

# Helping Communities and Families



## Tips on how to help communities and families recover

Disasters can have a range of impacts on those affected – individuals, families and communities. These disasters often promote feelings of fear, confusion, grief, helplessness, anxiety, anger, guilt and even diminished confidence in self or others. A variety of helpful interventions can assist individuals and communities to recover.

Following a disaster, governments and relief organisations play an important role in reducing distress for both victims and the broader society. Ensuring equitable distribution of resources and prompt access to healthcare increases trust and improves outcomes. Adhering to ethical principles when providing interventions and relief efforts enhances community wellbeing.

When interacting with individuals affected by a disaster event, Psychological First Aid (PFA) can help alleviate painful emotions and reduce further harm from initial reactions to disasters. PFA is recommended by international disaster experts and researchers to help people after disaster.

### Do's and Don'ts

By providing PFA to people in distress, you will help to create and sustain an environment of (1) safety, (2) calmness, (3) connectedness to others, (4) self-efficacy— or empowerment, and (5) hopefulness. Consider the following suggestions:

#### Do

- Help people meet basic needs for food and shelter, and emergency medical attention. Provide simple and accurate information on how to obtain these (safety).
- Listen to people who wish to share their stories and emotions; remember there is no wrong or right way to feel (calming).
- Be friendly and compassionate even if people are being difficult (calming).
- Provide information about the disaster or trauma and the relief efforts. This will help people understand the situation (calming). Help people contact friends or loved ones (connectedness).
- Give practical suggestions that encourage people to help themselves and meet their own needs (self-efficacy).
- Direct people to available government and non-government services (hopefulness).
- If you know that more help and services are on the way, remind people of this when they express fear or worry (hopefulness).



## Do's and Don'ts

### Don't

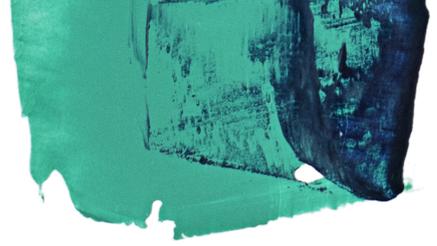
- Force people to share their stories with you, especially very personal details (may decrease calming).
- Give simple reassurances like “everything will be okay” or “at least you survived” (often diminishes calmness).
- Tell people what you think they should be feeling, thinking or doing now or how they should have acted earlier (decreases self-efficacy).
- Tell people why you think they have suffered by giving reasons about their personal behaviours or beliefs (also decreases self-efficacy).
- Make promises that may not be kept (decreases hope).
- Criticise existing services or relief activities in front of people in need of these services (diminishes hope).

## How can you help others

- Check in with friends and neighbours frequently, especially those who may need assistance.
- Donate food, money or your time.
- Find ways to help others help themselves.
- Get to know those who live around you as you work together and rebuild.

## How to communicate with children about the disaster

- Children may not understand what has happened and may be concerned that it will happen again. They may worry about the safety of their family, friends, or pets.
- Listen to children, pay attention to what they say, and how they act. Watch out for irritability, sadness, anger, worry, difficulty sleeping, concentrating or listening, and problems at school.
- Let children know they are not alone and provide opportunities for them to talk about what has happened. Answer questions simply and honestly and tell them what is being done to keep everyone safe.
- Maintain daily routines, activities, and structure with clear expectations, consistent rules, and immediate feedback; limit unnecessary changes.
- Take breaks from the crisis with activities unrelated to the event.



## How to communicate with children about the disaster (continued)

- Prevent further traumatisation by limiting access to television, the internet, or other forms of media that show disturbing scenes of the event.
- Help children maintain contact with their school and friends. Tell children how they can help, build on their strengths, and give simple 'doable' tasks.
- Be aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions as children will observe how you respond to the event and it will affect how they cope and behave.

If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties or irritability persist for more than two weeks after your return home, you should talk to your GP. For immediate assistance and/or 24-hour counselling and referrals, see details on the right.

### Useful services and resources

**Lifeline - for immediate assistance**  
13 11 14

**Australian Psychological Society - find a psychologist**  
1800 333 497

**Beyond Blue**  
1300 224 636