

Helping children and young people cope after a natural disaster

Information for parents, carers and students

Natural disaster events can be frightening and distressing. It is normal to experience a range of emotions. Common reactions include feelings of fear and anxiety, anger and frustration, confusion, sadness, loss and exhaustion. Each person will react differently. A natural disaster event may remind some children and young people of previous experiences.

What can parents and carers do?

You can help by creating a safe and supportive environment and remaining as calm as possible. Children and young people need to know that their family members love them and will do their best to take care of them.

It is important to keep in mind that distress is normal and expected soon after a natural disaster, but it's important to keep an eye out for signs of ongoing or increasing distress and support children and young people as needed.

Children and adolescents tend to bounce back after a traumatic event. We can support them and promote their natural recovery with some simple strategies.

Promote safety

- Allow your child to talk, remind your child of their safety and reassure them that their reactions are normal.
- Returning to routine, including attending school as soon as practical, will reduce stress and help your child feel safe.
- Provide age-appropriate, factual information and monitor their exposure to media stories and social media.

Promote calm

- Acknowledge and validate your child's experience. Help them to recognise and process their feelings.
- Soothe and calm distressed or overwhelmed children and young people.
- Talk honestly and openly about the event in an age-appropriate way. Provide truthful but simple information that will help them understand. There is no need to share too much detail.
- Provide children with simple, concrete answers to their questions. If you cannot answer the question, it is okay to say, "I don't know the answer to that.", "We may never know the answer to that."
- Let your child know they can talk whenever they are ready. Allow them to ask any questions they have. Children will move at their own pace through distress just like adults do.

Help children, families and communities be part of their own recovery

- Promote coping and self-care strategies, such as listening to music, playing with a pet, or watching a favourite show.
- Provide your child with age-appropriate information about available support people and services and remind them of their own resilience and coping strategies.
- It is important to empower young people to feel in control of their own reactions and support them to have a say in what they need.

Promote connectedness

- Speak with your child when they wish to talk, reaching out in a gentle manner, and ask how they are feeling.
- Help children identify social supports and help with positive connections. Encourage them to notice changes in their friends and look out for each other.
- Children and young people should have a clear understanding of who they can talk to if they need support or are concerned about a friend.

Promote hope

- Support your child to feel a sense of safety and control. Focus on small positive steps.
- Acknowledge that things are difficult now but will improve with support and time.
- Enhance coping skills and positive emotions. Share stories of coping when things were difficult in the past and remind each other of the things that helped.
- If possible, involve your child in activities that contribute to the wider community and support recovery.

Help Services

Reach out to one of the help lines if you become worried about yourself or someone else.

Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511

A 24/7 phone line staffed by mental health professionals that can direct individuals to local support services.

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

A free, confidential service that provides online or phone counselling for children and young people.

Lifeline: 13 11 14

24-hour crisis support for people experiencing a crisis or suicidal distress.

Headspace: 1800 650 890

A local mental health support service for young people and their families, with a focus on early intervention.

13YARN: 13 92 76

Free crisis counselling support for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples.

MensLine: 1300 78 99 78

24/7 telephone counselling support for men with concerns about mental health, relationships, stress and wellbeing.

Transcultural Mental Health Line: 1800 648 911

A phone line staffed from Monday to Friday between 9am and 4.30pm to support people in NSW from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Telephone interpreting service: 131 450

If you need interpreter assistance call TIS and say which language you need and the number you want to call. The operator will get an interpreter on the line to help with your conversation.