

TOOL KIT Getting through bushfires, flooding and extreme climate events

A self-help resource to help people cope with natural disasters

How do bushfires, flooding and extreme climate events impact communities?

Some of the ways bushfires, floods and extreme climate events can affect communities are:

- Loss of homes and regular employment
- Financial hardship
- Family and relationship problems (e.g. arguing, disagreements, lack of communication, physical conflict, relationship breakdown)
- Job pressure and overworking
- People leaving the community due to a lack of opportunities or income (particularly young people)
- Environmental problems, such as loss of vegetation and animals, drying of rivers, soil erosion and increased risk of bushfires
- Lack of community services, including health care, education, housing and employment organisations
- Higher incidence of physical and mental health problems amongst community members, as well as an increased risk of suicide
- Loss of social networks and a breakdown in community spirit

How do natural disasters affect individual wellbeing?

The stress caused by natural disasters can affect our wellbeing in several ways.



Some common signs of stress may include but are not limited to:

- Physical symptoms: tiredness, headaches, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite
- Behavioural: increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs to cope or escape the situation
- Psychological: poor concentration, poor memory, indecision, confusion
- Social: withdrawal, less contact with family and friends
- Emotional: feelings of anger, fear, sadness, irritability, helplessness, worry.

Most people experience these signs of stress at some point in their lives. However, if you are experiencing several at the same time or if they interfere with your ability to carry out daily activities, you should talk to someone you trust (e.g. partner, friend, relative) or seek help from your GP or another health professional.

Strategies to help you manage the stress of natural disasters

Here are some practical tips for managing the stress of natural disasters:

1 Recognise when it's getting too much

Learning to listen to your body and recognising the signs of stress is the first step in understanding how to take care of yourself. Take notice of any changes in your physical health, your behaviours or your emotions that might indicate that things are getting too much for you. Listen to concerns from loved ones about your wellbeing or behaviour.

Seek help immediately if you have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself.

2 Talk about it

Talking calmly and openly to someone you trust about how you're feeling allows you to release negative emotions and helps to relieve tension. If you don't feel comfortable talking to someone you know, telephone helplines like Lifeline and online options (e.g. email, online chat, forums) are also available for confidential support and advice.

Remember, during bushfires, flooding and extreme climate events, everyone in the community is likely to be experiencing similar emotions, so talking to family members, friends and neighbours can help everyone to release negative feelings and come up with practical ways of managing their stress and dealing with the situation.

3 Visit your GP or health professional

Talk to your GP about your situation and let them know if you've experienced any negative changes in how you feel. Your doctor can provide useful advice on how to manage stress and give you referrals to other services that might be able to offer you support.

4 Helping children and adolescents

Sometimes we don't discuss stressful situations with our children and adolescents because we don't want to worry them. However, children and adolescents usually pick up on when you are stressed and know when things aren't right, particularly if they witness their parents upset or arguing. Not knowing what's going on can make them worry and they may blame themselves for what's happening.

It's important to include children and adolescents in discussions about the situation and involve them in decision-making as much as possible. Help them to understand their responsibilities (e.g. concentrating at school, doing homework, helping at home) and reassure them that, although things are tough, you will get through it together. Talk to them about their feelings and notice any changes in their behaviour or mood that may indicate that they are feeling stressed.

5 Take care of yourself

Eat healthy food, get at least eight hours of sleep each night and exercise regularly.

Limit intake of alcohol and other drugs, as these can leave you feeling worse - agitated and anxious, flat or unmotivated.

Remember to take time out to relax – read a book, listen to music, watch a movie or try something new, like yoga or meditation. It's also important to do fun activities that you enjoy, both on your own and with family and friends. Spending time with friends and family helps to prevent isolation and loneliness.

6 Seek and accept help from others

Research shows that people with strong connections with family, friends and their community cope best in times of crisis. A strong support network reduces your sense of isolation and gives you people to talk to when things get rough.

It takes strength and courage to ask for and receive help from others, but people are usually more than happy to help! Make a list of where to go for different types of help and advice and keep it in a handy place.



7 Routine

Try to keep the rest of your life as normal as possible during the period of stress; establish a daily routine with regular times for sleep, meals, being sociable and physical activity.

8 Seek Support

Some people who experience natural disasters may feel helpless and hopeless. If you or someone you know is experiencing distress or thoughts of suicide, help is available.

Seek immediate support by talking to someone you trust, contacting Lifeline (13 11 14) or other support services. If life is in immediate danger, call triple zero (000).

Places to go to for help now:

- Lifeline 13 11 14 (24hrs), 13 43 57 (for bushfire recovery) or www.lifeline.org.au
- State Emergency Service - 132 500
- Government Assistance: <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/active-natural-disaster-events>
- Drought Assistance Hotline: 13 23 16
- Farm Assistance Hotline: 1800 050 585
- Rural Financial Counselling Service: 1800 686 175
- The Red Cross: <https://www.redcross.org.au/>
- St Vincent De Paul: https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Find_Help/National/

If your family is finding it difficult to pay for basic items such as food and petrol, you may be eligible for short term emergency relief assistance (e.g. food or petrol vouchers.) To access this kind of help, talk to your local Salvation Army, St Vincent De Paul or Material Aid/Emergency Response Agency.

Utilise online resources:

- Lifeline - www.lifeline.org.au
- Griefline - <https://griefline.org.au/resources/natural-disasters/>
- Headspace - <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/natural-disasters/>
- Red Cross: Looking after yourself and your family after a disaster: https://www.redcross.org.au/globalassets/cms-migration/documents/emergency-services/lookingafteryourself_1.pdf

For 24-hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14 For more information visit www.lifeline.org.au

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13 11 14

 **Lifeline**

www.lifeline.org.au