

Emotional responses after a disaster



People may be at risk of developing depression and anxiety after experiencing a traumatic event like a bushfire, flood, cyclone or earthquake.

Normal reactions

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling numb and detached
- Inability to focus
- Inability to plan ahead
- Constant tearfulness
- Intrusive memories or bad dreams related to the event
- Sleep disturbances
- Constant questioning – “What if I had done x, y or z, instead?”
- ‘Replaying’ the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again

These reactions can be severe and are at their worst in the first week, however, in most cases, they fade over a month. If a person’s day-to-day functioning is seriously affected for more than **two months after the event**, it’s important to discuss it with a General Practitioner or mental health professional.

Beyond a normal reaction

If you experience any of these symptoms at any time, seek professional help:

- A sense that the emotional and physical reactions are not normal
- Thoughts of ending one’s life or self-harm
- Loss of hope or interest in the future
- Avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where day-to-day tasks cannot be carried out
- Being startled easily e.g. jumping when a door slams
- Feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason
- Panic attack symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness and a sudden urge to go to the toilet
- Excessive guilt about things that were or weren’t said or done.

For immediate assistance

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

For more information on depression, anxiety and where to get help
www.beyondblue.org.au ☎ 1300 22 4636
info@beyondblue.org.au

Dealing with the emotional impact of a disaster

DO

- ✓ Spend time with people who care
- ✓ Give yourself time
- ✓ Find out about the impact of trauma and what to expect
- ✓ Try to keep a routine going – e.g. work, study
- ✓ Return to normal activities
- ✓ Talk about how you feel or what happened when ready
- ✓ Do things that help you relax
- ✓ Do things that you enjoy
- ✓ Set realistic goals – don't take on too much, but try to find goals that keep you motivated.
- ✓ Review and reward progress – notice even the small steps.
- ✓ Talk about the ups and downs of recovery with friends, family and the health professionals involved in your care.
- ✓ Have a plan to maintain positive changes and plans to deal with times of stress or reminders of the trauma.

DON'T

- ✗ Use alcohol or drugs to try to cope
- ✗ Keep yourself busy and work too much
- ✗ Engage in stressful family or work situations
- ✗ Withdraw from family and friends
- ✗ Stop yourself from doing things that you enjoy
- ✗ Avoid talking about what happened
- ✗ Take risks



For more information, see *Looking after yourself and your family after a disaster*, available from www.beyondblue.org.au or **1300 22 4636**