



Managing Stress After a Disaster

(Source: www.qld.gov.au/community/disasters-emergencies/queensland-disasters)

After a disaster you'll use a lot of emotional energy coping with your fears, frustrations and other feelings. You may not realise how much energy you're using, continue to work too hard and for too long, and put aside your emotional and physical wellbeing.

Eventually, you will begin to feel the effects. This is when normal stress symptoms may begin to show and can affect your mind, body, feelings and relationships.

These symptoms can be quite strong and are often at their worst in the first few weeks. They are not signs of weakness. These feelings are a response to a serious traumatic event and are to be expected. In most cases, they will fade over the following weeks or months, although some people may experience them for a longer period.

Normal stress symptoms

Psychological

- trouble thinking clearly, planning or making decisions
- low attention span or difficulty concentrating or remembering details
- continually thinking about the problem or other difficult times
- 'replaying' the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again
- not speaking clearly, slurring words or forgetting names.

Physical

- tension, stress or tightness in muscles
- weakness, tiredness and a loss of energy or enthusiasm
- headaches, trembling, sweating, nausea, aches or pains
- lack of appetite or an increased desire for stimulants, sugar, alcohol, tobacco or coffee
- feeling tired but unable to sleep, or having disturbed sleep, dreams or nightmares.

Emotional

- detached and don't care about things any more
- irritable, bad tempered, impatient or restless
- overwhelmed and everything seems too difficult
- tearful for no reason
- easily upset or oversensitive to what others do and say
- insecure or wanting to stay in familiar places
- feeling sad and hopeless as though the emergency will never end
- very emotional and experiencing reasonable waves of anger or worry.

Relationships

- blame others for the stress
- tend to blow things out of proportion
- can't feel happiness, enjoyment or affection for loved ones
- changed relationships with those close to you
- no longer want to be with family or friends or always need them around
- need to always talk about the emergency
- feel others don't understand or don't care.



These reactions are normal after a traumatic event. But if they continue, it can turn into a stress cycle and eventually a lifestyle. You need to break the cycle to overcome stress.

Break the stress cycle

Step 1: Recognise you are stressed

People don't often recognise they are stressed because they are too focused on the problems. Listen to others who may see you more clearly than you see yourself.

Step 2: Recognise your stress cycle

If stress has been ongoing, a pattern of stress may form. This is called a stress cycle and may become a lifestyle.

Step 3: Decide to break your pattern of stress

Although there are lots of things about the stress in your life that you cannot change, there may be some that you can.

Step 4: Reduce stressful activities

Check your lifestyle and routines to see where you can reduce the stress. Try to stop doing things that keep stress high.

Step 5: Increase relaxation and positive activities

Build activities into your day that are rewarding and give you a good feeling. Take time to enjoy yourself.

Take care of yourself

Doing things you enjoy can be the best cure for stress and there are many things you can do to break the stress cycle.

Physical

- take regular exercise such as walking, swimming, and cycling
- reduce your intake of alcohol, tobacco and sugar
- eat regular, well balanced meals.

Relationships

- keep regular contact with people you enjoy being with
- ask for help when you need it
- make time to be with your family or friends
- talk to people you trust about what is happening and how you are feeling.

Relaxation

- do regular relaxation exercises such as deep breathing, listening to quiet music, meditation
- consider massage or simple exercises to help with physical tension
- rest regularly, even if it's only for a short time
- find something to make you laugh.

Attitudes

- accept that it will take time to get out of the stress cycle and keep trying
- take care to stay safe, as your concentration and judgement may be impaired
- try to be organised so you have some time to yourself.



Family relationships after a disaster

It's normal for families to have difficulties after a disaster. Sometimes it might not be clear how problems are connected with the disaster, especially if they emerge long after the event.

Most families can become stronger following a crisis, but first you need to understand and deal with any issues. Below are some common reactions a family may experience after a disaster. They can be immediate, or happen in the medium term or long term.

Immediate effects

Some reactions may happen immediately after the disaster and continue for a few weeks, including:

- being afraid for each other's safety away from home
- nightmares or fear that another disaster will occur
- anger about the fear and distress the disaster has caused. Sometimes this is directed at another family member or at people outside the family
- loss of trust and confidence in themselves and other people
- emotional turmoil, anger, guilt, sadness, unpredictable behaviour or unreasonable reactions
- insecurity in children shown through behaviour such as bed wetting, changes in eating and sleeping habits or reverting to behaviour they have outgrown
- difficulty communicating because family members don't know what to say to each other or don't feel like talking.

Medium term effects

Changes which are not obviously related to the disaster can happen weeks or months after the event. These changes can include:

- spouses/parents may be irritable or intolerant, leading to friction and misunderstanding between themselves and their children
- children and teenagers can begin to seek attention or act disobediently, which usually means they are anxious or fearful
- family members' feelings for each other may change as they become more detached or preoccupied with their own problems and reactions
- family members may try too hard to help others and ignore their own needs
- family members' work or school performance and concentration levels may suffer
- spouses' sexual relationship may change
- family members may lose interest in leisure, recreation, sport or social activities
- teenagers may look outside the family for emotional support
- Immediate post disaster responses may continue or appear for the first time.

Long term effects

Sometimes problems become evident for the first time, months or years after the event, and often appear as everyday issues. Problems can include:

- memories of the disaster may come back if family members are involved in another crisis
- family members often need to go over the events—perhaps for months or years—to better understand what has happened
- people may find future disasters harder to handle, particularly when similar feelings occur
- family members may hide painful feelings until things have returned to normal, and only then show their distress
- immediate or medium term effects may occur as delayed reactions or may become habits.



You should consider any major change or problem in a family or for individuals could be related to the disaster, even if it happens a few years later.

Helpful things to do

These problems are all normal reactions to an event that has affected the whole family. A few ways to help your family recover after a disaster include:

- keep communicating—talk about what is happening, how you each feel and you need from each other to avoid feeling alone, isolated and misunderstood
- share information—children, teenagers and toddlers know something is going on and the reality is easier to deal with than the unknown
- do things together—make time for fun
- keep family roles clear —don't let children to take on too much responsibility for too long. Understand if a family member can't fulfil their role and talk about how they will resume it when they are ready
- be active—tackle problems, seek help, seek information and don't let issues develop
- look back—consider how everyone has changed since the disaster. Look for the ways it has influenced everyone for better or worse
- express emotions—support distressed family members and give them time to understand their feelings
- seek external support—keep in contact with support groups, other family, friends, neighbours and workmates. Make sure your family doesn't become isolated.

When to seek help

You may need help if:

- communication in the family is breaking down
- parents don't understand their children's (or each other's) behaviour
- things aren't improving over time
- a family member's physical or emotional health is deteriorating
- family members don't enjoy being together.

If you're concerned about yourself, your spouse, children or parents talk to your general practitioner (GP), community health centre or community mental health service.

Some GPs have additional training and expertise in mental health or phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 to talk about your feelings and get information and support.

Getting help

Need help now? Call Triple Zero (000) or go to a hospital if you are in immediate danger.

If you or someone you care about is distressed, in crisis, suicidal or needs someone to talk to, help is available. [Find a mental health service.](#)

You can also talk to your general practitioner (GP) or community health centre.

If you don't have anyone nearby to talk to, there are [help lines, counselling and support groups available.](#)

If you're having trouble coping, you can also

- phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 or download [Lifeline's Coping Kit](#)
- phone Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636.