



Coping after a natural disaster

Dealing with a natural disaster is difficult and it's normal to experience a range of emotions. These emotions may come and go in waves. It is important to give yourself permission to experience these feelings, whilst also trying to return to your normal routine where possible. Following a disaster you may experience a range of different thoughts and feelings.

Common reactions

Mental and physical reactions:

- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Difficulty focusing
- Recurring memories of the event
- Health problems (changes in appetite or digestion, headaches)
- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Memory disturbance
- Inability to attach importance to anything other than the incident.

Emotional reactions:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling numb and detached
- Grief
- Feeling of helplessness
- Questions of "what if?"
- Over-protection of self and family
- Feelings of isolation
- Anger – which may be manifested by:
 - irritability
 - frustration with bureaucracy

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Dealing with your reactions

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

Things to try:

- Talk to people and loved ones – it is the best healing medicine
- Accept help
- Periods of strenuous physical exercise, alternated with relaxation, will alleviate some of the physical and mental reactions
- Do something you enjoy
- Structure your time – go out even if you do not really feel like it
- Remember you are normal and having normal reactions – do not label yourself as “crazy”
- Be wary of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs and alcohol. This can just make the reactions worse
- Realise you will have good moments and not-so-good moments – that is normal after a crisis. Keep a journal; write your way through the event
- Realise that those around you are also under stress
- Eat nourishing, well balanced meals
- Do not attempt important life changes
- Do make as many daily life decisions as possible, to have a feeling of taking control of your life.

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 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 scu.edu.au/counselling

Phoenix Australia Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health: phoenixaustralia.org

Lifeline: 131 114

You need to allow family, friends and the wider community to help you. It will make you stronger and, years from now, will be an incredible insight into what others need in time of trauma – because you've been there and you understand.

Liz Tilley, whose house was destroyed in the 2003 Canberra bushfires.

Southern Cross University Student Health Service, Counselling

Lismore: 02 6626 9131

Coffs Harbour: 02 6659 3263

Gold Coast: 07 5589 3252

The Hotel School Sydney: 02 8249 3200

Southern Cross University Out of Hours

Crisis Line: 1300 782 676

All other areas: 1800 111 890

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