

Coping with the impact of natural disasters, emergencies, major accidents or mass violence

A bushfire, flood, major transport accident or violent incident can have a profound impact on people involved, either because they have been directly at risk or because they have witnessed the destruction, death or injuries caused by such events.

Emergency service personnel, other workers and volunteers may also be affected. A disaster can have emotional consequences for anyone nearby who felt threatened or thought that someone close to them may have been killed or injured. The media coverage may also reactivate painful memories of a similar event from the past.

Impact of disasters

Reactions to disasters can include confusion and disorientation, and strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt and anger. People can also have trouble sleeping and concentrating. Others may have distressing thoughts and images of the event.

For most, these reactions will gradually decrease over time, particularly with the help of family and friends. For some people, these problems can last longer and start interfering with their ability to return to their normal routine. People may be more at risk and may need to be monitored by a health professional if they:

- Lost family and friends during the event
- Have been seriously injured or have witnessed horrific scenes
- Have developed mental health problems as a result of past traumatic events

What helps immediately following disasters?

People cope with trauma in different ways. Following a disaster, it is important to regain a sense of safety and control. People often need to have access to a safe and secure environment, to find out what happened to family and friends and to have access to relevant services. Spending time with family and friends is also critical to the recovery process. Other coping strategies include finding information about the impact of trauma and getting back to daily routines. These include: regular meals, rest and sleep, work, study, relaxation or play. People affected by the disaster should also balance the amount of media coverage they watch, listen to or read. While getting information is important, watching or listening to news too frequently can reinforce distress.

[The Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#) recommend against routine debriefing – being asked to talk about the trauma and the emotions associated with it. This does not mean that people should not talk about what happened, but it is important to make sure that talking about what happened is entirely voluntary. People who want to talk about their experience may be supported in doing so, either with someone they trust or with a health professional. They should only do so when they are ready and can manage their distress.

People who survived a disaster need time to manage their distress and cope with what they went through or witnessed. However, those who experience distress or are not coping for more than two weeks should talk to a health professional.

People should talk to a health professional immediately if they:

- Feel highly anxious or distressed
- Their reactions to the traumatic event are interfering with home, work and relationships
- Are thinking of harming themselves or someone else

For more information about self-help strategies and general information about trauma, please visit our *Mental health and wellbeing information for the community* page: <http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/resources/resources-community.html>.