

# How to cope with the stress of natural disasters

*This information is for young people affected by a natural disaster such as a flood, bushfire, earthquake or cyclone.*

Everyone needs support after being in or witnessing an event that may be traumatic, but everyone will be affected differently. It's important to find the right level or type of support for you.

You will find this information helpful when you consider what will help and what won't help – then you can make a plan for yourself. You can also talk with a trusted adult about getting the right sort of help if it all feels a bit much.

## Common reactions to a natural disaster

Natural disasters can be hard to cope with and they can happen unexpectedly. Many people who have been through a natural disaster feel different emotions.

### 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 there's usually no-one 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, or 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 prefer not to think about them at all. This might be a help 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 emotions**

You might start to withdraw from your family and friends, or perhaps start to get irritable with others, as you try to manage your emotions. Some young people use alcohol and other drugs to 'switch off', but this probably won't help them cope with the challenges ahead.

Thinking about the event all the time, and having trouble sleeping, are common after a traumatic experience, but if this happens for any length of time you should definitely seek some professional help. Your appetite can change as well: some people want to eat more, and others find they don't feel hungry.



## **How to look after yourself during a tough time**

After a traumatic event it is even more important than usual to make sure you focus on your nutrition, sleep and exercise. Alongside this, headspace clinicians suggest:

### **Have a routine**

When everything feels 'a little out of control', a regular routine can help you manage things and make life seem more organised.

### **Allow 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.

### **Set some realistic goals**

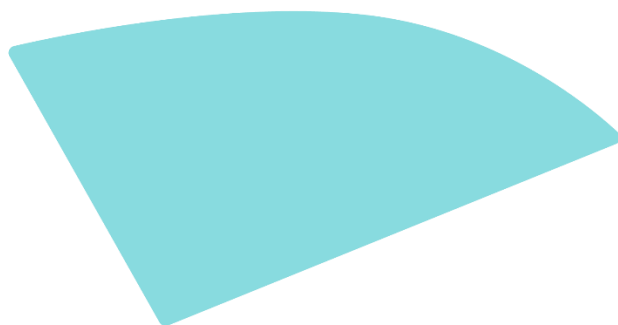
You could break large goals down into small achievable steps. This will let you prove to yourself that you have the skills and strength to recover, and feel good about yourself.

### **Reduce drug and alcohol use**

Alcohol and other drugs can mask your feelings, but sometimes make your feelings stronger so that you're less able to manage.

### **Use your strengths and surround 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.



## 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)** and help make a plan for your recovery. Or you can search for a health service and GP on **healthdirect**.

For more information, to find your **nearest headspace centre** or for online and telephone support, visit **ehespace**.

*The headspace Clinical Reference Group oversee and approve clinical resources made available in this document.*

For more information, visit [www.bushfiresupport.info](http://www.bushfiresupport.info)

