

Coping personally - general information for communities

Distress is an understandable and normal response to major disasters, like the recent floods in Queensland. Common causes of distress may be related to having been directly at risk from the floods, being concerned about family and friends who may be affected, witnessing injuries and distress to others, or being caught up in the panic and confusion that often follows. In addition, feelings and memories related to previous experiences of disasters or other grief and loss may also resurface.

Most people experience acute stress during events like the floods in Queensland and most manage with courage and strength. However, sometimes it is only later when the distressing images are recalled that some of the stressful effects start to show. While most people will manage with the support of family and friends, there are times when extra help and support may be needed.

Those who have lost loved ones, have been seriously injured, or are highly distressed by the floods, will often need particular support and care. Our communities have a history of coping with uncertain and troubled times with courage and strength.

There are three important things you need to know:

- normal reactions to this type of emergency
- positive ways of coping
- when to get extra help.

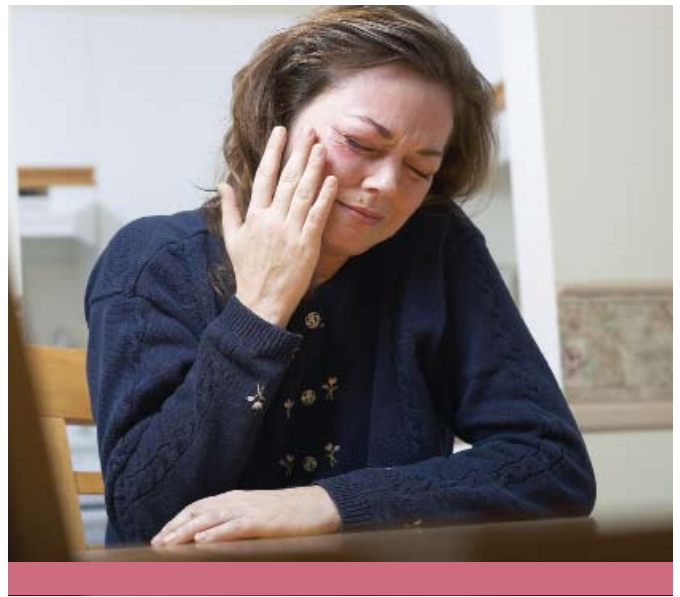
Normal reactions to a disaster like this include:

- shock and numbness, often fear at first
- horror and grief when the extent of loss is realised
- frustration, anger, helplessness and even sometimes despair when it all seems too much
- sometimes fears or old worries may resurface.

These feelings usually settle over the early weeks.

Positive ways of coping may be:

- supporting one another, especially in the family and in your community
- providing emotional support – comforting each other
- carrying out practical tasks – tackling the jobs that need to be done a bit at a time and counting each success
- sharing your experience and feelings with others - a bit at a time when it is right for you
- looking after your own and your family's general health – rest, exercise, food and company all help (being careful not to drink too much alcohol).



Children

Many adults are particularly concerned about the effects of disasters on children, including the effects of exposure of children to distressing images.

Parents and carers can help by answering children's questions honestly, acknowledging concerns and fears and helping children understand how they are protected.

Excessive exposure to shocking media images. Parents and carers can help by limiting children's television viewing and avoiding repeated viewing of disaster scenes.





When to ask for extra help

Sometimes post disaster stress can be ongoing and affect your physical and mental health and wellbeing.

It's time to ask for help if:

- your sleep is badly affected
- you feel very distressed, irritable, on edge or agitated much of the time
- you feel hopeless, despairing, miserable or that you can't go on
- you have trouble concentrating, are distracted and cannot do your usual tasks
- you feel your health is not so good
- you have recurrent nightmares or intrusive thoughts about the emergency
- you have new symptoms or old problems may seem to have returned, eg. breathing, heart and stomach problems.

For children, withdrawal, aggressive behaviours, difficulties at school, problems separating from parents or going to sleep may indicate the need for help.

Getting help

The most important thing to remember is that you, your family and your community are not alone. Support is available through a number of Queensland Government agencies and community organisations.

There are a number of ways of seeking help for distress.

Lifeline

Call 13 11 14

Lifeline Australia provides services from 59 locations. Lifeline Centres maintain a telephone counselling service in addition to providing information, referral and associated services in local areas.

Red Cross

The Australian Red Cross has a number free information booklets and fact sheets on recovering from a disaster and cleaning up after a flood. To obtain a copy of the booklets visit the 'After an emergency: what now?' section of the website or call Australian Red Cross on 1800 733 111.

Help and more information may also be obtained from your general practitioner, local Community Health Centre or local Mental Health Service.

Please refer to the White Pages telephone directory.

Produced by the Mental Health Branch, Queensland Health.

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