



Helping family and friends 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.

For many of us, disasters generate strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt or anger. Coping is hard, as is coming to terms with what's happened. Support from family and friends during this time is really important. For most of us, things start to become easier after a few weeks.

Providing practical support

Getting things back to normal after a disaster can restore a sense of order and control. Here are some ways you can help people do this.

- Recognising they've endured something extremely stressful and that they may need time and space to deal with it. Help by offering to do practical things like looking after the kids or doing the weekly shop.
- Encourage them to avoid too much media coverage of the event. Instead, tell them you will keep them informed of new or important information.
- Encourage them to look after themselves by:
 - getting plenty of rest
 - eating well
 - exercising regularly
 - finding time to relax
 - cutting back on coffee, cigarettes, drugs and alcohol.

Join them in doing fun things and encourage them to do something fun every day. Help come up with ideas by asking what things they enjoyed doing before the disaster. Acknowledge their achievements. Sometimes it's hard for people to see things are getting better, so you may need to point it out when they achieve a goal, no matter how small. Encourage them to get professional help if they're still struggling more than two weeks after the disaster.

Provide emotional support

Often people don't want to talk about their experience or feelings. But if they do, here are some helpful tips:

- Choose a time to talk when you won't be interrupted, feel rushed or tired.
- Reassure them that their distress is totally normal after an experience like theirs.
- Understand that talking about trauma can be painful and upsetting. This is a natural part of coming to terms with their experience - but don't feel that you have to make their distress just disappear.
- If they're too distressed to continue talking, make another time for a chat.



Listening is very important but sometimes it's hard to know what to say. While there's no 'right thing' to say here are a few pointers:

- Put yourself in their shoes. It's about them, not you, so don't interrupt, offer examples from your own life or talk about yourself.
- Avoid offering simple reassurances like, "I know how you feel" or "You'll be OK".
- Acknowledge their distress by saying things like:
 - It's really tough to go through something like this.
 - This is such a tough time for you.
 - Sometimes it's hard to see a light at the end of the tunnel.
- Ask leading questions like:
 - Would it be helpful to talk about [the event]?
 - You've had a rough time, how are you going?
 - How's [Name] going?
- Show you understand by re-phrasing what they say. Try starting with something like:
 - You seem really...
 - It sounds like...
 - Did I understand right that you...
 - No wonder you feel...

If they don't want to talk, you can still show your support by spending time with them, talking about other things and offering practical help. Let them be alone for a while if that's what they want but encourage them to have a little company every day, as isolating themselves from others is likely to only make matters worse.

For more information

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