

Promoting safety, comfort and help after disasters

When a disaster happens in a community, it can be highly distressing for many people. But there is a lot that family, friends, volunteers and community members can do to help those affected.



What can I do?

Psychologists at the Australian Psychological Society provide some general advice to help people to look after themselves (and this can apply to carers as well as those directly affected by the disaster):

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and give yourself permission to experience some reaction to it. Don't be angry with yourself for being upset.
- Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.
- Remind yourself that you can and are coping.
- Spend time with people who are predictable, familiar and respectful.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened. Gradually confronting what has happened can assist in coming to terms with a traumatic experience.
- Don't 'bottle up' your feelings – share your experiences with people you trust when opportunities arise. But don't feel pressured if you don't want to talk now – this is also OK.
- Find other ways as well to express your feelings, e.g. through a diary or art work.
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Keep busy and structure your day.
- Allow yourself time to rest if you are feeling tired. Regular exercise is also important.
- Make time to practise relaxation. You can use a formal technique such as progressive muscle relaxation, or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music. This will help your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- Avoid making any major decisions or big life changes.
- Make sure you do not unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and whom you trust. Social support is enormously helpful in times of crisis.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs. Help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or want a chance to talk or just be with someone.
- If your recent experience stirs up other memories or feelings from a past unrelated stressful occurrence, or even childhood trauma, try not to let the memories all blur together. Keep the experiences separate and deal with them separately.
- Keep reminding yourself that things will get better, and you do have the ability to manage.
- Give yourself time to adjust. Resilience is the norm, but it can take a while to bounce back.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/