Helping a friend or family member after a disaster

Disasters can be natural or human-made, or a combination of both. They can impact individuals and can leave communities struggling to cope.

By their very nature, disasters confront survivors with extreme conditions of stress, and while the nature of the disaster event may vary, they often include:

- threats to safety
- loss of loved ones, animals, and community members
- disruption to social connections and community functioning
- loss of home, possessions and built environments
- disruption to cultural or spiritual practices
- destruction of the natural environment
- loss of livelihood and financial security.

Disasters often involve two stages: the disaster event itself, and the rebuilding or recovery stage. Both are associated with their own challenges, and it is important to be mindful of the possible implications for mental health.

Common reactions

Many people respond to disaster by utilising existing coping resources and drawing on the support of family, friends and other social connections. However, the consequences of disaster may be more significant for some, and mental health impacts may be experienced. Where this occurs, the following reactions are common

Emotional: shock, irritability, anger, grief, sadness, fear, anxiety, guilt and shame

Mental / intellectual: confusion, disorientation, difficulty concentrating or solving problems, repetitive images of the disaster

Behavioural: withdrawal, avoidance of disaster reminders, getting into arguments, taking risks, overuse of alcohol or other substances

Physiological: feeling tense, wound up or jumpy, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, aches, pains and headaches.

A disaster is an occurrence disrupting the normal conditions of existence and causing a level of suffering that exceeds the capacity of adjustment of the affected community.

World Health Organisation
If you are supporting a friend or family member, it’s important to take notice of these reactions if they crop up. Mention that you’ve noticed changes and encourage them to talk to their doctor so that together they can find the best ways to recover.

**Encourage social connectedness**

Feeling socially connected is critical to recovery following disaster. There are different types of social connections that you can encourage family and friends to engage in. These include:

### Emotional support
Connecting with others for the purpose of talking about the disaster and how it’s made people feel.

### Informational support
Involves support in the form of advice, guidance, suggestions, and information necessary for problem-solving.

### Practical support
Connecting with others for the purposes of gaining assistance, financial support, material goods and services.

### Companionable support
Involves support for the purposes of increasing a sense of belonging, often via social activities, but does not necessarily involve talking about the disaster.

There are a lot of simple, practical and effective ways you can support your family and friends.

1. **Support self-care**
   a. Ask what they need
   b. Encourage them to get plenty of rest and relaxation, encourage healthy eating
   c. Encourage regular exercise, and support them by offering to join them
   d. Support them to cut back on coffee, cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol
   e. Encourage them to take time and space to process the distress they are experiencing
   f. Help free up time and space by providing practical support, such as offering to take care of the kids or do the weekly shopping.

2. **Support routine and balance**
   a. Support a gradual return to routine
   b. Suggest they participate in at least one enjoyable activity each day, and support by offering to join them
   c. Help them find a balance between alone time and company - sometimes people isolate themselves too much, and can benefit from someone reaching out to offer company
   d. Encourage them to limit their exposure to media coverage of the event to only what’s useful to know. You can offer to keep track for them.
Effective ways to support family and friends (continued)

3. Help them talk it through or suggest they seek referral to someone trained to do so
   a. Ask them if they want to talk about the disaster event
   b. Encourage them to talk if and when they are ready, and only as much as they are comfortable with
   c. If you feel you are the right person to do so, indicate you are available to listen, choose together the best time for this to occur
   d. Listen actively: acknowledge their feelings, re-phrase what they have said to check and show you understand, and let them talk at their own pace
   e. Don’t worry about finding the right thing to say - disaster and the feelings that go with it are messy, and your genuine support and empathy often help more than words can
   f. If they need to talk and you don’t feel able to do so, offer to help them find a qualified health practitioner. General practitioners are often familiar with local services.

4. If you can, be a strong shoulder to cry on
   a. Reassure them that their distress is only natural and to be expected
   b. Understand that talking about the disaster can be painful, and they may get upset. You don’t have to make their distress go away or provide reassurance - just be present while they talk and express distress
   c. If they become too distressed to talk, gently suggest a relaxing, self-soothing activity (simple is good: a cup of tea, a warm bath, ruggling up on the sofa with a pet), and make another time to talk.

5. Encourage help-seeking
   a. Encourage them to seek professional help if they are still finding it hard to cope three or four weeks after the disaster
   b. A visit to their GP is a good place to start, as the GP can arrange a mental health care plan, and refer them to the relevant mental health practitioner.

Don’t forget to look after yourself!

Recovery from disaster can take time. Supporting family and friends in the recovery process can be stressful and tiring, and you may need to consider taking time to look after your own health and wellbeing.

Many of the strategies here are just as useful to help you support yourself in this journey.

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Feeling socially connected is critical to recovery following a disaster.

Further information

- Talk to your GP about a Medicare Mental Health Plan, if you could benefit from some professional support.
- If you are in distress, and cannot see your GP right away, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.
- If you or someone you know is at immediate risk, call 000.