DISASTER MENTAL HEALTH HUB

Helping older adults after a disaster

Older adults may be more at risk when disasters occur

This may be for a number of reasons:

- older adults may be less practically prepared for disaster.
- older adults may have long-term medical conditions or disabilities, or live in isolation or institutional settings. All of these may make evacuation more difficult.
- older adults may have more difficulty asking for help during the disaster or afterwards.

In spite of these risks, some research suggests that older adults may recover from disaster more quickly and with fewer mental health impacts than younger people. This might be because many older adults carry on well with their daily lives and remain fully engaged with their families, friends and communities. Older adults are often great help to those around them particularly during times of crisis. Life experience can show them to be role models and sources of inspiration and practical knowledge.

They give voluntary aid, care for grandchildren or neighbours, and participate in support or recovery initiatives. Including older persons in planning for and responding in emergencies thus benefits the whole community.

Common reactions and indicators for further support

Within the first two to four weeks after a disaster, distress is common, and may present itself in the form of emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioural reactions.

Emotional reactions

- Anxious/fearful
- Overwhelmed by sadness
- Angry
- Guilty
- Disconnected
- Numb or unable to connect with emotions

Physical reactions

- Stomach aches or diarrhoea
- Headaches or other physical pain
- Marked increase or decrease in appetite
- Sweating or having chills for no physical reason
- Tremors or muscle twitches
- Feeling jumpy or easily startled

Cognitive reactions

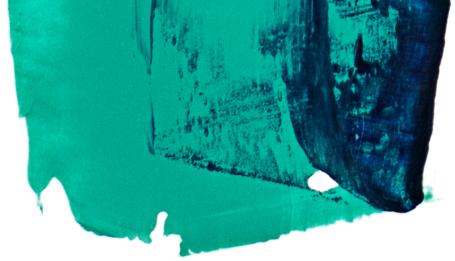
- Difficulty remembering things
- Difficulty thinking clearly and concentrating
- Feeling confused
- Excessive worrying
- Difficulty making decisions
- Avoiding talking or thinking about the disaster

Behavioural reactions

- Trouble falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Change in energy or activity levels
- Using substances or prescription medication to reduce distress
- Outbursts of anger
- Difficulty accepting help or helping others
- Isolating or withdrawing from others

It's normal to experience some level of distress after disaster. Most people find they feel better without the need for professional help, provided they use existing coping strategies and stay connected with their friends, family and community. But if distress is severe, ongoing, or the person wants to harm themselves or end their life, they should be referred to their general practitioner or specialist.

Tips for helping older adults after a disaster



Validate, normalise, educate

- Reassure them that their reactions are normal after a disaster.
- Remind them that asking for and accepting help is a sign of strength.
- Focus on their strengths and encourage them to take steps to improve their circumstances.
- Older adults may be more likely to interpret normal stress-related cognitive changes as a sign of dementia. Provide reassurance, and suggest they talk with their GP if they remain worried.

Provide information

- Inform them about the mental health assistance that is available and how to access it.
- Give information clearly and use plain language. Words like "assistance" or "support" might be more acceptable than "mental health services", for example.
- When giving information verbally, try to also give information in written form where possible, by way of tips sheets, for example, *Helping Yourself After a Disaster*.

Connect with practical and social supports

- Help them to continue to access their healthcare needs, including medications.
- Help them to connect, where possible, with assistance they previously received (e.g., if they used to receive Meals on Wheels, what similar/alternative service is available following the disaster).
- Help them to make social and community connections, as these are integral to recovery.

Follow up

- Check in over the weeks and months following the disaster.
- Be mindful of changing needs across the phases following a disaster.

For more information, download a copy of *Recovery after trauma – A guide for people with posttraumatic stress disorder* from **www.phoenixaustralia.org**.

Services you can recommend

If things are not getting any better, encourage the person to talk to their doctor. For immediate assistance call Lifeline on 13 11 14. For other services contact the Australian Psychological Society find a psychologist service on 1800 333 497 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636. For more information visit the Disaster Mental Health Hub at **www.phoenixaustralia.org/disaster-hub.**