



Supporting mental health recovery in the community after a disaster



**Government
of South Australia**

SA Health



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Purpose of this booklet

This booklet is based on a resource that was developed by the community affected by the Pinery bushfire in November 2015.

The purpose of this booklet is to:

- > Build community awareness of the mental health impacts of disasters such as fires, storms, floods, pandemics and other incidents that impact on the health and wellbeing of the community.
- > Help people to support each other if a disaster happens in the local community.
- > Provide tips on what to look out for, how to respond to people who might need support, what services are available, and how you can look after your own mental health and wellbeing.

Why mental health is important

It's common to experience stress and grief after a disaster. Some people will recover without formal help. However, others may need extra support to help get their life back on track.

Disasters can sometimes have an immediate impact on your mental health. But often, it might not be until later that you start noticing changes in the way you, or others around you, are thinking or feeling. There is a range of information and support services available (listed on pages 9 to 13 of this booklet). It's always a good time to seek support.

For further information visit

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/DisastersAndMentalHealthSupport

What to look out for

Signs you might hear or see that tell you a person may need support

Some signs that a person may need mental health support are obvious and some signs are less obvious. Signs might be verbal, emotional, cognitive, physical or behavioural. Below are some examples of signs you may notice in yourself or others.

Verbal signs

- > More withdrawn, not communicating in the way they normally would
- > Expressing feelings of hopelessness
- > May talk about a 'friend' as having problems, which may be a way of the person talking about their own struggles and reaching out for support
- > Talking about self-harm, suicide or death
- > Saying things such as:
 - “What’s the point? Things are never going to get any better”
 - “It’s all my fault, I should have been more prepared”
 - “I can’t take this anymore, I’ve had enough”
 - “I’m on my own... I don’t have anyone to talk to”
 - “It can’t be fixed... things will never be the same again”
 - “Nothing I do seems to make a difference, it’s out of my control”

Signs you might hear or see that tell you a person may need support

Emotional signs

- > Feeling worthless
- > Anxious
- > Fearful
- > Guilt
- > Grief
- > Anger outbursts
- > Impatience
- > Frustration
- > Low self-confidence
- > Overwhelming sadness
- > Numbness
- > Irritability
- > Crying
- > Loneliness

Cognitive signs

- > Confusion
- > Nightmares
- > Flashbacks
- > Confused about place and time
- > Obsessing about the incident
- > Poor concentration and attention
- > Difficulty remembering the event
- > Difficulty adapting to change
- > Difficulty understanding their reaction to the event

Signs you might hear or see that tell you a person may need support

Physical signs

- > Dizziness
- > Sweating
- > Nausea
- > Diarrhea
- > Loss of appetite or over eating
- > Pain
- > Very sensitive to unexpected sound
- > Sudden weight gain or loss
- > Persistent fatigue or exhaustion
- > Loss of interest in personal hygiene or appearance
- > Loss of sexual interest
- > Loss of interest in normal recreational activities

Behavioural signs

- > Self-harming
- > Increased use of alcohol and/or drugs to cope
- > Frequent use of humour (which is different to how the person is normally)
- > Trouble sleeping
- > Work absenteeism or decreased presence in the community
- > Giving away things that are treasured by them
- > Apathy
- > Consistently forgetting to take medication that is necessary for maintaining health and wellbeing
- > Taking extreme risks that show little value for own life (e.g. driving at risk).

How do I respond?

Tips on engaging with people who may need support

An important part of communicating with someone is to build trust. This will help the person to feel that there is someone who cares about their wellbeing and is there to listen. If a person feels comfortable talking more openly, it will give a better understanding on how they are coping and if they might benefit from other supports.

The following are some suggested 'conversation starters' you could consider using when talking with people who might be showing some of the signs listed earlier:

- > "Are you okay?"
- > "It has been a really tough time lately, how are you coping with everything?"
- > "I'm a bit worried because you haven't seemed yourself lately"
- > "I have noticed that you have been (name type of behaviour), is everything ok?"
- > "Is there something that I can do to help?"
- > "I am here for you if you ever want to talk"
- > "Do you know where to get some extra help if you need to?"
- > "Is there someone that you feel comfortable talking to if you need?"

What else can I do?

- > Provide reassurance to the person and encourage them to accept support from family and friends, and community programs
- > Encourage contact with local Relief and/or Recovery centres (if available)
- > Identify activities they normally do that help when they are not feeling like themselves
- > Encourage the person to visit their GP and/or to contact services listed in this booklet, and reassure them that it's ok to seek help
- > Encourage the person to get back into a routine, even if it is different to their routine prior to the incident
- > Encourage the person to maintain physical health and wellbeing through regular healthy meals and physical exercise.

Keep offering support, even if the person doesn't accept it the first time.

If they know there are people around them willing to help, they might be more likely to reach out and access support when they are ready.

Support services

Urgent mental health concerns

If you feel a person's safety is at immediate risk:
dial 000 (Triple Zero)

For mental health emergencies:

Mental Health Triage Service 13 14 65

- > Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week (country and metropolitan areas)
- > A trained mental health clinician will be able to assist with determining what interventions would be most appropriate. The person experiencing difficulty is able, and encouraged, to contact this service directly as well

Examples of a mental health emergency:

- > If you, or the person, have concerns about their safety including an increased risk of self-harm and/or thoughts about suicide
- > Your concerns about the person's behaviour, safety and welfare have escalated and require more immediate attention, and the person's needs are not able to be met through other support systems (eg. GP or other local services).

For further information on services that are available and how to access them, visit:

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/DisastersAndMentalHealthSupport

Support services

Non-urgent mental health concerns

General Practitioner

Encourage the person to speak with their GP about any concerns that they have, as early on as possible. The GP will be able to help with completing a mental health care plan which will provide access to specialist mental health services.

Primary Mental Health Services

Primary Mental Health Services are provided across metropolitan Adelaide and country South Australia. These services are delivered in partnership with GPs. For more information contact the Primary Mental Health service provider in your region:

Country SA – Primary Mental Health Services

Summit Health

Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and KI (08) 8406 7700

www.summithealth.org.au

Country and Outback Health

Yorke & Northern, Mid North, Eyre & Flinders, Far west & Outback regions (08) 8565 8500

cobh.com.au

Murray Mallee GP Network

Murray Mallee region (08) 8531 1303

www.mmgn.org.au

Sonder

Barossa and Gawler regions (08) 8209 0700

www.sonder.net.au

FocusOne Health

Riverland (08) 8582 3823 and Limestone coast (08) 8724 7696

focusonehealth.com.au

Support services

Non-urgent mental health concerns

Metropolitan Adelaide – Primary Mental Health Services

Sonder

Metro North and Centre/West (08) 8209 0700

www.sonder.net.au

Links to Wellbeing

Metro South and Centre/East (08) 8326 3591

www.neaminational.org.au/get-support/find-service/links-to-wellbeing

Country and Metro

Red Cross

Depending on the type of incident, The Australian Red Cross may be engaged by SA Health to provide Psychological First Aid. This support assists people affected by a major incident to feel safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful. It aims to reduce initial distress, promote flexible coping, and to link with other services where necessary. For more information, contact Red Cross:

(08) 8100 4500

www.redcross.org.au

Support services

Phone and online support – Country and Metro

Health Direct 1800 022 222

www.healthdirect.gov.au

24-hour practical health information and advice (including mental health)

Regional Access Program 1300 032 186

www.saregionalaccess.org.au

Free 24/7 online or telephone support service available to anyone over the age of 16, living or working in regional or remote SA

LifeLine 131 114

www.lifeline.org.au

24-hour phone service that offers confidential support and advice to help you deal with stress and personal challenges

BeyondBlue 1300 224 636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Information on depression; how to recognise the signs, how to get help for yourself or someone else, and how to stay well

Mensline 1300 789 978

www.mensline.org.au

Phone support, information and referral service, helping men deal with relationship and mental health needs

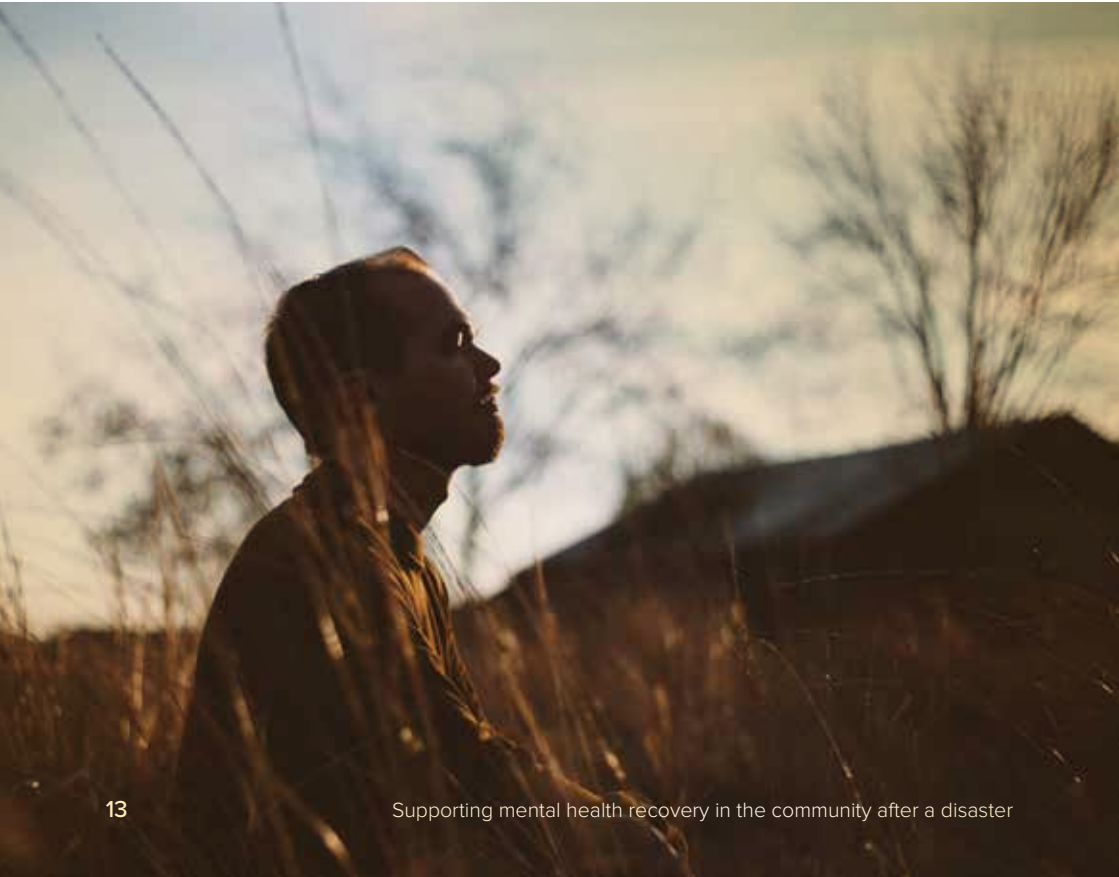
Information continued on next page...

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service is a nationwide service that provides 24/7 phone, video and online professional counselling to people who are affected by suicide, including:

- > anyone who is feeling suicidal
- > anyone who is caring for someone who is feeling suicidal
- > anyone who is bereaved by suicide
- > health professionals supporting people who are affected by suicide.



Supporting children and young people

After a disaster, it is important to understand that children and young people can react differently. The length of time it takes to recover will be different for each person. Their reaction can depend on different factors, including:

- > The type of traumatic event
- > Individual characteristics of the child, such as their temperament, age and developmental stage
- > Whether there has been significant disruption to the child's life, or whether the child has been able to return to their usual routine
- > The impact that the event has had on the child's main support systems (e.g. parents, friends or teachers) and how those around them are coping

Common reactions to a traumatic event may include:

- > Changes in their play, drawing, dreams or conversation
- > Regressive behaviour – behaving younger than they normally do
- > Difficulties getting to sleep
- > Difficulty managing big emotions, expressing irritability or anger
- > Fussy eating
- > Withdrawing
- > Wanting to stay close to a parent or caregiver
- > Problems concentrating at school

How can I support a child or young person?

- > Encourage children to share their feelings, and listen to them
- > Assure them that it is normal to feel sad and upset
- > Expect and be tolerant of regressive behaviour in younger children (E.g. thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, trouble getting to sleep)
- > Involve children by giving them specific chores to help them feel they are helping to restore family life

Where to go for help

If you are concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of a child or young person, contact:

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

(08) 8161 7198

www.wch.sa.gov.au

For more information and links to resources visit:

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/DisastersAndMentalHealthSupport



Looking after yourself

When offering support to those around you in the community, it's important to look after yourself too.

It is not uncommon for people who support others in distress to then start experiencing some of the emotional impacts themselves.

It is really important to monitor your own wellbeing. Keep in mind the signs, strategies and supports listed earlier in this booklet.

Whether you are a community member, first responder, parent, volunteer, local business owner, employer, employee, or tourist – everyone plays a role in supporting the community to recover after a disaster.

Your mental health matters.



Acknowledgements

The information provided in this booklet was developed in partnership with a number of individuals and organisations who have provided support to communities affected by disasters and major incidents across South Australia, and those who are passionate about supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our communities.

Thank you for your input.



Further information

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/DisastersAndMentalHealthSupport



This document has been reviewed and endorsed by SOCAG* for consumers and the community – June 2018.



Interpreter



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Public- A1 – I1

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*SA Health Safety and Quality Community Advisory Group.



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