 2007) [1]

1. **Do things that make you feel physically and emotionally safe, and be with those who are helpful to your wellbeing**
2. **Engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and feeling grounded (use of alcohol and other drugs can be counterproductive with this). Look for ways to include some routine and re-engage with pre-exposure activities as much as possible (e.g., playing games or sports, hobbies, etc.)**
3. **Find ways to connect with others, especially those who help you feel OK**
4. **Explore ways to get involved with repair and recovery of your community, and family and friends. This can help foster a sense of hope which is important to recovery**
5. **Be mindful of exposure to traumatic information through stories, traditional and social media. It can be helpful to take a break from the 24-hour news cycle.**

1 – https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5668133_Five_Essential_Elements_of_Immediate_and_Mid-Term_Mass_Trauma_Intervention_Empirical_Evidence

Tips for longer term after a natural disaster

It is important to keep up any regular routines or activities. This could be daily activities, like attending school or uni, a job, sports or catching up with friends. It could be something as simple as planning your day and trying to stick to that.

It's OK to start small

It's normal to feel like you want to get involved in the recovery process. You might like to look for ways you can contribute to your local community to help yourself and others to rebuild. It's also OK if this doesn't feel right just yet.

Our tips for a healthy headspace (found at the back of this leaflet) demonstrate things that can help people to create and maintain a healthy headspace, irrespective of whether they have experienced a natural disaster.

Ask our experts

How do you look after yourself during a tough time?

Our headspace clinicians have plenty of experience helping young people deal with difficult emotions. After a traumatic event it is even more important than usual to make sure you focus on your nutrition, sleep and exercise.

They also suggest:

- **having a routine.** When everything feels 'a little out of control', a regular routine can help you manage things and make life seem more organised
- **allowing yourself some 'worry time'.** If you're constantly worrying about, or replaying the stressful event, then set aside some time to worry each day. At other times, remind yourself to leave these thoughts until later
- **setting some realistic goals.** You could break large goals down into small achievable steps. This will let you prove to yourself that you have the skills and strength to recover, and feel good about yourself
- **reducing alcohol and other drug use.** Alcohol and other drugs can mask your feelings, but sometimes make your feelings stronger so that you're less able to manage
- **using your strengths and surrounding yourself with support.** Everyone has strengths, and you can draw on yours. Surround yourself with people who are reassuring and comforting, and who allow you to be yourself.

Common reactions to a natural disaster

Natural disasters can be hard to cope with. People can respond in very different ways which also change over time.

People who experience traumatic events are often able to recover, and do not experience ongoing difficulties, by using their strengths and resources as well as the informal supports of family, friends and the broader community. Some people may need to access professional support to navigate these challenges. It can be hard to know when it's time to seek professional support. Commonly, it's when someone has been experiencing difficulties for longer than a couple of months after an event, and is having an ongoing impact on the way they want to live their lives.

Fear and anxiety

Following a natural disaster you might experience fear and anxiety. It's common to worry that the disaster, whether a flood, bushfire or cyclone, could happen again, or to find that you're not feeling safe.

Grief and loss

There is no 'right' way to grieve for loved ones who have died or other major losses. It's very personal, very individual, and it's very much OK to grieve.

Anger and confusion

It can be difficult to understand a natural disaster because the damage seems so unfair, and theremay be noone to blame. This can make you feel frustrated, angry and confused.

Sadness and emptiness

You might be sad about losing family members or friends, and perhaps your home and precious possessions. If you've been asked to stay away from your home, if your friends are still away, or if your neighbourhood is badly damaged, feelings of sadness can turn to feelings of emptiness.

Denial

When bad things have happened, some people might prefer not to think about them at all. This might be helpful to start with, but our feelings can catch us by surprise later on. It's OK to distract yourself, but also find some time to think about what has happened and how you're going.

Guilt

You might feel guilty after a natural disaster. It might be about something that you did or didn't do at the time, or you might just feel bad about yourself. Sometimes you may feel guilty as people experienced loss or harm that you didn't.

Shock

Shock makes you slow down. It's a common way our bodies react to keep us safe in the first few days after a disaster and feelings of shock may come and go over a few weeks. You might feel numb or out of yourself.

Other challenges

Other areas of life can also be impacted. This might include; relationships with others, wanting to be alone, sleep, appetite, and possibly alcohol or other drug use.

These can be normal reactions and natural coping responses. However, they are associated with increased likelihood of experiencing ongoing difficulties. As a result it is 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 to family and friends, or to a headspace centre, for more support.

Build and maintain a healthy headspace

These tips can help you live your life in a positive and meaningful way, and also supports you to bounce back when times get tough.

1. get in to life

Keep doing the things that you love and are important to you. It can help keep the fun in your life, give you a sense of accomplishment and purpose, boost your confidence and connect with others.

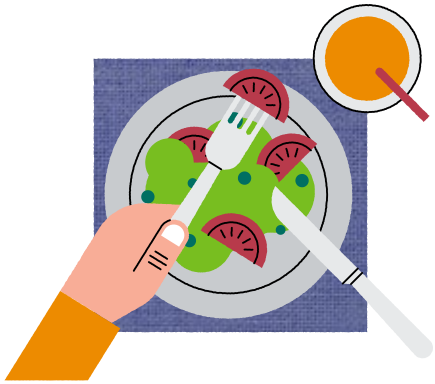
Things like drawing, fishing or playing the guitar, might just be for fun, but other things like work or study can give you new skills and might help to give you meaning.

From reading to exploring somewhere new, there are many ideas that can help you get in to life.

3. create connections

Feeling connected to others is an essential part of being human. Spending time with friends, family and people in your community can strengthen your mental health and wellbeing.

Planning a catch-up with friends, joining a club or committee, or participating in a team sport or safe online community can help you feel connected and meet new people.



4. eat well

When you think of improving your mental health, you may not always consider changing the food you eat, but there is a strong link between what we eat and how we feel.

A poor diet can make you feel sluggish, low and increase symptoms of depression and anxiety. Staying hydrated and having a healthy diet with a variety of fruit, veggies, nuts and whole grains can actually improve mental health.

5. stay active

Staying active can help you to sleep better, manage stress and boost your mood. Find an enjoyable way to keep active and make this part of your regular routine.

Make time to take a break from study or work to do some exercise, whether it's going to the gym, kicking a ball around with a friend or just going for a walk. Whatever it is, start small, and make sure it's something you enjoy.

6. get enough sleep

Getting enough sleep is good for your brain and body. It improves your mood, sharpens your concentration and increases resilience.

Reducing things that keep you from restful sleep – like noise or light that keeps you awake, or active stuff like social media or video gaming – will help you improve your sleep. Try a calming sleep playlist to help you get some more shut-eye.

2. learn skills for tough times

There are many different strategies that can help manage difficult thoughts and feelings. Things like meditation, taking a digital detox, listening to music, spending time outdoors or writing things down are just a few ways that can help you handle challenging times.

You could try out some meditation with a soothing playlist, or some guided deep breathing to help.

7. cut back on alcohol and other drugs

Alcohol and other drugs may feel like they help you to manage hard times in the short term, but they can interfere with your mental health and make you feel much worse in the long run.

Curbing the amount of alcohol and other drugs that you use (or avoiding alcohol and drugs altogether) will help you manage your emotions better and improve your wellbeing.

Swap socialising at the pub for movies, boardgames, cooking with friends, or you could get out for a walk and talk and explore your local area.

Read more about the 7 tips for a healthy headspace at headspace.org.au/tips

when should I get help?

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

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

Call Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 at any time of the day or night to speak with a counsellor.

Talk with a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, school counsellor or find out if there is a headspace centre near you.

Speak to your local doctor or General Practitioner (GP) who will help make a plan for your recovery. Or you can search for a health service and GP on healthdirect.gov.au.

National 24/7 crisis services

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467 or suicidecallbackservice.org.au

beyondblue: 1300 224 636 or beyondblue.org.au

Additional youth support services include:

headspace: visit headspace.org.au to find your nearest centre or call eheadspace on 1800 650 890

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au

ReachOut: reachout.com

SANE Australia: 1800 187 263 or sane.org

headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

V1 - January 2020