



## Helping yourself after a disaster

Traumatic events can be life threatening or end in serious injury. A disaster is a traumatic event that may be natural e.g., bushfires, floods, cyclones, epidemics, or man-made e.g., acts of terrorism, industrial or transportation accidents. Many of us will experience at least one of these during our lives.

Following a disaster, you might experience strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, anger or grief. You might find it hard to cope and it may take a while to come to terms with what's happened. These feelings generally resolve themselves and with the support of family and friends, you will recover. However, when these responses continue or begin to interfere with your daily life, the following tips may be valuable.

### Coping after a disaster

Recovery from the trauma of a disaster doesn't mean forgetting your experience or feeling no emotional pain when remembering it. It simply means less distress and more confidence in your ability to cope.

Even if you don't feel like it, try some of the suggestions below to help yourself come to terms with what has happened, and to reduce your distress:

- Recognise that you're in the middle of an emotional reaction to an extremely stressful event. It's OK to feel rotten but remember – even though it's tough, you can deal with it.
- Try to get plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep), regular exercise and eat regular, well-balanced meals. Physical and mental health are closely linked, so taking care of one helps the other.
- Your body is already 'hyped up' so cut back on tea, coffee, chocolate, soft drink and cigarettes. Avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope, as prolonged use can lead to longer term problems.
- Make time for relaxation – whether it's listening to music, taking a bath – whatever works for you. Consider learning meditation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation or breathing exercises. There are many apps available that can be downloaded to your smartphone.
- Create a daily timetable that includes exercise, work, relaxation and importantly, some fun.
- Resume your normal routine as soon as possible but take it easy. Don't throw yourself into activities or work as a way to avoid painful thoughts or memories. Tackle things that need to be done bit by bit and count each success.
- Don't bottle up your feelings or block them out. Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are unpleasant but they will ease with time. Constantly avoiding these thoughts, dreams or flashbacks can make matters worse over time.
- Avoid making major life decisions like moving house or changing jobs in the days and weeks after the disaster. But feel free to make as many smaller, daily decisions as possible, like what you'll eat or what film you'll see. Doing this will help you to feel more in control of your life.
- Spend time with people you care about, even if you don't want to talk about your experience. Sometimes you'll want to be alone and that's fine, but don't become isolated.



- If you're up to it, talk about your feelings to people who'll understand. Talking things through is part of the natural healing process and will help you to accept what's happened to you. As you start to feel better, you may even feel like supporting others in similar situations.
- If you can't talk to others about your feelings, then write them down. Again, it's all about getting your feelings out when you are ready.
- Stay informed about disaster related events via the news etc. but don't overdo it and avoid repeated viewing of disaster or trauma scenes.
- Take time to re-evaluate. A traumatic event can affect how you see the world, your life, your goals and your relationships. Again, talking this through with others can be very helpful.

If you've tried these strategies and things still aren't improving after a couple of weeks, or if you are having trouble coping, talk to your GP or mental health professional about what you can do next.

### For more information

- Talk to your GP.
- For immediate help, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.