

# Information for family and friends supporting young people affected by a natural disaster

## Responses to natural disasters

Life changes for everyone during and after a natural disaster, even if we haven't been directly present at the event. No two people will experience or respond to a natural disaster in the same way, and the types of support a person will need are different at different times.

Young people are especially vulnerable to the indirect effects of natural disasters due to these events sometimes being their first exposure, their developmental stage and their increased likelihood of high levels of exposure to graphic content – particularly via social media.

There is no right or wrong way to react to a traumatic event. Some people might experience sadness, and seek connection to others whilst others might feel numb and become more disconnected. Common reactions in young people include grief and loss, confusion, guilt, shame, fear, anxiety, and insecurity.

Following a natural disaster any reaction can be normal, you might notice disrupted sleep, eating patterns, changes in relationships or difficulty with routine activities like getting dressed or schooling.

**These are normal reactions to *not normal* events.**

## Reactions of parents/families

Family and friends can have an important role in the healing process for young people. But family and friends have their own problems to cope with, and you may find yourself juggling your own reactions to the disaster with your responsibilities for your child.

Look after yourself! Be kind to yourself and engage in self-care activities. This can help you, and modelling these activities for your young person may be beneficial.

## How to help your young person

The following tips are helpful after natural disasters:

- Validate the importance for young people to focus on their physical and emotional safety, and to be with those who are helpful to their wellbeing
- Facilitate connection with others.
- Include young people in repair and recovery efforts.
- Limit exposure to traumatic information in social and traditional media; take a break from the 24 hour news!
- Encourage coping skills and for your young person to engage in activities that promote a healthy headspace (see attached 'tips for a healthy headspace').
- As much as possible, support young people to maintain regular routines and stay connected to regular activities such as sport, school, and spending time with friends.
- Provide Stability
- Offer reassurance
- Normalise, but don't minimise
- Be available

## When to get help

Most people who experience traumatic events are able to recover by using their own resources and the support of family and friends.

You should think about getting help if your child is having difficulties more than about six weeks after the disaster, or is not functioning well in normal activities. Services such as your local doctor, community health centre, school counsellor or local mental health service can provide advice and assistance.

*Seek immediate help if you think your child is at risk, for example of self harm. Call your local hospital, emergency services, Lifeline (13 11 14) or Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800).*