

Mental health recovery for communities after a disaster

Information for partners and stakeholders in recovery

What is a disaster?

Every year, Australian communities face the devastating effects of disasters such as bushfires, floods, storms, pandemics, community violence and other major incidents. These can have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of communities, the economy, local infrastructure and the environment. In general, people are resilient and most people will recover over time with the right support; however, some people might need extra support to help get life back on track.

Common impacts of a disaster

It is common for people to experience stress and grief after a disaster. Sometimes the impact is obvious straight away, but often it's a slow process and can have a longer term impact. Some of the common impacts may include:

- > shock, distress, grief, anger, anxiety and depression
- > unpleasant memories, poor concentration and difficulty making decisions
- > feeling tense and on edge, as well sleep disturbance, stomach upsets, and general aches and pains
- > irritability, loss of interest in activities, and wanting to be alone

In addition to the trauma of the incident itself, it is also important to consider the broader impacts on the emotional wellbeing and functioning of individuals and communities, including:

- > loss of loved ones
- > financial stress
- > social isolation
- > relationship difficulties
- > displacement
- > loss of possessions
- > impact on employment, business and livelihood

A person's response to a traumatic event and likelihood of seeking support may be influenced by a number of factors, including:

- > prior traumatic experiences
- > current circumstances, including access to existing support networks and resources
- > physical and/or mental health history
- > previous experience accessing health (or other) services



Mental health in recovery

Often people will recover from disasters without formal mental health intervention; however, some people are likely to need additional support to help them cope. There are a range of mental health services available to support recovery after a disaster. These services are divided into three different streams:

- > **Low** – People experiencing a normal grief and stress response
- > **Moderate** – People who may require brief-medium term clinical intervention
- > **High** – People who may require medium-longer term specialist mental health care

Low: People experiencing a normal grief and stress response

Some people will benefit from initial contact with someone who validates and normalises their feelings. Connecting them with regular support systems such as family and friends, neighbours, and services in the community can help with their recovery.

- Helpful strategies**
- > Encourage them to stay connected with regular supports such as family and friends
 - > Identify activities they normally do that help when they are feeling down
 - > If the State Recovery Hotline is operational after an incident, encourage them to register for a health and wellbeing outreach visit by calling 1800 302 787
 - > Encourage contact with local recovery groups and services
 - > Encourage contact with services within their community
 - > If there are ongoing concerns, encourage the person to visit their GP

Support services

Psychological First Aid (PFA) – Red Cross

Depending on the nature of an incident, Red Cross may be commissioned by SA Health to provide PFA. This support assists people affected by a disaster by:

- > Helping people to feel safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful
- > Reducing initial distress and promoting flexible coping
- > Linking people with other support services where necessary

Contact Red Cross for more information:

(08) 8100 4500

www.redcross.org.au

Moderate: People who may require brief-medium term clinical intervention

People who require a period of clinical intervention, but are likely to completely recover without longer term impacts.

- Helpful strategies**
- > Encourage them to stay connected with regular supports such as family and friends
 - > Identify activities they normally do that help when they are feeling down
 - > 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 visit their GP

Support services GP and Primary Mental Health Services
Refer to page 3 for list of services by region

High: People who may require medium-longer term mental health care

Specialist help from a mental health professional may be needed if a person requires longer term therapeutic interventions as a result of more acute and/or enduring mental health impacts

- Helpful strategies**
- > As above for Low and Moderate Stress Response, but consider that you may need to be more proactive in supporting these strategies
 - > Talk to the person about visiting their GP and obtaining a Mental Health Treatment Plan
 - > Consider any potential risks to the persons safety (including suicidal ideation and/or self-harm) and link with support services as necessary (see below services for urgent mental health concerns)

Support services Community Mental Health Services
For a list of Community Mental Health Services by region visit:
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/DisastersAndMentalHealthSupport

Support services

Urgent mental health concerns

If you feel a person's safety is at imminent 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

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)

Non-urgent mental health concerns

General Practitioner (GP)

Encourage the person to speak with their GP about any concerns that they have as early as possible. The GP will be able to help with completing a mental health treatment 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	Metropolitan Adelaide
Summit Health Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and KI (08) 8406 7700 www.summithealth.org.au	Sonder Metro North and Centre/West (08) 8209 0700 www.sonder.net.au
Country and Outback Health Yorke & Northern, Mid North, Eyre & Flinders, Far west & Outback regions (08) 8565 8500 cobh.com.au	Links to Wellbeing Metro South and Centre/East (08) 8326 3591 www.neaminational.org.au/get-support/ find-service/links-to-wellbeing
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 Limestone coast (08) 8724 7696 focusonehealth.com.au	

Phone and online support services

Health Direct

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

1800 022 222

www.healthdirect.gov.au

LifeLine

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

131 114

www.lifeline.org.au

BeyondBlue

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

1300 224 636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Mensline

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

1300 789 978

www.mensline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service

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

1300 659 467

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Regional Access Program

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

1300 032 186

www.saregionalaccess.org.au

For further information visit:

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/DisastersAndMentalHealthSupport

Supporting children and young people

It is important to keep in mind the impact that a major incident can have on children and young people. The length of time it takes to recover will be different for each person and can depend on many different factors, including:

- > The nature of the traumatic event
- > Individual characteristics of the child or young person, such as their temperament, age and developmental stage
- > Whether there has been significant disruption to the child or young person's life, or, whether they have been able to return to their usual routine
- > The impact that the event has had on the child or young person's main support systems 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 (eg. thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, needing more help to get 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

Further information

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/DisastersAndMentalHealthSupport



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