

Coping personally after major disasters and cyclones

Distress is an understandable and normal response to major disasters, like Cyclone Larry. Common causes of distress may be related to having been directly at risk from the cyclone, 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 recent Cyclone Larry 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 cyclone, 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

While many people naturally feel stressed by events such as the recent Cyclone Larry, most manage with courage and strength. However sometimes distressing images may be recalled later and some of the stressful effects may start to show.

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 re-surface.

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 may be distressing, particularly to younger children. 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
- 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.

Seeking help

There are a number of ways of seeking help for distress related to Cyclone Larry:

- Centacare – 4044 0130
- Lifeline – 13 1114
- Salvos – 1300 363 622
- Red Cross - 4047 6154
- Cairns Mental Health Service – 4050 3100
- Innisfail Mental Health – 4061-5327
- Tablelands Mental Health – 4091 0213

In addition, your GP can be contacted, as they often are in the best position to assist with ongoing concerns

Other Brochures and pamphlets available:

- Coping with a disaster – information for times of stress
- Coping with a disaster – helping children and young people
(Translations for these brochures will be available upon request)

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