



Coping with natural disasters

The impact of natural disasters

Natural disasters can have a big impact on individuals and communities. Although we can't stop natural disasters, there are things you can do to help you and your family cope with them.

It is normal to experience all sorts of emotions and feel fearful or overwhelmed during or after the clean-up.

During and following a natural disaster it is common for people to:

- **Feel stressed**
- **Experience flashbacks or unwanted memories of the disaster**
- **Feel overwhelming loss or grief**
- **Feel anxious or easily startled**
- **Experience sadness, anger or guilt**
- **Socially isolating**
- **Have difficulty sleeping.**

Most of these symptoms and reactions are normal and will resolve in a matter of days or weeks after a natural disaster.

But high levels of distress and difficulties adjusting persisting more than a month after is an important sign to reach out to a counsellor for support.

Self care strategies

Getting back into a healthy routine is important for rebuilding your sense of physical and emotional safety after a natural disaster. Here are some ways you can stay resilient and well during a tough time:



Routine

- Consistent sleeping and waking times
- Regular and healthy meals
- Exercise and physical activity
- Switching off from technology use



Physical health

- Keeping hydrated and eating regularly
- Getting enough rest
- Talking deep slow breaths and practicing relaxation
- Limiting coffee and alcohol consumption



Enjoyable activities

- Engaging with hobbies and interests
- Spending time outside in nature
- Playing sport
- Cooking or baking
- Watching movies
- Arts and crafts
- Writing letters, music, and poetry
- Listening to and playing music
- Drawing and painting



Self-talk

Being gentle and patient with yourself and others

- Allowing yourself to be less than perfect
- Not dwelling on worst-case scenarios
- Keeping a realistic perspective
- Speaking to yourself with respect
- Reminding yourself emotions are normal and adjustments take time
- Understanding what is within and outside your control



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Self care strategies continued



Connection

- Checking in with family, friends and neighbours
- Talk about your feelings at a comfortable level
- Listen non-judgementally to others' experiences
- Comfort children and pets with more attention, hugs, and reassurance
- Assist your community where possible
- Access support services



Boundaries

- Limit exposure to negative news and social media
- Take time for yourself
- Try not to overload or over-commit yourself
- Say no to things you can't do

When to get support

While it's normal to feel distressed or upset by what happened and the losses that have occurred, you should consider speaking with a counsellor for support if you are experiencing:

- **extreme feelings of distress**
- **emotional reactions that are lasting longer than a few weeks**
- **distress that is interfering with your day-to-day activities**
- **withdrawal from usual relationships and activities**
- **feeling overwhelming fear for no apparent reason**
- **panic symptoms (eg racing heart, light-headedness, breathing difficulties)**
- **feelings of excessive guilt**
- **using alcohol or other drugs to cope**
- **loss of interest in the future**
- **thoughts of hurting yourself or suicide**

Getting Support

Taking that first step can be tough, but if you are experiencing mental health difficulties, it's important that you reach out. You can also get in touch with your GP or use our online or phone-based service by calling **1300 327 624** or emailing mhwb@ruralaid.org.au

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 or call **000** or speak to someone at **Lifeline (13 11 14)**