

When disaster strikes - How can general practitioners prepare

When disaster strikes local medical centre staff will likely be personally affected by the disaster. When people are under severe stress they are often unable to think as clearly as usual and this can affect decisions and reactions. It is helpful to prepare yourself and staff for the psychological impacts of a disaster and how to best support each other and the community before disaster strikes.

The opportunity to maintain engagement with meaningful employment and to help others after a disaster is psychologically protective. If the medical centre is well prepared it can offer staff a place from which they can feel empowered to help, connected in the community in a positive way, and more in control of their own recovery.

Some tips for being prepared include:

- **Implement actions to increase social support within the team.** When employees feel valued and supported in the workplace, they may have higher resilience that can be beneficial before, during or after a disaster occurs (e.g., staff morning teas/lunches, professional development activities, and self-care activities).
- **Have regular team meetings to ensure regular communication.** Have regular meetings to discuss challenging issues so that when a disaster does occur, the lines of communication are already open and trust has been established in clear communication.
- **Encourage proactive management of stress and mental health within the workplace** including the promotion of good nutrition, adequate sleep, stress management, exercise and work-life balance. Model a non-stigmatising attitude towards the mental health of both staff and patients.
- **Prepare for a disaster collaboratively.** Ask the employees what they need, or would like rather than telling them what they need to do. Once disaster strikes, stressed people are even less likely to respond well to being told what to do.
- **Have policies in place for managing predictable difficulties post-disaster,** (e.g., flexible work arrangements, bereavement leave, how you will maintain contact with absent employees, etc.) and make staff aware of these policies.
- **Simulate or discuss potential traumatic or challenging events that might increase post-disaster** to prepare those who may be exposed. This can include simulations of angry or threatening phone calls, or de-escalating a distressed or angry patient in the clinic. It should address the protocol for dealing with the situation, and the potential impact on employees.
- **Offer all interested, medical and non-medical, staff relevant training in how to help others and how to support themselves during a disaster.** Psychological first aid is an evidence-informed approach to help adults and children, families and communities in the immediate period after a potentially traumatic event, such as a disaster. PFA has been designed for delivery by lay and professional helpers who have received basic training. Phoenix Australia offer a range of relevant trainings. Visit www.phoenixaustralia.org/for-practitioners/training-programs/
- **Develop a disaster response network,** becoming aware of, and build relationships with key support services and referral networks. Have a list with key contacts and contact numbers readily available and updated.



- **Provide information on key topics of disaster-related mental health**, including common reactions post-disaster, self-care, and resilience. Have tip sheets and relevant information readily available in the clinic for staff and patients. Initiate professional development activities focusing on these key topics. Visit www.phoenixaustralia.org/for-practitioners/practitioner-resources/
- **Promote awareness of, and encourage use of support services available to staff.**
- **Recognise common unhelpful community responses post-disaster** and discuss how the medical centre will try to remain non-reactive and non-divisive through the post-disaster phase. Visit www.phoenixaustralia.org/for-practitioners/practitioner-resources/

For more information

For more information visit the Disaster Mental Health Hub at www.phoenixaustralia.org/disaster-hub

Additional Services

**For immediate assistance call
Lifeline on 13 11 14**

**Australian
Psychological Society**
Find a psychologist
service: 1800 333 497

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636