

# COMFORT AND HELP AFTER A NATURAL DISASTER

When a natural disaster happens in a community, it can be highly distressing for many people but it's normal to experience a range of emotions and there is a lot that family, friends, volunteers and professionals can do to help those affected. This information sheet will outline some useful skills that will help with your recovery.

## **Common reactions**

- Change in sleep pattern or nightmares
- Being easily startled
- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Hyperactivity or underactivity
- Health problems (eg change in appetite, headaches, digestive problems)
- Change in sexual behaviour

## **Thinking Reactions**

- Flashbacks
- Difficulty with concentration and decision making
- Memory disturbance
- Inability to attach any importance to anything other than the incident

## **Emotional Reactions**

- Fear, anxiety, guilt, depression
- Emotional numbing, grief
- Feelings of helplessness
- Over-sensitivity
- Over-protection of self and family
- Mood swings
- Anger - which may be manifested by
  - Scapegoating
  - Irritability
  - Frustration with bureaucracy
- Feeling isolated from or different from other people

These feelings, however painful, are a normal part of the healing process. However, there are things you can do to reduce their impact.

*Remember, what is happening to you is **a normal reaction to an abnormal event.***



## ***Coping after a natural 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 thinking about and working through 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. Structure your day and try to have a balance between being busy and productive and allowing time to reflect and process your feelings and thoughts.
- 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

## **Promoting safety, comfort and help after disasters | APS**

### ***Seeking professional assistance***

Many people will struggle to cope after a disaster. You don't need to have extreme symptoms in order to access help. All people will need to find support through family and friends but sometimes will need to speak to a professional to aid the healing process. GPs, Psychologists, Mental Health Nurses and Counsellors are trained to be of assistance and should be consulted if reactions to the disaster continue to be distressing and/or are hindering the functioning of everyday life.

Counselling is available via [Counselling and Wellbeing](#)



Student Health, Counselling and Wellbeing

Gold Coast: **(0)7 5552 8734**

Nathan: **(0)7 3735 7299**

Griffith University Mental Wellbeing Support Line

24 Hours: **1300 785 442** or text **0488 884 146**

for support seven days per week.

Counselling and Wellbeing  
[griffith.edu.au/counselling](http://griffith.edu.au/counselling)