

Traumatic Events

Support is available for you after natural disasters

Dealing with the shock, distress and grief of traumatic events is extremely difficult and is more emotionally draining than you may realise. In some respects dealing with these events can be like running a marathon – it requires pacing yourself for the long haul. Sadly for some who have been severely impacted by natural disasters, it may feel insurmountable and those in our community will need significant support over time to rebuild their lives. Below are some strategies for those who are feeling the impact in various ways and levels of severity. We are all different and will experience exposure to natural disasters, both direct and indirect exposure, in different ways. Please read below some information and tips to consider in relation to looking after your own wellbeing and supporting others at this point.

DO

- Make sure that you take time to rest, to be with people who support you, and to be alone with your thoughts.
- Take control of seemingly small things. When life seems out of control, begin to reclaim it a little at a time.
- Make a conscious choice to survive intense emotions.
- Focus on self care e.g. regular routine where possible such as healthy food, water, rest, appropriate exercise, sleep, time with those you love.

DON'T

- Expect too much of yourself – particularly during the early phases of your response. Give yourself time to recover from the 'shock' and re-stabilise a little.
- Turn away from painful sadness or anger because you are afraid of "losing it". Locate a quiet place or a supportive and trusted friend and give yourself the freedom to express your experience. Doing so in a constructive manner will help you 'find it' again over time.
- Make major changes. The grieving period is typically not the best time to make big decisions, like selling a home or switching jobs – even though you may initially want to.
- Don't consume excessive amounts of alcohol or other substances even though you may feel like it will relax you. Use of alcohol results in negative feelings being exacerbated.

HELPING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

- Be aware that children even if not directly exposed will hear and see news footage and hear stories from various sources that may concern them.
- Allow children to discuss their concerns with you and encourage them to express their fears and anxiety about the natural disasters
- Where possible reassure them without minimising the reality of the situation (e.g. We are safe from but people have lost lives and homes but we are ok; We have lost our house but we are all now safe)
- Focus on routines and getting on with everyday life as much as possible.

FOR COLLEAGUES

One of the greatest things you can do to help your grieving colleagues is to free yourself from feeling like you have to somehow fix them or take away their pain. You can't do that and people don't want you to try. This means opening yourself to feeling a degree of helplessness – something which makes you a better rather than lesser support! What grieving people frequently want and need is someone with whom they can share their experience at a rate and level that suits them.

DO

- Offer them the opportunity to let you know how they are going if/when they want, rather than asking them how they are going (e.g., “I'd be happy to hear how it's going for you if you'd like, when you're ready”).
- Listen and empathise with their experience (e.g., “That's really sad”). There are no magic words to take away the pain. When it comes to grief, pain is a natural part of loss and is the beginning of healing. If you are not sure what to say you don't need to say anything.
- Be patient. Traumatic reactions and grief can last many months. It can also re-surface unexpectedly.
- Ask what you can do to assist with everyday tasks. Offering practical support can be the most helpful.
- Encourage them to be comfortable expressing their emotions, i.e. crying, or getting angry.
- Continue your contact in a range of ways and over time. Often it is down the track that people need the support, so stay in touch. For example over the next few days and weeks call, email, SMS and/or invite your colleague to lunch or coffee, but always at their pace.
- Contact the EAP service for information and support via our website and 1300 361 008.

DON'T

- Try to fix it for them – you can't (This point can't be over-emphasised).
- Say, “I know how you feel.” It is very difficult to comprehend the individuality of another's loss.
- Try to rationalise the loss. “It was God's will” or “God sends only as much as you can handle”, “It was meant to be” and other cliché's tend to minimise the loss and may not be helpful.
- Tell them they are “lucky it wasn't worse” - this is not consoling to a traumatised person. Instead, tell them you are “sorry such an event has occurred”.
- Say “everything will be ok”. You can reassure them that they are now safe but you don't know how it will be for them in the future. They are likely to have a tough time.

If you are a manager or team leader and you would like to learn more about how to support staff and manage your own wellbeing please call **1300 361 008 (Australia)** or **0800 327 669 (New Zealand)** or go to **www.au.ppcworldwide.com** for regular updates.