information for family and friends

# supporting young people affected by a natural disaster

headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

## No two people will experience or respond to a natural disaster in the same way.

The types of support a young person will need are different in the initial days to weeks following a natural disaster (known as ***response phase***) to the following months (known as ***recovery phase***).

Life changes for everyone during and after a natural disaster, even if we haven't been directly present at the event. ***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 that be 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 affects of natural disasters due to these events sometimes being their first exposure, their developmental stage and their increased likelihood of high levels of exposure to graphic content – particularly via 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. Any reaction can be normal following a natural disaster. You might notice disrupted sleep, eating patterns, changes in relationships or difficulty with routine activities like getting dressed or schooling.

**These are normal reactions to *not normal* events.**

## Take care of yourself

Be kind to yourself and engage in self-care activities. These activities can be hard to do and especially easy to neglect when facing stressful or dangerous situations, but try to do something small for yourself. This can help you and modelling these activities for your young person may be beneficial.

## Supporting young people during the initial response to a natural disaster

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

1. **Validate the importance for young peoples' need to focus on physical and emotional safety, and be with those who are helpful to their wellbeing**
2. **Support young people to engage in activities that promote a sense of calm and feeling grounded (use of alcohol and other drugs can be counterproductive). Supporting young people to return to some routine and to re-engage in pre-exposure activities as much as possible is helpful (e.g., playing games or sports, hobbies etc).**
3. **Facilitate connection with others, especially those that help young people feel okay**
4. **Include young people in the repair and recovery of themselves, peers, families and your community. Fostering a sense of hope is important in a young person's recovery.**
5. **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 them 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, and spending time with friends.

People who experience traumatic events are often able to recover, and do not experience ongoing symptoms or difficulties, by using their own resources and the informal supports of family, friends and the broader community. For some it is important 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 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.

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

# Common reactions and behaviours

## Grief and loss

People who have survived a natural disaster may feel a sense of grief and loss. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' feelings and they can vary significantly from one person to another. You might be supporting a young person whose family members, friends, neighbours or pets died during the natural disaster. Their home or possessions may have been destroyed or damaged. Young people sometimes may have trouble explaining their feelings, and they may seem 'cut off' or bewildered. It can help to sit with them to help name their experiences. Giving them words to describe their feelings may be helpful.

## Confusion, guilt and shame

Trying to understand a natural disaster can be confusing, especially for young people. This may make them feel anger and more frightened as the days go by. Sometimes survivors of a disaster may feel guilty that they have survived while others have not. Young people may feel ashamed of how they are feeling. They may withdraw from others or hide their feelings.

## Fear, anxiety and insecurity

Sometimes people may feel anxious, frightened and unsafe for weeks or months after the disaster, despite being physically safe. This is a normal reaction to a frightening event.

## Reactions to trauma

Young people might 'act out' when they are grieving or traumatised. They may become aggressive or irritable, and start having problems at school. Alternatively, they might become withdrawn and 'clingy', and find it hard to separate themselves from family and friends.

Young people might develop physical complaints like stomach aches and headaches in response to their distress. Some young people may self harm, or use drugs or alcohol as a response to their emotions.

## Reactions of parents/families

Most people, of all ages, recover well from the emotional effects of natural disasters. Family and friends can have an important role in the healing process for young people. But family and friends have their own problems to cope with, and you may find yourself juggling your own reactions to the disaster with your responsibilities for your child.

**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.

## When to get help

You should think about getting help if your child is having difficulties more than about six weeks after the disaster, or is not functioning well in normal activities. Services such as your local general practitioner, community health centre, school counsellor or local mental health service can provide advice and assistance.

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

# How to help your young person

## Provide stability

Support your young person by maintaining regular predictable activities and routines. Encourage your young person to eat, rest and sleep well. It can be helpful to explain what will happen today and the next day, as best you can, and write down a plan to remind them. Provide as much security as possible, by being around, giving your young person time to talk, and by developing some comforting routines. Involve your young person in choosing new belongings, or perhaps remember old toys and other treasured possessions with a ‘goodbye ceremony’.

## Offer reassurance

Tell your young person about what is being done to help the whole community. It’s important to give young people age-appropriate and accurate information about the situation, in order to prevent them from creating their own narratives that may be more confronting than reality. It can help to ask your young person what their concerns, questions and worries are.

## Normalise, and don’t minimise

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

## Explain gently, create a shared story

When your young person is calm and feeling safe you can talk about how natural disasters are random and unpredictable. It can be helpful to correct any confused explanations of the disaster your young person may have.

Give your young person the chance to talk about what they miss and what they have lost, but do not push them to talk. Acknowledge that what has happened is not ‘fair’. If you have family and friends that have died, tell them enough details so there are no ‘secrets’, without causing extra distress.

Young children might need only a small amount of information, but they do need reassurance that natural disasters are uncommon and they are now safe (if accurate). Try not to discuss worrying ‘adult’ issues about the disaster in front of young children.

## Use your young person’s strengths and likes

Talk about the strengths you know your young person has, and how they can use them. For example, they might like to draw or tell stories, so let them do this to explain what has happened and how they are feeling. It’s OK to talk about how the disaster has affected you, and how you are trying to get life back on track.

## Be available

Make time to be with your young person, 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, too, have a lot to cope with. Staying calm and in control can help your young person to feel safe and grounded.

## Encourage coping skills

Encourage your young person to step back from their problems or negative feelings and think of ways to reduce their distress. Help them work out ways to solve problems, and find ways to relax and reduce their anxiety.

## 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.

## National 24/7 crisis services

**Lifeline:** 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au

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

**Beyond Blue:** 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

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